

IRAN-ISRAEL ENMITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: UNDERSTANDING THE NORMATIVE BEHAVIOURS

*Dr. Syed Qandil Abbas and Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi**

Abstract

This study tries to evaluate the enmity between Iran and Israel in the context of the Middle East. Iran, which is enhancing its role in the region and Israel, which is the only nuclear power in the Middle East, have been in a consistent adversarial relation with each other since the 1979 Revolution of Iran. The intensity of their enmity further consolidated after the collapse of Saddam Regime in Iraq which provided Iran the breathing space in the region. The exploitation of Iraqi political turmoil resulted in Iranian footprints across the region in a manner of encircling Israel. Similarly, Israeli policy of rapprochement with the Gulf States reflected its countermeasure of checkmating Iran. Though the strategy of searching for new allies assisted both Iran and Israel in extending their regional clout yet it also brought them into a conflict with each other due to the intersection of each other's spheres of influence. Hence, this study highlights those historical experiences which shape the current regional policies of both Iran and Israel particularly in the context of recent Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Simultaneously, this article would assess the dynamics of both Iran and Israel regarding the attainment of their objectives in the Middle East.

Keywords: Iran-Israel Enmity, Middle East Security, Constructivism, Geopolitics, Regional Hegemony, Perceptions.

Introduction

Since WWII, the Middle Eastern geopolitical structure has remained security centric. The borders' formation without considering the ethnic and religious linkages made the region vulnerable to clashes where ambitious states tried to grasp the opportunities for the attainment of their objectives. Initially, the creation of Israel and then the Iranian revolution remained two distinct features

*Dr. Syed Qandil Abbas is associated School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid i Azam University, Islamabad. The authors' email address is syed572@hotmail.com. Syed Fraz Hussain Naqvi is currently leading the Iran Program at Institute of Regional Studies, Islamabad. The authors' email address is frazashhab@gmail.com

in the regional proceedings. Since both the states were inherently the subscribers of expansionist policies, it invoked the resentments of the regional states. Israel's claim of centuries' long association with the region, due to Davidian Empire, propelled the idea of the "Greater Israel" within the policy circles of Tel Aviv.¹ On the other hand, being adherent to the idea of Political Islam and defying the monarchical and dictatorial system, Iran also vowed to export its ideals beyond its territory after the revolution. Therefore, as both the states advanced towards achieving the same objectives in the region, they were destined to intersect each other's on their way to expansionism. However, their approach of regional dominancy wasn't endorsed by the regional Arab states who viewed both Iran and Israel as the foreign conspirators in their native region. Resultantly, both Iran and Israel had to experience the hostile attitude from the regional players. Both the states had to coup up with the aggression against themselves as Israel was forced to engage with Arabs in the war of 1948 and Iran had to carry the burden of war with Iraq. The timings of their respective wars were crucial as they erupted shortly after the establishment of both the states. This made them aware of their weak standings in the region. The strategy for defence, adopted by both the states, was aimed at becoming militarily strong that could rebuff the threats from the regional Arab states. Over the course of time, both the states managed to develop themselves militarily strong and deter their regional enemies. Arab States, who largely remained dependent upon the US for their security, realized their perilous position as they remained unsuccessful in thwarting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and curtailing the influence of Iran in the Persian Gulf. As the US commitments to the Gulf's security gradually decreased, the Arab States had to mend their relationships with either Iran or Israel to guarantee their own security. Resultantly, after subsiding the threat posed by the Arabs, both Iran and Israel were left with no other major challenger but each other which sowed, and later intensified, their enmity.

Theoretical Framework

The article would analyse the enmity between Iran and Israel through mentioning the tenets of Constructivism. This theory was developed in the post-Cold War period as the "third school of thought" when both mainstream IR theories (Realism and Liberalism) failed to predict the structure of international system. For realists, the inability to predict the collapse of bipolar structure became a major hurdle in its acceptance in post-Cold War period. Simultaneously, the absence of any explanation in the literature of Liberalism about the threats posed by fundamentalism and rise of militant non-state actors, strengthened the

notion about the shortcomings of liberal ideology.² Constructivism, on the other hand, relies on three basic variables i.e. inter-subjectivity, identity and normative behaviour. First, the theory argues that material structures acquire significance only through the inter-subjectivity of the actors.³ Similarly, in the context of the Middle East, the tendency of reshaping the regional structure by both Iran and Israel is the outcome of their respective inter-subjectivities since both the states are perceived to be the outsiders in the Arab World. Therefore, diffusing the dominance of Arab states and extending their respective influence are the primary objectives of both Iran and Israel. Second, in relation to the first variable, 'identity' is also a core subject in constructivism. The theory argues that the identity of the actors are mainly derived by the normative patterns of the structures in which they inhabit.⁴ Therefore, while discussing the presence of Iran and Israel in the Middle East, which is traditionally the hub of Arabs' dominance, it is noteworthy that the general apprehensions of the Arab rulers against these two states are quite natural. To keep the influence of Iran or Israel away from the Arab World, the Arab states formulated the loosely connected "security alliance" (if not the "security regime") which could corner both Iran and Israel and make them realized about their disadvantageous position in the region.

The patterns of security arrangements were visible in the Arabs' alliance in subsequent wars against Israel and supporting Saddam Hussain during 1980-88 against Iran. Lastly, the variable of 'normative behaviour' is imperative in understanding the current aspirations of both Iran and Israel. Constructivism argues that unlike the realists' claims that structure dictates the behaviour of the states, it is rather the identities of the states which directs them towards their objectives while the structure only allows or constrain their actions.⁵ This variable would help in understanding the respective outlooks of Iran and Israel in association with the Middle East which would help in understanding their expansionist policies till the point where they actually collide with each other. In this way, while the weakening of Arab states and the legacy of Persian and Davidian empires, respectively, allow both Iran and Israel to maximize their power, their mutual resentments against each other put a constraint on their hegemonic designs in the region and instead, divert them towards competition.

US Relations with Israel and Iran during the Cold War

During the Cold War, the main arena for the global power competition was Europe which was divided into Capitalist and Communist camps. However, the Middle East was also significant for both the US and USSR. For the US, the

smooth and continuous flow of oil was vital to maintain its capitalist economy while for the USSR, the newly independent states provided the ground for the spread of communist ideas. As both the US and USSR favoured decolonization, the idea of handing over the power to indigenous people also led to the concept of a native Jewish land. The bitter experiences of the Nazi's execution of the Jews also provided the moral backing to this idea, mainly in the US. In this regard, *Balfour Declaration* of 1917 which prompted the idea of an exclusive Jewish State in the Middle East, had its support base in the US owing to the strong interest of then president, Harry Truman, who became the pivotal individual in ensuring the creation of Israel.⁶ Eventually, the creation of Israel in 1948 was materialized through a legal procedure followed in the United Nations.⁷ Nevertheless, the establishment of Israel was not the prerogative of the US only. In fact, since both the US and USSR were looking for state allies, the latter also vigorously supported the creation of Israel and voted in favour of dividing the Arabs and Jewish territories in UN resolution.⁸ However, the support of USSR to Arab Socialists i.e. Egypt, Syria and Iraq – all of which were apprehensive to Israel – led to the beginning of an exclusive US-Israel partnership. The objective of this partnership revolved around containing the Soviet expansion and deter the Arab Socialists from attacking Israel. The victory of Israel in 1967 war reflected Israel's Qualitative Military Edge (QME) against the Soviet weaponry which was given to Egypt and hence, resulted in the weakening of Soviet-Egypt partnership.⁹ Israel also proved itself as an important ally for the US in the region when it combated the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Jordan on the behalf of the US in 1970.¹⁰ PLO, with the assistance of the USSR, attempted a coup against the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Fearing the success of PLO and the turning the balance of power in Soviet's favour, the US asked for Israel to intervene as the direct involvement of the US could have led to the global catastrophe with the Soviet Union. The successful defence of the Hashemite Kingdom by the Israeli forces further strengthened the security and strategic partnership of Israel with the US. The US also increased its military aid to Israel from \$35 million in 1970 to \$545 million in 1971.¹¹ The strategic support of the US not only allowed Israel to defend itself from the hostile neighbours but also prompted its expansionist policy i.e. occupation of West Bank, Golan Heights and the invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Hence, where the US maintained close relations with Israel to contain Soviet Union and its client states in the region, Israel enjoyed the unprecedented support which helped it in gaining the military superiority over its neighbours.

Likewise, the role of Iran had remained prominent during the Cold War. The CIA coup of 1953 replaced the short lived democratic government of

Muhammad Mussadegh with that of Muhammad Reza Shah, famously known as *Shah of Iran*. Right after the coup, Shah cemented personal ties with the presidents of the US that helped him in elevating his stature. It was manifested in 1955 when Iran entered into Baghdad Pact (an anti-communist alliance) and then again in 1959 when the bilateral defence agreement was signed which made the US committed to the Iranian security.¹² The defence agreement was further strengthened after the sale of F-4, F-14 and F-15 fighter jets to Iran by the US throughout 1960s and 1970s.¹³ It is noteworthy that the US supply of arms to Iran far exceeded its combined supplies of weapons to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Pakistan and India.¹⁴ Moreover, the US also ensured that Iran would assume the role of 'the policeman' of the Persian Gulf after the withdrawal of the British in 1971. It was done to prevent the Soviet expansion which was evident through the communist insurgencies in Southern Yemen and Oman and hence, Iran became the chief recipient of the US arms between 1970 and 1979 which were worth \$8.3 billion.¹⁵ During the Cold War, the US objectives revolved around containing the spread of communism, ensuring the security of Israel and to maintain the steady flow of oil. Iran became the chief client state of fulfilling each of these objectives. With regards to Communism, Iran feared the Soviet expansion as much as the US due to its common border and historical experiences of Russian takeover of Iranian territories during Russo-Persian wars.¹⁶ Similarly, both the US and *the Shah* were repulsive of the pan-Arabism propagated by Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser – a major ally of the Soviets.¹⁷ Unlike many Arab states, Iran also had much friendly relations with Israel.¹⁸ Finally, owing to its geostrategic position in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, Iran was the major player in the transportation of oil. All these factors became the driving force behind the convergence of US-Iran interests and the existence of special bond between them.

Arab's Enmity towards Israel and Iran

The exceptional prestige of both Israel and Iran coupled with their strong ties with the US made the native Arab states paranoid. The division of Palestinian Arab Territory (PAT) into Arab and Jewish states was seen as the colonization plot by the Arab states. In the similar manner, the granting of power to Iran in the Persian Gulf Region (PGR) was perceived yet another attempt of undermining the authority of Arabs.¹⁹ Hence, both Israel and Iran had to experience the hostilities by the Arab States which aimed at reviving their authority over their tradition base of power i.e. the Middle East.

Israel and the Existential Threat from the Arab Neighbourhood

From the very beginning, Israel had to experience the hostility from its neighbouring Arab states which significantly influenced its regional policy. Being rather aggressive towards Jews owing to the historical antagonism, religiously motivated sentiments and the existence of a non-Arab state in an otherwise predominantly Arab region, the grievances of the Arab states were intense. To further aggravate the situation was the influx of Palestine refugees that insinuated both the economic and security concerns for the neighbouring Arab states.²⁰ Hence, the natural outcome was to avert the further deterioration of the regional dynamics which prompted Arabs to attack Israel. In an attempt of regaining the PAT, the neighboring Arab states initiated the first Arab-Israel war in 1948.

The 1948 war was initiated just after the proclamation of Israel as a state. Therefore, this conflict was taken as the existential threat to Israel. Nevertheless, the differences and divisions within the Arabs' alliance fractured the cohesive capability and led to their defeat. Moreover, the war favoured Israel's legitimacy as a state through the initiatives of armistice treaties with the neighboring Arab states (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan) that eventually led to the internationally recognized Israel's territorial boundaries under the international law.²¹ Nearly two decades after the first war, the second Arab-Israel war erupted in 1967 which provided Israel an opportunity to expand its territorial control.

Till 1967, the settlements remained intact as per the armistice treaties in post-1948 war. Nonetheless, the prevailing issues of Pan-Arabism by Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Syrian patronage to the Palestinian Armed Groups (PAGs) and Israel's regional advancements through 1956 Suez Canal Crisis and its responsive strikes against PAGs inside Syria led towards the conflictual scenario of 1967 war.²² In a preemptive strike, Israel managed to dysfunction the combined air force of the Arab states. Furthermore, their occupation of Golan Heights of Syria and Sinai Peninsula of Egypt signifies an important event in the region. It helped Israel in silencing the Palestinian groups by expanding its authority over the remaining portion including Gaza and West Bank. Also, by taking effective control of Golan Heights and Sinai Peninsula, Israel assured the prevention of further strikes by PAGs by making these regions as buffer zones. Six years after the 1967 war, the two Arab states – Egypt and Syria – with new regimes, launched the war on Israel in 1973 for two major purposes; regain the lost territories in 1967 war and legitimize their rule in their respective countries.²³ However, the conflict proved

to be damaging for the entire Arab world for certain reasons. First, the perpetuation of war was highly motivated by self-centric policies of Syria and Egypt i.e. to regain their respective lost territories of 1967 which marked Arabs' diversion from the Palestinian cause. Second, Egypt's entrance into the dialogue process with Israel that started with the Camp-David Accords, created an internal scuffle that led to Egypt's expulsion from the Arab League, hence, further injuring Arabs' unity. Eventually, the war could not turn the tides in Arab's favor as Israel not only managed to repel the attacks after the initial setback but also advanced till the capitals of Egypt and Syria.²⁴ Hence, within the 25 years of its establishment, Israel was engaged in three major wars to secure its survival and emerged victorious in each one of them.

Iranian Revolution and the Countermeasures by the Arab States

In the wake of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, all the military support and political backing granted by the US towards Iran during *the Shah* period backlashed severely. Having the most equipped military arsenal in the region and superiority over the Arab states, Iran's adopted the vigorous policy of exporting its revolution and dethroning the Arab rulers. The revolutionary ideology also created the dilemma for the US as from being the "most patronized state" in the region, Iran had become staunchly anti-West. Moreover, the slogan of 'neither East nor West' by Iran also echoed the determination of creating an Islamic pole. Since the slogan could have posed the threat to the bipolar structure, both the US and the USSR provided weapons to Iraq to counter the Iranian threat. On the other hand, the Gulf monarchies provided economic support to Saddam for waging the war against Iran to eliminate the threat to their rule.

Iraq became the centre of focus as it was the natural destination for Iran to export its revolution. The Shi'ite majority comprising over 65 percent of Iraq's total population was already feeling reprehensive by the Baathist rule of Saddam. Hence, Saddam felt threatened as Iranian Revolution could mobilize the native Iraqi Shi'ites as well. Moreover, as per Saddam's estimates, the launching of the attack against Iran could allow him to replace Egypt's leadership role in the pan-Arab movement.²⁵ In terms of capabilities, Iraq possessed advanced Soviet weaponry worth of \$2 billion which were purchased during 1969-1975 and went on to become the biggest recipient of Soviet's arms during 1975-1982.²⁶ In fact during the Iran-Iraq war period (1980-1988), Soviet Union supplied second largest number of arms to Iraq after India.²⁷ Similarly, the US assisted Saddam through

sending its military advisors and providing intelligence and satellite images of Iranian troops' movement which helped Saddam in accurately targeting the Iranian troops by using the nerve gas.²⁸ At the regional level, the Arab states of Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Kuwait provided small arms, mortars and anti-tank missiles to Saddam along with the economic aid in his military adventure against Iran.²⁹

Hence, Iran had to experience the extreme hostility from its neighbourhood in the initial years of its revolution. Nevertheless, after the initial setbacks, Iran managed to repel the Iraqi invasion and advanced inside the Iraqi territory. Eventually, after eight exhausting years of the war, though Iran couldn't export its revolution beyond its territories yet it managed to defend itself. Moreover, the repetitive demands by the Gulf States for the repayment of loans tempted Saddam to invade Kuwait, hence, fracturing the Arabs' accord. After successfully launching its 'Operation Desert Storm' in 1991 against Iraq, the US followed the policy of 'dual containment' against both Iraq and Iran. With the diffusion of Iraq's power, the Arab states remained paranoid and had to outsource their security by allowing the stationing of the US troops within their territories. On the other hand, Iran cemented its ties with the eastern powers i.e. Russia and China and therefore, strengthened its position in the Middle East.

Iran-Israel and their Advancement towards the Regional Supremacy

The 'identity' of both Iran and Israel in the broader regions of the Middle East caused their rift with the Arab states. Nevertheless, both Iran and not only managed to defend themselves but also successfully broke the Arabs' accord. After weakening the Arab bloc, the 'normative behaviour' as described by the Constructivist School of Thought aptly explains the aspiration by both Iran and Israel to achieve regional supremacy.

To prevent the future attacks by the Arab states, both Iran and Israel adopted two similar strategies; one was the normalization of ties in the region while second was the policy of attaining strategic depth. Israel's peace initiatives with the Arab states of Egypt and Jordan were the first major steps towards normalization. Since both Egypt and Jordan were dependent upon the US security, their successive defeats from Israel led to the signing of Camp David Accords (1978) and Wadi Araba Treaty (1994), respectively.³⁰ Subsequently, Israel also managed to sign a peace deal with the prime actor of Palestine issue – Palestine

Liberation Organization (PLO) – in Oslo Accords (1993). Contrary to the peace initiatives, Israel also neutralize any threat pre-emptively. The proactive policy was aimed at maintaining the strategic superiority over the Arab states which was reflected in two events. First, on June 7, 1981, Israel destroyed the nuclear site of Iraq in its 'Operation Opera'.³¹ The timing of the airstrikes was crucial as Iraq was involved in a war with Iran while it was also receiving the Western support. Moreover, the nuclear reactor of Iraq didn't pose any threat to Israel at that point of time.³² Still, the Israeli airstrike manifested its desire and policy framework of preventing the emergence of a nuclear competitor even at the expense of antagonizing the US or indirectly assisting the enemy states like Iran. Second, the very next year in 1982, Israel carried out its invasion of Lebanon in an offensive manner to curb the threat posed by Syria and PLO. The growing influence of Syria inside Lebanon and the deployment of Surface-to-Air missiles (SAMs) put Israel in a security dilemma.³³ Hence, Israel transformed its regional policy from reaction to Arabs' offenses to proactively diffusing the threat posed by PLO and its Arab allies.³⁴ Through such examples, it is apparent that the early victories of Israel against the Arab states provided confidence to Israeli sense of strategic superiority that allowed it to act with impunity.

In case of Iran, its post-war policies can be categorized into two periods; post-Cold War and post-2003. The war with Iraq along with international sanctions and arms embargo made Iran economically and militarily exhausted. In post-Khomeini period, the new administration led by pragmatist President Hashmi Rafsanjani, resorted to the policy of reconciliation to prevent any further encounter. In its attempt, Iran managed to revive its diplomatic relations with the Gulf States, mainly Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, while also managed to free some of its frozen assets in the United States mainly due to its condemnation of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.³⁵ Iran demonstrated the will of greater engagement with the West after President Khatami's speech of 'Dialogue among Civilizations' and supported the 'Northern Alliance' in Afghanistan against the Taliban. Similarly, in the wake of Soviet's dissolution, the economic interests of European Union became entrenched with that of Iran. With the collapse of Soviet Union and the formation of new Central Asian Republics (CARs), Iran became the cheapest transit route between the untapped energy resources of CARs and the industrial needs of EU.³⁶ Finally, Iran also redefined its foreign policy and with the collapse of Soviet Union, chose to side with Eastern Powers – Russia and China – to combat the unipolar dominance of the US. Since Russia had lost the superpower status, it was easy for Iran to foster ties on equal basis instead of becoming the client state. In this regards, the ties between the two countries grew significantly

in the domains of economy and military as the trade volume increased and Iran started to import Russian arms.³⁷ Hence, from 1988 till 2003, Iran enhanced its regional and global reconciliatory processes for both economic and security purposes.

From 2003 onwards, once Iran managed to stabilize itself internally, its foreign policy saw a drastic shift towards assuming regional role. As a part of its Global War on Terror (GWOT) against terrorist outfits and their sponsoring states, the US invasion of Iraq and the subsequent removal of Saddam favoured Iraq's Shi'ite majority and provided the political, religious, social and economic space to Iran.³⁸ The consolidation of Iranian footprints inside Iraq completed the strategic route for the former in two ways; access to the Mediterranean Sea and supplies to Hezbollah through Iraq-Syria corridor. The success in Iraq also encouraged Iran to mobilize the populations of Bahrain, Yemen and other Arab countries to put pressure on their respective regimes. In this regard, Iran is alleged to be the prime sponsor of non-state actors in destabilizing the Arab world through supporting the mass uprisings in the wake of Arab Spring.³⁹

Iran and Israel: Towards the Path of Collision

Once the efforts of Iran and Israel led to their strategic superiority over the Arab states, it left both these states to compete with no one for regional hegemony but each other. This factor led to their intersubjective perceptions against each other. The intensity of their rivalry was further aggravated through their common policy of engagement outside their (respective) borders which made their collision inevitable. At present, while attempting to subdue the other, both Iran and Israel are confronting each other inside Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, in cyber space, nuclear technology as well as in a broader international system i.e. the alliances with the global and regional powers. However, instead of acting directly against each other, both the states have been utilizing the Arabs' territory as the buffer zone which gives them the larger manoeuvrability and strategic advantage. By making the Arab world their battleground, both Iran and Israel utilize two tactics i.e. deterrence and limited attacks.

Deterrence through Alliance Formation

- ***Arab-Israel Rapport:*** Israel who has been paranoid about the adversarial attitude of the Arabs, now seeks cooperation with the former enemies. This is because of the convergence of interest between the two i.e. to contain Iran's influence in the region.⁴⁰ However, Arabs were always

sceptical about fostering ties with Israel publicly due to the Palestine issue. Nevertheless, the Abrahamic Accords which led to the resumption of official diplomatic relations between Israel and Arab states (UAE and Bahrain), along with the subsequent treaties with Morocco and Sudan, testify the growing concerns among the Arabs and Israel regarding the Iranian threat.⁴¹ The rapprochement between the Arab states and Israel embodies certain reasons. First, it allows both the Arabs and Israel to strengthen their case against Iran's interference through isolating it diplomatically. This would allow them to encircle Iran in order to halt its expansion in the region. Second, the gradual disengagement of the US from the Middle East, especially its reluctance to engage directly in the Syrian conflict, have brought Arabs and Israel closer in a political setup which could transform into a security arrangement against Iran. In fact, the inception of I2U2 paves the way for both Israel and UAE to engage in a multilateral framework in order to create a regional security apparatus in the wake of US withdrawal. This could potentially attract other Gulf States to participate in such a security arrangement. In fact, the during the 2022 visit of President Biden to Israel and KSA, the prospects of Middle Eastern Air Defence Alliance (MEAD) have gained momentum that could encompass the entire Gulf region.⁴² Third, the official recognition granted by the Arab states to Israel, makes the latter a reality in the region while weakening the Palestine cause. This would help Israel in curbing the Iranian involvement in Gaza more efficiently.

- ***Iran and the Resistance Bloc:*** Iran has faced diplomatic isolation as well as economic sanctions since the very beginning of its revolution. The diplomatic isolation where deprived Iran of building friendly partnerships with the states, the economic sanctions made Iran further vulnerable due to inability of upgrading the military hardware. Both these factors forced Iran to adopt unconventional strategies and revisionist policies through nurturing its ties with the non-state actors in the region. The strength of Iranian ties with the non-state actors became more apparent in 2006 when Hezbollah managed to prevent Israeli invasion in Southern Lebanon with the help of Iranian made missiles.⁴³ Though the 34-day conflict ended in a stalemate yet the unwavering determination by a non-state actor in front of a state actor unveiled the power of Iran which it exercises through the non-state actors. In the similar context, the two Islamist parties inside Gaza – Hamas and Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) – also receive funding from Iran and pose a security challenge to Israel.⁴⁴ Iran also finds greater space inside Syria through the ongoing Syrian Civil

War, by bringing the militia members from across the Muslim countries to defend the holy shrines. Hence, Iran has been able to hamper the expansion of Israel from all the three ends i.e. South West (Gaza), North (Lebanon) and North East (Syria). Iran's so-called proxy in Yemen, i.e. the Houthis, also threatens Israel's only passage through the Red Sea into the Indian Ocean. This is because of the persistent threat posed by Houthis' missile to the naval frigate and ships at the strategic chokepoint of Bab al Mandib Strait.⁴⁵ Eventually, through forming the alliance with the Islamist non-state actors, Iran managed to keep an eye on Israeli movements in the region. This resistance bloc also got strengthened after the Iran-Saudi rapprochement in March 2023. The rapprochement that was mediated by China and was further solidified by the visit of Saudi FM, Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud, to Iran in June 2023, paved the way for legitimizing the status of not only Iran but its partners as well. Syria, which was a long-term foe of Israel, was warmly welcomed back into the Arab League after more than a decade. Similarly, a Saudi delegation visited the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, in April 2023 for holding peace talks with Houthis. Hence, Iran was able to strengthen its position in the region through both joining with its state and non-state partners as well as diplomatically engaging with its Arab rivals. Such moves are essentially posing a question that; Is Saudi-Iran rapprochement threatening the prospect of Israeli normalization in the region?⁴⁶

Direct Confrontation

By strengthening their regional position and forming the alliances with their respective state and non-states partners, both Iran and Israel have become emboldened in their conduct against each other. The prime reason is to preserve their historic supremacy in their respective arenas i.e. the PAT and the PGR. Complementing this argument is Israel's staunch opposition to Iranian Nuclear Program. In fact, Israel couldn't develop strong ties with Obama Administration in comparison with other US presidents due to the latter policy of negotiating with Iran and finalizing the Iran Nuclear Deal, otherwise known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).⁴⁷ The US withdrawal from the Iranian Nuclear Deal in 2018 tempted Iran to lessen its commitments to the deal and gradually increase the uranium enrichment to alarm the regional foes. This prompted a series of counteracts allegedly by Israel to strike a detrimental blow to Iran nuclear activities. First, the assassination of Iranian chief nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, in the outskirts of Tehran in November 2020, was associated

with the Israel's intelligence agency.⁴⁸ Second, the underground nuclear site of Natanz was caught in amidst of mysterious explosions in April 2021 on which Iranian authorities blamed Israel of launching cyber-attack.⁴⁹ Finally, Israel's attacks on Iranian targets are not limited to the nuclear-related activities, in fact, Israel has been consistently targeting Iranian-linked targets in Syria⁵⁰ and has also carried out an attack on Iran's Revolutionary Guard's ship off the Yemen coast.⁵¹

Contrary to it, Iran has always relied upon its proxies to counter Israel. The utilization of proxies has served Iran two purposes. One, it prevented Israel from actively causing harm to Iran itself while second, it made Israel occupied within its own boundaries without significantly implementing the expansionist policies. The prime proxy groups through which Iran operates are Hezbollah and Hamas. Hezbollah has become the prime concern for Israel due to its stockpiles of rockets which is a consistent security threat for the latter.⁵² On the other hand, Hamas poses an internal threat. Being the social, political and military force in Gaza, Hamas consistently fires rockets towards Israel.⁵³ Nevertheless, as Israel has become increasingly involved directly against Iran, the reciprocal act on the behalf of Iran is inevitable. The diplomatic missions of Israel have been consistently attacked across the world with the most recent incident occurred in India where a small bomb detonated near the Israeli embassy.⁵⁴ In the Persian Gulf, where Iran is a formidable force, Israeli ships have been targeted repeatedly first in the Gulf of Oman, then near the coast of UAE.⁵⁵ The attacks on both the embassies and ships have been attributed to Iran as what seems to be the growing direct confrontation between Iran and Israel.

Conclusion

Iran and Israel have acquired the central position in the geopolitical proceedings of the Middle East. Through their historical experiences both the states have adopted two opposite yet interlinked approaches of rapprochement and assertiveness. The primary aim of both the states was to counter the Arabs' hegemony in the region for which both the states have successfully manoeuvred their regional policies. Both the states have employed the tactics of engaging with the enemy outside their territory. In this manner, Iran has been more successful in developing the network of its partners and engaging with the threats inside Iraq and Syria. However, both Iran and Israel have also activated the diplomatic channels to consolidate their diplomatic clout in the region. Nonetheless, Israel seems to be more successful in reaching out to other states in a more positive manner. Israel has diplomatic recognition in Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco,

Sudan, UAE and Bahrain in the region. It also shares normal ties with Oman, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. On the contrary, Iran still struggles to reach out to majority of Sunni Arab states. Eventually, both Iran and Israel have been unfolding their rivalry in the Middle East through the same policies which had been adopted during their respective conflicts with the Arab states i.e. aggressively responding to the threats and maintaining the regional supremacy. However, unlike the majority of Arab states, Iran and Israel are internally strong, have indigenous technology and has close association with the global powers. All these factors intensify their mutual enmity and aspire them to become the prime states in the regional hegemonic competition while overshadowing the traditional influence of Arab states in the Middle East.

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