ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

**SECOND CYCLE DEGREE IN
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

.....

IRAN'S GRAND STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: AN ASSESSMENT THROUGH THE LENS OF AUTHORITARIAN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Dissertation in Peacekeeping, Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution

Supervisor

Prof. Roberto Belloni

Defended by

Valentina Riad

Graduation Session July 2026

Academic Year 2025/2026

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 3

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS 4

INTRODUCTION 5

CHAPTER 1: IRAN'S CULTURE OF RESISTANCE 13

1.1. Historical roots of Iran's culture of resistance 14

1.1.1. The Iranian Revolution 14

1.1.2. The hostage crisis 20

1.1.3. The Iran-Iraq War 22

1.2. Ideological roots of Iran's strategic culture of resistance 26

1.2.1. The memory of Karbala and the centrality of martyrdom 26

1.2.2. The concept of jihad 33

CHAPTER 2: IRAN'S STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE 38

2.1. Theoretical framework 38

2.2. Iran's Grand Strategy of Resistance 49

2.3. Iran's Grand Strategy as an example of ACM 54

2.3.1. Discursive practices 55

2.3.2. Spatial practices 56

2.3.3. Economic practices 57

2.4. Regional applications 59

2.4.1. Iraq 60

2.4.2. Lebanon 62

2.4.3. Syria 65

2.4.4. Yemen 67

CHAPTER 3: IMPLEMENTING RESISTANCE: IRAN'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE GAZA WAR 70

3.1. Iran – Palestine relations 71

3.2. Understanding Iran's Engagement in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict 81

3.3. Iran, Gaza, and the Axis of Resistance 82

3.4. Iran's Authoritarian Conflict Management in Gaza 84

3.4.1. Discursive practices 85

3.4.2. Spatial practices 91

3.4.3. Economic practices 99

CONCLUSION 104

4.1. Evaluating ACM as the theoretical framework 106

4.2. Assessing Iran's strategy **107**
4.2.1. Strengths of Iran's strategy 107
4.2.2. Limitations of Iran's strategy 109
4.3. Concluding remarks **112**
BIBLIOGRAPHY ***114***

ABSTRACT

Over the past four decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has pursued what has been described as a "Grand Strategy of Resistance" to preserve and consolidate its position as a regional power in the Middle East. Confronted by a hostile regional environment dominated by Sunni monarchies and facing military asymmetry vis-à-vis the United States and Israel, the Iranian leadership developed the doctrine of "forward defense" as a means of ensuring regime survival through deterrence rather than conventional military superiority. Initially conceived as a defensive strategy, it evolved into a transnational network of state and non-state partners, commonly known as the Axis of Resistance, enabling Iran to project influence across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine while minimizing the costs of direct confrontation.

This dissertation examines the impact of Iran's strategy on the achievement of the Islamic Republic's strategic objectives in the Middle East. To answer this question, it adopts the theoretical framework of Authoritarian Conflict Management, which conceptualizes conflict not as a problem to be resolved but as a political instrument to be shaped and exploited in pursuit of strategic goals.

Using the Gaza War as a critical case study, the dissertation argues that Iran's strategy has been only partially successful. On the one hand, it enabled Tehran to expand its regional influence and consolidate its role as a pivotal actor through a network of allied state and non-state partners. On the other hand, the same mechanisms that strengthened Iran's regional position also generated significant vulnerabilities, increasingly exposing the Islamic Republic to direct confrontation with its principal adversaries. The findings suggest that while Iran's strategy constitutes an effective form of authoritarian conflict management in the short term, its long-term capacity to ensure regime security and regional stability remains uncertain.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACM	Authoritarian Conflict Management
AIO	Authoritarian International Order
ARMISH	United States Military Mission with the Imperial Iranian Army
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CSIS	Canadian Secret Intelligence Services
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
IFT	Informal Funds Transfer
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
LIO	Liberal International Order
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PIJ	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
PKK	Kurdistan Workers' Party
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
SCIRI	Supreme Council of Iraq
TBML	Trade-based Money Laundering
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council

INTRODUCTION

On May 17, 2005, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi undertook a landmark visit to Baghdad, where he met with Iraq's newly elected Prime Minister, Ibrahim al-Jaafari. This was the first visit by a high-ranking Iranian official to Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein, marking a significant moment in post-war regional diplomacy. In his speech, Kharrazi affirmed the Islamic Republic's commitment to supporting Iraq's political and economic reconstruction and pledged to contribute to improving the country's security conditions (Esfandiari, 2005).

Beyond expressing solidarity with the new Shia-led government, Kharrazi's visit carried broader strategic significance, as it signalled Iran's intention to assert its role as a regional power and to ensure that its status and interests were acknowledged in the evolving Middle Eastern order. Choosing Baghdad for this message was particularly symbolic: at that time, Iraq stood at the centre of competing regional and international agendas, and its future was widely perceived as pivotal to the balance of power in the Middle East.

Kharrazi's visit to the Iraqi capital thus encapsulates Iran's ascent in the regional hierarchy – an ascent shaped by the interplay of three key factors: its geopolitical significance, its enduring ideological appeal rooted in Shia identity, and the catalytic effect of external rival missteps.

Geopolitical significance. Geography constitutes a central pillar of Iran's foreign policy, as the Islamic Republic is located at a strategic intersection between the Arab, Turkish, Russian and Indian worlds. Its territory sits at the nexus of multiple geopolitical fault lines and trade corridors, granting Tehran a unique vantage point in straddling key transit routes that connect the Middle East and the Persian Gulf to Central and South Asia (Muñoz, 2008).

Beyond its location, Iran retains control over substantial energy resources – possessing the world's second-largest proven natural gas reserves and some of the largest oil pools – and exerts influence over critical maritime chokepoints.

Indeed, it maintains coastlines on three strategically significant bodies of water: the Caspian Sea, the Persian/Arabian Gulf, and the Sea of Oman (Muñoz, 2008).

This combination of geographic position, energy wealth, and maritime access not only enhances Iran's economic and strategic leverage but also underpins its ability to project power and shape the regional environment.

Ideological appeal. The second factor supporting Iran's regional role is its ideological influence. With approximately 90 percent of its population adhering to Shia Islam, the Islamic Republic is the largest Shia-majority state in the world.

The country's association with Shiism has deep historical roots, tracing back to the Safavid dynasty (1501–1736), under whom Iran emerged as a Shia empire in sharp contrast to its Sunni neighbours, most notably the Ottoman Empire to the west. The geopolitical rivalry between the Safavids and the Ottomans for dominance in the heartland of the Muslim world rapidly took on pronounced sectarian dimensions, as the Ottoman sultans positioned themselves as defenders of Sunnism while the Safavids institutionalized Shiism as the state religion. This legacy of religious differentiation endowed Iran with a distinct Shia identity, distinguishing Iranians from most Arab and Turkish populations not only in terms of language and culture but also in religious doctrine and practice (Nasr, 2016).

Iran's ascent as a regional power since the beginning of the XXI century has been bolstered by what Vali Nasr terms the "Shia revival". This revival was symbolically inaugurated in April 2003, when nearly two million Shia pilgrims converged on the Iraqi city of Karbala to observe *Arbaeen*, the commemoration of the fortieth day following the martyrdom of Imam Husayn in 680 C.E – the first of its scale since the ousting of Saddam Hussein, whose regime had long prohibited public Shia observances (Nasr, 2016).

According to Nasr (2016), the Middle East has undergone a shift, from an old to a new regional order. In the "old Middle East," identity and priorities were shaped primarily by Arab interests, and regional order rested on the political weight of Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus – long-standing centres of Sunni authority. By contrast, the new Middle East is increasingly defined by the

identity and agency of non-Arab Shia actors, with Iran – a Persian and Shia-majority state – uniquely positioned to benefit from this shift (Nasr, 2016).

Therefore, although the Shia revival may have originated in post-2003 Iraq, it has amplified Iran's influence and enabled it to assume a leading role in shaping the region's new balance of power.

External dynamics. Finally, strategic missteps and destabilizing interventions by rival powers – notably the United States, Israel, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) led by Saudi Arabia – have created political and security vacuums that the Islamic Republic has been quick to exploit (Kidwai, 2020).

Firstly, the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq dismantled a key regional counterweight to Tehran. Iran's post-2003 strategy in Iraq has been driven by a clear objective: to transform its former adversary into a dependent client state, thereby neutralizing any future threat from across the border. It was successful on three fronts: political, military and economic. Politically, Tehran has backed key allies, most notably ensuring the premiership of Nouri al-Maliki during the 2010 elections, despite his bloc winning fewer seats than rival Ayad Allawi, a staunch critic of the Islamic Republic. Militarily, Iran gained considerable legitimacy in Iraqi eyes through its swift and decisive support in the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) / Daesh in June 2014, becoming the first foreign power to provide arms, advisors, and billions of dollars in aid to Baghdad. Economically, Tehran has deepened Iraqi dependency through trade dominance, credit lines, and reconstruction funds, leaving Iraq's economy – aside from oil – largely reliant on its eastern neighbour (Kidwai, 2020).

Secondly, Israel's 2006 war in Lebanon inadvertently bolstered Hezbollah, one of Iran's most important regional allies, and further solidified Tehran's influence in Palestine.

In Lebanon, Iran, through Hezbollah, has established an extensive and effective network of social services, hospitals, mosques and a satellite TV network. By providing essential services at times when the Lebanese government itself struggled to do so, Hezbollah has emerged as a "state within a

state," dominating southern and eastern Lebanon while granting Teheran direct influence on the ground.

Similarly, in Palestine, Iran has gradually filled a political vacuum created by the absence of substantive peace initiatives and the diminishing prospects of a viable two-states solution. The 2006 Israeli attack further provided the Islamic Republic with an opportunity to reinvigorate its financial and military support for the militant group Hamas, thereby consolidating its presence in the area (Kidwai, 2020).

Lastly, GCC-led interventions in Syria and Yemen have failed to achieve their intended objectives, instead exacerbating instability and expanding Iran's strategic reach. In Syria, the inability of Gulf states to dislodge Bashar al-Assad has allowed Tehran to solidify its position as his primary backer, ensuring the survival of a crucial ally and safeguarding its influence in the Levant. In Yemen, the protracted conflict has seen Iran-backed Houthi rebels maintain the capacity to strike Saudi territory, while the Saudi-led coalition has struggled to achieve a decisive victory. These setbacks have not only undermined GCC influence but have also enabled Iran to project power deeper into both the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula (Kidwai, 2020).

Having acquired the status of regional great power, the Islamic Republic faced the challenge of preserving and consolidating such position. To this end, over the past four decades Tehran has pursued what Nasr (2025) describes as a "Grand Strategy of Resistance".

Confronted by a regional environment dominated by Sunni monarchies and acknowledging its military inferiority to its two main adversaries, the United States and Israel, Iranian leaders recognized that regime survival depended less on achieving battlefield superiority than on establishing credible deterrence.

This strategic logic gave rise to the doctrine of "forward defense", initially conceived as a defensive mechanism designed to keep threats away from Iranian territory. Over time, however, it evolved into a far-reaching network of state and non-state partners commonly referred to as the Axis of Resistance. Central to this regional strategy is what Afshon Ostovar (2019) terms "militant

clientelism": Iran’s practice of cultivating and sustaining long-term relationships with armed non-state actors that are ideologically aligned with its revolutionary values and dependent on its material and logistical support. These groups act as both proxies and partners, enabling Iran to project power into contested spaces such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, while avoiding the costs and risks associated with direct military confrontation. Through irregular forms of warfare, including guerrilla operations, and proxy warfare, they have become essential instruments of Iran's regional power projection and deterrence strategy.

Research question.

This thesis addresses the following research question: **what impact has Iran's strategy had on the achievement of the Islamic Republic's strategic objectives in the Middle East?**

To answer, this dissertation adopts the framework of Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM), as developed by Lewis et al. (2018). The choice of this framework stems from the observation that Tehran's approach to regional conflicts extends beyond conventional foreign policy: rather than seeking to resolve conflicts through negotiated settlements or power-sharing arrangements, Iran’s Grand Strategy of Resistance aims at shaping, containing, and exploiting conflict dynamics in ways that advance its security interests and regional influence.

From an ACM perspective, conflict is not necessarily viewed as a problem to be eliminated, but as a political condition that can be managed and instrumentalized to produce favorable outcomes. Consistent with such logic, Tehran employs coercive mechanisms of discursive, spatial, and economic control to conflict dynamics; rather than pursuing peaceful resolution, Iran seeks to regulate political narratives, influence strategic territorial spaces through allied actors, and leverage economic resources to sustain networks of dependence and loyalty. The central question is thus not whether Iran resolves conflicts, but whether its management of conflict has effectively contributed to the realization of the Islamic Republic's broader strategic objectives in the Middle East.

Thesis' main argument.

This dissertation argues that Iran's strategy has been only partially successful in achieving the Islamic Republic's strategic objectives. On the one hand, it enabled Tehran to consolidate its position as a pivotal regional actor, while expanding its sphere of influence through a network of allied state and non-state partners across the Middle East. On the other hand, the very mechanisms that contributed to Iran's rise as a regional power also generated significant strategic vulnerabilities: as the Gaza War and its international repercussions demonstrate, a strategy originally designed to keep conflict beyond Iran's borders has increasingly exposed the Islamic Republic to direct confrontation with its principal adversaries. Consequently, while Iran's approach can be understood as an effective form of authoritarian conflict management in the short term, its long-term capacity to guarantee regime security and strategic stability remains deeply contested.

Research significance.

This thesis addresses a critical gap in the literature on conflict resolution by engaging with non-Western paradigms of peacebuilding. While much of the existing scholarship remains grounded in liberal peace theories, this study seeks to broaden the analytical framework by engaging with Iran's resistance-oriented approach. In doing so, it contributes to a growing body of work that questions the universality of Western peacebuilding norms and highlights the need to understand alternative models rooted in distinct political, cultural, and religious worldviews.

Beyond its academic significance, the dissertation has urgent practical relevance. As the conflict in Gaza continues to escalate and regional dynamics remain volatile, a deeper understanding of Iran's strategic calculus is essential for anticipating future developments and policy responses. The Islamic Republic's ideological and material support for groups like Hezbollah and Hamas is not merely tactical but reflects a coherent and long-term vision for the region. Analysing this model can offer critical insights into the prospects for stability and the potential for negotiating peace on new terms.

Research methodology.

This thesis employs a qualitative, case study-based methodology to examine Iran's model of conflict management. The analysis draws from a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include official speeches by Iranian leaders, government documents, statements issued by institutions of the Islamic Republic, and media content produced by Iranian and Axis of Resistance actors. These sources are complemented by a broad engagement with the scholarly literature on peace and conflict studies, authoritarian conflict management, and Middle Eastern politics.

Thesis structure.

The study is structured into four main chapters, each designed to provide a comprehensive analysis of Iran's strategic approach and its implications.

The first chapter traces the historical and ideological foundations of Iran's regional strategy by examining the emergence of the doctrine of resistance following the 1979 Revolution. It argues that resistance evolved from a revolutionary principle into a defining feature of the Islamic Republic's strategic culture, shaped by historical experiences and rooted in Shia ideology.

The second chapter develops the dissertation's theoretical framework by introducing the concept of Authoritarian Conflict Management and situating it within the broader debate on the crisis of liberal peace and the rise of alternative approaches to conflict governance. It then examines Iran's Grand Strategy of Resistance, focusing on the security rationale underpinning the doctrine of forward defense and the construction of the Axis of Resistance. Building on this analysis, the chapter assesses the extent to which Iran's regional strategy reflects the core mechanisms of ACM and applies the framework to four key conflict arenas (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen).

The third chapter turns the attention to the Palestinian arena and examines the events of October 7, 2023 and the subsequent war in Gaza, paying particular attention to the regionalization of the conflict through the involvement of the Axis of Resistance. It analyzes the role of Hamas within Iran's broader regional strategy and assesses how Tehran sought to shape the conflict through

mechanisms of discursive, spatial, and economic control in pursuit of its strategic objectives.

The conclusive chapter revisits the research question and evaluates the impact of Iran's regional strategy in achieving the Islamic Republic's objectives. Drawing on the findings of the previous chapters, it assesses both the strengths and limitations of Iran's approach to conflict management, highlighting the extent to which the strategy enhanced Tehran's regional influence while simultaneously generating new vulnerabilities. The conclusion argues that, although the strategy proved effective in projecting power and shaping regional conflicts, its ability to ensure long-term regime security remains increasingly uncertain.

CHAPTER 1: IRAN'S CULTURE OF RESISTANCE

مقاومت (*moqawemat*):

From the Arabic root *q-w-m*, which conveys the idea of "remaining firm" and "withstanding pressure." In its basic linguistic sense, the Persian word suggests endurance, perseverance, and opposition to external force or domination (*Dehkhoda Dictionary*).

Semantically, *moqawemat* oscillates between two complementary dimensions: active resistance, which denotes struggle, confrontation and defiance; and passive endurance, expressing steadfastness, patience and refusal to yield (*ArabicLangClub*). Therefore, the term carries both a physical and a moral connotation: it implies not merely the act of opposing aggression, but also a steadfast moral attitude, invoking faith, and perseverance in the face of adversity.

Understanding this conceptual core is essential to grasping what Rivera (2022) defines as "Iran's strategic culture of resistance". As conceptualized by Doeser (2017: 744), strategic culture "structures what options are considered to be appropriate, effective, and productive by a specific actor in decisions to participate in military operations, thereby influencing, but not determining, the actor's behavior." In this sense, resistance constitutes the foundational framework through which Iran constructs political legitimacy, formulates strategic objectives, and envisions its confrontation with the prevailing international order. Nevertheless, this culture of resistance does not rigidly determine Iran's behavior, as the country consistently demonstrates a high degree of adaptability and pragmatism in its strategic conduct (Rivera, 2022).

For this purpose, this chapter aims at elucidating the culture of resistance in Iran and proposes to do so by analyzing its historical and ideological roots.

1.1.Historical roots of Iran's culture of resistance

Writer Mark Twain famously said, "History does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes". In the case of the Islamic Republic, the strategic culture of resistance has been deeply shaped by a collective memory marked by foreign invasions, episodes of near territorial disintegration, and humiliating imperial interventions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Nasr, 2025). These historical traumas did not merely linger at the level of narrative, as they became embedded in the political consciousness of the state.

As Nasr (2025) observes, three historical experiences were decisive in transforming resistance from an ideological motif into a structuring logic of Iranian state behavior: the Iranian Revolution, the 1979 hostage crisis, and the Iran-Iraq War.

1.1.1. The Iranian Revolution

In the decade preceding the Iranian Revolution, the concept of resistance had not yet crystallized into a coherent foreign policy doctrine but rather emerged as a structuring logic of rejection directed against the Pahlavi regime. During the 1960s, popular discontent intensified, largely driven by two central grievances: the regime's authoritarian governance and the widespread perception of its political and economic subordination to foreign powers (Saikal, 1980).

The first dimension of rejection concerned the authoritarian practices implemented by the Shah. Indeed, in the aftermath of Mossadeq's overthrow, he sought to restructure the organization and institutional foundations of the regime in order to secure political control and promote economic stability. Central to this project was the concentration of authority within the monarchy itself. To this end, the Shah relied on two principal mechanisms: economic maneuvering and political repression (Saikal, 1980).

Saikal (1980) explains that economic maneuvering in the Shah's strategy refers to the deliberate use of economic policy, development planning, and resource allocation not primarily for neutral economic growth, but as political

tools to consolidate authority. In this context, the oil industry was crucial because it provided the financial independence and distributive power that allowed the monarchy to centralize political authority while presenting its actions as contributing to modernization and national progress.

The Shah performed economic maneuvering in two forms. Firstly, through the control of strategic revenues. Oil income flowed directly to the monarchy-controlled state apparatus, enabling the regime to finance development and administrative programs without substantial reliance on domestic taxation or parliamentary approval. Secondly, through development planning. The Second Seven-Year Development Plan (1956–1962) allocated investments across infrastructure, agriculture, industry, and social sectors, thereby stimulating economic growth and employment, while simultaneously selecting which regions and groups would benefit (Salari et al., 2024).

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's consolidation of power also relied heavily on a second instrument: political repression. Following the overthrow of Mossadeq, the regime moved swiftly to suppress dissent by imposing strict censorship on the mass media and banning political organizations, activities, and forms of cultural or literary expression deemed threatening to state security (Saikal, 1980).

The primary instrument of this repressive apparatus was the armed force, systematically deployed to eliminate opposition across the political spectrum. Through executions, imprisonment, and exile, the military dismantled organized movements such as the National Front and the Tudeh Party, suppressed tribal uprisings in the south, and carried out extensive internal purges, most notably the 1954 army purge, during which hundreds of officers accused of Tudeh sympathies were tried by military tribunals and subjected to severe sentences (Saikal, 1980).

Alongside the military, the SAVAK (*Sazman-e Ittila'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar,* National Security and Information Organization) became another pillar of the Shah's repressive system from 1957. Expanded into a vast intelligence network with thousands of full-time agents and numerous informers, it had the power to censor the media, screen applicants for government positions, and

employ coercive methods, including torture, to suppress dissidents. In the words of one British correspondent, SAVAK was the Shah's "eyes and ears, and, where necessary, his iron fist" (Abrahamian, 1982).

Nevertheless, the Shah's authoritarian practices had not been possible were they not accompanied by US aid. Washington pursued a strategy of long-term involvement in Iran across five strategic domains: oil industry, economy, military, system of alliances and cultural reforms.

The oil industry. In the aftermath of the oil nationalization crisis, both Tehran and Washington were eager to resolve the Anglo-Iranian dispute: the Shah's government faced an urgent need for capital and international legitimacy, while the United States sought to prevent Soviet influence over Iran's strategic resources and to secure a direct American presence in the country's most vital economic sector. These converging interests led to the establishment of an international consortium of major Western oil companies to assume operational control of Iran's oil industry, replacing the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Formed in 1954, the consortium included British Petroleum with a 40 percent share; five American companies holding a combined 40 percent (8 percent each); Royal Dutch Shell with 14 percent; and the Compagnie Française des Pétroles with 6 percent. This solution, however, entailed significant political and economic costs for Iran: indeed, despite formally recognizing Iran's ownership of its oil resources, in practice foreign companies – first of all, US companies – exercised effective control over production, pricing and marketing, allowing Washington to influence the direction of Iranian economic development (Saikal, 1980; Mallinckrodt, 2019).

Economic aid. In the aftermath of Mossadeq's overthrow, the Eisenhower's presidency considered substantial economic assistance essential to stabilizing the Shah's regime and facilitating Iran's economic recovery (Eisenhower, 1963). Consequently, Washington provided significant financial assistance, averaging approximately $45 million annually over the following three years. (*U.S. Office of Statistics and Reports*), making Iran one of the largest recipients of U.S. economic aid outside the NATO alliance during the postwar period. Concurrently, the provision of financial assistance was accompanied by an

extensive American technical and advisory presence in Iran: hundreds of U.S. officials, development experts, and private investors entered the country to support economic planning, oversee the allocation of aid, and transfer technical expertise (Saikal, 1980).

Military aid. The consolidation of American influence in Iran's economic sphere was paralleled by extensive U.S. involvement in the expansion and modernization of the country's armed and security forces. Beginning in 1942, the Shah initiated a process of military reorganization with the establishment of a U.S. military advisory presence, which was formalized the following year as the United States Military Mission with the Imperial Iranian Army (ARMISH). This cooperation intensified after 1953, when, under the framework of the Mutual Security Act, Iran received approximately $535.4 million in American military grants – the largest allocation to a non-NATO country at the time (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Moreover, American support extended to Iran's internal security apparatus: the central intelligence and surveillance organization, SAVAK, was established with assistance from the CIA (Saikal, 1980).

System of alliances. Alongside economic and military assistance, the United States sought to integrate Iran into a broader regional security architecture aimed at containing Soviet influence during the Cold War. Building on this vision, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles advanced the concept of a "Northern Tier" alliance linking Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran into a defensive belt along the Soviet Union's southern flank, as outlined in a U.S. State Department bulletin in February 1953. The strategy rested on the assumption that these states, united by a common anti-communist orientation and supported by American resources, could prevent the diffusion of communist influence into the Arab world, particularly toward Egypt and the wider Middle East (Saikal, 1980). This U.S. strategic vision ultimately materialized in the Baghdad Pact of 1955, later reconstituted as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).

Cultural reforms. Cultural and educational initiatives served as key vehicles for the dissemination and normalization of Western norms within Iranian society. Among the most prominent were the American-

sponsored Franklin Book Program in Tehran and the Imperial Foundation for Translation and Publishing: through the translation and circulation of Western texts, these institutions shaped intellectual discourse by promoting in Iran narratives aligned with modernization, anti-communism, and close cooperation with Western powers (Saikal, 1980; Khalifa and Haddadian-Moghaddam, 2024).

To summarize, in the aftermath of the 1953 coup, the Shah's regime relied heavily on U.S. political, economic, and military backing for both its short-term stability and long-term durability, thereby narrowing its autonomous policy choices in favor of a distinctly pro-Western – predominantly pro-U.S. – orientation in domestic and foreign affairs alike. From Washington's perspective, deepening engagement with Iran served clear strategic objectives: it sought not only to secure access to Iran's strategic oil resources but also to cultivate a reliable regional ally that could function as a frontline bulwark against Soviet expansion during the Cold War (Wise, 2011). By the 1960s, these dynamics crystallized into what Saikal (1980) describes as Iran's "dependence relationship" with the United States.

Rad (2022) explores how these dynamics were perceived within the Iranian society, emphasizing that external support for the Shah did not remain confined to the geopolitical sphere but deeply penetrated domestic conceptions of legitimacy. The visible presence of American advisors, together with considerable U.S. economic, political, and cultural influence, contributed to a widespread perception that the monarchy functioned less as an autonomous national authority than as an extension of external power. In Rad's (2022:18) words, "the fact that the shah was viewed as alien, or disconnected from many of his subjects, was a key component of his failure and the rising momentum of the revolution". Indeed, across diverse constituencies (clerics, nationalist intellectuals, leftist activists, and segments of the urban middle class) the regime increasingly appeared to be sustained by external support rather than popular consent. In this sense, structural dependence gradually translated into a crisis of political legitimacy, fostering a powerful social narrative that portrayed the Shah as a puppet of Western, particularly U.S., interests (Rad, 2022).

It was within this broader climate of popular grievance that Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as a central figure of the Revolution. He articulated the revolutionary struggle as a quest for independence (استقلال, *esteqlal*). While the meaning of independence varied among different social and political groups, by the 1970s opposition to the United States had become one of the few unifying elements within an otherwise fragmented political landscape. Nasr (2025) points out that in this context, *esteqlal* was widely understood not simply as juridical sovereignty, but as active resistance to American influence in Iran's political, economic, and military affairs. Anti-Americanism therefore emerged as a central pillar of his ideological framework, presenting the United States as the primary obstacle to Iran's sovereignty.

Drawing on Islamic symbolism, Khomeini famously labeled the United States the "Great Satan" (شیطان بزرگ, *sheitan-e bozorg*), a term rooted in Abrahamic religious imagery that framed Washington as a moral and political adversary confronting not only Iranians but oppressed peoples worldwide (Nasr, 2025). In other words, Khomeini situated the Iranian struggle within a broader cosmology of resistance, expanding its meaning beyond opposition to a single foreign power into a principled rejection of hegemonic subordination and an affirmation of self-defined sovereignty, ultimately encapsulated in the slogan "Neither Eastern nor Western, Islamic Republic" (جمهوری غربی نه شرقی نه اسلامی, *na sharqi, na gharbi, jomhuri-ye eslami*). First articulated in Khomeini's *Sahifeh-ye Imam* speeches (April 1979), this formula was subsequently codified in the 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic, where Article 152 recites:

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon the rejection of all forms of domination, both the exertion of it and submission to it, the preservation of the independence of the country in all respects and its territorial integrity, the defence of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States.

1.1.2. The hostage crisis

On November 4, 1979, a group of Iranian students seized control of the United States embassy in Tehran. Initially conceived as a short-lived political demonstration, the takeover evolved into a 444-days-long hostage crisis that would profoundly reshape Iran's culture of resistance, as well as its foreign policy doctrine.

The embassy seizure illustrated the practical operationalization of resistance, *i.e.* its transformation into a concrete practice of confrontation, directed primarily against the United States. The event demonstrated that the young Islamic Republic was prepared not only to denounce American influence rhetorically but also to challenge it directly through unconventional and highly visible acts (Nasr, 2025).

In an interview, the movement's leader, Seyyed Mohammad Mousavi Khoeiniha, he stated that "the takeover constituted a protest against the admission of the shah into the United States" (Ebtekar, 2000). As Ramazani (2013) emphasizes, the embassy seizure cannot be understood in isolation from the deeper historical memory of foreign intervention, particularly the CIA-backed overthrow of Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953. For this reason, the militant students framed their action as a necessary defensive measure to neutralize what they perceived as a persistent U.S. threat to the revolution (Ebtekar, 2000; Ramazani, 2013).

Yet the crisis quickly generated opportunities that extended far beyond the hostage takers' original intentions.

Firstly, it significantly accelerated the radicalization of the revolutionary leadership. The hostage issue became a pivotal instrument in the internal power struggle led by Ayatollah Khomeini, who famously characterized the episode as the beginning of a "second revolution," underscoring its transformative political function (Ramazani, 1988): indeed, the crisis provided the Supreme Leader with a strategic opportunity to marginalize and ultimately eliminate nationalist and moderate opponents. In a concerted effort, radical religious forces and segments of the revolutionary Left capitalized on the extensive cache of sensitive documents seized from the embassy, selectively publishing materials that were

used to discredit rival political figures and portray them as compromised by or aligned with U.S. interests. By framing moderation and diplomatic engagement as evidence of complicity with the United States, these groups were able to recast political dissent as betrayal, thereby narrowing the boundaries of legitimate participation within the emerging political order (Ramazani, 1988; Nasr, 2025).

Secondly, the hostage crisis fostered a new sense of political confidence (Nasr, 2025). The response of the United States to the hostage crisis was widely perceived in Tehran as hesitant and ineffective. The Carter administration initially pursued a strategy of calibrated escalation, moving from diplomatic condemnation to negotiation and ultimately to threats, in the hope of securing the hostages' release without direct confrontation. When these efforts failed, Washington authorized a high-risk military operation, code-named Desert One, involving covert deployments of aircraft, helicopters, and special forces into Iranian territory. The operation ultimately collapsed due to mechanical failures and a fatal collision during preparations that resulted in the deaths of eight American service members, foreclosing further military rescue efforts (Brzezinski, 1982; Bowden, 2006).

Khomeini interpreted the aborted U.S. mission as evidence of divine protection, famously declaring that it was "the sand" acting as "God's agent" that destroyed the American helicopters (*Sahifeh-ye Imam*, 1980).

Although a significant setback for the United States, the Desert One debacle bolstered Iranian confidence and emboldened the revolutionary leadership to maintain a defiant posture: for many religious revolutionaries, the hostage crisis ultimately confirmed the efficacy of uncompromising resistance, reinforcing the conviction that direct confrontation could shield Iran from the recurring threat of foreign intervention that had long haunted its modern history (Nasr, 2025).

Ramazani (2005:273) explains that "the hostage taking became the crucible of Iran's largely confrontational foreign policies for most of a decade". In particular, the episode revealed a fundamental orientation in the Islamic Republic's strategic calculus, that is, the prioritization of regime survival and national interests over international legitimacy. In conventional international relations theory, states accrue legitimacy by observing widely accepted norms

and conversely, they lose it when they flout these standards. Yet, for the revolutionary leadership in Tehran, such normative considerations were subordinate to the imperative of preserving the revolution and shielding the regime from foreign threats.

This entailed a strategic preference for asymmetry over parity in Iran's security thinking. Confronted with the overwhelming conventional superiority of the United States and its allies, the revolutionary leadership concluded that matching adversaries through conventional military balance was neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, the crisis demonstrated the political efficacy of unconventional confrontation: a relatively weak revolutionary state had immobilized a global superpower through irregular, and symbolic tactics rather than direct military force. This experience reinforced a doctrine centered on asymmetric pressure (including political coercion, irregular methods, and indirect confrontation) as a viable means of exercising resistance while avoiding conventional vulnerability (Cordesman, 2011).

1.1.3. The Iran-Iraq War

Although the Revolution "birthed" the Islamic Republic, it was the Iran-Iraq War that significantly oriented its national security strategy for decades to come, as affirmed by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in a public speech in 2022. The contemporary Islamic Republic is therefore, paradoxically, not solely or primarily the product of the revolutionary ideology and political mobilization that brought it to power in 1979; rather, it has been decisively forged through the failures and perceived successes that emerged from Iran's nearly decade-long confrontation with Iraq and its regional and international allies (Tabatai and Samuel, 2017).

On September 22, 1980, Iraq launched a full-scale invasion of Iran, thus initiating a protracted conflict that would become one of the most destructive confrontations of the late twentieth century.

Saddam Hussein's decision to launch the offensive reflected, in part, anxieties over the transnational appeal of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary

Shia ideology: leaders in Baghdad, indeed, feared that an empowered Shia political model in neighboring Iran might inflame sectarian divisions and destabilize Iraq's fragile internal order, particularly given that its Shia-majority population was governed by a Sunni-dominated political elite (Nasr, 2006; Ataie, 2021).

The Iranian leadership soon came to view Iraq's motives as a pretext, masking a broader campaign of Western hostility towards the revolution, with the United States blamed as the principal architect. The coincidence of the invasion with the ongoing hostage crisis reinforced the perception that the escalating tensions were an attempt by the U.S. to coerce Iran into releasing the hostages. Consequently, Ayatollah Khomeini framed the Iran-Iraq conflict as an "imposed war" (جنگ تحمیلی, *jang-e tahmili*) (Nasr, 2025).

As reported in "The Writ of Imam: Collection Imam Khomeini's Works" (2000), the Ayatollah's wartime discourse placed resistance at the center of Iran's strategic and ideological posture. Presenting Saddam Hussein as a corrupt aggressor with whom negotiation was impossible, he framed continued struggle, not compromise, as the only legitimate response, declaring that Iran would resist until victory, "even if it took twenty years". Because the war was portrayed as an externally imposed aggression, resistance was cast as both a national duty and an existential necessity, to be sustained despite isolation and material constraints through reliance on domestic mobilization and endurance. Accordingly, the wartime struggle was officially framed as a "sacred defense" (دفاع مقدس, *defa'e moqaddas*), a powerful concept that became central to the Islamic Republic's ideological and mobilizational discourse (Rad, 2022; Nasr, 2025).

Although the war eventually proved a defeat for Iran, its outcome was filtered through the ideological lenses of the "imposed war" and the "sacred defense". Within official discourse, the conflict came to represent a decisive historical inflection point: it was a rupture with earlier memories of foreign invasions, defeats, and national humiliation and, instead, a moment in which Iran was seen to have defied overwhelming odds. Moreover, the setback was not attributed to faulty strategic assumptions but rather to the extensive international support provided to Saddam Hussein, which Iranian leaders portrayed as

evidence of a hostile and unjust global order determined to punish their country. In this narrative, while military success remained elusive, a different form of triumph was claimed: the endurance of the Islamic Republic and its capacity to sustain resistance despite isolation and pressure from powerful external actors (Nasr, 2025).

The war also led Iran's leadership to conclude that international norms and institutions provided no protection for their country, citing the United Nations' failure to promptly and unequivocally condemn Iraq's invasion as evidence of a biased and ineffective global order. Although the UN eventually issued a ceasefire resolution in July 1982, this occurred only after Iraqi forces had been expelled from Khorramshahr and the frontlines had shifted into Iraqi territory, raising concerns about Iraq's territorial integrity and the survival of Saddam Hussein's regime. From Tehran's perspective, the timing of the resolution signaled an effort to shield Iraq rather than to deliver impartial justice (Mostaghimi and Taromsari, 1997). Concluding that international norms offered little guarantee of protection, Iranian leaders gradually embraced a doctrine of self-reliant security, which over time crystallized into the so-called *Meydan* (literally meaning "battlefield"), that is, prioritizing tangible hard-power instruments over diplomatic engagement in the pursuit of national interests (Nasr, 2025).

It was within this broader context of perceived international abandonment and growing defiance toward prevailing global norms that Khomeini consolidated and expanded the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a central pillar of the Republic's wartime strategy. Conceived as both an ideological vanguard and a military instrument of resistance, the IRGC developed operational practices that blended revolutionary mobilization with forms of irregular and asymmetric warfare intended to offset Iran's conventional weaknesses. These methods included the extensive use of volunteer militias such as the *Basij*, mass infantry assaults framed as acts of sacrifice, guerrilla-style operations, and the cultivation of transnational proxy networks beyond Iran's borders – operating at the margins of, or in tension with, established international norms of warfare and conduct (Ostovar, 2016; Alemzadeh, 2021; Nasr, 2025).

Beyond the battlefield with Iraq, the war also became a catalyst for the Islamic Republic's broader regional ambitions: it enabled Tehran to fully embed the Palestinian cause. As the conflict escalated, the United States expanded its military presence in the Persian Gulf to protect Arab monarchies and deter Iranian attacks, a posture that Iranian leaders interpreted as constituting an "undeclared war" (Mousavian and Shahidsaless, 2014).

Within this context of perceived encirclement, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon offered Iran a new strategic and ideological opening: Khomeini framed Israel as an extension of Western, particularly U.S., imperial power and therefore inherently hostile to the values and interests of the Islamic Republic. By positioning Iran at the forefront of resistance to Israel and championing the Palestinian cause, the leadership sought both to legitimize its revolutionary mission and to gain broader acceptance within a predominantly Sunni Muslim world that shared the defiance towards Israel (Nasr, 2025).

Lebanon consequently assumed growing importance within Iran's wider regional strategy. Khomeini strategically linked the conflict with Iraq to the liberation of Palestine in the widely circulated slogan that "the road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala," signaling the view that victory in Iraq constituted a necessary step in the confrontation against Israel (Nasr, 2025).

This section has demonstrated that Iran's strategic culture of resistance was forged through recurrent episodes of foreign intervention and deeply rooted perceptions of existential threat. Over time, these historical experiences transformed resistance from a moral and revolutionary ideal into an organizing principle of state behavior, characterized by four interrelated features: a preference for rupture over accommodation, asymmetry over parity, endurance over short-term gains, and the prioritization of political survival over international approval.

The following section turns to the ideological foundations underpinning Iran's strategic culture of resistance.

1.2. Ideological roots of Iran's strategic culture of resistance

The Iranian strategic culture of resistance cannot be fully understood without situating it within the Shia theological matrix from which it draws its symbolic power. The paradigmatic memory of Karbala, together with the centrality of martyrdom and the concept of *jihad*, establish a moral imperative to confront injustice and resist tyranny. However, it was only through the modern reinterpretation of Shiism under Ayatollah Khomeini that these religious paradigms were recast into an activist political doctrine.

1.2.1. The memory of Karbala and the centrality of martyrdom

In Islamic thought, oppression (ظلم, *dhulm*) denotes any act of injustice, or violation of rights, whether committed by individuals, social groups, or political authorities. At its core, *dhulm* signifies the act of placing something outside its rightful order, thereby disrupting both moral balance and social harmony; in practice, it encompasses a wide spectrum of abuses, ranging from personal transgression to systemic injustice and tyrannical rule (Raza, 2025).

The Qur'an explicitly condemns oppression as a grave sin and repeatedly commands believers to uphold justice, even when it entails personal cost.

As stated in Surah An-Nisa (4:135):

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُواْ كُونُواْ قَوَّٰمِينَ بِٱلْقِسْطِ شُهَدَآءَ لِلَّهِ

"O you who have faith! Be maintainers of justice…"

This imperative establishes justice not as an optional virtue, but as a religious obligation, thereby embedding resistance to injustice within the ethical structure of Islam itself (Raza, 2025).

More generally, at the heart of Islamic ethics lies the principle of "enjoining the good and forbidding the evil" الأمر بالمعروف والنهي عن المنكر (*amr bil ma'ruf wa nahi 'anil munkar*). It was within this ethical framework that the Battle of Karbala was elevated as a paradigmatic stand against oppression – a confrontation that came to symbolize the primacy of moral legitimacy over political authority (Raza, 2025).

The Battle of Karbala took place on 10 Muharram 61 AH (10 October 680 CE) and constitutes one of the foundational events in Shia historical consciousness. It followed the death of the first Umayyad caliph, Mu'awiya I, and the succession of his son, Yazid I, whose leadership marked a sharp departure from the true Islamic values of justice. Indeed, his regime was characterized by political repression, moral corruption, and the consolidation of absolute power and, as such, it was contested by several figures within the Muslim community. Among them was Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who firmly refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid, arguing that his leadership lacked moral and religious legitimacy (Sabir, 2017; Newman, 2025).

On the day of ʿAshura, fighting broke out between the two sides. The engagement was brief and militarily unequal, as Husayn's companions were killed one after another. Husayn himself entered the battlefield last: outnumbered, deprived of access to water, and encircled by opposing forces, he ultimately chose death over submission (Sabir, 2017; Newman, 2025). His death was not in pursuit of power, but in defense of the absolute truth and human dignity, as he himself declared in the Sermon of Mina (*al Tawhid*: 34*)*:

"O God! You know that everything we did was not prompted by rivalry for political power, nor for a search for wealth and abundance; rather it was done to demonstrate to men the shining principles and values of Your religion, to reform the affairs of Your land, to protect and secure the indisputable rights of Your oppressed servants, and to act in accordance with the duties You have established and the norms, laws, and ordinances You have decreed."

His decision has been interpreted within the Shia tradition as a deliberate and conscious act of self-sacrifice grounded in moral conviction, that is, a **martyrdom** (استشهاد, *istishhād*). The Arabic term derives from the root meaning "to witness" and "to become a model": a *shahīd* is one who sees and testifies to the truth, not only through words but through action, even to the point of death. By sacrificing his life in defense of truth, the martyr eventually a model, an example worthy of emulation (Ezzati, 1986).

Husayn's ultimate sacrifice transformed Karbala from a seventh-century military confrontation into a lasting moral paradigm: his willingness to confront

overwhelming forces and to accept death rather than compromise with unjust authority became central to Shia collective memory, elevating Karbala into a transhistorical symbol of resistance against tyranny and injustice (Raza, 2025).

The enduring significance of Karbala rests not only on the historical event itself but also on the religious meaning attached to martyrdom in Islamic thought.

Various passages of the Quran contribute to the sacralization of martyrdom, described by Kaur (2010: 445) as "the moment when the body is, at once, liberated from the secular as well as elevated to the sacred" and "performed on the body through the mediation of external agencies, divine or otherwise".

Surah al-Baqarah (2:154)

وَلَا تَقُولُوا لِمَن يُقْتَلُ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتٌ ۚ بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ وَلَٰكِن لَّا تَشْعُرُونَ

Never say that those martyred in the cause of Allah are dead—in fact, they are alive! But you do not perceive it.

The Surah establishes one of the foundational theological principles underlying the Islamic conception of martyrdom: those who die "in the path of God" are not to be regarded as dead, but as possessing a form of spiritual life beyond ordinary human perception and in greater proximity to God. In other words, by denying the finality of physical death, the Qur'anic formulation confers a transcendent meaning upon sacrifice, allowing martyrdom to be interpreted as a continuation of existence rather than its end (Ibn Kathir, 1998).

Surah al-Imran (3:170) :

١٦٩ فَرِحِينَ بِمَآ ءَاتَىٰهُمُ ٱللَّهُ مِن فَضْلِهِۦ وَيَسْتَبْشِرُونَ بِٱلَّذِينَ لَمْ يَلْحَقُوا۟ بِهِم مِّنْ خَلْفِهِمْ أَلَّا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

rejoicing in Allah's bounties and being delighted for those yet to join them. There will be no fear for them, nor will they grieve.

The Surah portray those who die in the path of God as existing in a state of divine favor and spiritual fulfillment: rather than experiencing loss or suffering, the martyrs are described as rejoicing in the grace granted to them and anticipating the arrival of other believers who will follow the same path. The verse thus presents martyrdom as a condition free from fear and sorrow, transforming death into a source of reassurance rather than despair (Ibn Kathir, 1998).

Surah al-Tawbah (9:111)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اشْتَرَىٰ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَمْوَالَهُمْ بِأَنَّ لَهُمُ الْجَنَّةَ ۚ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَيَقْتُلُونَ وَيُقْتَلُونَ ۖ وَعْدًا عَلَيْهِ حَقًّا فِي التَّوْرَاةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ وَالْقُرْآنِ ۚ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِعَهْدِهِ مِنَ اللَّهِ ۚ فَاسْتَبْشِرُوا بِبَيْعِكُمُ الَّذِي بَايَعْتُمْ بِهِ ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ.

Allah has indeed purchased from the believers their lives and wealth in exchange for Paradise. They fight in the cause of Allah and kill or are killed. This is a true promise binding on Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran. And whose promise is truer than Allah's? So rejoice in the exchange you have made with Him. That is ˹truly˺ the ultimate triumph.

The verses remind believers the promise of Paradise as the ultimate reward for those who dedicate their lives to the cause of God, thus presenting martyrdom as part of a sacred covenant in which believers entrust their lives and possessions to God in exchange for eternal salvation. By linking struggle and self-sacrifice to the assurance of Paradise, the Qur'an establishes a powerful spiritual incentive that frames martyrdom as the highest form of religious fulfillment (Ibn Khatir, 1998).

However, as Rabil (2018) argues, for over a millennium Shia ulama tended to shy away from politics. It was only under the leadership of Ruhollah Khomeini that the commemoration of Ashura was transformed into a catalyst for modern political resistance and the figure of the martyr assumed an explicitly political dimension.

The Supreme Leader deliberately framed the early mobilization against the Shah in 1963 around the symbolism of Ashura in an effort to mobilize deeply rooted religious and emotional sentiments. Most importantly, he presented the struggle against monarchical rule as a contemporary continuation of Husayn's confrontation with injustice: the Shah was symbolically associated with the figure of Yazid, while the revolutionary opposition was portrayed as inheritors of Husayn's moral struggle (Kaur, 2010; Raza, 2025). As noted by Gruber (2008: 30), Karbala came to function as "primarily a political message, anchored deeply in religious sentiment that yelled and clamored and shrieked for salvation from tyranny".

The identification of contemporary political struggle with the paradigmatic memory of Karbala fostered a powerful ethos of courage and sacrifice, encouraging many Iranians to perceive resistance to the Shah not only as a political necessity but also as a moral duty and a religious obligation. During the revolutionary period, major protests and demonstrations were frequently coordinated with the commemorations of Muharram, which provided established social spaces for mass mobilization and the dissemination of revolutionary discourse. Ashura thus evolved from a ritual commemoration into a central rallying point for the revolutionary movement, as reflected in Khomeini's own statements: "This revolution is a reflection of the revolt of Ashura. They do not know that weeping over Imam Hussain's martyrdom is to revive the sense that a minor group stood against a major empire. It is a decree directed by Imam Hussain for all people, 'Everyday is Ashura and everywhere, Karbala.' The revolt conveys the message that the revolution should be perpetuated everyday and everywhere" (Raza, 2025).

Kaur (2010: 449) argues that Husayn's sacrifice came to be interpreted as a "manual of action" for the revolution, in which the revolutionary militant emerged as the modern embodiment of the martyr. This development added a new, political dimension to martyrdom: the martyr is not only one who sacrifices the body in the struggle against injustice and seeks union with God, but also one whose sacrifice is formally recognized and rewarded by state authority (Kaur, 2010).

In post-revolutionary Iran, the symbolism of martyrdom has therefore been integrated into a wider political framework, in which it is the state asserting the authority to delineate and regulate the boundary between sacred and secular death. The narrative of martyrdom was so thoroughly politicized that a dedicated governmental body, the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs (*Bonyad-i Shahid va Isaargaran*), was created (Kaur, 2010).

Established in 1979 on the directive of Ruhollah Khomeini, the Foundation initially aimed to support the families of those who had sacrificed their lives during the struggle against the Shah, assisting them in the ritual burial of the fallen. However, the massive casualties of the Iran–Iraq War soon expanded its

mandate: in the 1980s the Foundation became responsible also for the welfare of the dead soldiers' families, including the provision of employment opportunities, pensions, legal services, access to higher education, interest-free loans, and exemptions from military service. The organization was also entrusted with the maintenance of the Martyrs' Cemetery outside Tehran, where thousands of revolutionaries and soldiers are currently buried (Kaur, 2010).

It is evident that, in post-revolutionary Iran, the tradition of martyrdom extends far beyond the confines of theology. The state's intrusion into this symbolic domain becomes visible not only in moments of political conflict but also in the physical organization and visual culture of urban public space. In Tehran, this presence is particularly striking: visitors are often confronted with large-scale murals covering both private buildings and public walls commemorating revolutionaries and soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the 1979 Revolution and, subsequently, during the eight-year Iran–Iraq War (Marzolph, 2003; Rolston, 2017).

A study conducted by Rolston (2017) on more than one thousand murals in Tehran shows that explicit references to the Karbala narrative are common. In many cases, the portrait of a fallen fighter is directly juxtaposed with an image of the veiled Imam Husayn, thereby visually linking contemporary martyrs with the foundational martyr of Shia Islam (see Figure 1).

On some murals, this symbolic association is further reinforced through the depiction of one of the Supreme Leaders, either Ayatollah Khomeini or Ayatollah Khamenei, thus conferring a form of religious validation to the martyrs (see Figure 2).

Moreover, Kaur (2010) notes a recurrent motif in murals: a white dove and a red rose (see Figure 3). Representing the symbol of the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, it functions a seal of official recognition by the State, binding individual biographies and visual representations of sacrifice into a coherent governmental narrative of martyrdom.



Figure 1. The martyr Seyyed Mujitaba Hashemi, a commander during the irregular wars in Kurdistan in 1985, and, top right, Husayn on horseback. (© Bill Rolston)



Figure 2. On the right, Ayatollah Khomeini; at the center, members of Basij paramilitary force; on the left, Ayatollah Khamenei. (© Vahid Salemi)



Figure 3. Portraits of martyrs of the Iran-Iraq. On the bottom left, the Foundation of Martyrs' symbol. (© Fotokon)

1.2.2. The concept of jihad

Another concept that plays a central role in Islam and that was mobilized by Khomeini's political rhetoric is the notion of *jihad*. Before analyzing the Ayatollah's use of the term, it is useful to briefly outline its meaning in the Quran and in Islamic history.

In contemporary discourse, *jihad* has become a highly politicized and contested term: particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, it came to be widely associated with indiscriminate and radical violence, often treated as synonymous with "holy war". For this reason, several scholars (Cook, 2005; Moghadam, 2007; Demichelis, 2021) sought to counter this reductionist interpretation by emphasizing the term's spiritual dimensions, arguing that *jihad* primarily denotes an individual's inner striving to live in accordance with God's will, and that any associated violence is strictly defensive in nature.

Etymologically, *jihad* (الجهاد) derives from the root j-h-d, meaning "to exert" or "to strive". In the Quran, the concept is often expressed as *al-jihād fī sabīl Allāh* (literally, "striving in the path of God"). However, the scope of *jihad* evolved over time. In the Meccan period, *i.e.* prior to the Prophet's migration, *jihad* is rarely associated with organized violence and primarily carries a spiritual or ethical sense, emphasizing the believer's struggle to uphold faith, cultivate moral discipline, and resist sin. However, following the *Hijra* (migration) to Medina in 622 CE, the term increasingly acquires a martial dimension, becoming more closely connected to armed conflict against non-believers (Cook, 2005; Moghadam, 2007; Demichelis, 2021).

The dual nature of *jihad* is expressed in the Quran, whose verses draw a distinction between "lesser *jihad*" (*al-Jihad al-Asghar*) and "greater *jihad*" (*al-Jihad al-Akbar*) – respectively, physical struggle and spiritual struggle.

Surah al-Tawbah (9:73):

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّبِيُّ جَـٰهِدِ ٱلْكُفَّارَ وَٱلْمُنَـٰفِقِينَ وَٱغْلُظْ عَلَيْهِمْ ۚ وَمَأْوَىٰهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۖ وَبِئْسَ ٱلْمَصِيرُ

O Prophet! Struggle against the disbelievers and the hypocrites, and be firm with them. Hell will be their home. What an evil destination!

The verses command Muslims to confront the disbelievers and hypocrites firmly. Classical tafsir (Ibn Kathir, 1998) interprets them as referring primarily to the physical dimension of jihad and emphasizes that armed defense is permitted under conditions where the Muslim community faces threats or aggression.

Surah al-Furqan (25:52):

فَلَا تُطِعِ ٱلْكَٰفِرِينَ وَجَٰهِدْهُم بِهِۦ جِهَادًا كَبِيرًا

So do not yield to the disbelievers, but strive diligently against them with this Quran.

The verses urge believers to remain steadfast in faith, resist sin, and live according to God's guidance. Here, *jihad* is primarily ethical and moral, a personal struggle to uphold truth and righteousness (Ibn Khatir, 1998).

Another important distinction lies in the divergence between Shia and Sunni conceptions of *jihad*. Classical Sunni jurisprudence generally situates *jihad* within the framework of a unified *ummah*, endowed with a divinely sanctioned mandate to defend and, in some contexts, expand the territorial boundaries of Islam. By contrast, Shia understandings are shaped primarily by two defining features: the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and the doctrine of the occultation of the Hidden Imam (Moghadam, 2007; Rabil, 2018).

The first reinforces Shia historical experiences of marginalization and persecution, offering a paradigmatic model of righteous resistance against unjust authority. Consequently, opposition to tyranny and the moral imperative to challenge oppression have become central components of Shia conceptions of struggle (Moghadam, 2007; Rabil, 2018).

The second structures the parameters within which *jihad* may be legitimately waged. In Shia theology, a line of twelve Imams succeeded the Prophet, each endowed with divinely guided knowledge and regarded as the rightful leaders of the Islamic community. The Twelfth Imam, however, in order to escape the violent fate that befell his predecessors, entered into concealment in the tenth century in what is known as the "Great Occultation." Twelver Shias maintain that he will return as the *Mahdi*, an eschatological figure destined to establish universal justice (Momen, 1985).

This doctrine had important implications for the theory of *jihad*, establishing that expansive or offensive *jihad* was effectively suspended until the Mahdi's return. By contrast, defensive *jihad*, *i.e.* undertaken to protect the *ummah* from external aggression, remained an individual obligation (Moghadam, 2007; Rabil, 2018).

Ruhollah Khomeini drew upon Islamic and Shia doctrines of *jihad* to formulate a dynamic and interventionist framework: just as the inner struggle seeks to purify the individual soul, the external struggle aims to reorder the social and political realm in accordance with divine justice.

There are two interrelated dimensions in Khomeini's concept of *jihad*: tyranny and resistance.

In his lectures (1970), the Supreme Leader instructs that the preservation of an individual's faith and moral integrity depends on the existence of a just social and political order. Where such a system is absent, tyranny prevails, which he defines through four distinct characteristics.

Firstly, cultural domination: Khomeini identifies Western influence, particularly that of the United States, as a corrosive force that alienates Muslims from their religious and cultural foundations (Khomeini, 1970).

Secondly, the person and policies of the ruler: a tyrannical ruler (*taghut*) is characterized by personal arrogance, moral corruption, repressive governance, and subservience to foreign powers (Khomeini, 1970).

Thirdly, widespread poverty: foreign exploitation and domestic corruption combine to deprive people of their basic needs, making economic inequality a central feature of systemic oppression (Khomeini, 1970).

Finally, the abandonment of divine law: tyrannical governments are those that rebel against God's command by instituting unjust or "evil" laws in place of Islamic norms. This final dimension provides the theological foundation for the preceding three: Khomeini (1970) maintains that cultural dependency, political despotism, and economic injustice would not have arisen had rulers remained faithful to Islamic principles; conversely, a genuinely Islamic leadership would have resisted foreign domination, prioritized public welfare over personal

aggrandizement, and administered economic resources in accordance with just taxation and redistribution.

Accordingly, Khomeini saw revolt against tyrannical regimes to establish an Islamic government as the only correct path. In his words (1970), “the first [step] is the principle of the governance of the faqih, and the second is that the fuqaha’, by means of jihad and enjoying the good and forbidding the evil, must expose and overthrow tyrannical rulers and rouse the people so that the universal movement of all alert Muslims can establish Islamic government in place of tyrannical regimes.”

By merging the language of *jihad* with that of anti-imperialist and third-world resistance movements, Khomeini broadened its scope beyond the defense of Muslim territory or the restoration of historical Islamic rule: it became a universalized struggle against tyranny as such (Rabil, 2018).

1.3. Concluding remarks

In conclusion, resistance emerged as the defining pillar of the Islamic Republic's strategic culture through a process shaped by three formative historical experiences. First, the 1979 Revolution established resistance as a slogan of independence, expressing the rejection of foreign domination and the aspiration for political self-determination. Second, the hostage crisis transformed resistance into a mode of confrontation, reinforcing the belief that defiance rather than accommodation was the most effective way to challenge external pressure and assert revolutionary sovereignty. Finally, the Iran–Iraq War, interpreted by Iranian leaders as an “imposed war,” elevated resistance from a revolutionary principle to a national strategy centered on endurance in the face of overwhelming threats.

At the same time, resistance drew its normative strength from Shia Islam. The memory of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Husayn provided a powerful moral framework that linked contemporary political struggles to the duty of confronting injustice; likewise, the concept of defensive *jihad* reinforced the obligation to protect the Muslim community against external aggression. Yet it was Ayatollah Khomeini's synthesis of Shia religious symbolism with anti-

imperialist and Third Worldist discourses that transformed these ideas into a broader political doctrine. By portraying the Shah and, more broadly, Western powers, particularly the United States, as forces that subordinated Muslim societies and alienated them from their religious and cultural foundations, Khomeini universalized the meaning of resistance beyond the defense of Iran or Islam alone. Resistance thus became a comprehensive worldview that combined religious legitimacy, political autonomy, and opposition to foreign domination.

The next section will examine how the Iranian leadership translated the culture of resistance into a structured political strategy.

CHAPTER 2: IRAN'S STRATEGY OF RESISTANCE

In a Middle East marked by state fragility and proxy warfare, Iran has emerged as one of the most consequential actors shaping conflict dynamics through indirect, adaptive, and often coercive means: rather than seeking comprehensive conflict resolution, Tehran has frequently pursued strategies aimed at controlling instability, preserving favorable balances of power, and expanding political influence through local partners and asymmetric instruments. This makes Iran a particularly relevant case for assessing how authoritarian powers manage conflict beyond their borders.

The chapter is structured in four sections. First, it outlines the theoretical framework of ACM, placing it into the broader context of the crisis of liberal peace and identifying its main mechanisms. Second, it examines Iran's grand strategy of resistance, focusing on its security logic and reliance on forward defense. Third, it analyzes the extent to which this strategy reflects the core characteristics of ACM. Finally, the chapter applies this framework to four key regional arenas of conflict - Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen - where Iran has adapted its strategy in order to secure influence in the broader region.

2.1. Theoretical framework

In the aftermath of the Global War on Terror, and particularly following interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, scholars have pointed to the emergence of a profound crisis in the liberal peace paradigm: these peacebuilding operations revealed the limitations of externally imposed, top-down strategies centred on democratic transition, electoral processes, and market liberalization, often implemented without sufficient consideration for local preferences, social dynamics, and indigenous conceptions of peace (Chandler, 2017; Mac Ginty,

2024). Furthermore, Cheung (2019) underlines that the promotion of democratic elections in contexts where civic education, institutional capacity, and the rule of law remain weak, risks producing governance systems vulnerable to corruption and elite capture. The cases of Afghanistan and Iraq are illustrative in this regard: despite the establishment of formally democratic institutions, both countries have experienced persistent corruption and ineffective governance, with limited improvements in socio-economic conditions and, in some cases, further deterioration (Cheung, 2019).

Critics therefore contend that the liberal peace framework has done little to advance the emancipation of local populations. Instead, liberal peacebuilding is often interpreted as a legitimizing discourse for Western-led interventions, functioning as a vehicle for the projection of power and the consolidation of a new form of imperialism. From this perspective, the promotion of neoliberal economic models and governance structures serves to reinforce Western hegemony rather than to foster genuinely inclusive and context-sensitive peace (Chandler, 2010; Cooper et al., 2011; Nadarajah and Rampton, 2015).

In practice, these shortcomings have contributed to a transformation in the dynamics of civil war termination, both in terms of how conflicts end and the nature of post-conflict political orders (Toft, 2010; Kovacs and Svensson, 2013).

With regard to conflict outcomes, there has been a marked decline in internationally mediated peace agreements, decreasing from eight cases in 2001 to only one by 2010. As Kovacs and Svensson (2013) argue, the period following 2009–2010 reflects a reversion to the historical norm whereby military victory, rather than negotiated settlement, re-emerges as the predominant mechanism for the termination of civil wars.

At the same time, important shifts can be observed in post-conflict political trajectories. Drawing on an analysis of 130 civil wars, Toft (2010) demonstrates that negotiated settlements are associated with increasing levels of authoritarianism over the long term. This conclusion is based on the relationship between types of war termination and changes in “polity” scores, which range from −10 (fully authoritarian regimes) to +10 (fully democratic regimes).

As illustrated in Figure 1, which compares a state's average polity score at the onset of civil war with its evolution in the subsequent five to twenty years, negotiated settlements tend to produce only short-term gains in democratisation: while an initial improvement in democratic indicators (+6) is observable in the immediate post-war period, over time this trend is reversed by a gradual but statistically significant shift toward authoritarianism. This tendency becomes particularly pronounced in the long term: after approximately twenty years, the average change in polity score (-6) indicates a substantial movement toward more authoritarian forms of governance.

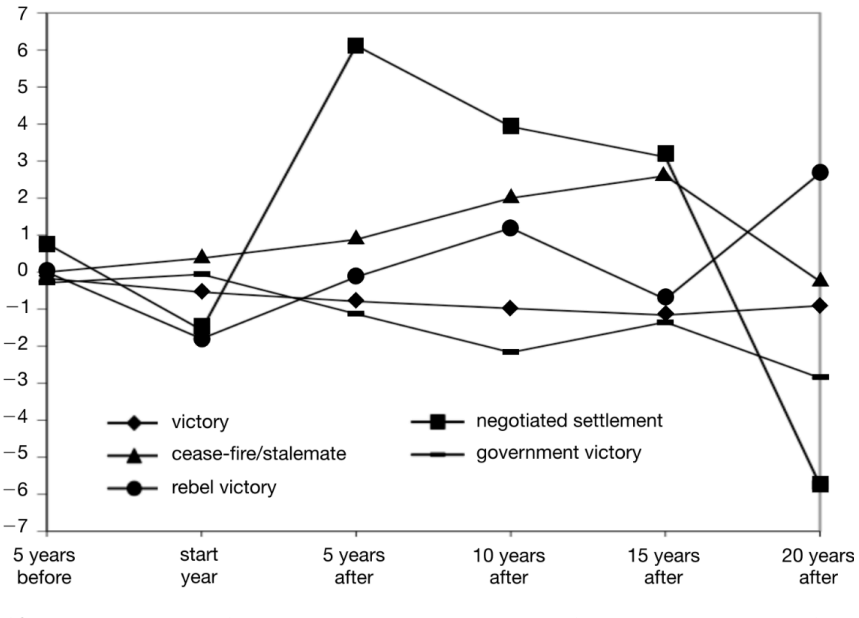


Figure 1. Change in Polity Score before and after Civil War, by Termination Type, 1946– 2002 (Toft, 2010).

Lewis et al. (2018) identify a range of cases since 2000 in which a shift away from liberal mechanisms of conflict resolution has become increasingly evident. This trend is observable not only in instances of outright military victory, but also in the evolution of post-conflict orders following negotiated settlements. One of the most striking examples is Sri Lanka, where an internationally mediated peace process collapsed in 2006 and was subsequently replaced by a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign, culminating in the military defeat of

the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 (Goodhand, 2010; Lewis et al., 2018).

Similar dynamics can be observed elsewhere. In eastern Turkey, the breakdown of peace negotiations in 2015 led to the resumption of conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), accompanied by a shift toward coercive, security-driven strategies. Also, Russia rejected any form of international mediation and negotiation during the Second Chechen War (1999–2003) and, rather, pursued a strategy of military victory, culminating in the establishment of an authoritarian post-conflict order in Chechnya (Lewis et al., 2018). Likewise, China's response to unrest in Xinjiang has relied heavily on coercive state practices and authoritarian governance mechanisms to suppress a low-intensity Uighur insurgency (Odgaard and Nielsen, 2014).

Finally, even in cases where internationally mediated peace agreements were initially implemented, such as in Angola, Cambodia, and Tajikistan during the 1990s, post-conflict trajectories have often converged toward non-democratic regimes (Heathershaw, 2009; Lewis et al., 2018).

Costantini et al. (2026) further identify a pragmatic transformation in contemporary peacebuilding practices, characterized by a move away from conflict resolution (CR) toward conflict management (CM). These two ideal-typical intervention models differ in scope, temporal horizon, and underlying ambitions. On the one hand, CR seeks to address the root causes of conflict through the institutionalization of governance structures and the transformation of underlying political dynamics. By contrast, CM prioritizes the containment and reduction of immediate violence rather than its underlying causes: for this reason, it operates within a short-term timeframe and focuses on managing the manifest expressions of conflict, often relying on military instruments. The distinction can be summarized as "governance-centered and stability-centered approaches" (Costantini et al., 2026: 5).

While CM has traditionally been associated with non-Western powers, particularly Russia and China (Costantini et al, 2026), recent scholarship points to a broader pragmatic turn toward stabilization, suggesting that Western actors, too, have increasingly shifted away from ambitious, transformative

peacebuilding agendas toward short-term and cost-effective strategies focused on security and stability (Belloni and Costantini, 2019; Belloni and Moro, 2019).

Liberal norms have thus proven increasingly inadequate in addressing the realities of contemporary civil war termination, pointing to a deeper structural limitation than what Cooper (2007: 605) describes as a mere "crisis of confidence and credibility" in the liberal peace paradigm. Rather, as Kuchling (2020: 6) suggests, these developments may signal that "we might now be witnessing a real crisis of liberal internationalism".

This shift towards non-liberal mechanisms of conflict management coincides with two significant changes in the international order: namely, the growing influence of Russia and China and the rise of authoritarian middle powers (Kenkel, 2021; Lewis, 2022; Desrosiers and Cheeseman, 2026).

Firstly, China and Russia have become increasingly influential actors within the international system, playing a more prominent role in shaping global responses to conflict and governance crises. Both states have, in various instances, provided diplomatic, political, and at times military support to governments implicated in state violence and serious human rights violations, including cases such as Myanmar, Sudan, Sri Lanka, Syria, and Zimbabwe. Beyond these forms of material and political backing, Beijing and Moscow have also played a significant role in contesting and reshaping normative frameworks within key international institutions: in particular, they have contributed to the gradual erosion of liberal peacebuilding norms by challenging interventionist and human rights–based agendas in multilateral arenas, including the UN Security Council and the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva (Lewis, 2010).

Secondly, over the past two decades, a number of states from the Global South have risen to positions of increasing influence in both the discourse and practice of international politics. To adequately describe them, I shall use Kenkel's (2021) concept of "rising powers," defined by two key characteristics: first, these states have sufficient status to influence responses from other actors; second, they self-identify and act as powers on an upward trajectory. As such, rising powers are not merely adapting to the existing international order but they are actively contesting it, both in its institutional structures and its normative

foundations, challenging a rule-based system in which they have historically occupied a subordinate position (Kenkel, 2021).

A further defining feature of these actors is that they are "locally powerful without being globally dominant" (Desrosiers and Cheeseman, 2026: 17): while they may lack the global reach of great powers, they exert significant influence within their respective regions and increasingly shape regional security.

Notably, many of these rising powers overlap with the BRICS+ grouping – as of today, counting as members Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Iran. As highlighted by the V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report (2024), they tend to exhibit predominantly authoritarian political characteristics. As illustrated in Figure 2, their average Liberal Democracy Index score is relatively low, at approximately 0.20, indicating limited adherence to liberal democratic norms.

Authoritarianism, in this context, can be understood following Linz's classical definition as a political system characterized by "limited, not responsible, political pluralism" where "a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits" (Linz, 2000: 159). In other words, these regimes prioritize political control and regime stability over democratic participation and accountability.

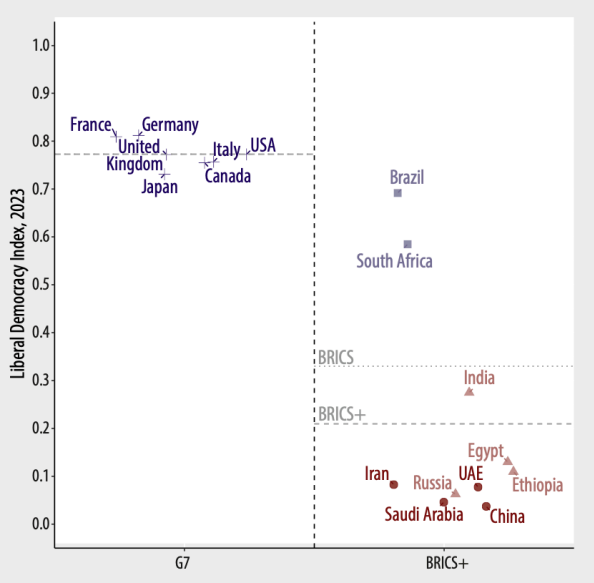


Figure 2. Liberal Democracy Index, G7 vs. BRICS+ (VDem, 2024)

In contemporary international relations, the increasing influence of authoritarian powers – both old and new – has tilted the balance towards what Richmond (2025) names "Authoritarian International Order" (AIO) to the detriment of the Liberal International Order (LIO).

AIO is conceptualized by the author as a multipolar configuration of global politics shaped by autocratic, authoritarian, and institutionally fragile states characterized by significant democratic deficits. Primarily driven by Russia, China, North Korea and Iran, this order is grounded in a realist ontology of enduring antagonism: indeed, within this framework, enmity is treated as a structural condition of international relations, and the use of force is normalized as a legitimate and often necessary instrument for the pursuit of national and geopolitical interests (Richmond, 2025).

Normatively, the AIO stands in opposition to the LIO, since it favors sovereignty and regime stability over liberal values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. Moreover, rather than fostering multilateral cooperation based on shared norms, it often disrupts or selectively engages with international institutions, privileging the principle of non-interference. Additionally, the AIO provides limited space for civil society and grassroots political participation, systematically constraining local agency in favor of centralized authority. In doing so, it prioritizes order over legitimacy, and control over inclusion (Richmond, 2025).

At the core of the AIO lies the notion of "victor's peace," a model in which post-conflict order is fundamentally shaped by the outcome of war rather than by negotiated compromise. In this framework, political reconstruction is imposed in a top-down manner and legitimacy does not stem from inclusive or participatory processes, but rather from the acceptance – whether voluntary or coerced – of the victor's dominance by the defeated actors (Richmond, 2006; 2025). In the author's words (2025: 1389), "the more autocratic, authoritarian and conservative a system is, the more the peace it creates depends on the use of and threat of force, division, polarization, securitization, nationalism and bloc formation". In this sense, peace is not conceived as the resolution to the conflict,

but as its containment through dominance, control, and the continuous management of potential dissent.

The reconfiguration of the international order, together with the resurgence of the "victor's peace" model, entails significant implications for peacebuilding, most notably the emergence of what has come to be known as "authoritarian conflict management" (ACM).

Lewis et al. (2018: 491) define ACM as "the prevention, de-escalation, or termination of organized armed rebellion and other forms of mass violence such as intercommunal unrest through methods that eschew genuine negotiations among parties to the conflict". Rather than engaging in inclusive dialogue or accepting international mediation and constraints on the use of force, ACM approaches systematically rely on coercive state apparatuses and hierarchical power structures to impose order. At its core, therefore, ACM is characterized by the centrality of coercion and the consolidation of political authority, whereby stability is achieved through the suppression of opposition rather than through compromise or institutional transformation (Lewis et al., 2018).

This approach is underpinned by particular assumptions about the causes of conflict. The literature on civil war traditionally distinguishes between explanations based on grievances, economic motivations (greed), and opportunity arising from state weakness (Cederman and Vogt, 2017). Proponents of ACM tend to reject grievance-based accounts and ascribe conflict to the greed of political opponents, or as the result of opportunities arising from weak state capacity (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier et al., 2009).

Consequently, policies informed by ACM focus on eliminating the conditions that enable rebellion, rather than addressing its root causes. Although coercion and the use of force remain central components of this approach, reliance on military repression alone is insufficient to ensure long-term stability; instead, authoritarian conflict management operates through a broader strategy of hegemonic control, aimed at limiting opportunities for mobilization across multiple dimensions of social and political life. This involves the consolidation of power within three key domains: public discourse, space, and the economy. Each of these domains is governed through specific sets of practices – discursive,

spatial, and economic – through which the state seeks to shape narratives, control territory and movement, and regulate access to economic resources (Lewis et al., 2018).

Discursive practices. Within authoritarian approaches to conflict management, the opening of spaces for dialogue and communication is often perceived as counterproductive and potentially destabilizing, as it may enable opposition groups to articulate grievances and mobilize both domestic and international support. For this reason, ACM seeks to constrain dissenting voices and promote a hegemonic discourse aimed at delegitimizing armed opponents, thereby excluding them as illegitimate actors from any potential negotiation process (Lewis et al., 2018).

Authoritarian regimes pursue these objectives through three main strategies.

First, they rely on coercion and repression to suppress alternative sources of information and competing interpretations of events. For instance, governments may restrict journalists' and researchers' access to conflict-affected areas, thereby limiting independent reporting (Lewis et al., 2018).

Second, authoritarian actors actively produce and disseminate official narratives aimed at delegitimizing opposition groups by portraying them as illegitimate, terrorist, or externally manipulated, consequently rejecting claims that their actions are rooted in genuine political or socio-economic grievances (Lewis et al., 2018).

Third, regimes seek to construct a broader hegemonic discourse that resonates with what Gramsci (1971) conceptualizes as "common sense", *i.e.* the set of worldviews and assumptions shared by the majority of the ordinary population. In line with Van Dijk's (1993: 254) argument that "dominance may be enacted and reproduced by subtle, routine, everyday forms of text and talk", authoritarian discourse operates through ordinary language and seemingly natural narratives, that gradually shape public perceptions and reinforce the regime's ideological dominance. Such discourses often draw upon and amplify existing social, ethnic, or political cleavages, constructing and entrenching distinctions between "in-groups" and "out-groups" (Wodak et al., 1999; Van Leeuwen, 2008).

Spatial practices. A second key dimension of non-liberal approaches to conflict management concerns the political, physical, and symbolic control of space. Spatial theory, most notably developed by Henri Lefebvre (1991), challenges the notion of space as a passive "theatre" in which political and military dynamics unfold; instead, it emphasizes how actors actively seek to organize space to provide them with advantages in conflict (Coward, 2004), to comply with their own normative understandings of political and social order (Legg, 2007) and to influence the terms of post-conflict settlement (Toal and Dahlman, 2011). For instance, within liberal peacebuilding frameworks, space is ideally conceived as an open public sphere, a modern-day "agora", where dialogue, interaction, and negotiated resolution can take place. By contrast, within ACM, space is understood as a strategic resource that can be exploited by potential insurgents for organizing, recruitment, resource extraction, and the projection of alternative normative orders. Consequently, authoritarian actors seek to control, centralize and homogenize spatial configurations in order to prevent such uses and to maintain political dominance (Lewis et al., 2018).

In practice, this spatial control is exercised through a range of coercive and administrative measures, including military clients, territorial occupation, the establishment of encampments, and the forced resettlement or displacement of civilian populations. Beyond direct coercion, authoritarian regimes also engage in the long-term transformation of space through urban planning and architectural interventions. This may involve renaming places, organizing state-sponsored commemorative rituals, or replacing historically rooted neighborhoods with standardized apartment complexes or artificial reconstructions of "traditional" architecture, frequently adapted for touristic consumption (Lewis et al., 2018). Collectively, these practices of post-conflict urban reconstruction, serve political objectives, as newly designed urban spaces are often intended to "construct, communicate and normalize a particular sense of identity to the citizenry" (Moser, 2013: 39).

Economic practices. The third key dimension of ACM concerns interventions in the economic sphere. In liberal peacebuilding frameworks, economic programs typically emphasize poverty reduction in order to mitigate

perceived socio-economic grievances, and market-oriented reforms designed to stimulate private sector development and broader economic growth (Lewis et al., 2018).

By contrast, within ACM, economic policy is primarily oriented toward political stabilization, with economic growth constituting an important yet secondary objective. Authoritarian economic governance in conflict-affected settings is generally guided by two interrelated aims: first, to restrict access by insurgent actors to financial and material resources; and second, to channel economic benefits toward loyal clientelist networks that support the regime (Lewis et al., 2018). In this context, reconstruction processes are often embedded within a patronal political economy characterized by opaque and informal mechanisms through which resources are allocated to the regime's allies (Soares de Oliveira, 2011).

Nevertheless, in response to these exclusionary economic practices, rebel groups may seek alternative sources of financing, including organized crime, diaspora contributions, and international aid. Consequently, state actors operating within conflict environments attempt to extend their control beyond formal economic sectors to include illicit economies and transnational trafficking networks. Where necessary, this may involve co-opting, subcontracting, or directly integrating criminal structures into state-aligned networks, thereby consolidating control over both licit and illicit flows of resources (Lewis et al., 2018).

Having outlined the core dynamics of ACM as a theoretical lens, the next step is to assess whether and how these logics are reflected in Iran's regional conduct. Rather than viewing Tehran's foreign policy solely through ideological or sectarian explanations, this thesis situates Iran's behavior within a broader strategic framework centered on regime survival, deterrence, and influence projection.

2.2. Iran's Grand Strategy of Resistance

Iran's regional strategy is best understood as the product of a coherent and fundamentally security-driven conception of national interest, informed by historical experiences of foreign intervention, regional isolation, and asymmetric confrontation with superior military powers (Nasr, 2025).

At its core lies the doctrine of "forward defense": rather than adopting a purely territorial or reactive posture, Iran seeks to externalize potential threats by projecting power beyond its borders and engaging adversaries at a distance, while simultaneously expanding its regional influence through both state and non-state actors (Ostovar, 2019; Yossef, 2019; Azizi, 2021; Mens, 2024; Nasr, 2025).

This strategy pursues three interrelated and mutually reinforcing objectives.

First, it is fundamentally oriented toward regime survival, which remains the paramount priority of the Islamic Republic: in a context marked by persistent external pressure and perceived encirclement, regional engagement is designed to prevent isolation, neutralize threats at a distance, and preserve the stability of the political system established after 1979 (Mens, 2024; Nasr, 2025).

Second, the strategy aims to establish credible deterrence, particularly vis-à-vis the United States and Israel, both of which Iran views as existential threats and imperial powers that destabilize the region in service of Western hegemony. Iran deters adversaries by leveraging indirect and forward-based capabilities, such as proxy militias and missile systems, to raise the costs of confrontation through the threat of retaliation across a dispersed and interconnected regional network (Mens, 2024; Nasr, 2025).

Third, the strategy serves to expand the Islamic Republic's ideological and political reach: by embedding itself in resistance narratives against Western domination and Zionism, Iran positions itself as both the protector of oppressed Muslims and the symbolic leader of an alternative regional order, grounded in Islamic principles and conceived in opposition to the Western-led international system (Mens, 2024; Nasr, 2025).

As Nasr (2025: 7) underscores, Teheran's actions "are not so ideological expressions or random acts of violence devoid of direction"; on the contrary, they are grounded in a structured and purposive strategic logic. Therefore, whatever normative judgments one may hold regarding the legitimacy or morality of this approach, its coherence and intentionality cannot be dismissed analytically.

While the foundations of this approach were laid in the early years following the Revolution, it was primarily during the period between 2001 and 2011, under the leadership of Ali Khamenei, that the conception of resistance – as described in the preceding chapter of this thesis – was consolidated into a more systematic and operationalized grand strategy (Yossef, 2019; Azizi, 2021; Mens, 2024; Nasr, 2025).

In particular, two moments were critical in prompting a recalibration of its regional strategy, turning it into the "Grand Strategy" we are witnessing today: the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab protests in 2011.

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. The US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 fundamentally transformed Iran's security environment as it removed Saddam Hussein's regime and established a sustained U.S. military presence directly on Iran's western border. This development significantly intensified Tehran's perception of strategic encirclement and heightened fears of being Washington's next target. Indeed, unlike the 1991 Gulf War, which was framed as a limited effort to reverse Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the 2003 intervention was explicitly oriented toward regime change and regional transformation, with the stated ambition of promoting democracy and ending authoritarianism and Islamic radicalism across the Middle East. From Tehran's perspective, this broader project placed Iran itself within the scope of potential U.S. action (Barzegar, 2008; Ansarifard and Haji-Yousefi, 2021).

These concerns were further exacerbated by the timing of revelations regarding Iran's nuclear program, which emerged a few months before the invasion of Iraq – an intervention itself justified in part by fears of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (Nasr, 2025). Within Iranian strategic circles, this parallel reinforced the perception of an imminent threat, leading the former IRGC

commander Hasan Kazemi Qomi to conclude that, “after Iraq, it was Iran’s turn” (Rouztalab and Rahmani, 2014: 408).

Moreover, the Iranian leadership increasingly came to interpret U.S. hostility not merely limited to mutual grievances but as a reflection of Israel’s national security thinking: in their opinion, Washington’s primary goal was to prevent Iran from reaching parity with Israel and even weaken it to Tel Aviv’s benefit. This line of thinking made asserting its presence in the Arab world as the Islamic Republic’s strategic necessity (Nasr, 2025).

In this context, in 2003 Iran formally embraced the strategy of “forward defense” (*defa‘ pisehrou* or *defa‘-e roubejelo*), defined as the imperative of defending the homeland by projecting influence and presence in the Arab world, *i.e.* beyond its borders, thereby ensuring a minimum level of “relative security” (*amniyat-e nesbi*) (Barzegar, 2008).

At the same time, Iranian decision-makers, particularly within the IRGC, were acutely aware of the limitations of Iran’s conventional military capabilities. The rapid and decisive defeat of Saddam Hussein’s army in 2003 reinforced the perception that Iran could not withstand a direct confrontation with the United States through conventional means. This awareness contributed to the development of a military approach often described as “defensive realism” (Esfahani, 2018), which emphasized the use of asymmetric tools and indirect engagement: instead of deploying large-scale Iranian forces, Tehran prioritized the mobilization and support of locally staffed militias, whose command, training, and operations were closely managed by the IRGC (Yossef, 2019; Nasr, 2025).

Therefore, forward defense was driven above all by pragmatic security considerations: by seeking victory in deterrence, Iran’s primary objective was “reducing the likelihood of a war in Iran” and “not the likelihood of losing that war once it started” (Barzegar and Rezaie, 2017: 29–33).

The 2011 Arab protests. The uprisings that swept across the Arab world in 2011 constituted both a strategic challenge and a window of opportunity for Iran. On the one hand, the power and political vacuums that the protests left behind threatened the stability of key regional allies, notably Syria and, to a lesser

extent, Iraq, thereby putting at risk the networks through which Tehran projected its influence. On the other hand, the widespread weakening and, in some cases, collapse of state authority created favorable conditions for Iran to expand its regional role. Indeed, the Iranian leadership cherished these events as an "Islamic Awakening," interpreting them as a delayed continuation of the revolutionary model established in 1979. Beyond the ideological framing, however, the Arab uprisings had clear geopolitical consequences, since they empowered the revisionists and weakened the status-quo powers. In this sense, regional disorder reconfigured the balance of power in ways that Iran could strategically exploit (Akbarzadeh, 2017; Yossef, 2019).

In response to this unique combination of threats and opportunities, Iran progressively introduced an offensive dimension into its doctrine of forward defense: while the core objective of externalizing threats remained unchanged, the means through which this objective was pursued became more proactive and interventionist (Yossef, 2019). In the literature on military doctrine, offensive strategies are typically understood as those that prioritize seizing the initiative, whether through pre-emptive, preventive, or expansionist action, and aim to shift the locus of conflict onto the enemy's territory (Posen, 1984; Levite, 1989).

In practice, this offensive turn has been operationalized by the IRGC through the adoption of hybrid warfare, defined as the integrated use of diverse instruments of power combining both regular and irregular modes of fighting. Scholars generally identify two defining features of contemporary hybrid warfare. First, it places a strong emphasis on irregular forms of engagement, including guerrilla tactics, proxy warfare, special operations, and non-kinetic instruments such as intelligence activities, information campaigns, and cyber operations. Second, it is characterized by an offensive orientation rooted in structural asymmetry, whereby states exploit ambiguity and indirect methods to project power without triggering full-scale retaliation (Tenenbaum, 2015; Yossef, 2019).

Yossef (2019) notes that, in the Iranian case, this hybrid and offensively oriented approach can be observed across four main dimensions: the systematic use of proxy actors, the development and deployment of drone capabilities, the

expansion of naval guerrilla tactics, particularly in the Persian Gulf, and the increasing integration of cyber operations. In this sense, hybrid warfare enables Iran to operate within a "grey zone" of conflict, exercising coercion, shaping outcomes, and advancing its regional position while deliberately remaining below the threshold of open interstate war (Yossef, 2019).

This offensive recalibration of Iran's strategy was paralleled by the need to create a regimented regional network. It is within this context that the notion of the "Axis of Resistance" (*Mehvar-e Moqavemat*) progressively emerged as both an ideological construct and a strategic framework. The term gained prominence in the early 2000s, partly as a discursive response to the label "Axis of Evil" popularized by George W. Bush, which designated Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the central adversaries of the United States. In contrast, Iranian officials and their allies appropriated a similar rhetoric to articulate a counter-axis defined by resistance to US and Israeli influence in the Middle East (Ostovar, 2019; Mansour et al., 2025; Nasr, 2025).

As scholars argue (Ostovar, 2019; Mansour et al., 2025), the Axis of Resistance should be understood not as a formal alliance, but as a loosely coordinated transnational network composed of both state and non-state actors, whose relationships with Tehran vary significantly in terms of dependence and autonomy. This conceptualization challenges dominant interpretations, particularly among Global North policymakers, which are often influenced by Israeli security narratives portraying these groups as a unified system of Iranian-controlled proxies operating across the Middle East with the primary objective of threatening Israel. However, such representations oversimplify the nature of Iran's relationships with these actors and obscure the complexity of the network. Indeed, reducing these groups to mere anti-Israeli "Iranian proxies" neglects both their relative independence of action from Iran and their broader geostrategic significance for Iran beyond the Palestinian issue (Alemzadeh, 2025).

The composition of the Axis further underscores its heterogeneity. It includes key Shia actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, various Iraqi militias, particularly those incorporated into the Popular Mobilization Forces, and the

Houthi movement in Yemen. However, the network is not exclusively sectarian, as it also encompasses Sunni groups, most notably Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, whose inclusion highlights that shared geopolitical objectives rather than sectarian identity, constitute the primary cohesive force of the Axis (Alemzadeh, 2025).

Moreover, the Axis of Resistance has, in specific contexts, intersected with the strategic interests of external state actors, most prominently Russia: in the Syrian conflict, coordination between Tehran and Moscow, although not amounting to a formal alliance, has been instrumental in ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. This convergence highlights the pragmatic and adaptive nature of the Axis, which is capable of accommodating actors with distinct, and at times only partially overlapping, objectives (Nasr, 2025).

2.3. Iran's Grand Strategy as an example of ACM

Iran's regional strategy outlined above can be analytically interpreted through the framework of authoritarian conflict management (ACM), as developed by Lewis et al. (2018). Within this perspective, conflict is not conceived as a problem to be resolved through negotiated settlement or inclusive political processes, but rather as a condition to be managed, contained, and strategically manipulated. In this sense, Iran's regional strategy aligns with a mode of conflict management that privileges coercive and illiberal instruments, including the use of force, indirect warfare, and selective support to armed actors, over diplomatic resolution or institutional reform. As Abboud (2018: 327) argues, this approach reflects a logic of "making peace by sustaining war," whereby peace is not the cessation of violence but its reconfiguration in the service of regime consolidation.

Applying the lens of ACM thus reinforces the central argument of this dissertation: that Iran's regional strategy should not be understood as a series of *ad hoc* or reactive policies, but rather as a structured and adaptive approach to managing conflict, in which violence is neither eliminated nor uncontrolled, but

actively organized and instrumentalized to produce favorable strategic outcomes.

This section applies the ACM framework to the Iranian case by examining three interrelated dimensions: discursive practices, spatial practices, and economic practices.

2.3.1. Discursive practices

Iran's regional strategy operates through a set of discursive practices aimed at constructing a hegemonic narrative that simultaneously legitimizes its actions and delegitimizes its adversaries.

Central to this effort is the production of a simplified and emotionally resonant language grounded in the binary opposition between the "oppressed" (*mostazafin*) and the "oppressors" (*mostakberin*) (Gölz and Vollmer, 2025). This dichotomy originates in the revolutionary thought of Ruhollah Khomeini, who famously asserted that "Islam belongs to the oppressed, not the oppressors." As Abrahamian (1993) notes, this formulation was not merely rhetorical but reflected a broader attempt to fuse Islamic tradition with modern anti-colonial thought, thereby producing a universalized grammar of resistance that transcended Iran's national borders.

This discursive structure has been consistently reproduced and operationalized in the rhetoric of former Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Across numerous public speeches, he describes the international system as being shaped by "global arrogance" (*estekbar-e jahani*), a term used to designate the plan of action of Western powers, primarily the United States and Israel, which, concealing behind the normative language of liberal democracy, reproduce coercion, intervention and hierarchical order. Consequently, the Ayatollah has repeatedly called for a "civilizational and global struggle", thereby situating resistance not as a contingent political choice but as a historically necessary response to systemic domination (Khamenei, 2022; 2023; 2025).

This discourse resonates strongly among segments of Iran's domestic population and allied actors because it draws on a shared Shia and broader

Islamic religious vocabulary: by invoking concepts such as *jihad* and martyrdom – already discussed in the first chapter of this thesis – the political struggle is elevated into a sacralized moral duty, thereby facilitating its translation into everyday language and popular political consciousness (Rabil, 2018; Raza, 2025).

For this reason, the resistance discourse was successful in shaping the rhetoric and strategic self-understanding of the actors associated with the Axis of Resistance, thereby extending the reach of this discursive framework beyond Iran's borders (Gölz and Vollmer, 2025). Since its formation, for instance, Hezbollah explicitly adopted this narrative in its *Open Letter to the Oppressed in Lebanon and the World* (1985), situating its struggle against Israeli occupation within a broader global confrontation with imperialism (Alagha, 2011). Similarly, for Yemen's Ansar Allah, the discourse of the oppressed has become a central ideological pillar, as the movement has incorporated the *mostazafin* narrative to articulate its domestic conflict within a transnational grammar of resistance, thereby linking local grievances to a wider regional struggle against external domination (Lackner, 2025).

The creation of a hegemonic discourse serves two interrelated objectives. First, it legitimizes Iran's regional actions: not only does the binary framing position the Islamic Republic as the defender of oppressed Muslims across the world, but it also simplifies complex political and geopolitical conflicts to ethical oppositions, eventually limiting alternative interpretations and justifying coercive actions. Second, it delegitimizes adversaries by framing them not as legitimate political actors, but as structurally oppressive forces inherently opposed to justice and sovereignty.

2.3.2. Spatial practices

Within the framework of ACM, space is understood as a strategic resource: because it can be exploited by insurgent actors for organization and recruitment, authoritarian strategies of conflict management prioritize the containment, fragmentation, and control of spatial configurations, using coercive and

administrative instruments such as military deployment, territorial occupation, the establishment of controlled zones, and, in some cases, the displacement of civilian populations (Lewis et al., 2018).

Within Iran's grand strategy, such spatial control is exercised primarily through an indirect and decentralized model of territorial control, relying on a wide network of armed non-state actors that Ostovar (2019) conceptualizes as "militant clients". The term "militant" refers to armed groups that are materially and militarily supported by Iran and that actively employ force in pursuit of shared strategic objectives; the term "client" denotes organizations whose primary external patron is Iran and which maintain varying degrees of operational dependence on it, including either operating alongside IRGC commanders in conflict zones or controlling sufficient territory and infrastructure, such as border crossings, supply routes, or airports, to facilitate sustained Iranian logistical and military involvement (Kapur and Ganguly, 2012; Ostovar, 2019).

Iran's most significant militant-client relationships are located in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, involving as actors Hezbollah, PMF, pro-Assad forces and Houthis (Ostovar, 2019).

2.3.3. Economic practices

A central component of Iran's strategy lies in its reliance on illicit funding mechanisms and informal financial systems: from Beirut and Damascus to Baghdad and Sanaa, Iran-backed groups do not merely receive financial support; they are embedded within a deliberately constructed parallel financial system designed to circumvent international sanctions and regulatory oversight (Imeny et al., 2021; Smith, 2025). As Smith (2025) highlights, this system constitutes a multi-layered and resilient architecture that combines state-directed funding, semi-official institutions, and informal transfer networks, thereby ensuring operational continuity even under conditions of maximum international pressure. Its core objective is to finance allied non-state actors while minimizing traceability within the formal financial system.

Within this architecture, *hawala* networks play a pivotal role as one of the most flexible and efficient mechanisms for transferring funds across borders. Historically rooted in Middle Eastern and South Asian commercial practices, it was brought to the forefront of Western security concerns in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when it was identified as a potential channel for financing groups such as Al-Qaeda (Razavy, 2006; Rahimi, 2020).

Razavy (2006) explains that the particularity of *hawala* is its dependence upon strong religious and cultural beliefs: the term itself, loosely translated from Arabic as "transfer" or "debt assignment," and from Hindi as "trust," reflects the system's reliance on interpersonal credibility rather than institutional guarantees. The defining characteristics of this Informal Funds Transfer (IFT) include the absence of formal documentation, the speed and the low cost of transactions.

In practice, a client deposits funds with a *hawaladar* (broker), who provides a code, often a simple word or phrase from the Quran, to the sender. This code is, then, communicated to a counterpart broker in the destination location, who releases the equivalent sum to the intended recipient upon verification. Crucially, records are minimal and eventually destroyed, leaving little to no paper trail. (Razavy, 2006; Rahimi, 2020; Smith, 2025).

The *hawala* system, thus, enables Iran to finance its regional allies through indirect settlement mechanisms, whereby a payment made in Tehran triggers the release of equivalent funds in cities such as Beirut or Baghdad.

In parallel, the Islamic Republic makes extensive use of trade-based money laundering (TBML) to conceal financial transfers within ostensibly legitimate commercial activities. This includes practices such as over- and under-invoicing, the declaration of fictitious shipments, and the use of commodities (particularly oil, petrochemicals, and metals) to settle accounts within proxy networks. These transactions are often embedded within complex and circular trade routes spanning the Gulf, East Africa, and the Caucasus, further obscuring their origin and purpose while reinforcing the durability of Iran's regional financial infrastructure (Imeny et al., 2021; Smith, 2025).

From an ACM perspective, such practices serve the dual objective of controlling access to resources and reinforcing clientelist networks: by

operating through opaque and decentralized financial channels, Iran limits the ability of external actors to disrupt its support systems and effectively shield its allies from economic isolation; at the same time, resource flows are selectively distributed, thus reinforcing hierarchical relationships of dependence between Tehran and its partners. In this sense, Iran's economic strategy does not seek to reconstruct formal economies or promote development, but rather to reconfigure economic space in ways that sustain conflict (Lewis et al., 2018).

2.4. Regional applications

Iran's regional strategy reflects a context-sensitive application of authoritarian conflict management (ACM), whereby discursive, spatial, and economic practices are deployed in varying combinations across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. While these practices differ in intensity and form, they share a common foundation: the systematic mobilization and instrumentalization of Shia communities as vectors of influence and regime projection.

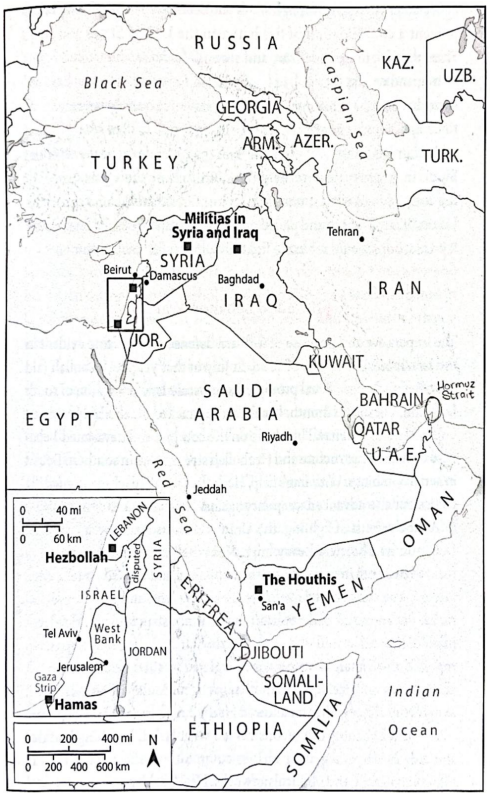


Figure 3. Iran's militant clients across the Middle East (Nasr, 2025).

2.4.1. Iraq

"Iran considers Iraq's security and stability as its own" (*Islamic Republic News Agency*, 2014) – this statement by the former Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, encapsulates the strategic centrality of Iraq within the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. Historically, Iraq represented Iran's most immediate threat and served as the Arab bulwark in Washington's campaign to contain the Islamic Republic. However, the 2003 invasion of Iraq fundamentally altered this dynamic: by dismantling the Iraqi state apparatus, the U.S. intervention created a power vacuum that Tehran rapidly exploited to expand its influence (Nasr, 2025).

Iran's involvement in Iraq was, thus, driven by a combination of geopolitical ambition and security concerns: on the one hand, Tehran views Iraq as part of its natural sphere of influence and, on the other, it regards the configuration of the Iraqi state as critical to its broader pursuit of regional hegemony, with Baghdad representing the gateway to Syria and to the broader Middle East (Guzanski, 2011).

Over the past decade, Iran's policy toward Iraq can be characterized as pursuing a dual orientation: anti-U.S. and pro-Shia. In the short term, Iran has sought to generate and sustain instability sufficient to undermine Washington's strategic objectives and prevent the establishment of a lasting U.S. military presence; in the longer term, its strategy has aimed to limit the re-emergence of Sunni political and military power that could challenge the Islamic Republic's ideological and security foundations (Kirmanj and Sadq, 2018).

Iran's influence in Iraq unfolds across three domains: namely, religious, military, and political-economic.

Religious influence. In April 2003, approximately two million Shia pilgrims gathered in the Iraqi city of Karbala to commemorate the Arbaeen, marking an unprecedented revival of Shia public and mass observances decades of repression under Saddam Hussein (Nasr, 2006).

While U.S. policymakers correctly anticipated that the fall of Saddam would reopen cross-border interactions between Iraq and Iran, they underestimated the direction of influence: rather than Iraq acting as a vector of political change

toward Iran, it was Iran that capitalized on these newly open boundaries to expand its influence. Indeed, Iraq's Shia majority (comprising over 60 percent of the population) fundamentally altered the country's internal balance of power and, by extension, the regional equilibrium in ways that favored Iran: post-2003 Iraq gave way to the emergence of a broader transnational Shia space, described by King Abdullah II of Jordan as a "Shia crescent" stretching from Lebanon to the Persian Gulf, within a predominantly Sunni regional order (Barzegar, 2008; Guzansky, 2011; Nasr, 2006; 2025).

In line with its broader model of ACM, Iran operationalizes religious influence at the discursive level: specifically, Tehran frames its role in Iraq through narratives of protection of Shia communities and defense of holy shrines, thereby justifying intervention as a religious duty (Kirmanj and Sadq, 2018; Nasr, 2006; 2025). In ACM terms, this discursive strategy transforms sectarian identity into a political resource and shapes local perceptions of legitimacy.

Military influence. Iran's military influence in Iraq is primarily exercised through its support for Shia militias, most notably within the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Since the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, Iraq's institutional weakness has enabled Tehran to expand its security role via the IRGC and, in particular, its elite group, the Quds Force, through which the Islamic Republic has provided extensive financing, training, and weaponry to aligned militias, equipping them with tactical capabilities ranging from surveillance and intelligence gathering to the deployment of improvised explosive devices. The presence of IRGC operatives on the ground has further facilitated the coordination of militia activities, the establishment of logistical corridors, and the consolidation of pro-Iranian armed networks across Iraqi territory. The material dimension of this support is evident in the repeated discovery of weapons systems, including rockets and ammunition, marked as "made in Iran," underscoring the depth of Tehran's military provisioning (Gatehouse, 2010; Nader, 2015; Guzansky, 2018).

From an analytical perspective, this military engagement aligns closely with the spatial dimension of ACM: accordingly, rather than reinforcing centralized

state control, Iran's strategy has contributed to the proliferation of parallel armed structures that operate both within and alongside formal Iraqi institutions, thus allowing Tehran to exercise territorial control.

Political-economic influence. At the political level, Tehran has not only supported the emergence of Shia-dominated governments but has also played an active role in shaping the formation and orientation of successive Iraqi administrations: drawing on longstanding ties with exiled opposition groups that had previously operated from Iran, such as the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (formerly SCIRI) and the Dawa Party, as well as cultivating relations with newer actors like the Sadrist Movement led by Muqtada al-Sadr, Iran has embedded itself within Iraq's political landscape. These networks have provided Tehran with multiple channels of influence, enabling it to shape decision-making processes while simultaneously counterbalancing the presence of external actors such as the United States and Saudi Arabia (Nader, 2015; Kirmanj and Sadq, 2018).

At the economic level, Iraq has become an increasingly vital partner for Iran, as bilateral trade has expanded significantly, with Iraq emerging as a major market for Iranian goods and energy exports, including natural gas supplies. Most importantly, Iraq functions as a critical corridor through which Iran can mitigate the effects of sanctions by accessing foreign currency, importing restricted goods, and sustaining commercial flows through formal and informal channels (Guzansky, 2011; Kirmanj and Sadq, 2018).

2.4.2. Lebanon

The roots of Iranian involvement in Lebanon can be traced back to the mid-1950s, when Tehran began to view the eastern Mediterranean as an area of strategic importance. Beyond such geopolitical interest, Iran perceived the rise of Arab nationalism, particularly under Gamal Abdel Nasser, as a direct ideological and political threat and, in response, it sought to position Lebanon, as a frontline in countering the expansion of Nasserist influence (Shapiro, 2000; Zisser, 2011).

Following the fall of the Shah in 1979, Iran's engagement in Lebanon acquired a concrete dimension in the form of Hezbollah. The Islamic Republic played a decisive role in the organization's creation and early consolidation by bringing together disparate Lebanese Shia factions under its patronage, mediating among them, and providing the material and organizational support necessary for their institutionalization. This formative role is reflected in Hezbollah's adoption of *wilayat al-faqih* ("guardianship of the jurist") as a central ideological principle, with its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah explicitly recognizing the Iranian Supreme Leader as the ultimate source of political and religious authority (Deeb, 1988; Hamzeh, 2004; Zisser, 2011). In an interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Ray al-A'am* in 2005, he stated, "we saw Imam Khomeini, may God have mercy on him, as the leader and the ruler *wali al-imam*; after Khomeni's death, we see Imam Khamenei as such a leader".

A pivotal turning point was the 1982 Lebanon War, which created the opportunity for Iran to establish Hezbollah as a forward line of defense against Israel. To this end, Tehran systematically transformed the organization into a highly capable military actor by providing extensive training, operational support, and large quantities of advanced weaponry – over time, this included the transfer of nearly 50,000 rockets and missiles. The strategic logic underpinning this military buildup lies in Iran's reliance on Hezbollah as a key component of Iran's deterrence architecture: in the absence of direct conventional parity with Israel, Tehran has sought to project power indirectly by enabling Hezbollah to impose significant costs in the event of confrontation. In other words, without it, Iran's capacity to respond to potential Israeli or U.S. military actions would be significantly constrained (Zisser, 2011; Hokayem, 2015).

Iran-Hezbollah communication is conducted through the al-Quds Force, whose role, however, extends well beyond the provision of training and material assistance: indeed, in practice, its operatives act as advisors, coordinators, and, at times, key arbiters in operational decision-making. Such deep level of embedment in the organization's command structure ensures not only

Hezbollah's military effectiveness but also its strategic alignment with Iran's broader regional objectives (Zisser, 2011; Abbas and Jahangaiz, 2020).

At the same time, the 1982 Israeli attacks marked a critical turning point in the evolution of Hezbollah from a predominantly militant organization into a comprehensive socio-political movement, the scope of its activity among the Shiite population throughout the country increasing substantially. Beginning in the mid-1980s and supported by substantial Iranian financial assistance (estimated at tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars annually), Hezbollah developed an extensive welfare and social services network, designed both to secure the support of marginalized Shia communities and to provide an alternative to the limited capacity of the Lebanese state (Zisser, 2011; Abbas and Jahangaiz, 2020).

Today, Hezbollah maintains a wide-ranging institutional infrastructure spanning education, healthcare, reconstruction, and financial services. Moreover, the organization is involved in rebuilding housing and infrastructure, supplying basic services, and providing financial assistance through dedicated institutions offering loans and social support. Additional mechanisms, such as compensation funds for families of fighters and detainees, as well as judicial and arbitration bodies operating in Shia areas, further reinforce its governance role. Finally, Hezbollah's influence is sustained through an extensive media apparatus, including multiple radio stations and the television channel "al-Manar" (Zisser, 2011; Abbas and Jahangaiz, 2020).

Thus, since the mid-1980s, Hezbollah has consolidated itself as a powerful and multifaceted actor: on the one hand, it operates as a highly capable militia at the forefront of the confrontation with Israel; on the other, it functions as a deeply embedded political and social movement, advancing the interests of Lebanon's Shia community while simultaneously serving as a key instrument of Iranian influence in the country.

2.4.3. Syria

Iran's intervention in Syria represents one of the clearest manifestations of its broader Axis of Resistance strategy, as Tehran's support for the Bashar al-Assad was carried out not in isolation but through a coordinated network that included Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and later Russia.

Syria constituted the most strategically significant arena of contestation in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab protests. Iran's close relationship with Syria dates back to the 1970s, when Damascus emerged as a natural ally for Tehran, particularly in light of their shared rivalry with Iraq under Saddam Hussein. Moreover, although Syria's Shia population is relatively small, the ruling Alawites trace aspects of their historical origins to Shiism and have often sought religious legitimacy through ties with Shia clerical authorities. Syria also holds symbolic importance for Iran, as Damascus is home to a major Shia shrine, the resting place of Imam Hossein's sister, Sayyidah Zaynab (Al-Moussawi, 2017; Wastnidge, 2017; Nasr, 2025).

Beyond these ideological and religious dimensions, Syria was of central geopolitical importance because it constituted the indispensable link between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Tehran increasingly envisioned a contiguous land corridor extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon. The collapse of the Baathist Syria would therefore have jeopardized this strategic land bridge and severely weakened Iran's regional posture. Within Iran's leadership, support for intervention was also framed in broader geopolitical terms: defending Syria was presented not merely as support for President Bashar al-Assad, but as resistance to what Tehran perceived as a U.S.-led regional project aimed at fragmenting Syria, weakening allied states, and ultimately encircling Iran itself. For this reason, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei concluded that the risks of losing Syria outweighed the costs of intervention (Al-Moussawi, 2017; Wastnidge, 2017; Nasr, 2025).

As Tehran recognized that its own forces were insufficient to secure the desired outcome, it operationalized what Ahmadian and Mohseni (2021) describe as the "regionalization" and "internationalization" of the Axis of Resistance strategy.

Regionalization. Tehran pursued a regional expansion of its strategy by involving a transnational network of aligned non-state actors: the Islamic Republic drew on established partners, particularly Hezbollah, while also mobilizing newly created militias from across the region to support the Syrian regime. In doing so, Iran turned the Syrian conflict into a theatre of coordinated proxy warfare, where allied forces expanded its operational and logistical reach (Wastnidge, 2017: Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021; Nasr, 2025).

Internationalization. Faced with deteriorating conditions on the battlefield, Iran complemented its regional proxy strategy by seeking the direct involvement of Russia as a decisive external partner in the Syrian conflict. Tehran viewed Moscow as sharing similar concerns regarding the possible collapse of the Assad regime, particularly the loss of strategically vital areas such as Latakia and the advance of jihadist groups, including the al-Nusra Front. This marked a new phase in Iranian strategy, in which the preservation of Syria required not only regional allied mobilization but also great-power backing (Wastnidge, 2017: Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021; Nasr, 2025).

According to Ahmadian and Mohseni (2021), three factors drove this shift.

First, by 2014-2015 it had become increasingly clear that the Assad government was unable to secure victory through existing means, especially as the rise of Islamic State increased the perception of existential threat (Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021).

Second, Tehran sought to counter the expanding influence of the United States and Turkey within Syria: U.S. support for Kurdish-led forces, particularly the Syrian Democratic Forces, had given Washington a meaningful foothold in the conflict, reinforced by superior airpower that Iran and its regional allies could not match. Russian intervention therefore offered a means of restoring strategic balance, particularly in the aerial domain (Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021).

A third factor related to domestic Iranian politics following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015. Conservative factions within Iran viewed closer cooperation with Russia as a way to offset President Hassan Rouhani's diplomatic opening toward the West and to prevent Iran from drifting too closely into a Western orbit (Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021).

Securing Russian participation was therefore seen in Tehran as essential to simultaneously resolving multiple strategic challenges. Initial cooperation took the form of intelligence sharing and diplomatic coordination, with Moscow already shielding Damascus in the United Nations Security Council, particularly after allegations of chemical weapons use in 2013. Then, their partnership culminated in Russia's direct military intervention in September 2015, which fundamentally altered the balance of power, stabilized the Assad regime, and demonstrated Iran's capacity to integrate major-power support into the broader Axis of Resistance framework (Wastnidge, 2017: Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021; Nasr, 2025).

2.4.4. Yemen

Iran's role in Yemen remains more opaque and comparatively limited than its involvement in the other regional theatres above described. Unlike Iraq or Lebanon, Yemen has not historically occupied a central place in Iranian foreign policy. However, its geopolitical position, particularly its proximity to Saudi Arabia and its location along key maritime routes, has elevated its importance in recent years: within what has often been described as a regional "cold war" between Tehran and Riyadh, Yemen has emerged as a peripheral but strategically valuable arena in which both powers seek to expand influence indirectly (Terrill, 2014; Ostovar, 2019).

Iran's engagement in Yemen is primarily mediated through its relationship with the Houthi movement (or Ansar Allah), which originated in the 1990s as a socio-religious movement and evolved into an armed actor following repeated clashes with the Yemeni state after 2004. Although the Houthis are rooted in the Zaydi branch of Shia Islam, distinct from Iran's Twelver Shiism, their political discourse has increasingly converged with Iran's broader "resistance" narrative. In an interview with *al-Monitor*, Mohammed Nasser al-Bakhiti, the senior representative of the movement, framed the connection with Iran in terms of a common spiritual and political outlook rather than direct operational cooperation – in his words, "there is no direct cooperation in resisting Western occupation;

instead, the connection over those issues is a shared spiritual-religious connection". This ideological alignment is particularly visible in the Houthi slogan ("God is great, death to America, death to Israel, curse upon the Jews, victory to Islam"), echoing themes central to Iranian revolutionary discourse (Terrill, 2014; Zweiri, 2016).

Despite repeated denials by both parties, a growing body of evidence since 2011 has pointed to at least limited forms of Iranian support: reports by U.S. government officials, U.S. media outlets and United Nations Panels indicate that Tehran, primarily through the IRGC's Quds Force, has provided the Houthis with weaponry ranging from small arms to more advanced missile technology, some of which has been used in attacks against Saudi territory. At the same time, Iran appears to have supported the development of smuggling networks and covert logistical channels for the transfer of arms and resources, thus, once again, circumventing international monitoring and sanctions (Charbonneau, 2012; Schmitt and Worth, 2012; 2014; Terrill, 2014).

2.5.*Concluding remarks*

In conclusion, Iran's regional strategy can be understood as the practical manifestation of the strategic culture of resistance discussed in the previous chapter. Faced with persistent security vulnerabilities, conventional military limitations, and the perception of a hostile regional environment, the Islamic Republic developed the doctrine of "Forward Defense" as a means of projecting threats away from its borders and safeguarding regime survival. While initially conceived as a defensive strategy, the regional transformations unleashed by the Arab uprisings gradually expanded its scope, enabling Tehran to adopt a more proactive role in shaping political and security dynamics across the Middle East. The consolidation of the Axis of Resistance represented the culmination of this evolution: through a network of state and non-state actors united by a shared opposition to U.S. and Israeli influence, Iran acquired a flexible and cost-effective instrument for deterrence and regional influence.

This chapter has argued that Iran's regional strategy can be effectively interpreted through the lens of Authoritarian Conflict Management (ACM), a

framework that shifts attention away from conflict resolution and toward the manipulation of conflict dynamics. Coherently, rather than seeking to eliminate disputes, Tehran has consistently pursued policies aimed at shaping conflicts in ways that maintain leverage over adversaries and reinforce its regional influence. This approach is operationalized through a triple form of control. First, Iran exercises discursive control by promoting a hegemonic narrative centered on the opposition between the oppressed and the oppressors, thereby legitimizing its regional interventions while delegitimizing its adversaries. Second, it pursues spatial control through an indirect and decentralized model of territorial influence, relying on networks of allied armed groups, known as “militant clients”. Third, it employs economic and financial control through informal and illicit financial networks that sustain allied actors while circumventing international sanctions, create enduring structures of dependence and influence. Although adapted to local conditions, these mechanisms have been applied across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen, revealing a remarkable degree of strategic consistency.

Viewed through the ACM framework, Iran's regional engagement appears not as a series of ad hoc responses to individual crises, but as a coherent and integrated strategy designed to manage conflict environments in ways that advance regime security, deterrence, and regional influence. The following chapter examines whether this analytical framework can also explain Iran's behavior in the Palestinian arena.

CHAPTER 3: IMPLEMENTING RESISTANCE: IRAN'S GRAND STRATEGY IN THE GAZA WAR

On February 17, 1979, only days after the triumph of the Iranian Revolution, Yasser Arafat became the first foreign leader to visit the newly established Islamic Republic. During his visit, the chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) delivered an emotional speech celebrating both the solidarity of anti-imperialist movements across the Global South and the emancipatory potential of Islam as a force of political mobilization. More than a symbolic diplomatic encounter, the visit marked the beginning of a relationship that would profoundly shape the political landscape of the Middle East over the following decades (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

What started as an expression of revolutionary solidarity gradually evolved into a strategic partnership linking Tehran to a diverse range of Palestinian actors: through diplomatic, military, and financial support, Iran transformed the Palestinian cause into a central component of its broader regional strategy, integrating groups such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) into the wider "Axis of Resistance." By the time the Gaza war erupted in October 2023, Palestine had become not only a powerful ideological symbol for the Islamic Republic but also a key arena through which Tehran projected influence, challenged Israeli and American power, and advanced its regional ambitions.

This chapter examines the evolution of Iran–Palestine relations from the 1979 Revolution to the outbreak of the Gaza war in 2023. It first traces the historical development of ties between Iran and Palestinian movements, highlighting the ideological, strategic, and geopolitical factors that underpin Tehran's engagement with the Palestinian issue. It then analyzes the events surrounding the 7 October attacks and the subsequent war in Gaza. Finally, drawing on the Authoritarian Conflict Management framework developed in this thesis, the chapter investigates how Iran has sought to shape the conflict through discursive, spatial, and economic forms of control.

3.1. Iran – Palestine relations

Palestinian-Iranian relations have evolved considerably over time, experiencing periods of rapprochement followed by significant tensions, while also being influenced by shifting regional dynamics. Nevertheless, the enduring foundation of their relationship has remained their shared opposition to Israel, which continues to constitute the principal source of political and strategic convergence between the two actors.

The origins of Palestinian–Iranian connections can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s, and they developed along both practical and ideological lines.

On a practical level, the relationship was fostered through cooperation between the PLO and emerging Iranian guerrilla organizations opposing the Shah's regime. Among the various revolutionary groups that emerged in Iran during this period, two became particularly prominent: the *Sazman-i Cherik-ha-yi Feda-i Khalq-i Iran* (Organization of the Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas), commonly referred to as the Marxist Fada'iyan, and the *Sazman-i Mujahidin-i Khalq-i Iran* (People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran), known as the Islamic Mojahedin (Abrahamian, 1980). In the early 1970s, members of both organizations received military and ideological training in Palestinian camps in Syria and Lebanon under the auspices of the PLO (Chehabi, 2006). It was through these military interactions that the first political and organizational links between Palestinian movements and Iranian revolutionary actors were established (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

At the ideological level, the Palestinian question occupied a central place within the discourse of pre-revolution Iran, as opposition to Zionism became increasingly embedded within broader critiques of imperialism and Western domination (Alavi, 2023).

Shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the influential cleric Ayatollah Kashani publicly denounced the creation of Israel and expressed support for the Palestinian people. As reported by Razavi (2002), in one of his earliest declarations on the issue, delivered in 1947, Kashani warned that "the

foundation of the Zionist regime will be the source of corruption for Muslims in the Middle East and the whole world", hence framing the Palestinian cause as a collective responsibility for the Islamic world.

Anti-Zionist sentiments were not confined to the religious establishment, with non-clerical intellectuals playing significant role in linking the Palestinian struggle to broader Third Worldist and anti-colonial movements. Shariati, in particular, became one of the most influential ideologues of the Islamic Revolution through his synthesis of Islam, social justice, and anti-imperialist thought: drawing on the Islamic principle of *amr-e beh ma'ruf va nahy-ye az monkar* ("enjoining good and forbidding evil"), he managed to frame Zionism as part of a broader structure of oppression and injustice that Muslims were morally obliged to resist (Hanson, 1983; Rahnema, 1997).

A discussion of pre-revolutionary Iranian support for Palestine would nevertheless be incomplete without reference to Ruhollah Khomeini. Rising to political prominence in the early 1960s, Khomeini consistently condemned the Shah's close relations with Israel and the West: in his view, the Palestinian question transcended national and ethnic boundaries and represented a cause of concern for the entire Muslim community (*ummah*), thereby actualizing what Alavi (2023: 286) terms "the Islamisation of the Palestinian cause". This vision was clearly articulated in a message addressed to Muslims during the 1971 Hajj pilgrimage, in which the Ayatollah urged believers to focus their attention on "the liberation of the Islamic land of Palestine from the grasp of Zionism" and to support those engaged in the struggle for its liberation (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

Precisely because of these organizational connections and ideological affinities, the victory of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was met with widespread enthusiasm among Palestinian movements. In Palestinian-controlled areas and refugee camps in Lebanon, large posters of Ruhollah Khomeini were displayed prominently, often accompanied by the slogan "Today Iran, Tomorrow Palestine" (Cobban, 1984).

The success of the Islamic Revolution became a source of political inspiration for the PLO leadership, particularly at a time when the Camp David Accords had led Egypt to abandon the broader Arab anti-Israeli front and sign a

peace agreement with Israel. Arafat viewed Khomeini's ascent from exile to the leadership of a revolutionary movement that had defeated a seemingly powerful U.S.-backed regime as a model that could potentially be replicated in the Palestinian struggle. During his first visit to Tehran in 1979, the PLO's Chairman, was handed the keys to the former Israeli diplomatic mission in Tehran (Alavi, 2023). Such gesture carried immense psychological and political significance for Palestinian nationalism: as Alavi (2019: 10) notes, after more than two decades of struggle, it represented "the first piece of Israeli real estate Arafat had captured".

Nevertheless, by the late 1980s, the close relationship between the PLO and the Islamic Republic of Iran began to deteriorate. Concerned that the Iran–Iraq War would undermine the prospects for a unified regional front against Israel and relegate the Palestinian question to a secondary place, Arafat initially attempted to mediate between Tehran and Baghdad. However, as the conflict persisted, the PLO's leader gradually aligned himself more openly with the Baathist regime, holding regular meetings with Iraqi officials to discuss both the war and broader inter-Arab political developments. This rapprochement with Iraq became visible when in 1984 Arafat publicly affirmed the PLO's support for Iraq in what he described as its "just" struggle to defend its sovereignty and achieve a "just peace" (Alavi, 2019).

Additionally, the end of the Cold War marked a decisive transformation in regional politics: the collapse of the Soviet Union deprived the PLO of a major international patron and alternative source of political support, while simultaneously consolidating the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East. It was in this context of increasing diplomatic isolation and growing U.S. pressure that Arafat came to regard negotiations with Israel as a political necessity and eventually the PLO signed the Oslo Accords in 1993, formally recognizing Israel's right to exist (Hassan, 2011; Alavi, 2019).

For the Islamic Republic, Oslo represented a profound ideological and strategic betrayal: according to Takeyh (2009: 173), the accords "hit Tehran like a thunderbolt", provoking an intense reaction from Iranian leaders, with Ali Khamenei's sharp condemnation of Arafat as "that puny ill-reputed blackguard"

whose crime was “greater than Anwar Saddat’s acceptance of Camp David” (Takeyh, 2009: 174).

The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 plunged the PLO’s relations with Iran into ice and, consequently, prompted Tehran to redirect its support toward Palestinian Islamist movements, regarded as more ideologically compatible and more firmly committed to armed resistance against Israel. Among these movements, two actors emerged as particularly significant: the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). Among the figures most profoundly affected by the revolutionary developments in Iran was Fathi al-Shiqaqi, a Palestinian activist living in exile in Egypt. Disillusioned both by the failure of Arab nationalism following the Six-Day War and by what he perceived as the Muslim Brotherhood’s insufficient engagement with the Palestinian cause, al-Shiqaqi increasingly turned toward the revolutionary model represented by Iran. In 1979, he authored *Khomeini: The Islamic Solution and the Alternative*, a work praising the Ayatollah’s conception of political Islam and revolutionary resistance, whose publication led to his arrest in Egypt and expulsion from the Muslim Brotherhood. It was during his exile, in 1981, that al-Shiqaqi and his associates established the *Saraya al-Quds* (Jerusalem Brigades), which later became the military wing of the PIJ (Skare, 2021; Alavi, 2023).

Relations between PIJ and Iran deepened considerably during the late 1980s. Indeed, following the outbreak of the First Intifada, many PIJ leaders were imprisoned or expelled to Lebanon in 1988. This exile, however, enabled PIJ militants to receive training in Hezbollah camps in Lebanon; to receive financial assistance and weapons from Iran; and to receive sanctuaries in Syria. As Skare (2021) underlines, these developments consolidated a close trilateral relationship between PIJ, Iran, and Hezbollah, which soon translated from the military camp into a political alliance: at the beginning of the 1990s the movement opened a diplomatic office in Tehran and its representatives began to regularly participate in conferences and political events organized by the Islamic Republic (Hatina, 2001; Alavi, 2019; 2023).

Hamas. In 1987 a second Islamist movement emerged from the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood: the Islamic Resistance Movement, known in Arabic as *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya*, acronym of Hamas. Unlike the secular-nationalist orientation of the PLO, Hamas' ideological framework resonated more closely with Tehran's revolutionary discourse: the organization categorically rejected the legitimacy of the Israeli state and established its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, to conduct armed operations against Israeli forces in the occupied territories. This commitment to armed resistance became the principal basis for the growing strategic intimacy between Hamas and Iran (Seliktar and Rezaei, 2020; Alavi, 2019; 2023).

Both Islamist movements capitalized on the widespread disillusionment among Palestinians toward the PLO's recognition of Israel, perceived as a failure to deliver meaningful sovereignty or national liberation. As frustration with the peace process and the Oslo framework intensified, support for Hamas and PIJ grew substantially: particularly, Hamas achieved strong electoral performances throughout the 1990s, including victories over Fatah in student elections at al-Najah University in 1996 and 1997. In a public demonstration of the strengthening relationship between Tehran and Hamas, the movement's spiritual leader, Ahmed Yassin, paid an official visit to Iran in 1998, where he was praised by Ayatollah Khamenei as "the true representative of the Palestinian resistance" (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

The year 2000 marked a significant turning point in the regional balance of power. After nearly two decades of occupation, and in accordance with UNSC Resolution 425, Israel withdrew its forces from southern Lebanon and dismantled its allied militias in the area: for the first time since the establishment of Israel in 1948, Israeli troops had been forced to retreat from Arab territory by a non-state Arab paramilitary actor, namely Hezbollah (Khatib and Matar, 2014).

Hezbollah's perceived victory had a profound symbolic and strategic impact across the region, most importantly it reinforced the credibility of the "resistance" model promoted by Iran and emboldened Palestinian Islamist movements to intensify armed resistance against Israel. Indeed, shortly

thereafter, a new wave of Palestinian mobilization was triggered: on September 28, 2000, the controversial visit of Ariel Sharon to the Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, regarded as Islam's third holiest sanctuary after Mecca and Medina) under heavy Israeli security protection ignited the Second Intifada, also known as the al-Aqsa Intifada (Khatib and Matar, 2014; Alavi, 2019; 2023).

Iran and Hezbollah were quick to express their support for the Intifada: Tehran portrayed the uprising as part of the broader regional struggle against Israel and Western domination, while Hezbollah intensified its rhetorical and operational solidarity with Palestinian factions. Moreover, some wounded Palestinians received medical treatment in Iran, and in April 2001 the PIJ leader Ramadan Shallah met with Ali Khamenei, who reportedly agreed to substantially increase Iranian financial support for the organization by up to 70 percent (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

Another decisive moment occurred in 2005, when Israel unilaterally withdrew its military forces and settlements from the Gaza Strip after 38 years of occupation. Hamas portrayed the withdrawal as a victory achieved through armed resistance rather than negotiations, contrasting its approach with what it regarded as the failures of the Oslo process and subsequent peace initiatives (Tamimi, 2009).

This perception contributed significantly to Hamas' political rise. In January 2006, Hamas achieved a landslide victory in the Palestinian legislative elections, defeating the secular-nationalist Fatah movement. Yet, this electoral outcome also triggered an international backlash: rather than recognizing the results of elections it had previously encouraged, the administration of George W. Bush imposed sanctions on the Hamas-led government and suspended financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

The resulting political and economic vacuum created an opportunity for Iran to deepen its influence in Gaza: benefiting from rising oil revenues in the mid-2000s, Tehran became a key financial and military sponsor of Hamas, thereby strengthening the "Axis of Resistance" and increasing its leverage in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Ostovar, 2016; Alavi, 2019; 2023).

However, the 2011 Arab protests unleashed new regional upheavals which ultimately affected Hamas's political positioning, as the organization sought to exploit emerging opportunities, particularly those created by the rise of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated governments and movements in Egypt and Tunisia, which it interpreted as a strategic victory for political Islam and as an opportunity to strengthen its own regional legitimacy and autonomy. In this context, Hamas's political leadership gradually distanced itself from the so-called "Axis of Resistance", physically leaving Damascus and aligning itself more closely with the new regional alignment centered around Egypt under Mohamed Morsi, alongside Turkey and Qatar (Salah, 2017; Alavi, 2019; 2023).

This strategic recalibration ultimately proved unsuccessful: contrary to Hamas' expectations, the Assad regime survived the Syrian uprising, while the regional ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood rapidly reversed, when in July 2013, the government of Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by the Egyptian military and replaced by a regime led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The new Egyptian leadership adopted a strongly hostile posture toward both the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, imposing severe political and economic restrictions on Gaza in an effort to weaken Islamist networks linked to the Brotherhood (Alavi, 2019).

Consequently, Hamas found itself increasingly regionally isolated, as Syria severed its relations with the movement, while Iran temporarily reduced its financial support. Nevertheless, the deterioration of relations proved neither complete nor permanent, as shared opposition to Israel and the continued importance of armed resistance remained central pillars of convergence between Hamas and Iran (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

Eventually, Israel's military operations against Gaza in 2012 and 2014 created the conditions for a gradual rapprochement between the two actors. During both the November 2012 and July 2014 wars, Gaza was subjected to extensive Israeli bombardment and large-scale military campaigns aimed at degrading the military capabilities of Palestinian armed factions, particularly Hamas and the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

For Tehran, restoring relations with Hamas increasingly appeared to be a strategic necessity in order to preserve the regional "balance of resistance" against Israel. More broadly, Iran's strong support for the Assad regime during the Syrian civil war had significantly damaged its image among many Sunni Arab constituencies, which increasingly perceived Iranian regional policies as sectarian and expansionist. In this context, rapprochement with Hamas offered Tehran an opportunity to partially overcome the Sunni–Shia divide and reaffirm its broader claim to leadership of the Muslim anti-Israeli resistance camp (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

The 2012 Gaza war provided particularly visible evidence of the re-emerging relationship between Iran and Hamas: not only were Iranian-manufactured Fajr-5 rockets launched from Gaza toward Israel, also large billboards appeared across the Gaza Strip displaying the message "Thank You Iran" in Arabic, English, Hebrew, and Persian, thereby representing one of the first public acknowledgments by Hamas of Iran's role in arming Palestinian resistance groups. On the other side, Hamas' ability to sustain armed resistance against Israeli military operations reinforced within Iranian political circles the perception that the movement remained the principal Palestinian actor capable of confronting Israel militarily: consequently, support for the Palestinian resistance in Gaza received backing from multiple sectors of the Iranian political establishment, including IRGC, the presidency, and Ali Khamenei himself (Alavi, 2019; 2023).

The years 2020 and 2021 marked another significant phase in the consolidation of relations between Iran and Palestinian resistance movements: regional normalization initiatives between Israel and several Arab states, combined with renewed violence in Jerusalem and Gaza, reinforced Tehran's claim to leadership of the Palestinian cause and strengthened cooperation with Hamas and PIJ.

In January 2020, Donald Trump unveiled the "Deal of the Century" alongside Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, at the White House: commonly referred to as the "Deal of the Century," the 181-page plan marked a major departure from previous U.S. policy by abandoning explicit support for

the two-state solution, recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, reducing aid to Palestinians, and legitimizing Israeli settlements in occupied territories (*The Guardian*, 2020; Alavi, 2023).

The Palestinian Authority responded with the suspension of relations with both the U.S. and Israel and its President, Mahmoud Abbas, called for an emergency meeting of the Arab League. However, his appeal was met with disappointment, as several Arab states, particularly Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, increasingly prioritized strategic ties with Washington and shared hostility toward Iran over traditional solidarity with the Palestinian cause (*France24*, 2020; Alavi, 2023).

On its side, Tehran strongly opposed the U.S. initiative: Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif contacted both Mahmoud Abbas and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh to reiterate Tehran's rejection of the plan and reaffirm Iran's political and diplomatic support for the Palestinians; similarly, Esmail Ghaani declared Iran's readiness to oppose and undermine the initiative. Therefore, in sharp contrast to the relative silence or acquiescence of several Arab governments, Palestinian political factions received vocal and public backing from Tehran (Amer, 2020; Alavi, 2023).

In September 2020, the foreign ministers of Bahrain and the UAE joined Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump at the White House to sign the so-called Abraham Accords, formally normalizing diplomatic relations between Tel Aviv, Manama and Abu Dhabi. The agreements further consolidated a *de facto* strategic alignment between Israel and conservative Gulf monarchies under U.S. sponsorship, largely motivated by their shared opposition to Iran (Crowley, 2020; Alavi, 2023).

Palestinian reactions to the agreements were overwhelmingly negative. Officials within the Palestinian Authority condemned the accords as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause, while Hamas denounced normalization as support for Israeli occupation policies. Iran echoed these criticisms, with Ali Khamenei describing the Abraham Accords as a "humiliation" and accusing the UAE of betraying both the Palestinians and the broader Islamic world. At the same time, cooperation between Iran-aligned Palestinian factions deepened and in

December 2020 Hamas and PIJ conducted their first joint military exercise in Gaza. On the eve of the drills, a large portrait of Qasem Soleimani, assassinated in a U.S. strike in Baghdad in January 2020, was prominently displayed along Gaza's main coastal road (*Aljazeera*, 2020a; 2020b; Staff, 2020; al-Mughrabi, 2020).

The convergence between Iran and Palestinian factions intensified further during the May 2021 escalation between Israel and Gaza. Tensions erupted following Israeli attempts to evict Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood in East Jerusalem and clashes at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound. During the conflict, Khamenei called upon Muslim countries to provide political, financial, and military support to the Palestinians. Following the ceasefire, both PIJ Secretary-General, Ziad al-Nakhalah, and Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, sent messages of appreciation to the Iranian leadership, explicitly acknowledging Tehran's support for the Palestinian resistance. In particular, in his letter, al-Nakhalah emphasized that Iran's sustained backing had played a decisive role in the success of the "Sword of Jerusalem" operation (*Reuters*, 2021; *Tehran Times*, 2021a; 2021b; Alavi, 2023).

A significant diplomatic gesture occurred in August 2021, when, contrasting the regional isolation of Palestinian Islamist movements in Gaza, the Iranian government invited the leaderships of Hamas and PIJ to President Ebrahim Raisi's inauguration. The seating arrangements at the ceremony attracted international attention: Iranian media highlighted the EU representative, Enrique Mora, placed in the second row behind Hamas and PIJ leaders, who were instead seated in the front row (Rasmussen, 2021).

This engagement continued in October 2021, when, at the invitation of the Iranian leadership, delegations from both Hamas and PIJ participated in the 35th Islamic Unity Conference in Tehran and delivered speeches at the opening session (*Mehr News Agency*, 2021). As Alavi (2023) correctly observes, taken together, these diplomatic gestures underscore the significance of Hamas and PIJ within Iran's regional strategy while also enhancing their political standing and confidence at the regional level.

3.2. Understanding Iran's Engagement in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Iran's involvement in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict is closely connected to the broader strategic ambitions of the Islamic Republic: specifically, it stems from its desire for regional hegemony (Shine and Catran, 2017). Since the 1979 Revolution, the Palestinian cause has occupied a central position in Iranian foreign policy, functioning as an ideological commitment which, however, has never been disassociated from the country's geopolitical interests (Takyeh, 2009; Fatima et al., 2025).

In particular, Iran's strategy in Palestine – especially in the Gaza Strip – allows Tehran to pursue two main objectives: on one hand, to assert itself as the leader of the Muslim world, at least in the Middle East; and on the other hand, to contest and counter U.S. influence in the region (Shine and Catran, 2017; Parchami, 2022; Sternfeld, 2024; Azizi, 2025; Fatima et al., 2025).

On the one hand, by positioning itself as one of the most ardent and uncompromising defenders of the Palestinian cause, Iran seeks to cultivate political legitimacy beyond its traditional Shia sphere of influence. Indeed, support for Palestine constitutes a unifying issue across the Muslim world, since it is widely perceived not only as a national struggle for self-determination, but also as a broader symbol of resistance against occupation, colonialism, and Western domination. Moreover, the centrality of Jerusalem and the al-Aqsa Mosque, celebrated as one of Islam's holiest sites, gives the Palestinian question a profound religious and symbolic significance for Muslims worldwide. In other words, endorsing Palestinians' rights in its strategy allows Tehran to present itself as the defender of the whole *ummah*, thus transcending sectarian divisions between Sunni and Shia communities and expanding appeal among Sunni Islamist movements and, more generally, Arab publics (Shine and Catran, 2017; Azizi, 2025; Fatima et al., 2025; Nasr, 2025).

On the other hand, Iran views the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a "proxy battleground for its broader struggle against Western, especially American, influence in the Middle East" (Azizi, 2025: 149).

From the perspective of the Islamic Republic, Israel represents a foreign implant in the Middle Est by the United States to impose their own concept of

regional order. Consequently, support for Palestinian resistance movements enables Iran to challenge the U.S.-led regional architecture indirectly, without engaging in direct interstate confrontation: by arming, financing, and diplomatically supporting Palestinian factions, Tehran seeks to impose strategic costs on Israel, weaken U.S. regional allies, and promote its own power arrangement (Shine and Catran, 2017; Parchami, 2022; Sternfeld, 2024; Azizi, 2025; Fatima et al., 2025).

It is in light of these two objectives that the Islamic Republic's sustained support for Hams and PIJ should be understood: as Tehran's attempt to construct a transnational "Axis of Resistance" based less on sectarian, Shia identity than on a shared Muslim commitment to armed opposition against Israel and Western dominance (Azizi, 2025).

3.3. Iran, Gaza, and the Axis of Resistance

On the morning of October 7, 2023, during the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah and coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, Hamas announced the start of "Operation al-Aqsa Flood", firing between 3,000 and 5,000 rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory within a span of twenty minutes; simultaneously, an estimated 3,000 militants breached the Gaza perimeter and infiltrated southern Israel using a combination of trucks, motorcycles, bulldozers, speedboats, and paragliders. The attacks constituted the first large-scale penetration of Israeli territory by Palestinian armed groups since the 1948 Arab–Israeli War (*Aljazeera,* 2023; Pusztaszeri and Harding, 2024; Nasr, 2025; Mekelberg, 2026).

Hamas's operation also exposed severe vulnerabilities within Israel's intelligence and security apparatus: due to the scale of the attack and surprise of the Israeli citizens, it has been described by Beaumont (2023) as "an intelligence failure for the ages".

Israel's response was quick to arrive, initiating the military campaign that would become known as the Gaza War. Following the attacks, Israeli forces launched extensive aerial bombardments across the Gaza Strip and on October

27 commenced a ground invasion of the strip. The Israel Defense Force (IDF) subsequently conducted multiple large-scale operations throughout Gaza, including offensives in Rafah and Khan Yunis, prolonged sieges in northern Gaza, and later military operations in Gaza City. In parallel, it pursued a systematic strategy of targeted assassinations against Hamas's political and military leaders both within Gaza and abroad (*Al Jazeera,* 2023; Pusztaszeri and Harding, 2024; Nasr, 2025; Mekelberg, 2026).

However, the conflict rapidly expanded beyond the Israeli–Palestinian arena and assumed a distinctly regional dimension. Following Israel's retaliation, Iran and members of the "Axis of Resistance" came to Hamas's aid, activating military, political, and communication networks across multiple theaters: Hezbollah intensified cross-border attacks from southern Lebanon; Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria launched drone and missile strikes against U.S. military installations in the region; finally, the Houthis in Yemen targeted commercial shipping routes in the Red Sea, significantly immobilizing maritime trade and disrupting international navigation (Pusztaszeri and Harding, 2024; Nasr, 2025; Mekelberg, 2026).

The Gaza War thus became what Nasr (2025: 1) defines as "the bold manifestation of the ascendance of the Axis of Resistance". The opening of seven interconnected fronts demonstrated the ability of Iran and its regional allies to transform their shared strategic objective – namely, confronting Israel and limiting U.S. influence in the Middle East – into a coordinated yet flexible regional response (Bajoghli and Nasr, 2024). At the same time, the conflict revealed the extent to which Iran had succeeded in constructing what Israeli analysts increasingly describe as a regional "ring of fire" surrounding Israel: through years of financial, military, and logistical support to allied non-state actors across Lebanon, Gaza, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Tehran progressively established a network of proxy forces capable of "encircling" Israel (Azizi, 2023; Sobelman, 2024).

In this sense, the Gaza War constitutes the clearest manifestation to date of Iran's grand strategy of forward defense. As stated in Chapter Two, the central idea is that confrontation with Israel and the United States should occur as far as

possible from Iranian territory itself. In this logic, the Levant increasingly emerged as the principal theater of confrontation. Prior to his death in October 2024, Hassan Nasrallah repeatedly described the conflicts unfolding across the Levant as "united spheres" (*vahdat al-sahat*). In other words, developments in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen should not be understood as isolated crises, but rather as different fronts within one integrated regional struggle (Baconi, 2023; Seurat, 2023; Azizi, 2023; Bajoghli and Nasr, 2024; Matthiesen, 2024; Nasr, 2025).

At the same time, the conflict demonstrated that the cohesion of the Axis of Resistance increasingly transcended direct Iranian command and control: indeed, although Iran remained the central political and strategic actor within the alliance, the Axis was now also held together by a shared ideological commitment to resisting Israel and opposing U.S. influence in the Middle East. The Palestinian cause provided the movement with a powerful source of legitimacy capable of mobilizing popular support across sectarian and national boundaries. At the same time, for many Palestinians living in Gaza and in the West Bank, Iran and the Axis of Resistance increasingly appeared as the only regional actors willing to confront Israel militarily (Baconi, 2023; Seurat, 2023; Bajoghli and Nasr, 2024; Matthiesen, 2024; Nasr, 2025).

In conclusion, the Gaza War revealed how Tehran had transformed a collection of allied militias into a relatively integrated regional security architecture capable of coordinating military, political, and ideological action across the Middle East.

3.4. Iran's Authoritarian Conflict Management in Gaza

The war in Gaza represents a critical case study through which to examine Iran's regional strategy as a form of ACM: rather than pursuing liberal models of conflict resolution based on negotiation and institutional peacebuilding, the Islamic Republic has sought to manage and shape the conflict through a combination of ideological mobilization, transnational proxy networks, and

selective economic and military support. In this section, Iran's involvement in Gaza will be analyzed through the three core dimensions of ACM: discursive practices, spatial control, and economic practices.

3.4.1. Discursive practices

As discussed in Chapter Two, Iran's regional strategy operates through a set of discursive practices aimed at constructing a hegemonic narrative that both legitimizes Tehran's actions and delegitimizes its adversaries'. These discursive mechanisms, which constitute a central dimension of ACM, have also been prominently employed during the Gaza war.

This section draws primarily on the analysis conducted by Rajabi and Mousavi (2025) of the speeches delivered by Ali Khamenei following the Al-Aqsa Flood operation. Specifically, the authors examine 42 speeches delivered by the Supreme Leader between October 9, 2023 and October 9, 2024, all sourced from the official Information Portal of the Office for the Preservation and Publication of His Works (khamenei.ir).

The table below illustrates the most frequently recurring keywords in Ali Khamenei's speeches and the number of times they appear throughout the selected corpus.

Keyword	Frequency
Islamic	992
Palestine	954
America	949
Zionist	933
Gaza	932
World	932
Resistance	924
West	43
Lebanon	42
Martyr	39
Defense	35
Criminals	33
Occupier	33
Enemy	29
Operation Al-Aqsa	23
Oppressed	21
Muslim	21

According to Rajabi and Mousavi (2025), the thematic analysis of these speeches reveals that Khamenei's discourse is structured around three principal dimensions: geographic, conceptual, and ideological.

From a geographic perspective, the frequent repetition of terms such as "Palestine," "Gaza," and "Lebanon" demonstrates a strong emphasis on which territories are portrayed as central arenas of resistance against occupation.

Conceptually, expressions such as "resistance," "struggle," "enemy," and "Operation Al-Aqsa" establish a binary framework opposing the forces of resistance to those of occupation, thereby reinforcing narratives of confrontation.

At the ideological level, recurrent references to "Islam" and the "Muslim" community connect the Palestinian struggle to broader religious and moral values, presenting resistance not merely as a political project but as a spiritual

and civilizational duty. In parallel, emotionally charged terms such as "oppressed," "martyr," and "criminals" serve a mobilizational function by contrasting Palestinian victimhood with the alleged brutality of the Zionist regime (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

To better understand how these narratives function within Iran's broader strategy of Authoritarian Conflict Management, it is necessary to examine not only the content of the speeches, but also the ways in which language is employed to construct political meaning and legitimize authority.

Accordingly, the lens through which Rajabi and Mousavi (2025) analyze the speeches, is that of discourse analysis, an approach that explores the interplay between language, power, and ideology. In particular, the authors adopt Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis, which consists of "linguistic analysis," "discursive interaction analysis," and "social context analysis". At the linguistic level, the analysis focuses on vocabulary, syntax, and rhetorical structures employed in the speeches; at the interactional level, attention is given to the relationship between the producer of the discourse (in this case, the Supreme Leader) and the intended audience; finally, at the social level, the analysis situates these discursive practices within their broader historical, cultural, and political context in order to clarify how the discourse reinforces existing power structures (Fairclough, 1993).

Linguistic analysis. At the linguistic level, Ali Khamenei's discourse is characterized by the extensive use of highly emotive and identity-oriented language aimed at strengthening solidarity around both the Palestinian cause and the broader Islamic community: through the repeated invocation of terms such as "Islamic Ummah," "religious obligation," "historical responsibility," and "jihad", the speeches construct the conflict not as a localized political dispute, but as a collective struggle involving the entire Muslim world. In doing so, the audience is discursively positioned as part of a unified transnational community bound by shared moral and religious duties (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

From a syntactic and rhetorical perspective, the two Iranian scholars (2025) observe that the speeches frequently employ declarative and imperative structures, conveying certainty and warning about urgency: indeed, declarative

statements present political claims as unquestionable truths, while imperative formulations encourage action.

A central feature of Khamenei's discourse since October 7, 2023, is the portrayal of resistance as the only viable path toward the liberation of Palestine, its centrality being underscored by the repeated use of the term "resistance" – appearing 924 times in the speeches analyzed. At the same time, Khamenei's rhetoric repeatedly emphasizes the alleged fragility and inevitable decline of Israel through expressions such as "collapse," "irreparable defeat," and "devastating earthquake." Such language serves a dual purpose: it delegitimizes the enemy while simultaneously instilling optimism and empowerment among supporters of the resistance (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

Alongside this triumphalist rhetoric, the discourse also relies heavily on narratives of victimhood and moral condemnation. References to "cruel crimes," "violence against men and women," "humanitarian disaster," and the "silence of international institutions" are employed to portray Palestinians as victims of systemic injustice and to accuse Western powers of hypocrisy. In particular, the repeated contrast between Western claims of defending human rights and their perceived support for Israel enables Iran to challenge the moral legitimacy of both Israel and the broader Western-led international order (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

Discursive interaction analysis. At the level of discursive interaction, Ali Khamenei's speeches are directed toward multiple audiences, each addressed through distinct rhetorical strategies and communicative objectives: it follows that, rather than functioning solely as ideological statements, these speeches operate as instruments of political mobilization. Rajabi and Mousavi (2025) identify four different audiences: the Palestinian people, the Islamic Ummah, pro-Palestine U.S. students and even the "Zionist enemy".

Toward the Palestinian people, the discourse is primarily centered on generating hope and sustaining the spirit of resistance, with recurrent expressions such as "victory is near" and "resistance pays off" reinforcing the perception that perseverance will ultimately lead to liberation. Similarly, repeated references to the "patience," "endurance," and "sacrifices" of

Palestinian youth elevate resistance into a moral virtue, portraying Palestinians not as passive victims but as active historical agents (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025). In Fairclough's (1993) framework, this can be understood as a form of interactional reinforcement, through which discourse strengthens collective resilience and emotional solidarity.

In addressing the broader Islamic world, Khamenei's rhetoric seeks to cultivate a sense of unity and shared responsibility among Muslims: the Palestinian cause is framed as a collective obligation of the Islamic Ummah rather than a purely national struggle. References to concepts such as "religious duty," "the first *qibla* of Muslims," and the "one Ummah" contribute to the construction of a transnational Islamic identity centered on solidarity with Palestine. In other words, through this discourse, support for the Palestinian resistance is presented not only as politically desirable, but also as a religious and historical imperative capable of reshaping regional power relations (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

A fraction of these speeches also engages with pro-Palestinian student movements in the West, particularly in U.S. universities. Khamenei portrays students and young activists supporting Palestine as part of a broader "Global Resistance Front," thereby incorporating them into the symbolic universe of the Axis of Resistance. Expressions such as "on the right side of history" and "an honorable struggle" are used to morally legitimize student activism. Moreover, by appealing to non-Middle Eastern publics, the Supreme Leader aims at extending its appeal into global civil society (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

Finally, the speeches are also directed toward Israel, referred to consistently as the "Zionist enemy." In this context, the rhetoric assumes a confrontational and psychological dimension aimed at undermining the enemy's legitimacy and morale. Concepts such as the "inevitable decline of Zionism," "irreparable damage," and the "collapse" of the Zionist regime are repeatedly invoked to project an image of Israel as fragile. In other words, emphasis on alleged Israeli intelligence and military failures serves as a form of psychological warfare intended to discredit Israel while simultaneously boosting confidence within the resistance camp (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

Social context analysis. Rajabi and Mousavi (2025) ultimately situate the Ayatollah's speeches within their broader historical, political, and cultural context, emphasizing that these statements cannot be understood independently from the regional and international developments unfolding after the outbreak of the Gaza war. In particular, Khamenei's discourse sought not only to interpret the events for domestic and regional audiences, but also to strategically position Iran as a central actor within the evolving Middle Eastern order.

A first important contextual dimension concerns the broader geopolitical transformations taking place in the region. Khamenei's rhetoric reflects Iran's attempt to capitalize on the growing fragmentation of the regional order and the declining legitimacy of Western-led security arrangements in the Middle East. By framing the Gaza war as part of a wider confrontation between the "Axis of Resistance" and the Israeli-Western alliance, the discourse situates Tehran at the center of a transnational resistance front extending across Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

The statements must also be understood in light of the historical relationship between Iran and Palestine. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Palestinian cause has constituted a core pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and it has consistently been employed by Tehran as a means of legitimizing its regional role, presenting Iran as the defender of oppressed Muslims and the principal opponent of Israel and Western interventionism. Khamenei's discourse during the Gaza war therefore builds upon decades of ideological continuity, reaffirming Palestine not only as a geopolitical issue but also as a central symbolic component of the Islamic Republic's identity and legitimacy (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

Another key dimension concerns the role of media and information warfare. Khamenei's speeches clearly seek to shape a global narrative surrounding the conflict by emphasizing the contrast between the "oppression" and suffering of Palestinians and the alleged "crimes" of the Zionist regime. Through emotionally charged language, the discourse attempts to influence international public opinion and strengthen transnational solidarity with Palestine. In this regard, the speeches can be interpreted as part of a broader struggle over narrative

dominance, in which media representation becomes an essential arena of conflict alongside military confrontation (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

Closely connected to this is the effort to expose what the Ayatollah presents as the hypocrisy of Western civilization. A recurring theme throughout the speeches is the contradiction between Western claims of defending human rights, and respecting international law and the military, political, and financial support provided to Israel. By repeatedly highlighting this inconsistency, the discourse seeks to undermine the moral legitimacy of the Western-led international order and to portray Iran and the Axis of Resistance as the authentic defenders of justice and oppressed peoples. This narrative serves not only a regional function, but also a global one, aiming to mobilize international public opinion, particularly in the Global South and among anti-Western audiences, against Israel and its Western allies (Rajabi and Mousavi, 2025).

3.4.2. Spatial practices

Gaza represents a structural anomaly within Iran's model of ACM due to its condition of extreme isolation. Indeed, unlike other arenas in which Iran projects influence through relatively open transnational networks and cross-border mobility, the Gaza Strip operates under a permanent Israeli siege that severely restricts movement, trade, and political autonomy.

A siege can be understood as a regime of comprehensive blockade in which sovereignty over borders, imports, exports, and the circulation of people and goods is effectively removed from the targeted territory and subordinated to the control of a hostile external power (Smith, 2016; 2019). In their analysis of the sanctions regime imposed on Iraq during the 1990s, Tariq and Jacqueline Ismael (2015) describe siege practices as a form of "war against the people." Although developed in relation to Iraq, this interpretation can be extended to other contemporary siege regimes, including Gaza. From this perspective, siege warfare is not directed solely at coercing governments or political elites; rather, it targets the broader population: indeed, by restricting access to food, medicine, infrastructure, mobility, and economic resources, siege regimes operate through

the regulation – or, better – deterioration of civilian life itself (Smith, 2016; 2019).

In the case of Gaza, Israel exercises authority over the Strip's borders, airspace, territorial waters, population registry, telecommunications infrastructure, and the movement of people and goods. The militarized fence and separation wall surrounding Gaza constitute only the most visible manifestation of a much broader infrastructure of siege: indeed, this system operates through a complex network of checkpoints, surveillance technologies, naval restrictions, and permit systems. Moreover, all imports and exports entering or leaving Gaza remain subject to Israeli oversight and, in the case of the Rafah crossing, coordination with Egypt. Through these mechanisms, Israel is able to regulate not only territorial access, but also the circulation of humanitarian aid, construction materials, fuel, electricity, medical supplies, and commercial goods (Smith, 2016; 2019).

What makes the Israeli siege of Gaza distinctive is its permanent character. Under international law (Hague Regulations of 1907; Fourth Geneva Convention), military occupation is generally conceived as a temporary condition justified by security considerations and the maintenance of public order until a political resolution is achieved. Implicit within this legal framework is the expectation that occupation cannot persist indefinitely: the occupying power must eventually either integrate the territory and extend full political and civil rights to its inhabitants or withdraw from it altogether. On the contrary, as Smith (2019: 40) explains, "the Israeli state has managed to make occupation permanent in Gaza by creating a state of permanent siege against the residents of Gaza".

For the Islamic Republic, the Gaza's blockade entails that, unlike Hezbollah in Lebanon, the PMF in Iraq, or the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas is a spatially isolated militant client. In other words, Gaza's isolated geography, bordered by Israel and Egypt, with no contiguous overland corridor to Iran's supply networks, structurally prevents Iran from exercising the logistical and territorial control functions that define the militant-client relationship in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. As a result, the mechanisms identified by Ostovar (2019), such as the

control of border crossings, supply routes, airports, and strategic infrastructure, are impossible to apply in the Gazan context.

These geographical constraints had important operational implications for the Gaza war. Despite Iran's long-standing support for Hamas, available evidence suggests that Tehran did not play a direct operational role in the planning or execution of the 7 October attacks: both U.S. and Israeli officials concluded that Iranian leaders neither orchestrated nor possessed prior knowledge of the assault. Moreover, documents reportedly seized by the Israeli Defense Forces indicate that Hamas had attempted to secure broader Iranian participation in the operation but failed to obtain Tehran's full approval or commitment (Cohen et al., 2023; Wintour, 2023; Azizi, 2025).

Yet Iran's extensive military, economic, and political backing for Hamas is widely acknowledged. As Smyth (2023: 25) argues, "while Iran cocked the gun, it was its Palestinian proxies that pulled the trigger".

Iran tried to – and succeeded in – circumvent Gaza's isolation and exercise authoritarian spatial control through two practices: a multi-front strategy and tunnel warfare.

In what Iranian strategists often describe as a "unity of fronts" approach, Iran deployed the entire Axis of Resistance into a coordinated "joint operations room" (Vazirian, 2023; Azizi, 2025). This structure operated through three interconnected operational echelons.

The first and foundational tier consisted of the Palestinian territories, where Iranian-backed factions, particularly Hamas and PIJ, conducted military operations against Israel (Azizi, 2023; Levy, 2024; Grinberg, 2025).

The second tier is represented by Hezbollah, which, since the outbreak of the war, moved rapidly to alleviate the pressure on Hamas and PIJ by opening an additional front against Israel, namely southern Lebanon. Through sustained rocket fire, anti-tank missile attacks, and cross-border operations, Hezbollah sought to divert Israeli military attention and resources toward the northern front and succeeded in forcing Israel to evacuate dozens of northern border communities, while imposing significant economic and logistical costs on the Israeli state (Azizi, 2023; Levy, 2024; Grinberg, 2025).

A third and final layer of Iran's multi-front strategy involved the allied militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Iran-backed armed groups in Iraq and eastern Syria launched repeated rocket, drone, and mortar attacks against U.S. military bases in the region, presenting these operations as acts of solidarity with Hamas and as part of a broader effort to challenge Western support for Israel (Azizi, 2023; Levy, 2024; Grinberg, 2025). According to experts from *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, Iran-aligned Iraqi militias claimed responsibility for more than 140 attacks against U.S. installations in Iraq and Syria after October 18, 2023.

At the same time, the Houthis expanded the conflict into the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula: operating from northern Yemen, the Houthis launched long-range missiles and drones toward southern Israel. Notably, the armed group fired ballistic missiles directly at Israel – a threat the Jewish State had not experienced since the Iraqi Scud missile attacks during the 1991 Gulf War. In addition, they targeted commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea and even conducted helicopter-assisted seizures of cargo ships associated with Israel (Azizi, 2023; Levy, 2024; Grinberg, 2025).

Through this "unity of fronts" strategy, Iran managed to transform the Gaza war from a geographically isolated conflict into a broader regional confrontation involving multiple simultaneous theaters of pressure.

The second strategy deployed to overcome Gaza's spatial constraints is the subterranean reconfiguration of the battlefield as a substitute for conventional spatial control.

Deprived of secure supply corridors, and freedom of movement due to the Israeli siege, resistance actors in Gaza increasingly relied on underground infrastructure to compensate for their spatial vulnerability and asymmetry vis-à-vis Israel's conventional military superiority (Morag, 2025; Melnikova, 2025; Richemond-Barak and Voiculescu-Holvad, 2026).

In general terms, subterranean warfare refers to military operations conducted beneath the surface of the earth through tunnels, caves, underground bunkers, sewer systems, and other concealed subsurface structures. Such underground networks can significantly complicate the efforts of a

conventionally superior military force to monitor and neutralize combatants operating within them, since, by creating concealed routes of movement and communication, subterranean systems provide a degree of battlefield mobility and operational flexibility even in environments characterized by extensive surveillance and territorial enclosure. For this reason, to weaker military actors and insurgent groups, underground warfare functions as an asymmetric strategy designed to offset the overwhelming advantages of stronger conventional armies in terms of air power, artillery, intelligence, logistics, and territorial dominance. (Morag, 2025; Melnikova, 2025).

Morag (2025) argues that the current Gaza war marks the first instance in which subterranean warfare has evolved from a primarily tactical instrument into a genuinely strategic phenomenon. In the context of the conflict, Hamas' underground infrastructure has become the organization's most important strategic asset, central to its ability to pursue both military and political objectives vis-à-vis Israel. More specifically, the tunnel network has been crucial for ensuring Hamas' survival as both an armed movement and a governing authority.

From this perspective, the extensive system of tunnels, underground depots, command centers, and concealed logistical routes beneath Gaza constitutes far more than a defensive military tool. Rather, it functions as the backbone of Hamas' organizational resilience and long-term survivability: the subterranean network enables the movement of fighters, storage of weapons, protection of leadership structures, and continuation of military operations even under conditions of intense aerial bombardment and territorial encirclement. In this sense, the underground infrastructure acquires a strategic character because it directly supports Hamas' capacity to endure and sustain the conflict over time (Morag, 2025; Richemond-Barak and Voiculescu-Holvad, 2026).

The development of Hamas' subterranean infrastructure dates back to the early years of Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip following the 1967 Six-Day War. Initially, tunnels were employed on a relatively limited scale for the smuggling of weapons, the concealment of fighters, and the evasion of Israeli surveillance, yet, over time, these rudimentary underground passages evolved

into a highly sophisticated and extensive subterranean network that became central to Hamas' military strategy and resilience. Indeed, as the network expanded, the construction of tunnels, underground storage facilities, weapons factories, and concealed rocket-launching sites enabled Hamas to operate simultaneously beneath multiple urban areas across the Gaza Strip. This evolution allowed the organization to coordinate complex military operations across different battle spaces while reducing its exposure to Israeli air superiority and surveillance capabilities (Morag, 2025; Richemond-Barak and Voiculescu-Holvad, 2026).

By the time of the October 7, 2023 attacks, Hamas had transferred a substantial portion of its military infrastructure underground and developed one of the most extensive subterranean systems ever constructed by a non-state actor.

The underground system (often referred to as the "Gaza Metro") is estimated to include between 560 and 720 kilometers of tunnels and bunkers situated at varying depths, ranging from shallow passages beneath civilian structures such as apartment buildings, mosques, schools, and hospitals to deep underground facilities extending more than 60 meters below the surface. During the subsequent Israeli military operations in Gaza, Hamas relied heavily on this underground infrastructure to sustain combat activities: fighters used tunnels to maneuver across the battlefield, launch attacks against Israeli forces, and retreat without direct exposure; the network also facilitated underground medical treatment, communications, command-and-control operations, and the launching of rockets from concealed silos connected to subterranean routes (Morag, 2025; Olson et al., 2025; Richemond-Barak and Voiculescu-Holvad, 2026).

From an assets-based perspective, Hamas' command, control, communications, and intelligence architecture was deeply embedded within the underground environment. Much of the organization's strategic weaponry, particularly its rocket arsenal, was either stored underground, transported through tunnels, or launched from concealed subterranean positions; similarly, several weapons production facilities were reportedly located beneath the

surface, further reducing Hamas' vulnerability to Israeli strikes (Morag, 2025; Olston et al., 2025; Richemond-Barak and Voiculescu-Holvad, 2026).

Over the years, Hamas also devoted a significant share of its financial resources to the construction and maintenance of this infrastructure, highlighting the strategic priority attributed to subterranean warfare. Israeli military investigations and captured Hamas documents reportedly indicated that constructing one kilometer of a standard tunnel could require approximately one year of work and cost around $275,000. However, the cost varied significantly depending on the tunnel's size, depth, and operational function. Given the diversity and scale of the underground infrastructure in Gaza, precise estimates remain difficult. Nonetheless, some reports suggest that Hamas spent approximately $90 million on the construction of just three dozen tunnels in 2014 alone, while broader estimates place the total cost of the subterranean network at over $1 billion (Morag, 2025; Olston et al., 2025; Richemond-Barak and Voiculescu-Holvad, 2026).

Nevertheless, the development of Hamas' subterranean infrastructure cannot be understood in isolation from the broader model promoted by Hezbollah and supported by Iran.

A report published by Tal Beeri (2021), head of the research department at the Alma Research and Education Center, revealed the existence of a large-scale Hezbollah tunnel network extending across different parts of Lebanon. With a cumulative length estimated at hundreds of kilometers, the system was so vast that Lebanon was described as a "Land of Tunnels" (Beeri, 2021: 2).

Much like the tunnel infrastructure developed by Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah's underground system reportedly includes command-and-control centers, weapons depots, supply storage facilities, underground medical units, and launch positions for rockets and missiles. And, same as in Gaza, this underground system was designed to facilitate the concealed movement of fighters, weapons, and supplies while avoiding detection by the IDF (Beeri, 2021).

Several scholars, including Miller (2014), Lappin (2021), and Olson (2025), have highlighted the striking similarities between Hamas' and Hezbollah's

subterranean strategies. In their opinion, these similarities are not coincidental but rather reflect shared patterns of external support and technological transfer. Specifically, Olson et al. (2025) notes that both organizations benefited from the technical and financial assistance of Iran and North Korea.

The tunnel projects emerged from a longstanding triangular cooperation linking Tehran, Pyongyang, and Hezbollah since the 1980s. The relationship became visible during the 2006 Lebanon War, when North Korean advisers reportedly provided substantial expertise to Hezbollah in the construction of military tunnels, drawing on their own country's decades-long experience in subterranean warfare and underground fortification systems developed since the 1950s. In other words, Hezbollah regarded North Korea as a key source of technical knowledge in the field of tunnel construction and underground military infrastructure (Beeri, 2021; Lappin, 2021; Olson et al., 2025).

Yet the organization needed financing. In this regard, the Alma report (2021) suggests that tunneling activities in Lebanon were facilitated through ostensibly civilian construction companies operating as cover organizations. Among these was the "Beqaa for Construction and Contracting" company, reportedly established in 2005 under the sponsorship of the IRGC. Illustrating the depth of Iranian involvement, until 2013, the company was allegedly headed by Hassan Shateri, a senior IRGC officer, in charge of overseeing and coordinating Hezbollah's tunnel project (Beeri, 2021; Olson et al., 2025).

The striking similarities between Hezbollah's and Hamas's use of tunnel warfare have prompted analysts to ask who has drawn inspiration from whom. Several researchers argue that Hamas's adoption of underground warfare reflects the broader influence of Hezbollah's military model on Palestinian resistance strategies. As Beeri (2021) observed, "Hamas is usually the last in the food chain when it comes to new tools used by the radical axis," suggesting that tactical innovations often diffuse from other members of the Axis of Resistance to Gaza. A similar view was expressed by the Canadian-Israeli journalist Friedman, who argued in an interview with *The Times of Israel* (Miller, 2021) that "Hamas's entire strategy post-2000 was inspired by Hezbollah and by what happened in the 1990s, culminating in the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon."

Official rhetoric on both sides further reflects this admiration for the Hezbollah model: in his 2010 book *Hizbullah: The Story from Within*, Hezbollah Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem argued that the lessons of Lebanon could be replicated elsewhere, writing that "what happened in Lebanon can be repeated in Palestine" (Miller, 2014; Lappin, 2021; Olson et al., 2025).

In this sense, tunnel warfare in Gaza should not be viewed solely as a localized tactical adaptation to siege conditions, but rather as part of a broader transnational military doctrine circulating within the Axis of Resistance under Iranian sponsorship.

3.4.3. Economic practices

A central component of Iran's regional strategy is its reliance on illicit funding mechanisms and informal financial networks to the extent that Iran-backed groups are integrated into a deliberately constructed parallel financial architecture designed to circumvent international sanctions and regulatory oversight (Imeny et al., 2021; Smith, 2025).

In the Palestinian arena, Iran employs many of the same mechanisms used to support other members of the Axis of Resistance, including cryptocurrencies and TBML, discussed extensively in Chapter Two.

However, the Tehran–Hamas relationship exhibits a distinctive feature: a strategy of "carrots and sticks" (Smyth, 2023: 27), whereby financial resources are selectively distributed or withheld to shape the behavior of allied groups and ensure their alignment with Iranian regional priorities.

The evolution of Iran's relationship with Hamas illustrates this dynamic. Canadian Secret Intelligence Service (CSIS) estimates suggest that Iran transferred between $3 million and $18 million annually to Hamas in the early 2000s (CSIS, 2002). Yet, between 2012 and 2013, Tehran suspended much of its funding in response to Hamas's support for Sunni Islamist opposition groups in Syria and its criticism of Iran's intervention on behalf of the Assad regime (Levitt, 2023; Smyth, 2023).

A similar pattern can be observed in Iran's relations with Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Although PIJ largely avoided sanctions for maintaining a neutral stance on the Syrian conflict, the group reportedly experienced a temporary suspension of Iranian funding in 2015 after refusing to endorse Iran-backed Ansar Allah (the Houthis) in Yemen. As one PIJ official acknowledged in 2016, Iran expected its allies not only to receive financial assistance but also to support its broader political and military positions across the region (Smyth, 2023).

Once these episodes of tension were over, Iranian support for Hamas has increased substantially over time: according to U.S. and Israeli estimates, Tehran currently provides Hamas with between $70 million and $100 million annually, figures broadly consistent with statements made by Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in 2022 (Sales, 2018; Levitt, 2023).

From an ACM perspective, these practices of withholding funds serve a fundamental function: by selectively allocating financial assistance and conditioning support on political loyalty, Iran strengthens clientelist networks that enhance its influence while preserving cohesion within the broader Axis of Resistance.

3.5. Concluding remarks

This chapter has demonstrated that Iran's engagement with the Palestinian cause is neither a recent development nor a mere reaction to contemporary events: rather, it represents the culmination of a relationship that dates back to the 1970s and has evolved alongside the broader transformation of the Middle East's geopolitical landscape.

Following the 1979 Revolution, support for Palestine became a central pillar of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy: the Palestinian struggle was incorporated into Iran's revolutionary narrative as both a religious and political obligation, enabling Tehran to portray itself as a defender of the oppressed (*mustazafin*) and a leading opponent of Israel and Western influence in the Middle East.

A major turning point occurred after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, which severely strained relations between Tehran and the PLO: viewing

the peace process as a betrayal of the Palestinian struggle, Iran redirected its support toward Islamist movements that rejected negotiations with Israel and remained committed to armed resistance, most notably Hamas and PIJ. Over the last five decades, through sustained political, military, and financial support for these, Tehran gradually integrated the Palestinian resistance into its broader Axis of Resistance.

Nevertheless, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 produced a significant rupture in relations between Iran and Hamas. While Tehran remained firmly committed to preserving the Assad regime, Hamas chose to distance itself from Damascus and expressed support for elements of the Syrian opposition. Despite these disagreements, neither side severed relations completely, recognizing the strategic value of continued cooperation, until Israel's military operations against Gaza in 2012 and 2014 created the conditions for a gradual rapprochement.

The years 2020 and 2021 marked a further phase in the consolidation of ties between Iran and Palestinian resistance movements, prompted by the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states under the Abraham Accords, together with renewed violence in Jerusalem and Gaza. Throughout the crisis, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called on Muslim states to provide political, financial, and military support to the Palestinians, reaffirming Iran's commitment to the resistance camp and highlighting the centrality of Palestine within its regional strategy.

As argued throughout this chapter, Iran's strategy in Palestine serves two interconnected objectives. First, it enables Tehran to portray itself as the principal defender of the Palestinian cause and, more broadly, as a champion of Muslim populations confronting perceived Western domination: by positioning itself at the forefront of the struggle against Israel, the Islamic Republic seeks to strengthen its legitimacy beyond its national borders and expand its appeal among regional audiences. Second, Palestine provides a crucial arena through which Iran can challenge Israeli military and political power while simultaneously contesting U.S. influence in the Middle East: support for

Palestinian armed groups allows Tehran to impose costs on its adversaries and exercise pressure without engaging in direct interstate confrontation.

The Gaza war that followed the attacks of 7 October 2023 represented a critical moment in the evolution of this strategy. The conflict returned the Palestinian issue to the center of regional and international politics after years in which it had been overshadowed by other crises, including the Syrian civil war, the rise and fall of ISIS, and the normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states. For Iran, the war created an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of the Axis of Resistance as a coherent transnational network capable of mobilizing across multiple fronts.

Viewed through the lens of ACM, Iran's role in Gaza extends beyond conventional military support, as Tehran has sought to shape and control the conflict through a combination of discursive, spatial, and economic mechanisms.

Discursively, Iran has sought to shape perceptions of the conflict by constructing a narrative that legitimizes armed resistance while delegitimizing alternative approaches to the Palestinian question. As Rajabi and Mousavi (2025) demonstrate, a central feature of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's speeches since 7 October 2023 has been the portrayal of resistance as the sole effective and legitimate path toward the liberation of Palestine; at the same time, this discourse is reinforced through narratives of victimhood and moral condemnation that depict Palestinians as victims of systematic oppression and Israeli actions as fundamentally unjust.

Spatially, the Islamic Republic managed to overcome the constraints imposed by the Israeli permanent siege of Gaza through two mechanisms: the promotion of a multi-front strategy and support for tunnel warfare. By integrating Gaza into a broader network of allied actors across the region, stretching from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq and Yemen, Tehran transformed a localized conflict into part of a wider regional confrontation. At the same time, the development of underground tunnel systems enabled Palestinian groups to still sustain military operations and preserve strategic mobility.

Economically, Iran has supported Palestinian resistance groups through a range of financial mechanisms, including cryptocurrencies and TBML, which

allow Tehran to sustain its partners despite international sanctions and financial restrictions. However, its relationship with Hamas is characterized by a strategy of selective incentives and disincentives. By distributing or withholding financial support according to the movement's degree of alignment with Iranian regional objectives, Tehran transforms economic aid into a mechanism of control, eventually reinforcing dependency.

Together, these practices illustrate how the Islamic Republic manages conflict not by seeking its resolution, but by leveraging it in ways that advance its geopolitical interests: in other words, rather than acting as a mediator or peacebuilder, Iran derives strategic value from maintaining a controlled level of confrontation that enhances its regional influence by strengthening its network of non-state partners and constraining the actions of its adversaries. In this sense, Iranian involvement in the Gaza war represents a critical case study of how Iran employs authoritarian conflict management to pursue broader regional ambitions.

As the following chapter will demonstrate, the conflict also exposed some of the limitations and contradictions of this strategy, raising important questions about the extent to which Iran's management of conflict ultimately contributes to regional stability or, conversely, perpetuates cycles of violence and instability that may undermine its own long-term objectives.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East remains one of the most strategically significant and contested regions in contemporary international politics: characterized by enduring conflicts, intensifying rivalries among regional actors, and interference from external powers, the region continues to shape global security dynamics. Within this complex environment, a multitude of powers pursue competing political, economic and security interests, often through a combination of conventional and unconventional means. Understanding the strategic doctrines that guide the behavior of these actors is therefore essential for explaining both the persistence of regional instability and the evolving balance of power in the Middle East.

In this increasingly competitive regional scenario, the Islamic Republic of Iran has emerged as one of the most influential actors shaping Middle Eastern dynamics.

Following the 1979 Revolution, the Islamic Republic developed a strategic culture centered on the concept of resistance, which became both a source of political legitimacy and the principal lens through which Tehran interpreted its relationship with the regional and international order. This culture was shaped by a series of historical experiences, notably the Revolution itself, the 1979 hostage crisis, and the Iran-Iraq War, which collectively transformed resistance from a revolutionary slogan into a guiding principle of statecraft, characterized by a preference for confrontation over accommodation, asymmetric methods over conventional parity, long-term endurance over short-term gains, and the prioritization of regime survival over international acceptance. Moreover, the doctrine of “resistance” is deeply rooted in Shia ideology. In particular, the concepts of martyrdom and jihad, provided a powerful moral framework that

cast resistance against oppression as a religious obligation. By linking these themes to anti-imperialist and Third World discourses, Ayatollah Khomeini broadened the meaning of resistance beyond the defense of Islam or Iranian sovereignty, presenting it instead as a universal struggle against domination and injustice.

In brief, Iran's regional behavior is best understood as the product of a fundamentally security-driven conception of national interest, rooted in the country's historical experiences of foreign intervention, strategic isolation, and asymmetric confrontation with militarily superior adversaries. To address these perceived vulnerabilities, Tehran developed a strategy commonly referred to as "Forward Defense": this doctrine seeks to externalize threats by projecting influence beyond Iran's borders and engaging adversaries at a distance. At its core, the strategy serves three interrelated objectives: safeguarding regime survival, strengthening deterrence against external threats, and expanding the Islamic Republic's political and ideological influence across the region.

The regional upheavals triggered by the Arab uprisings of 2011 marked an important evolution of this strategy: while the fundamental objective of externalizing threats remained unchanged, Iran increasingly adopted a more proactive and interventionist posture, seeking not only to contain emerging challenges but also to shape regional developments in its favor. This transformation was accompanied by the consolidation of the so-called Axis of Resistance (*Mehvar-e Moqavemat*), a loosely coordinated transnational network of state and non-state actors aligned with Tehran's broader strategic vision. Although varying considerably in their degree of dependence on Iran, these actors share a common opposition to U.S. and Israeli influence in the Middle East. Extending from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq, Palestine, and Yemen, the Axis today includes groups such as Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces, pro-Assad militias, the Houthis, and Hamas, constituting the principal instrument through which Iran projects power and pursues its regional objectives.

The Gaza War constituted the most significant test of Iran's regional strategy since the emergence of the Axis of Resistance and can be understood as its most visible manifestation. Indeed, the opening of multiple interconnected fronts

across the Middle East demonstrated the capacity of Iran and its regional partners to translate a shared strategic objective – namely, confronting Israel and constraining U.S. influence – into a coordinated, albeit decentralized, regional response. Within this framework, the Palestinian cause served as a powerful source of legitimacy, enabling the Axis to mobilize support across sectarian divides. For many Palestinians, particularly in Gaza and the West Bank, Iran and its allies increasingly came to be perceived as among the few regional actors willing to challenge Israel through direct military confrontation. In this sense, the conflict highlighted the extent to which Tehran had succeeded in building a network capable of projecting pressure across several theaters simultaneously, thereby enhancing both its deterrent capabilities and regional influence.

4.1. Evaluating ACM as the theoretical framework

The findings of this thesis suggest that Authoritarian Conflict Management provides a valuable framework for understanding Iran's regional strategy. Indeed, rather than treating Tehran's involvement in different conflicts as a series of isolated or *ad hoc* interventions, ACM highlights the existence of a broader and relatively coherent approach aimed at managing, rather than resolving, conflict environments. Across Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine, Iran has consistently relied on a combination of discursive, spatial, and economic forms of control to shape local dynamics, preserve strategic influence, and deter external adversaries. The Gaza War further demonstrated that Iran's objective was not to achieve a decisive resolution of the conflict but to sustain a regional balance that constrained Israel by reinforcing its deterrent posture.

At the same time, the case study also reveals an important limitation of ACM: Hamas's decision to launch the Operation Al-Aqsa Flood without Iranian involvement or authorization highlights the degree of autonomy that some partners retain and the limits of Iran's ability to dictate their actions. Nevertheless, this does not invalidate the framework; on the contrary, it reinforces the argument that Iran's regional strategy is best understood as an

attempt to shape and regulate conflict dynamics rather than dictate their outcomes. ACM therefore offers an effective lens through which to analyze the logic, instruments, and objectives of Iran's regional engagement.

4.2. Assessing Iran's strategy

Nearly twenty-five years after Iran formally adopted the strategy of "forward defense", this thesis attempts to answer the following research question: what impact has Iran's strategy had on the achievement of the Islamic Republic's strategic objectives in the Middle East?

In addressing this question, the chapter evaluates both the strengths and limitations of Iran's Grand Strategy, assessing the extent to which it has enhanced the regime's security, deterrence, and regional influence while also generating new strategic vulnerabilities.

4.2.1. Strengths of Iran's strategy

The first major advantage of the Islamic Republic's strategy is its cost-effectiveness. At its core lies the delegation of military functions to a network of allied non-state actors. Scholars of proxy warfare argue that reliance on non-state partners reduces the risks associated with direct military intervention, including heavy casualties, the substantial financial costs of overseas deployments, escalation into broader hostilities, and the political embarrassment that may result from overt strategic failure. Furthermore, when proxy forces are locally embedded, they provide important operational benefits, such as greater legitimacy among local populations and superior knowledge of the terrain and of social dynamics (Ostovar, 2019; Santos, 2025; Simsek, 2025).

Accordingly, for Iran, the use of proxies has served as an effective means of compensating for its limitations in conventional military power: acknowledging the military and technical superiority of its adversaries, namely the U.S. and Israel, Tehran has relied on asymmetric warfare conducted by allied armed groups. These actors are capable of inflicting significant strategic damage to the opponents, contesting territorial control, and sustaining protracted conflicts, all

while enabling Iran to preserve a degree of plausible deniability regarding its involvement. In this way, Tehran indirectly exerts pressure on its adversaries and still avoids the full political, military, economic, and diplomatic repercussions associated with direct confrontation (Ostovar, 2019; Santos, 2025; Simsek, 2025).

A second major advantage of Iran's Grand Strategy is its ability to prevent the country's regional isolation and to gain significant political leverage: indeed, through the cultivation of a network of state and non-state allies across the Middle East, Iran has established itself as an indispensable actor in regional affairs. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to envision any peace plan or conflict agreement in the Middle East without inviting the Islamic Republic's representatives to the table.

More specifically, the strategy has enabled Iran to overcome its geopolitical isolation in a region largely dominated by hostile Sunni powers, particularly the Gulf monarchies led by Saudi Arabia. In this regard, the Islamic Republic has been remarkably successful in exporting its worldview to Shia communities, a central objective of the clerical leadership that emerged from the 1979 Revolution that has been carried out by the IRGC. Organizations such as Hezbollah and several Iraqi militias not only maintain close political and military ties with Tehran but also embrace key aspects of Iran's ideological framework. Moreover, they regard Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei as their foremost religious and political authority and have incorporated the fundamental assumptions of the Islamic Republic's regional strategy into their own political agendas (Ostovar, 2019; Santos, 2025; Simsek, 2025).

However, Iran's regional strategy has frequently been criticized for its sectarian character and its reliance on predominantly Shia actors. To mitigate this perception and expand its appeal among the whole Muslim community, Tehran has strategically embraced the Palestinian cause, maybe the only issue capable of transcending sectarian divisions across the Muslim world: by positioning itself as a champion of Palestinian resistance against Israel, Iran has sought to bridge the Sunni–Shia divide and enhance its legitimacy among broader Muslim audiences (Ostovar, 2019; Santos, 2025; Simsek, 2025).

In this context, Iran's support for Palestinian groups has generated important political and symbolic dividends. Backing Palestinian resistance has strengthened Iran's soft power and reinforced its claim to leadership within the so-called "Axis of Resistance." Moreover, Tehran's partnership with organizations such as Hamas and PIJ has enabled it to project influence directly into the Palestinian territories, thereby extending its geopolitical reach beyond its traditional Shia constituencies (Ostovar, 2019; Santos, 2025; Simsek, 2025).

More broadly, Iran has succeeded in building a transnational network of allied actors capable of challenging the influence of pro-U.S. regional powers and advancing Tehran's strategic objectives across multiple conflict arenas. Hezbollah in Lebanon, the PMF in Iraq, pro-Assad forces in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas and PIJ in Palestine all form a transnational Iranian-backed army, sharing Iran's strategic goals and fighting for a shared purpose: as one of the commanders of the Syrian Front, Sardar Falaki, stated in an interview with *Mashregh News* (24 July 2016), "with one uniform, under one flag, as one organization, and as one front they fight *jihad*".

In brief, as Ostovar (2019: 184) observes, "within the context of Iranian national security thinking, the militant client strategy has made the Islamic Republic more formidable in the region and better able to counter the United States than at any other point in its nearly forty-year history".

4.2.2. Limitations of Iran's strategy

Despite these achievements, Iran's forward defense strategy has also generated significant costs and vulnerabilities. While many of these weaknesses had been developing over time, the events following the October 7 attacks brought them into sharp relief. In this sense, the Gaza war served as a double-edged test: on the one hand, it demonstrated the extent of Tehran's regional influence and the operational reach of its network of allies; on the other, it exposed the structural limitations and vulnerabilities inherent in its Grand Strategy.

One of the principal risks associated is that of escalation of conflicts and stems from the interconnected nature of its network of allied actors: in other words, because these groups operate across multiple theaters, localized conflicts can rapidly expand into broader regional confrontations. The Gaza war provides a clear illustration of this dynamic: following Israel's military response to the October 7 attacks, Iranian-aligned actors opened several additional fronts across the region, including in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, dragging the whole region into a wider war.

A further risk observed by Ostovar (2019) is that Iran's regional focus and involvement in foreign wars could exasperate political tensions domestically: while the Islamic Republic presents its regional interventions as essential to national security, many Iranians increasingly perceive these commitments as a burden on an already fragile economy.

Recent public opinion data suggest that dissatisfaction with Iran's foreign policy extends well beyond opposition circles. In particular, a survey conducted by Stasis Consulting in 2024 found that 78 percent of respondents believed Iran's foreign policy contributes to the country's economic and social problems, while 63 percent stated that it does not advance the well-being of ordinary citizens. Although a majority (61 percent) still supported maintaining Iran's regional military role, the findings reveal a widespread perception that the costs of Tehran's external commitments are increasingly borne by the domestic population (Ghafouri, 2024).

This deterioration of popular consent has become particularly visible during periods of social unrest: during the Mahsa Amini demonstrations in 2022-2023 and the December 2025 demonstrations, some participants chanted "Neither Gaza nor Lebanon, My Life for Iran". The rallying cry is a clear critique to the regime for allocating resources to foreign allies while living standards at home continue to deteriorate (*BBC News*, 2025).

The events of October 7 also highlighted a fundamental weakness inherent in proxy warfare, commonly described in political science as the "principal–agent problem". This concept refers to the tensions that emerge when one actor (the agent) acts on behalf of another (the principal) but possesses its own

interests, priorities, and information. The problem becomes particularly acute when the objectives of the principal and agent diverge or when the principal lacks sufficient oversight over the agent's actions (Salehyan, 2009; Simsek, 2025; Khatib, 2026).

In the context of Iran's strategy, allied militant groups are not merely instruments of Iranian policy but autonomous actors pursuing their own political and strategic agendas, which do not always fully align with those of Tehran. Salehyan (2009: 502) describes this phenomenon through the concept of "agency slack," whereby proxy actors may deviate from the sponsor's preferences, fail to carry out assigned tasks as intended, or pursue actions that generate unintended consequences for the patron.

The Hamas attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, provide a particularly revealing illustration of these control challenges. Although Iran has long provided Hamas with financial, military, and political support, available evidence suggests that the attack was conceived and executed by Hamas without direct Iranian involvement in its planning or authorization.

The attacks also revealed what Ali (2025: 93) terms the "commitment trap." Commitment refers to a public pledge to support or protect an external actor in the context of a conflict, thereby binding the commitment-giver to a particular political position. While entering into such commitments is typically voluntary, fulfilling them often acquires an obligatory character. It follows that a commitment trap emerges when a state feels compelled to honor a prior commitment despite changing circumstances that make doing so increasingly costly or contrary to its strategic interests (Ali, 2025).

Applied to Iran's regional strategy, the commitment trap highlights the tensions inherent in Tehran's relationships with its network of allies. Having positioned itself as the principal supporter of the so-called Axis of Resistance, Iran faces significant reputational and strategic costs if it fails to assist its partners during periods of crisis. Yet honoring these commitments may draw Tehran into conflicts under unfavorable conditions or expose it to military retaliation by more powerful adversaries (Ali, 2025; Simsek, 2025; Khatib, 2026).

Because Iran’s adversaries generally regard these actors as extensions of the Islamic Republic, attacks carried out by the latter, whether explicitly authorized by Tehran or undertaken independently, are frequently attributed to Iran itself. As a result, the actions of allied groups can trigger retaliatory measures against the Islamic Republic, even when it was not directly involved in the decision-making process (Ostovar, 2019; Simsek, 2025; Khatib, 2026).

This dynamic reveals a fundamental paradox at the heart of Iran’s strategyof forward defense: while reliance on proxy actors has allowed Tehran to expand its influence and avoid the costs of direct military engagement, the same strategy can expose it to the very risk it was designed to mitigate, namely direct military confrontation with Washington (Simsek, 2025).

4.3. Concluding remarks

On February 28, 2026, war officially entered Iranian soil: the conflict began when the U.S. and Israel launched airstrikes on Iran, targeting military and government sites and culminating with the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (Britannica Editors, 2026). For the first time since the adoption of the doctrine of “Forward Defense”, the Islamic Republic found itself directly exposed to the kind of large-scale confrontation that its regional strategy had been designed to prevent.

In this sense, this thesis concludes that Iran's Grand Strategy of Resistance has been only partially successful in achieving the Islamic Republic's strategic objectives.

On the one hand, it enabled Tehran to consolidate its position as a pivotal regional actor and expand its sphere of influence through a network of allied state and non-state partners across the Middle East. The Gaza War demonstrated the resilience of this network and its capacity to mobilize multiple fronts around a shared strategic objective, namely opposition to U.S. and Israel.

On the other hand, the very mechanisms that contributed to Iran's rise as a regional power also generated significant strategic vulnerabilities. As this thesis has shown, the doctrine of “Forward Defense” was designed to externalize

threats, create strategic depth, and keep conflict away from Iranian territory. Yet the Gaza War and its subsequent regional escalation revealed the limits of this approach: indeed, the activation of multiple fronts across the Middle East increased pressure on Israel and the United States, but it also heightened the risk of escalation and progressively eroded the distinction between indirect and direct confrontation. Ultimately, the events of 2026 revealed Iran’s Grand Strategy to be a strategic boomerang: a strategy designed to protect the regime by keeping conflict at a distance ultimately contributed to bringing conflict inside the Iranian state itself.

As the Middle East enters a new and uncertain phase, the future of Iran's Grand Strategy remains unclear. Whether the Islamic Republic will adapt its approach or continue to rely on the logic of resistance and conflict management remains to be seen. What is evident, however, is that the regional order shaped by decades of Iranian activism has entered a period of profound transformation, the consequences of which will continue to influence the broader Middle East for years to come.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abbas, S. Q., & Jahangaiz, M. (2020). *Iran's foreign policy towards Lebanon: Success story of synergy between hard and soft power.* Journal of Research in Social Sciences, 8(2), 116–134. https://doi.org/10.52015/jrss.8i2.58.

Abboud, S. (2021). *Making peace to sustain war: The Astana process and Syria's illiberal peace*. *Peacebuilding, 9*(3), 326–343. https://doi.org/10.1080/21647259.2021.1895609.

Abrahamian, E. (1980). The Guerrilla Movement in Iran, 1963–1977. *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)* 86: 149–174. https://doi.org/10.2307/3012295.

Abrahamian, E. (1982). *Iran between two revolutions*. Princeton University Press.

Abrahamian, E. (1993). Khomeinism. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ahmadian, H., and Mohsen P. (2019). *Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 95(2), 341–364. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48570068.

Akbarzadeh, S. (2017). *Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council sheikhdoms*. In K. S. Almezaini & J.-M. Rickli (Eds.), *The small Gulf states: Foreign and security policies before and after the Arab Spring* (pp. 96–115). Routledge.

Alagha, J. E. (2011). *Hizbullah's documents: From the 1985 open letter to the 2009 manifesto*. Pallas Publications.

Alavi, S. A. (2019). *Iran and Palestine, Past, Present, Future*. London: Routledge.

Alavi, S. A. (2023). *Palestine and Iran*. In: Gürbey, G., Hofmann, S., Ibrahim Seyder, F. (eds) Between Diplomacy and Non-Diplomacy. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09756-0_14.

Alemzadeh, M. (2021). *The attraction of direct action: The making of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in the Iranian Kurdish conflict*. *British*

Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 50(3), 589–608. https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1990013.

Alemzadeh, M. (2025,). *Iran, Palestine and the axis of resistance*. *Middle East Report Online (MERIP)*. https://www.merip.org/2025/01/iran-palestine-axis/.

Ali, A. M. (2025). The cost of commitment: Understanding the Iran's intervention in the Israel–Hamas war (2023–2024). *Journal of Political Science*: Bulletin of Yerevan University, 4(2[11]), 91–106. https://doi.org/10.46991/JOPS/2025.4.11.091.

Aljazeera (2020a). Stab in the Back: Palestinians Condemn Israel-Bahrain Deal. September 11. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/11/stab-in-the-back-palestinians-condemn-israel-bahrain-deal.

Aljazeera (2020b). Iran's Khamenei Says UAE Betrayed Muslim World with Israel Deal. September 1. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/1/irans--khamenei-says-uae-betrayed-muslim-world-with-israel-deal.

Aljazeera (2023). Israel-Palestine escalation updates: Gaza under bombardment. October 7. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2023/10/7/israel-palestine-escalation-live-news-barrage-of-rockets-fired-from-gaza.

Al-Moussawi, A. H. A. E. (2017). Iran and the Syrian crisis. Journal of US-China Public Administration, 14(3), 136–144. https://doi.org/10.17265/1548-6591/2017.03.002.

Al-Mughrabi, N. (2020). Gaza Militants Fire Rockets Into the Sea in First Joint Exercise. Reuters, December 29. https://www.reuters.com/article/israel-palestinians-gaza-drill-int-idUSKBN2930TX

Amer, A. (2020). Iran FM Phones Abbas to Discuss US Peace Deal. Al-Monitor, February 12. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/02/palestine-iran-pa-contacts-abbas-zarif-haniyeh-hamas-fatah.html.

Ansarifard, M., & Haji-Yousefi, A. M. (2021). *Deterrence as a security-defense strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Challenges, requirements, and its strategic model*. *Journal of International Relations Studies, 14*(55), 7–31.

Ataie, M. (2021). *Exporting the Iranian revolution: Ecumenical clerics in Lebanon*. *International Journal of Middle East Studies, 53*(4), 672–690. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743821000441.

Azizi, H. (2021). *The concept of "forward defence": How has the Syrian crisis shaped the evolution of Iran's military strategy?* Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP). https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/concept-forward-defence-how-has-syrian-crisis-shaped-evolution-irans-military-strategy.

Azizi, H. (2023). *How Iran and its allies hope to save Hamas*. War on the Rocks. November 16 https://warontherocks.com/how-iran-and-its-allies-hope-to-save-hamas/.

Azizi, H. (2025). *Enduring Resistance from Tehran*. In: van Veen, E. (eds) The Future of the Occupation of the Palestinian Territories after Gaza. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-93798-9_10.

Barzegar, K. (2008). *Iran's foreign policy in post-invasion Iraq*. *Middle East Policy, 15*(4), 47–58.

Baconi, T. (2023). What Was Hamas Thinking? Foreign Policy. November 22. https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/11/22/hamas-gaza-israel-netanyahu-palestine-apartheid-containment-resistance/.

Bajoghli, and Nasr, V (2024). How the War in Gaza Revived the Axis of Resistance. Foreign affairs. January 17. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/how-war-gaza-revived-axis-resistance.

Barzgar, K., and Rezaei, M. (2017). Iran's Defense Strategy Based on Views of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Strategic Studies Quarterly, 19(74), 7-34.

BBC News. (2025). Iran crisis deepens – protests spread with chants of "death to the dictator". December 31. [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DiPLTFh1MUM.

Beaumont, P. (2023). Hamas's murderous attack will be remembered as Israeli intelligence failure for the ages. The Guardian. October 7. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/07/hamas-stealth-attack-will-be-remembered-as-israeli-intelligence-failure-for-the-ages.

Beeri, T. (2021). Hezbollah's "Land of Tunnels" – the North Korean-Iranian connection. Alma Research and Education Center. https://israel-alma.org/hezbollahs-land-of-tunnels-the-north-korean-iranian-connection/.

Belloni, R., & Moro, F. N. (2019). *Stability and stability operations: Definitions, drivers, approaches*. *Ethnopolitics, 18*(5), 445–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2019.1640503.

Belloni, R., & Costantini, I. (2019). *From liberal statebuilding to counterinsurgency and stabilisation: The international intervention in Iraq*. *Ethnopolitics, 18*(5), 509–525. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2019.1640964.

Bowden, M. (2006). *Guests of the Ayatollah: The first battle in America's war with militant Islam*. Atlantic Monthly Press.

Britannica Editors. (2026). 2026 Iran war. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/event/2026-Iran-war.

Brzezinski, Z. (1982). *The failed mission*. April 18. *The New York Times Magazine*.

Cederman, L.-E., & Vogt, M. (2017). *Dynamics and logics of civil war*. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 61*(9), 1992–2016. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002717721385.

Chandler, D. (2010). *International statebuilding: The rise of post-liberal governance*. Routledge.

Chandler, D. (2017). *Peacebuilding: The twenty years' crisis, 1997–2017*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-50322-6.

Charbonneau, L. (2013). Exclusive: U.N. monitors see arms reaching Somalia from Yemen, Iran. Reuters. February 11. https://www.reuters.com/article/world/exclusive-un-monitors-see-arms-reaching-somalia-from-yemen-iran-idUSBRE9190E5/.

Chehabi, H. (2006). *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*. London: I.B.Tauris.

Cheung, H. (2019). *The rise of illiberal peacebuilding and authoritarian modes of conflict management*. *Cornell International Affairs Review, 13*(1), 4–41. https://doi.org/10.37513/ciar.v13i1.547.

Cobban, H. (1984). *The Palestinian Liberation Organisation, People, Power and Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cohen, Z., Lillis, K. B., Bertrand, N., and Herb, J. (2023). Initial US Intelligence Suggests Iran Was Surprised by the Hamas Attack on Israel | CNN Politics. CNN. October 11. https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/11/politics/us-intelligence-iran-hamas-doubt/index.html.

Collier, P., Hoeffler, A., & Rohner, D. (2009). *Beyond greed and grievance: Feasibility and civil war*. *Oxford Economic Papers, 61*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1093/oep/gpn029.

Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (1979, amended 1989). Islamic Consultative Assembly. https://en.parliran.ir/eng/en/Constitution.

Cook D. (2005), *Understanding Jihad*. California University Press.

Cooper, N., Turner, M., & Pugh, M. (2011). *The end of history and the last liberal peacebuilder: A reply to Roland Paris*. *Review of International Studies, 37*(4), 1995–2007. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210511000143.

Cordesman, A. H. (2011). *U.S. and Iranian strategic competition* (Vol. 2). Center for Strategic and International Studies. https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition-2.

Costantini, I., Dian, M., Knapp, A., & Moro, F. N. (2026). *(Il)liberal peace? P5 approaches to conflict management and resolution*. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241214409.

Coward, M. (2004). Urbicide in Bosnia. In: Graham S (ed.) Cities, War and Terrorism: Towards an Urban Geopolitics. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 154–171.

Crowley, M. (2020). Israel, U.A.E. and Bahrain Sign Accords, With an Eager Trump Playing Host. *The New York Times*, September 15. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/15/us/politics/trump-israel-peace-emirates--bahrain.html.

Deeb, M. (1988). *Shia Movements in Lebanon: Their Formation, Ideology, Social Basis, and Links with Iran and Syria*. Third World Quarterly, 10(2), 683–698. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/3992662.

Demichelis, M. (2021). *Violence in early Islam: Religious narratives, the Arab conquests and the canonization of jihad*. I.B. Tauris.

Desrosiers, M.-E., & Cheeseman, N. (2026). *The rise of authoritarian middle-powers and what it means for world politics*. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009705264.

Doeser, F. (2017). *Strategic culture, domestic politics, and foreign policy: Finland's decision to refrain from Operation Unified Protector*. *Foreign Policy Analysis, 13*(3), 741–759. https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orx001.

Ebtekar, M. (2000). *Takeover in Tehran: The inside story of the 1979 U.S. Embassy capture*. Talonbooks.

Eisenhower, D. D. (1963) Mandate for Change, 1953-1956. London: Heinemann.

Esfandiari, G. (2005). Iran: Foreign Minister Makes Landmark Visit To Baghdad. RFE/RL. May 18. https://www.rferl.org/a/1058922.html.

Ezzati, A. (1986). *The concept of martyrdom in Islam*. *Al-Serat, 12*. Tehran University.

Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketization of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 133–168. https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926593004002002.

Fatima, M., Azam, S., and Naz, A. . (2025). The Role of Iran in Israel-Palestine Conflict. Insights: Journal of Humanities and Media Studies Review, 2(1). https://doi.org/10.63290/jhmsr.v2.i1.31.

Fearon, J. D., & Laitin, D. D. (2003). *Ethnicity, insurgency, and civil war*. *American Political Science Review, 97*(1), 75–90. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055403000534.

France24 (2020). Palestinian Leader Mahmoud Abbas Suspends Relations with the US, Israel. February 1. https://www.france24.com/en/20200201-palestinian-leader-mahmoud-abbas-suspends-relations-with-the-us-israel.

Gatehouse, G. (2010): US Fears Iranian Influence in Iraq. BBC News. March 2. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8544896.stm.

Ghafouri, A. (2024). New polling highlights Iranians' views on Iran's foreign policy and regional role. *Middle East Institute*.

https://mei.edu/publication/new-polling-highlights-iranians-views-irans-foreign-policy-and-regional-role/.

Gölz, O., & Vollmer, R. (2025). *Narratives of the oppressed: The dialectic of resistance behind the axis*. *Middle East Report Online (MERIP)*. https://www.merip.org/2025/01/narratives-of-the-oppressed/.

Goodhand, J. (2010). Stabilising a victor's peace? Humanitarian action and reconstruction in Eastern Sri Lanka. *Disasters* 34(3): 342–367.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks* (Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith, Eds. & Trans.). Lawrence & Wishart.

Grinberg, A. (2025). Iran's multiple fronts, one war strategy. Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS). August 8. https://jiss.org.il/en/grinberg-irans-multiple-fronts-one-war-strategy/.

Gruber, C. (2008). *The message is on the wall: Mural arts in post-revolutionary Iran*. *Persica, 22*, 15–46. https://doi.org/10.2143/PERS.22.0.2034399.

Guzansky, Y. (2011, January). *"Made in Iran": The Iranian involvement in Iraq*. *Strategic Assessment, 13*(4), 85–97. Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/made-in-iran-the-iranian-involvement-in-iraq/.

Hamzeh, A. N. (2004). *In the Path of Hizballah*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Hanson, B. (1983) The Westoxication of Iran: Depictions and Reactions of Behrangi, al-e Ahmad, and Shariati, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 1.

Hassan, S. (2011). Oslo Accords: The Genesis and Consequences for Palestine. *Social Scientist 7* (8): 65–72.

Hatina, M. (2001). *Islam and Salvation in Palestine*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press.

Heathershaw, J. (2009). *Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order*. London: Routledge.

Hokayem, E. (2010). Iran and Lebanon. https://iranprimer.usip.org/sites/default/files/PDF%20Iran%20Region_Hokayem_Lebanon.pdf.

Ibn Kathir, I. (1998). *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* (English trans.). Darussalam.

Imeny, M. V., Norton, S. D., Salehi, M., Moradi, M. (2021), Taxonomies of money laundering: an Iranian perspective. *Journal of Money Laundering Control*, Vol. 24 No. 2 pp. 348–360. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMLC-07-2020-0074.

Islamic Republic News Agency. (2014). *Iran not seeking permission for supporting Iraq*. IRNA. September 25. https://en.irna.ir/news/2738699/Iran-not-seeking-permission-for-supporting-Iraq.

Ismael, T. and Ismael, J. (2015). *Iraq in the Twenty-First Century :Regime Change and the Making of a Failed State*. New York: Routledge.

Kapur, S. P., & Ganguly, S. (2012). *The jihad paradox: Pakistan and Islamist militancy in South Asia*. *International Security, 37*(1), 111–141.

Kaur, R. (2010). *Sacralising bodies: On martyrdom, government and accident in Iran*. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 20*(3), 441–460. https://doi.org/10.1017/S135618631000026X.

Kenkel, K. M. (2021). *Rising powers and peacebuilding*. In C. de Coning & C. T. Call (Eds.), *Rising powers and peacebuilding: Breaking the mold?* (pp. 441–460). Springer.

Khalifa, A. W., and Haddadian-Moghaddam, E. (2024). *Biography as cultural diplomacy: Cold War best sellers in the Middle East*. *Diplomatica, 7*(1), 59–87. https://doi.org/10.1163/25891774-BJA10137.

Khatib, L. and Matar, D. (2014). *The Hizbullah, Phenomenon, Politics and Communication*. London: Hurst & Company.

Khatib, L. (2026). The degradation of Iran's proxy model. *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs,*Harvard Kennedy School. https://www.belfercenter.org/research-analysis/degradation-irans-proxy-model/.

Khomeini, R. (1970). *Islamic government: Governance of the jurist*. Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works.

Khomeini, R. (1980). *Sahifeh-ye Imam* [The Imam's anthology of speeches, messages, interviews, decrees, religious permissions, and letters] (Vol. 12). The Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works.

Khomeini, R. (2000). *The writ of Imam: Collection of Imam Khomeini's works*. Institute for Compilation and Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works.

Kidwai, S. A. (2020). The Rise of Iran as a Regional Power. India Quarterly 76, no. 2 (June 2020): 313-328. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48589368.

Kirmanj, S., & Sadq, A. K. (2018). *Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq and Syria: Strategic significance and regional power balance*. *The Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies, 43*(1–2), 152–172.

Kovacs, M. S., and Svensson, I. (2013). The return of victories?: The growing trend of militancy in ending armed conflicts. *Paper prepared for the 7th general conference of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR)*, Science Po Bordeaux, Domaine Universitaire. Bordeaux, 4–7 September 2013.

Kuchling, J. (2020). *Liberal peace and its crisis: The revival of authoritarianism*. E-International Relations. June 16. https://www.e-ir.info/2020/06/16/liberal-peace-and-its-crisis-the-revival-of-authoritarianism/.

Lackner, H. (2025). From Local Governance to Constitution Building: Yemen after 10 Years of Conflict. Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep). https://doi.org/10.31752/idea.2025.14

Lappin, Y. (2021). New report exposes "land of tunnels" in Lebanon, pioneered by Hezbollah. *The Jewish Press*. August 13. https://www.jewishpress.com/news/middle-east/lebanon/new-report-exposes-land-of-tunnels-in-lebanon-pioneered-by-hezbollah/2021/08/13/.

Lefebvre, H. (1991). The Production of Space. Oxford: Blackwell.

Legg, S. (2007). Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Levite, A. (1989). Offense and Defense in Israeli Military Doctrine. Tel Aviv: Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies.

Levitt, M. (2023) Combating Hamas's networks of illicit finance and terrorism. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. October 26.

https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/combating-hamass-networks-illicit-finance-and-terrorism.

Levy, I. (2024). I. Levy, The "Axis of Resistance" Strategy in the Israel-Hamas War. *Manara magazine*. January 9. https://manaramagazine.org/2024/01/the-axis-of-resistance-strategy-in-the-israel-hamas-war/.

Lewis, D. (2010). *The failure of a liberal peace: Sri Lanka's counter-insurgency in global perspective*. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding, 4*(4), 647–671. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678802.2010.511509.

Lewis, D., Heathershaw, J., & Megoran, N. (2018). *Illiberal peace? Authoritarian modes of conflict management*. *Cooperation and Conflict, 53*(4), 486–506. https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718766039.

Lewis, D. (2022). Contesting liberal peace: Russia's emerging model of conflict management. *International Affairs* 98(2): 653–673. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2018.1436478.

Linz, J. (2000). *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes*. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Mac Ginty, R. (Ed.). (2024). *Routledge handbook of peacebuilding* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003293408.

Mallinckrodt, A. (2019). The importance of oil in US-Iranian relations post-British withdrawal (1968–79)(SSRN Working Paper No. 3437255). SSRN. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3437255.

Mansour, R., Al-Shakeri, H. and Haid, H. (2025), The shape-shifting 'axis of resistance': How Iran and its networks adapt to external pressures, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, https://doi.org/10.55317/9781784136369.

Marzolph, U. (2003). *The martyr's way to paradise: Shiite mural art in the urban context*. *Ethnologia Europaea, 33*(2–3), 87–98.

Matthiesen, T. (2024). How Gaza Reunited the Middle East. Foreign Affairs. February 9. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/how-gaza-reunited-middle-east.

Mehr News Agency (2021). 35th Islamic Unity Conference Kicks Off in Tehran. October 19. https://en.mehrnews.com/amp/179846/.

Mekelberg, Y. (2026), From the Hamas October attack to Israel's seven-front conflict: Was it inevitable? CIDOB. March 23. https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/hamas-october-attack-israels-seven-front-conflict-was-it-inevitable.

Melnikova, S. F. (2025). The Tunnel War in Gaza: The Evolution of Hamas' Underground Infrastructure in an Asymmetric Conflict. SSRN: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5635150.

Mens, J. (2024). *Iran's "forward defense," Israel's security dilemma, and American strategy*. *Orbis*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2024.05.010.

Miller, E. (2014). Hamas, Hezbollah and the tunnels: Who's inspiring whom? *The Times of Israel*. August 4. https://www.timesofisrael.com/hamas-hezbollah-and-the-tunnels-whos-inspiring-whom/.

Moghadam, A. (2007). *Mayhem, myths, and martyrdom: The Shi'a conception of jihad*. *Terrorism and Political Violence, 19*(1), 125–143. https://doi.org/10.1080/09546550601079656.

Momen, M. (1985). *An introduction to Shi'i Islam: The history and doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. Yale University Press.

Morag, N. (2025). Subterranean Warfare's Strategic Coming of Age: The Israel-Hamas War of 2023-Present. Journal of Strategic Security 18, no. 3 (2025) : 281-298. https://doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.18.3.2457.

Moser, S. (2013). New cities in the Muslim world: The cultural politics of planning an "Islamic city". In P. Hopkins (Ed.), *Religion and place: Landscape, politics and piety* (pp. 39–55). Springer.

Mostaghimi, B., & Taromsari, M. (1997). *Double standard: The Security Council and the two wars*. In F. Rajaee (Ed.), *Iranian perspectives on the Iran-Iraq war* (pp. 62–70). University Press of Florida.

Mousavian, S. H., & Shahidsaless, S. (2014). *Iran and the United States: An insider's view on the failed past and the road to peace*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Muñoz, G. M. (2008). Iran, a Geopolitical Player in the Middle East. IEMed (2008): 34-36. https://www.iemed.org/publication/iran-a-geopolitical-player-in-the-middle-east/.

Nadarajah, S., & Rampton, D. (2015). *The limits of hybridity and the crisis of liberal peace*. *Review of International Studies, 41*(1), 49–72. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210514000060.

Nader, A. (2015, June). *Iran's Role in Iraq: Room for Cooperation?* Rand.org; RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE151.html.

Nasr, V. (2006). The Shia revival: How conflicts within Islam will shape the future. 2nd ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Nasr, V. (2025), I*ran's Grand Strategy: A Political History*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Newman, A. J. (2025). *Battle of Karbala*. Encyclopaedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Karbala.

Odgaard, S. L., and Nielsen, T. G. (2014). China's counterinsurgency strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang. *Journal of Contemporary China* 23(87): 535–555.

Olson, K. R., Olson, P., & Wagner, E. (2025). Israel border security threats: Soil tunnels. *Open Journal of Soil Science*, 15(6), 361–387. https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2025.156016.

Ostovar, A. (2016). *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199387892.001.0001.

Ostovar, A. (2019). The Grand Strategy of Militant Clients: Iran's Way of War. Security Studies 28, no.1: 159–88. https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2018.1508862.

Parchami, A. (2022). An Iranian Worldview: The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic. *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 2022 (special): 9–23. https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.2022SIstratcul001.

Posen, B. R .(1984). Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany between the World Wars. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

Pusztaszeri, A., and Harding, E. (2024). The aftermath of October 7: Regional conflict in the Middle East. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). December 19. https://www.csis.org/analysis/aftermath-october-7-regional-conflict-middle-east.

Rabil, R. (2018, August 31). *Contextualizing jihad and takfir in the Shi'a conceptual framework*. Middle East Institute. https://www.mei.edu/publications/contextualizing-jihad-and-takfir-shia-conceptual-framework.

Rad, A. (2022). The Foreign Shah and the Failure of Pahlavi Nationalism. In *The State of Resistance: Politics, Culture, and Identity in Modern Iran* (pp. 18–52). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rad, A. (2022). The Islamic Republic and Its Culture of Resistance. In *The State of Resistance: Politics, Culture, and Identity in Modern Iran* (pp. 53–97). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rahimi, H. (2020). *Hawala as credit: Recognizing how hawala supports the business climate in Afghanistan*. *Journal of Money Laundering Control, 23*(1), 224–244. https://doi.org/10.1108/JMLC-07-2019-0053.

Rahnema, A. (1997). *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shariati*. London: I.B. Tauris.

Rajabi,M. and Mousavi,S. M. (2024). Discourse Analysis of Ayatollah Khamenei on the Issue of Palestine After the Al-Aqsa Storm operation. *Strategic Studies of the Islamic Revolution*, 2(4), 93-118. https://doi.org/10.22034/irsj.2025.492863.1081.

Ramazani, R. K. (1988). *Revolutionary Iran: Challenge and response in the Middle East*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ramazani, R. K. (2005). *Iran's hostage crisis: International legitimacy matters*. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 25*(2), 273–278. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-25-2-273.

Ramazani, R. K. (2013). *Independence without Freedom: Iran's Foreign Policy*. University of Virginia Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wrj9g.

Rasmussen, S. E. (2021). Iran Swears in President Ebrahim Raisi as Unease Grows in West. *The Wall Street Journal*, August 5.

https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-to-swear-in-new-president-as-unease--grows-over-nuclear-deal-11628150225.

Raza Khan, A. (2025). *The Holy Qur'an (Kanz-ul-Iman translation)*.

Razavi, S. A. (2002). *Ulamay-e Shiie va Hemayat-e Feqhi va Siyasi az Filistin [The Shia Clergy and the Islamic Jurisprudent and Political Support for Palestine]*, Paygaah-e Etelaa Resaani-e Hawzah, Azaar-e 1381, Tehran, Vol. 78.

Razavy, M. (2005). Hawala: An underground haven for terrorists or social phenomenon?. Crime Law Soc Change 44, 277–299. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-006-9019-3.

Reuters (2021). Iran Leader Urges Muslim States to Back Palestinians Militarily, Financially. May 21. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle--east/iran-leader-urges-muslim-states-back-palestinians-militarily-financially--2021-05-21/.

Richemond-Barak, D., and Voiculescu-Holvad, S. (2026). The Rise of Tunnel Warfare as a Tactical, Operational, and Strategic Issue. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 49:5, 501-520, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2023.2244191.

Richmond, O. P. (2006). *The problem of peace: Understanding the 'liberal peace'. Conflict, Security & Development, 6*(3), 291–314. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800600933480.

Richmond, O. P. (2025). *Peace in an authoritarian international order versus peace in the liberal international order. International Affairs, 101*(4), 1381–1401. https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaf076.

Rivera, W. A. (2022). *The strategic culture of resistance: Iranian strategic influence in its near abroad. Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, 2022 (Special Issue on Strategic Culture), 49–68. https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.2022SIstratcul004.

Rolston, B. (2017). *When everywhere is Karbala: Murals, martyrdom and propaganda in Iran. Memory Studies, 13*(1), 3–23. https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698017730870.

Rouztalab, M. H., & Rahmani, M. (Eds.). (2014). *Oral history of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Tehran: Center for Strategic Research.

Sabir, R. (2017.). *Karbala: Chain of events*. Al-Islam.org. https://al-islam.org/articles/karbala-chain-events.

Saikal, A. (1980). *The rise and fall of the Shah*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Salah, A. M. A. (2017). The Hamas Movement and Its Political and Democratic Practice, 1992–2016. *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 4: 561–576. https://doi.org/10.1080/17550912.2017.1401739.

Salari, M., Torabi Farsani, S., & Jadidi, N. (2024). *Economic transformations in Iran during Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's era: Development plans and their consequences. Journal of Social-Political Studies of Iran's Culture and History, 3*(3), 325–339. https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jspsich.3.3.19.

Salehyan, I. (2009). The delegation of war to rebel organizations. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54(3), 493–515. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002709357890.

Sales, N. (2018). Tehran's International Targets: Assessing Iranian Terror Sponsorship. *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. November 13. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tehrans-international-targets-assessing-iranian-terror-sponsorship.

Santos, E. A. (2025). The role of Iran in proxy conflicts in the Middle East. *Diplomacy and Law*. https://www.diplomacyandlaw.com/post/the-role-of-iran-in-proxy-conflicts-in-the-middle-east.

Schmitt, E., & Worth, R. F. (2012). *Aiding Yemen rebels, Iran seeks wider Mideast role*. *The New York Times*. March 15. https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/15/world/middleeast/aiding-yemen-rebels-iran-seeks-wider-mideast-role.html.

Seliktar, O. and Rezaei, F. (2020). *Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Seurat, L. (2023). Hamas' Goal in Gaza. Foreign Affairs. December 11. https://www.foreignaffairs.com/israel/hamass-goal-gaza.

Shapiro, S. (2000). *Hizbullah: Between Iran and Lebanon*. Tel Aviv: Kibbutz Meuhad.

Shine, S., & Catran, A. (2017). *Iran's policy on the Gaza Strip*. Institute for National Security Studies. https://www.inss.org.il/publication/irans-policy-gaza-strip/.

Simsek, H. F. (2025). Iran's proxy war paradox: strategic gains, control issues, and operational constraints. *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 36:6, 997-1024. https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2025.2512807.

Skare, E. (2021). *A History of Palestinian Jihad; Faith, Awareness, and Revolution in the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, P. (2025). Illicit finance in regional proxy group funding: How Iran moves money. *Iran Strategic Observatory*. https://iransto.com/illicit-finance-in-regional-proxy-group-funding/.

Smith, R. J. (2016) Isolation Through Humanitarianism: Subaltern Geopolitics of the Siege on Gaza. *Antipode*, 48: 750–769. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12224.

Smith, R. J. (2019). Israel's Permanent Siege of Gaza. *Middle East Report*, (290), 38–42. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45406228.

Smyth, P. (2023). The path to October 7: How Iran built up and managed a Palestinian "Axis of Resistance". *CTC Sentinel*, 16(11). December 21. https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-path-to-october-7-how-iran-built-up-and-managed-a-palestinian-axis-of-resistance/.

Soares de Oliveira, R. (2011). *Illiberal peacebuilding in Angola*. *The Journal of Modern African Studies, 49*(2), 287–314. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X1100005X.

Sobelman, D. (2024). Israel, Gaza, and Iran's "ring of fire". Lawfare. September 8. https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/israel--gaza--and-iran-s--ring-of-fire.

Staff, T. (2020). Iran's Khamenei: Muslim Nations Reject Humiliation of Compromise with Israel. *The*

Sternfeld, L. (2024). *The Realignment of the Middle East*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/03/the-realignment-of-the-middle-east/.

Tabatabai, A. M., & Samuel, A. T. (2017). *What the Iran-Iraq War tells us about the future of the Iran nuclear deal*. *International Security, 42*(1), 152–185. https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00286.

Takeyh, R. (2009). *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of Ayatollahs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tamimi, A. (2009). *Hamas, Unwritten Chapters*. London: Hurst & Company.

Tehran Times (2021a). Arafat Calls on Iran to Come to Palestinian's Aid. June 12. https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/65923/Arafat-Calls-On-Iran-to-Come-to-Palestinians-Aid.

Tehran Times (2021b). Ayatollah Khamenei Replies to Messages from Palestinian Resistance Leaders. May 24. https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/461292/Ayatollah-Khamenei-replies-to--messages-from-Palestinian-resistance.

Tenenbaum, E. (2015). *Hybrid Warfare in the Strategic Spectrum: An Historical Assessment*, in Guillaume Lasconjarias and Jeffrey A. Larsen,NATO's Response to Hybrid Threats (Rome: NATO Defense College, Forum Paper No. 24, 2015), 101-102.

Terrill, W. A. (2014). *Iranian involvement in Yemen*. Orbis, 58(3), 429–440. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2014.05.008.

The Guardian (2020). Trump Unveils Middle East Peace Plan With No Palestinian Support. January 28. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/28/donald-trump-middle-east--peace-plan-israel-netanyahu-palestinians.

Times of Israel, October 21. https://www.timesofisrael.com/irans--khamenei-muslim-nations-reject-humiliation-of-compromise-with-israel/.

Toft, M. D. (2010) *Securing the Peace: The Durable Settlement of Civil Wars*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian. (2018). *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Iran, 1951–1954, Second Edition* (Document 355). https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1951-54IranEd2/d355.

Van Dijk, T. (1993). Principles of critical discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society* 4(2): 249–283.

Van Leeuwen, T. (2008). Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vazirian, A. H. (2023). Iran's Unification of the Arenas Campaign against Israel: Foundations and Prospects. *Middle East Institute*. https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-unification-arenas-campaign-against-israel-foundations-and-prospects.

V-Dem Institute. (2024). *Democracy report 2024: Democracy winning and losing at the ballot*. University of Gothenburg. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4774409.

Wastnidge, E. (2017), *Iran and Syria: An Enduring Axis*. Middle East Policy, 24: 148-159. https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12275.

Wintour, P. (2023). No evidence yet of Iran link to Hamas attack, says Israeli military. *The Guardian*. October 9. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/09/no-evidence-yet-of-iran-link-to-hamas-attack-says-israeli-military.

Wise, K. (2011). *Islamic Revolution of 1979: The downfall of American-Iranian relations*. *Legacy, 11*(1), Article 2. https://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/legacy/vol11/iss1/2.

Wodak, R., de Cillia, R., and Reisigl, M. et al. (1999) *The Discursive Construction of National Identity*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Yossef, A. (2019). *Upgrading Iran's military doctrine: An offensive "forward defense"*. Middle East Institute. December 10. https://mei.edu/publications/upgrading-irans-military-doctrine-offensive-forward-defense.

Zisser, E. (2011). *Iranian involvement in Lebanon*. *Military and Strategic Affairs, 3*(1), 3–14. Institute for National Security Studies (INSS).

Zweiri, M. (2016). *Iran and Political Dynamism in the Arab World: the Case of Yemen*. Domes, 25: 4-18. https://doi.org/10.1111/dome.12078.