

Foreign Intervention and Conflict Management: A Critical Assessment of the Role of External Actors in the Israel-Iran Rivalry 2015 – 2025

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ABSTRACT

This thesis critically examines the role of external actors in managing the rivalry between Israel and Iran from 2015 to 2025. The study is guided by four key objectives: to assess the extent to which external interventions have succeeded or failed in managing escalation; to analyze the strategies employed by external actors in conflict management; to evaluate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as a tool of conflict management; and to examine the broader lessons the Israel–Iran rivalry provides for international conflict management. The study adopts a qualitative research design, relying on documentary analysis of policy documents, official reports, international treaties, and relevant scholarly literature. Theoretical analysis is informed by realist theory, which helps explain the strategic behaviour of both regional and external actors within the rivalry. The qualitative approach is considered appropriate as it allows for an in-depth understanding of meanings, patterns, and relationships embedded in international conflict dynamics, rather than numerical measurement of variables. Findings reveal that the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025 has been sustained through proxy warfare, targeted military strikes, cyber operations, and diplomatic containment strategies. Iran’s approach is largely anchored on the use of non-state allies across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, while Israel relies on intelligence operations, precision airstrikes, and the disruption of Iranian regional influence. Despite persistent tensions, both states have largely avoided full-scale war through deterrence and calibrated escalation. The study further finds that external interventions have produced mixed outcomes, as they have contributed to both temporary de-escalation and unintended escalation. The continued expansion of proxy networks, technological advancements in warfare, and shifting regional alliances increase the risk of miscalculation and potential escalation into open conflict. The study recommends that foreign interventions should prioritize the strengthening of regional security dialogue frameworks involving Gulf Cooperation Council states, Turkey, and other regional stakeholders. An inclusive regional security architecture would help reduce bilateral tensions and distribute responsibility for conflict management more effectively.

Keywords: *Conflict Management; External Actors; Israel–Iran Rivalry; Foreign Intervention; Regional Security*

Contribution/Originality: This study contributed to the literature on international conflict management by critically assessing the role of multiple external actors in the Israel–Iran rivalry from 2015 to 2025. Unlike earlier studies that focus primarily on bilateral relations or individual actors, it comparatively examines how the strategic interests and power politics of major powers have influenced conflict management efforts. The study extended Realist Theory by demonstrating how national interests shape mediation outcomes and regional security dynamics. It also provided practical policy recommendations for strengthening multilateral conflict management and promoting sustainable peace in the Middle East.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Israel–Iran rivalry is one of the most persistent and complex conflicts in the contemporary Middle East, shaped by ideological, strategic, and security considerations. While the roots of the rivalry can be traced to the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which fundamentally altered the balance of power in the region, the conflict has persisted into the twenty-first century through indirect confrontations, proxy engagements, and competition for regional influence. Over time, external actors including major powers and international organisations have repeatedly intervened in efforts to manage, contain, or influence the rivalry. Despite these interventions, the rivalry has continued to escalate in unpredictable ways, raising critical questions about the effectiveness of international efforts at conflict management.

From 2015 onwards, the Israel–Iran rivalry entered a particularly significant phase. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015 was widely viewed as a major international intervention aimed at curbing Iran’s nuclear programme and reducing tensions in the region. The agreement, spearheaded by the P5+1 countries (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany), sought to limit Iran’s nuclear capacity through monitoring and verification mechanisms while lifting selected sanctions (Katzman, 2016). This initiative represented a direct and coordinated attempt by external actors to manage a core dimension of the rivalry. However, the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in May 2018 and the subsequent reinstatement of economic sanctions disrupted the fragile balance achieved by the agreement, demonstrating the vulnerability of international interventions to changes in the strategic priorities of key actors (Miller, 2019).

Simultaneously, the rivalry has been expressed through proxy engagements, particularly in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Iran’s support for Hezbollah, which emerged as a Lebanese Shiite militant organisation in the 1980s and consolidated as Iran’s key regional proxy by the late 1990s has been central to Israel’s security concerns. Israel has responded with military action and strategic deterrence, sometimes in coordination with external powers such as the United States. Scholars including Mearsheimer and Buzan argue that these indirect confrontations exemplify the logic of offensive realism, in which states and their allies seek to maximise power and security in an anarchic international system. Despite significant scholarly attention to military and proxy dimensions, there is limited systematic evaluation of how external interventions shape the escalation or de-escalation of the rivalry over extended periods.

Economic and diplomatic interventions have also played a prominent role. The imposition of international sanctions on Iran, particularly by the United States and European Union, represents one of the most extensive uses of non-military pressure in contemporary conflict management (Drezner, 2011). While sanctions were intended to constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions and encourage compliance with international norms, they have also had unintended consequences, including strengthening domestic resilience in Iran and fostering adaptive strategies that complicate conflict resolution. Additionally, multilateral diplomatic efforts by organisations such as the United Nations and the European Union have sought to de-escalate tensions, yet their effectiveness has been constrained by the competing priorities of powerful member states (Nye, 2011).

The central problem, therefore, lies in the apparent paradox of intervention: while external actors actively engage in managing the Israel–Iran rivalry, the conflict persists and, in some cases, escalates. Existing studies often examine isolated aspects of the conflict such as nuclear negotiations, proxy wars, or military confrontations without integrating these interventions into a comprehensive analysis of their impact on conflict management over time. Moreover, interventions are frequently driven by the strategic interests of external actors rather than the objective of conflict resolution, raising questions about their sustainability, coherence, and effectiveness. There is a critical need to examine not only the strategies employed by external actors but also their outcomes in terms of escalation, containment, and influence over the rivalry's trajectory.

Focusing on the period from 2015 to 2025, this study interrogates the ways in which external actors have influenced the trajectory of the Israel–Iran rivalry. It examines how diplomatic, economic, and military interventions have interacted with the dynamics of escalation, containment, and strategic signaling. The core of the argument is that interventions cannot be treated as neutral mechanisms of conflict resolution; instead, they are shaped by the strategic interests and power calculations of external actors, producing outcomes that both manage and sustain the rivalry. This analysis provides a framework for understanding the limits and potentials of international interventions in protracted regional conflicts.

Literature Review

In conflict management, foreign interventions refer to deliberate actions undertaken by external actors, including states, regional powers, and international organizations, to influence the dynamics and outcomes of disputes between conflicting parties. Unlike unilateral interventions aimed at pursuing narrow strategic interests, interventions in conflict management are primarily concerned with regulating disputes, preventing escalation, and maintaining regional stability (Barnett & Duvall, 2015). These interventions operate through a range of mechanisms, from diplomatic engagement to economic incentives and limited military measures, reflecting the complex interplay between power, strategy, and diplomacy in international relations.

At the conceptual level, foreign interventions are rooted in the understanding that conflicts rarely occur in isolation; the actions of external actors can significantly shape the trajectory and intensity of hostilities. Scholars argue that interventions can be both proactive and reactive. Proactive interventions involve preventive diplomacy or preemptive measures designed to contain potential escalation before it becomes violent. Reactive interventions, on the other hand, respond to crises as they unfold, often seeking

to stabilize or contain the conflict through negotiation, mediation, or pressure tactics (Parsi, 2017). This duality underscores the strategic complexity of interventions, highlighting the need for careful calibration of actions to achieve intended outcomes without exacerbating the conflict.

They are generally categorized into three broad forms: diplomatic, economic, and military. Diplomatic interventions involve negotiation facilitation, mediation, confidence-building measures, and in some cases, coercive diplomacy to induce compliance without resorting to force (Roziki et al., 2025). For instance, diplomatic engagement between external powers and Israel or Iran often aims to open communication channels, reduce tensions, and encourage restraint, serving as a tool to manage the rivalry strategically. Economic interventions, which may include sanctions or targeted incentives, seek to influence the strategic calculations of the parties involved by altering the costs and benefits of specific actions (Freedman, 2015). Military interventions, while typically limited in scope, serve as a signal of resolve or deterrence, reinforcing the credibility of diplomatic or economic measures without directly engaging in full-scale conflict (Waltz, 1979).

The effectiveness of interventions in conflict management depends not only on the resources and capabilities of the external actors but also on their legitimacy and acceptance by the conflicting parties. Legitimate actors, often sanctioned by international norms or multilateral institutions, are more likely to gain cooperation and reduce resistance (Roziki et al., 2025). Conversely, interventions perceived as self-serving or biased may intensify hostility and prolong conflict, demonstrating the delicate balance required in international engagement. The Israel–Iran rivalry illustrates this dynamic, where interventions by external powers have at times reduced immediate tensions but also triggered countermeasures, demonstrating both the potential and limits of outside influence.

A critical feature of international interventions in conflict management is their integration with broader strategic objectives. External actors do not intervene solely for humanitarian reasons; interventions are often shaped by considerations such as regional security, strategic alliances, economic interests, and global power balances (Afridi et al., 2025). By understanding interventions in this strategic light, this thesis situates them as tools of influence that operate within a larger system of international politics, where every action carries potential consequences for both conflict intensity and regional stability. Interventions are inherently multi-dimensional, involving overlapping political, economic, and military strategies (Roziki et al., 2025). The interplay of these dimensions is crucial in shaping the behavior of the parties to the conflict. For example, sanctions may co-exist with diplomatic negotiations and limited military posturing to create pressure while preserving avenues for dialogue, demonstrating a nuanced approach to conflict management. This multi-layered understanding underscores the importance of conceptual clarity: external actions must be analyzed in terms of purpose, mechanism, and effect, rather than simply categorized as coercive or supportive.

In the context of this thesis, examining international interventions conceptually allows for a critical understanding of their strategic and operational logic. By focusing on the conceptual link between external involvement and conflict management, the study establishes a foundation for analyzing how interventions by the United States, European Union, and regional powers have influenced the Israel–Iran rivalry from 2006

to 2025 (Afridi et al., 2025). This approach ensures that the research does not merely describe interventions but assesses their role in shaping conflict dynamics, highlighting patterns, trends, and implications for regional stability.

Finally, the concept of international interventions in conflict management provides a robust analytical lens for understanding how external actors attempt to regulate, contain, and influence conflicts. It emphasizes the strategic purpose, mechanisms, and contextual relevance of interventions, offering a clear framework for the empirical and analytical chapters that follow. By situating interventions within this conceptual framework, the thesis is equipped to explore the relationship between external actions and conflict outcomes, providing both theoretical clarity and practical relevance to the study of the Israel–Iran rivalry.

The Role of External Actors in Conflict Management

The involvement of external actors in conflict management has become a defining feature of contemporary international relations, particularly in regions characterized by protracted rivalries and weak indigenous security mechanisms. Scholarly literature widely acknowledges that external actors, including states, international organizations, and multilateral institutions, play increasingly prominent roles in shaping the trajectory, intensity, and outcomes of conflicts beyond their immediate borders. Their engagement reflects humanitarian considerations and strategic interests, making external intervention a complex and often contested component of conflict management (Berdaliyev et al., 2025).

External actors are generally understood as entities that are not direct parties to a conflict but possess the capacity and willingness to influence its course. Their roles in conflict management range from diplomatic mediation and peace facilitation to coercive measures such as sanctions, military intervention, and security guarantees. The literature emphasizes that such involvement is often motivated by a combination of normative commitments to international peace and security and pragmatic calculations tied to geopolitical interests (Bellamy and Paul, 2011). As a result, external actors frequently operate at the intersection of conflict resolution and power politics. One of the most prominent roles of external actors in conflict management is mediation. Through diplomatic engagement, shuttle diplomacy, and negotiation facilitation, external actors seek to reduce hostility, manage crises, and create pathways toward dialogue. Studies on mediation suggest that external involvement can be particularly effective in contexts where local actors lack trust or communication channels have broken down (Bercovitch and Gartner, 2015). However, the success of mediation is closely linked to the perceived neutrality, leverage, and credibility of the intervening actor.

Beyond mediation, external actors also contribute to conflict management through the establishment of normative and institutional frameworks. International organizations such as the United Nations and regional bodies have developed mechanisms for peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and post-conflict stabilization. Scholars argue that these institutional arrangements can help regulate behavior, constrain escalation, and provide legitimacy for conflict management efforts, especially when supported by broad international consensus (Diehl and Balas, 2014). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of such frameworks often depends on the political will of powerful states and the consent of conflict parties.

Coercive strategies constitute another dimension of external involvement in conflict management. Measures such as economic sanctions, arms embargoes, and limited military intervention are frequently employed to alter the behavior of conflict actors or deter escalation. The literature remains divided on the effectiveness of coercive tools, with some scholars viewing them as necessary instruments for enforcing international norms, while others caution that they may exacerbate conflict dynamics or entrench resistance (Drezner, 2015). This debate underscores the ambivalent role of external actors as both stabilizers and potential sources of escalation.

In regions marked by enduring rivalries, the role of external actors is further complicated by issues of alignment and strategic competition. External powers often support different sides in a conflict, thereby influencing local power balances and shaping conflict trajectories. Such involvement may contribute to short-term stability through deterrence or balance-of-power arrangements, but it can also prolong conflicts by reinforcing rival camps and reducing incentives for compromise (Buzan and Wæver, 2015). This duality highlights the inherent tension between conflict management and geopolitical rivalry in external intervention.

The literature also draws attention to the unintended consequences of external involvement. While external actors may seek to manage or resolve conflicts, their actions can undermine local ownership, weaken domestic institutions, or create dependency on external security guarantees. Scholars of conflict transformation argue that sustainable conflict management requires careful calibration of external roles to avoid displacing local agency and accountability (Paris, 2015). These concerns have fueled debates about the appropriate scope and limits of external intervention in conflict-prone regions. Existing scholarship presents external actors as indispensable yet imperfect agents of conflict management. Their capacity to influence conflicts is significant, but outcomes are shaped by the interaction between external strategies, local dynamics, and broader regional structures (Berdaliyev et al., 2025). Understanding the role of external actors, therefore, requires moving beyond simplistic assessments of success or failure to examine how different forms of involvement interact with the underlying causes and dynamics of conflict. This perspective is essential for assessing international intervention in complex rivalries such as those characterizing the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Realist Theory. It explains the persistence, intensity, and strategic logic of the rivalry. Realist theory remains one of the most influential frameworks in the study of international relations, particularly in explaining interstate rivalry, power competition, and security-driven behaviour. Rooted in the works of scholars such as Morgenthau (1948), (Waltz, 1979), and (Mearsheimer, 1947), realism is built on the assumption that the international system is anarchic, lacking a central authority capable of enforcing rules or guaranteeing the security of states. In such a system, states are compelled to prioritize survival, pursue power, and act in accordance with their national interests.

From a realist perspective, the Israel–Iran rivalry is best understood as a strategic contest shaped by perceptions of threat, regional balance of power, and security dilemmas. Israel views Iran’s regional influence, missile capabilities, and nuclear ambitions as existential threats, while Iran perceives Israel’s military superiority, alliance

with the United States, and regional interventions as direct challenges to its security and ideological objectives. This mutual suspicion generates a self-reinforcing cycle of rivalry, deterrence, and proxy confrontation.

Realism is particularly useful for explaining why the rivalry persists despite diplomatic efforts, sanctions, and multilateral negotiations. The theory emphasizes that states are unlikely to relinquish strategic advantages or compromise core security interests, especially in regions characterized by historical animosity and unstable power configurations such as the Middle East. External actors, including the United States, Russia, and European powers, are also viewed through a realist lens as pursuing their own strategic interests, whether through alliance maintenance, power projection, or regional influence.

Within this framework, foreign interventions are not neutral or altruistic. Rather, they are instruments through which powerful states seek to shape outcomes in ways that align with their geopolitical interests. Realism therefore provides the structural explanation for why interventions occur, why they are selective, and why they often prioritize stability and balance over genuine conflict resolution.

In the context of the Israel–Iran rivalry, Realism provides a lens to understand why external actors intervene. Interventions by powers such as the United States, Russia, and regional actors like Saudi Arabia are not motivated purely by peacebuilding but by strategic calculations aimed at preserving influence, deterring threats, and maintaining regional balances of power. Similarly, Iran and Israel's policies toward one another are guided by self-preservation, military capabilities, and the desire to secure regional dominance.

This framework allows the study to critically analyze external interventions as manifestations of power politics. Conflict management efforts, such as mediation or diplomatic negotiations, are interpreted not as neutral peacemaking but as instruments employed by external actors to serve their strategic interests, prevent escalation, or maintain regional stability in line with their national objectives. By applying Realism, the study examines the strategic motivations, the influence of power asymmetries, and the role of external actors in shaping both the intensity and the management of the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025.

The application of Realist theory to the study of foreign interventions in the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025 provides a clear framework for understanding the behavior of both the primary actors and the external states that have intervened in the conflict. Realism, with its central focus on power, security, and the anarchic nature of the international system, explains not only why Israel and Iran pursue aggressive and strategic policies but also why external actors like the United States, Russia, European powers, and regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE engage in interventions that both shape and manage the conflict.

Realism helps to interpret the motivations of Israel and Iran as rational actors seeking security and strategic advantage. Israel's military operations, intelligence campaigns, and expansion of missile defense systems reflect a realist understanding of survival within a hostile regional environment. Similarly, Iran's nuclear program, support for proxy militias such as Hezbollah, and its strategic positioning in Iraq, Syria,

and Yemen can be interpreted as measures to balance Israel's regional influence and deter direct attacks. Realism provides a lens through which these actions are understood not as impulsive or ideologically driven alone, but as calculated moves to maximize power, enhance deterrence, and secure national survival in an anarchic system where threats are ever-present (Patrick, 2022).

Realism clarifies the role of external actors as strategic power brokers rather than neutral peacemakers. The United States, as Israel's principal ally, has consistently intervened in the rivalry through military aid, intelligence sharing, and strategic support. These interventions are guided by a realist logic: ensuring that Israel maintains a qualitative military edge in the region, protecting U.S. geopolitical interests, and preventing Iranian dominance that could destabilize global energy flows or threaten allied states. Similarly, European powers, through diplomatic engagements and nuclear negotiations, acted to contain the rivalry and limit the proliferation of nuclear capabilities by Iran. From a realist perspective, these interventions are not primarily motivated by normative ideals of peace but by the strategic imperative to manage a conflict that could escalate into a broader regional war threatening their interests (Byman, 2018).

The involvement of regional actors further demonstrates Realism in action. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf states have aligned with Israel strategically, albeit often indirectly, to counterbalance Iran's regional ambitions. This alignment includes intelligence sharing, coordinated policy measures, and in some cases, tacit support for military operations aimed at weakening Iran's proxy influence. These interventions reflect the realist principle of balancing power to prevent any single actor from achieving regional hegemony, illustrating that conflict management by external actors is often a strategic tool to maintain equilibrium rather than a purely humanitarian or diplomatic endeavor.

Realism also helps explain the limited success of diplomatic interventions during this period. For example, efforts by European powers and multilateral institutions to negotiate Iran's nuclear program achieved intermittent successes but often collapsed under the weight of conflicting strategic interests and mistrust. Realism posits that states will only engage in meaningful negotiation when it aligns with their national interests and security priorities. Thus, while diplomacy may temporarily reduce tensions, it does not fundamentally alter the underlying power dynamics or rivalrous nature of the Israel–Iran relationship. The collapse of the 2025 nuclear talks, followed by escalated military posturing, exemplifies this realist principle: strategic calculations ultimately determine whether conflict management efforts succeed.

Moreover, the application of Realism sheds light on the use of proxy actors in the rivalry. Iran's support for Hezbollah, Shi'a militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen can be seen as a realist strategy to project power asymmetrically, deter Israel and its allies, and influence regional outcomes without engaging in direct confrontation that might threaten its survival. Realism interprets these proxies as instruments of statecraft, allowing Iran to extend its strategic reach and counterbalance Israel's superior conventional capabilities. Similarly, external actors such as the United States and Gulf states must account for these proxy networks when formulating interventions, illustrating the interdependent nature of power politics in the region (Patrick, 2022).

Realism underscores that conflict management by external actors is inherently self-interested. Measures such as ceasefires, negotiations, and indirect mediation are not undertaken out of altruism but to maintain the balance of power, prevent uncontrollable escalation, and protect the interveners' geopolitical and economic interests. The persistent tension between Israel and Iran, punctuated by intermittent military engagements and proxy conflicts, reflects the realist notion that the international system is fundamentally competitive and that peace is contingent upon the alignment of strategic interests rather than normative agreements.

Applying Realist theory to the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025 provides a structured and coherent explanation for both the behavior of the primary actors and the interventions of external powers. Realism demonstrates that actions, whether military, diplomatic, or economic, are largely driven by the pursuit of power, security, and national interest within an anarchic international system. The theory helps illuminate why external interventions often succeed in managing but not resolving the conflict, why proxies play a critical role in shaping dynamics, and why diplomacy is constrained by strategic imperatives. In essence, Realism allows for a nuanced understanding of the Israel–Iran rivalry as a conflict shaped not only by ideological and historical factors but also by the calculated pursuit of power by multiple actors in a competitive international environment (Stephen, 2018).

2. METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research design, drawing on historical and analytical approaches to examine international intervention in the Israel–Iran rivalry within the framework of conflict management. The choice of this research design is informed by the nature of the research problem, the objectives of the study, and the need to generate in-depth understanding of complex political processes rather than numerical generalisations.

Qualitative research design is widely acknowledged as appropriate for studies in political science and international relations where the focus is on interpreting meanings, motivations, and patterns of interaction among actors. According to Creswell, qualitative research enables the researcher to explore complex social and political phenomena within their natural contexts, allowing for rich and detailed analysis of processes and outcomes (Creswell, 2014). In the context of the Israel–Iran rivalry, the qualitative approach provides the flexibility required to examine strategic behaviour, diplomatic engagements, and external interventions shaped by historical, ideological, and security considerations.

The study further employs a historical research design, which is suitable for analysing political developments over time. Historical research, as noted by Tosh, allows scholars to trace continuity and change, identify patterns, and situate contemporary events within broader temporal contexts (Tosh, 2015). Given that the Israel–Iran rivalry has evolved through distinct phases influenced by regional and international developments, a historical approach enables the study to examine how international intervention strategies have adapted across different periods and circumstances.

In addition, the research adopts an analytical and interpretive design, which facilitates critical examination of policy decisions, diplomatic initiatives, and intervention strategies. According to George and Bennett, analytical case-oriented research is particularly effective in international relations studies where the objective is to understand causal mechanisms and strategic interactions rather than to test variables statistically (George & Bennett, 2015). This approach allows the study to interrogate the motivations of external actors and assess the implications of their interventions for conflict management outcomes.

The research is also case-study oriented, with the Israel–Iran rivalry serving as the central case. Case study design is appropriate where the researcher seeks to gain intensive knowledge of a single case within its real-life context (Yin, 2018). The Israel–Iran rivalry is strategically significant and analytically rich, making it suitable for examining broader issues of international intervention, power politics, and conflict management. By focusing on this case, the study is able to generate context-specific insights while also contributing to general debates in international relations and conflict studies. The research design is theory-informed, guided by realist theory and conflict management theory as established in the preceding chapter. These theoretical frameworks shape the selection of data, guide the analytical process, and provide the conceptual tools for interpreting findings. As noted by Blaikie, theory-guided research enhances analytical coherence and strengthens the explanatory depth of qualitative studies (Blaikie, 2010).

The adopted research design provides a systematic and rigorous framework for examining international intervention in the Israel–Iran rivalry. By integrating qualitative, historical, analytical, and case-study approaches, the study is well positioned to address the research questions and achieve its stated objectives. The design is therefore appropriate for generating valid, credible, and theoretically grounded findings within the discipline of political science. This study is based mainly on secondary sources of data, which are appropriate for examining international conflict, interstate rivalry, and external intervention. The nature of the study makes direct primary data collection impractical, given the interstate and international scope of the research.

The secondary data used in this study includes documentation and research reports by organizations such as the UN and EU. Journals, textbooks, and unpublished manuscripts, e.g. doctoral studies. Some of these materials were obtained from universities' libraries such as Delta State University library, Abraka, University of Port Harcourt library, University of Benin library. Journals and internet sources were also of great importance

This study adopts a qualitative method of data analysis, relying on thematic and interpretive analysis of documentary sources. The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand meanings, patterns, and relationships embedded in international conflict dynamics, strategic interests, and external intervention rather than to quantify variables.

Data collected from books, journal articles, policy documents, and official reports were systematically reviewed, organized, and analyzed based on key themes derived from the research objectives. These themes include strategic interests, power politics, external intervention, conflict management mechanisms, and outcomes of international

involvement in the Israel–Iran rivalry. Relevant materials were compared across time and context to identify consistencies, shifts, and emerging patterns within the study period. The analysis involved critical interpretation of texts to explain how international actors influence conflict behavior and regional security outcomes. Attention was given to context, intent, and consequence to establish logical connections between international intervention and conflict dynamics. This method allows for depth, flexibility, and rigorous interpretation, making it suitable for studies in international relations and conflict management (Braun & Clarke, 2015).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The effectiveness of external actors in the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025 can be understood as limited, conditional, and primarily strategic rather than transformative. Empirical literature and contemporary geopolitical analyses indicate that although external actors, including the United States, European powers, Russia, and regional stakeholders, have significantly influenced the trajectory of the rivalry, their interventions have largely focused on managing escalation, preserving the balance of power, and advancing strategic interests rather than achieving sustainable conflict resolution. This outcome is consistent with Realist theory, which argues that international relations are shaped by power politics, national interest, and survival imperatives (Adigbuo, 2018; Efebeh, 2019).

A key area where external actors have demonstrated relative effectiveness is in short-term conflict containment and deterrence. Evidence from the 2025 escalation suggests that coordinated external support, particularly from the United States to Israel, contributed to limiting the intensity and duration of confrontation. Military coordination, intelligence sharing, and defensive support systems helped to reduce the scale of destruction and prevented the escalation from developing into a prolonged regional war (National Institute of International Affairs, 2025). This aligns with Okpevra's (2017) position that external influence in conflict environments often functions to stabilize immediate crises rather than resolve underlying tensions.

However, despite these short-term stabilizing effects, the long-term effectiveness of external interventions remains highly questionable. Post-escalation analyses reveal that although Iran experienced operational and infrastructural setbacks, its core strategic objectives particularly regional influence, deterrence posture, and nuclear ambition remained largely unchanged (OSW, 2025). Similarly, recent scholarly assessments indicate that the rivalry has gradually shifted from indirect confrontation to more direct forms of engagement without addressing its structural and ideological roots (World Scientific, 2025). Efebeh (2019) supports this view by arguing that conflicts rooted in enduring strategic interests are resistant to external attempts at resolution, especially where core state interests remain intact.

External actors, particularly the United States and its allies, have relied heavily on sanctions regimes, military presence, and diplomatic warnings to deter Iranian actions and reassure regional allies. However, empirical findings suggest that such strategies have produced mixed and sometimes counterproductive outcomes. Gbambu (2026) observes that coercive signaling during the 2025 escalation intensified mutual threat perceptions and reinforced distrust among actors, thereby contributing to escalation rather than de-escalation. This reflects Adigbuo's (2018) argument that foreign policy instruments, while designed to protect national interests, may

inadvertently escalate tensions in competitive security environments. It is constrained by the increasing complexity of great power competition in the Middle East. The rivalry has become embedded within broader geopolitical struggles involving the United States, Russia, and China, each pursuing distinct strategic objectives. This has led to fragmented and sometimes contradictory intervention patterns that weaken collective conflict management efforts (Global Research Council Report, 2026). Clarke (2020) similarly notes that international politics is often shaped by competing power interests, which limit the possibility of coordinated and neutral intervention.

Simultaneously, External actors have shown limited success in addressing the persistence of proxy warfare, which remains a defining feature of the Israel–Iran rivalry. Iran’s reliance on decentralized networks and allied non-state actors has enabled it to sustain strategic influence despite sustained external pressure and targeted interventions (Ben Yaakov & Pack, 2026). Opone (2017) explains that such conflict systems are historically embedded and structurally resilient, making them difficult to dismantle through conventional external intervention strategies.

The role of multilateral institutions further highlights these limitations. While organizations such as the United Nations have attempted to mediate tensions through resolutions, sanctions, and diplomatic engagement, their effectiveness has been constrained by structural limitations, veto politics, and competing interests among major powers (IIARD, 2026). Sanubi (2015) reinforces this position by arguing that international institutions are inherently limited by the power structures that govern global politics, reducing their capacity for independent conflict resolution. Moreover, even when external actors achieve military or strategic superiority, this does not necessarily translate into long-term stability or conflict resolution. The 2025 confrontation demonstrates that despite significant tactical gains by Israel and its allies, Iran retained the capacity to adapt, reorganize, and sustain its strategic posture (SSRN, 2025). Orhero (2018) supports this observation by emphasizing that modern conflicts are characterized by resilience and adaptation rather than decisive victory.

While some actors prioritize military deterrence, others emphasize diplomatic engagement or geopolitical positioning. These inconsistencies produce fragmented interventions that reduce the overall capacity for coherent conflict management. Nwador (2017) notes that such inconsistencies in foreign policy approaches often weaken collective efforts at managing international conflicts; while multiple actors intervene across diplomatic, economic, military, and institutional dimensions, their collective effectiveness is constrained by competing strategic interests and the absence of a unified enforcement framework.

A general reading of the evidence suggests that external actors have been more successful in managing the visibility and intensity of the rivalry than in resolving its underlying causes. This is particularly evident in how escalation cycles are frequently contained but not prevented, and how tensions repeatedly re-emerge in different regional theatres despite sustained external engagement. Recent conflict assessments indicate that the rivalry has remained structurally stable in its hostility, even as intervention levels increased, largely because external actors operate within fragmented geopolitical alignments rather than coordinated frameworks (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025). This fragmentation reduces the possibility of unified pressure or consistent diplomatic direction across all actors involved.

The United States continues to be the most influential external actor due to its combined use of sanctions, military deterrence, and strategic alignment with Israel. However, recent developments in global security analysis show that shifts in U.S. policy orientation, particularly between engagement and coercive strategies, have created policy discontinuities that reduce long-term predictability in the rivalry environment (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2025). These fluctuations have contributed to adaptive responses by Israel and Iran, rather than structural behavioural change.

European actors, particularly the European Union, maintain a more diplomatic and regulatory role, focusing on negotiation frameworks and nuclear governance mechanisms. However, their effectiveness remains limited by their reliance on transatlantic coordination and lack of independent coercive capacity. As recent UN-aligned governance assessments highlight, the EU's influence is largely procedural, contributing more to dialogue maintenance than to enforcement outcomes in high-intensity geopolitical rivalries (United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 2025).

Russia and China have emerged as increasingly important external actors within the study period, but their engagement follows different strategic logics. Russia's involvement is closely tied to its regional military presence and strategic positioning in Syria, where it simultaneously manages relations with both Iran and Israel to avoid escalation spillover. China, on the other hand, prioritizes economic stability and infrastructure diplomacy, avoiding direct security alignment while expanding its regional economic footprint. This dual approach limits their ability to act as decisive conflict mediators, despite their growing global influence.

At the regional level, Middle Eastern states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey play a significant role in shaping the operational environment of the rivalry. Their involvement is driven by security competition, alliance restructuring, and shifting regional alignments. These actors contribute to what can be described as the regional diffusion of the Israel–Iran rivalry, where conflict dynamics extend beyond bilateral confrontation into multiple interconnected theatres such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

International organizations such as the United Nations system and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) provide monitoring and verification frameworks that influence how the rivalry is understood globally. However, recent empirical developments show that their effectiveness is increasingly constrained by access limitations and political contestation over compliance. For example, inspection disruptions and restricted verification access in 2025 significantly reduced the continuity of nuclear monitoring in Iran, limiting the institutional capacity to provide independent assessment of escalation risks (IAEA, 2025; UN News, 2025).

The Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025 is best characterized as partial, strategic, and constrained. External interventions have been effective in achieving short-term objectives, including deterrence of escalation, limitation of direct confrontation, and maintenance of a regional balance of power. However, they have largely failed to achieve long-term conflict resolution, structural transformation, or reduction of underlying tensions. Instead, they tend to reinforce existing power dynamics and perpetuate the rivalry. This outcome strongly supports the Realist argument that external

actors are primarily motivated by national interest and power considerations, which shape but ultimately limit the effectiveness of conflict management efforts.

Diplomatic Intervention by External Actors in the Israel–Iran Rivalry (2015–2025)

One of the most persistent and formally recognized forms of external engagement in the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025 is Diplomatic intervention. Unlike military or covert interventions, diplomatic efforts are primarily aimed at managing tensions, preventing escalation, and sustaining communication channels between hostile actors. However, within the framework of Realist theory, these diplomatic initiatives are not purely peace-oriented; rather, they reflect the strategic interests of powerful states seeking stability, influence, and balance of power in the Middle East (Adigbuo, 2018; Efebeh, 2019).

In this period, the most significant diplomatic intervention is the continued effort to manage Iran's nuclear program through multilateral negotiations, most notably the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and subsequent attempts to revive or replace it after shifting geopolitical developments. European powers, particularly the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, have consistently attempted to sustain diplomatic engagement with Iran, even in periods of heightened tension following the withdrawal of the United States from the agreement. These efforts reflect a broader European strategy of conflict containment through negotiation rather than confrontation (Clarke, 2020).

However, empirical developments show that diplomatic interventions have been repeatedly undermined by divergent strategic interests among external actors. While European states prioritize diplomatic continuity, the United States and its regional allies have often adopted a more coercive approach, emphasizing sanctions and military deterrence. This lack of policy cohesion has significantly weakened the effectiveness of diplomatic engagement, creating what scholars describe as fragmented diplomacy in the Middle East (Global Research Council, 2026).

This fragmentation is not accidental but structural. States engage in diplomacy only to the extent that it aligns with their national interests. As Efebeh (2019) notes, diplomatic engagement in international politics often functions as an extension of strategic competition rather than a genuine mechanism for conflict resolution. In the context of the Israel–Iran rivalry, diplomacy is frequently used to stabilize tensions temporarily while preserving strategic advantages on all sides.

Simultaneously, diplomatic intervention involves the role of backchannel negotiations and indirect mediation efforts facilitated by third-party states such as Oman, Qatar, and Switzerland. These actors have occasionally provided neutral platforms for communication between Iran, the United States, and Israel indirectly. Such interventions are significant because they reduce the risk of miscalculation during periods of heightened tension. However, their impact remains limited due to the absence of binding enforcement mechanisms and the unwillingness of key actors to make substantial concessions (IIARD, 2026).

Diplomatic interventions have often been reactive rather than preventive. Instead of addressing structural causes of the rivalry, most diplomatic efforts emerge during crisis periods when escalation has already occurred. This reactive nature reduces their long-term effectiveness and reinforces the cyclical pattern of tension and de-escalation.

Okpevra (2017) argues that in conflict-prone international systems, diplomacy is often constrained by historical grievances and power asymmetries, which limit its transformative capacity.

The period between 2018 and 2025 further demonstrates the weakening of diplomatic mechanisms, particularly after the deterioration of nuclear negotiations and increased direct hostility between Israel and Iran. Despite renewed calls for dialogue, diplomatic initiatives have struggled to regain credibility due to mutual distrust, inconsistent commitments, and competing security concerns. Orhero (2018) explains that in such strategic environments, diplomacy becomes secondary to security imperatives, especially when states perceive existential threats. External actors are frequently influenced by broader great power competition, particularly involving the United States, Russia, and China. Each of these actors pursues diplomatic engagement with Iran and Israel in ways that reflect their broader geopolitical interests rather than a unified peace strategy. This multipolar diplomatic environment has further complicated conflict management efforts and reduced the coherence of international responses (World Scientific, 2025).

According to Eilam, E. (2005), a future war would likely escalate, with Iran stepping up attacks on US forces in the GCC and Iraq. It could also jeopardise global energy supplies through vulnerable routes like the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, targeted by Iran and its Houthi allies. By contrast, a negotiated deal could roll back Iran's programme without the risks of a broader regional war. Following the 12 day-war, the E3 countries triggered the snapback process, re-imposing all UN and EU sanctions on Iran. They gambled that time pressure and heightened risk of war would force Tehran to grant inspectors access and verify the fate of its uranium stockpile. But Iran refused to cede its last remaining bargaining chips in a potential future negotiation with the US, in return for an extension of snapback, a tool that is largely viewed as a European gun to its head.

Having exhausted its snapback leverage, the E3 should now look to provide a soft landing to avoid fuelling an escalatory dynamic with Iran. The immediate priority should be to go back to the diplomatic drawing board. This effort should be broadened beyond the E3: the EU, Switzerland and Norway should accelerate shuttle diplomacy between Iran, Israel and the White House. While a comprehensive deal is unlikely at this stage, a series of small reciprocal steps could address concerns on all sides and limit the risks of escalation. This could start with mutual restraint: for example, the West refraining from enforcing oil restrictions on shipments to China, in return for Iran continuing to halt enrichment. This would give Trump a political win on his 'zero enrichment' demand at little cost, since enrichment has practically stalled due to the strikes. Iran could frame the pause as temporary while it repairs the damage to its nuclear facilities and consistent with its perceived right to enrichment. This process should then encourage Iran to continue its engagement with international inspectors under the Non-Proliferation Treaty, including by providing access to bombed nuclear sites.

Crucially, the US and Europe must also restrain Israel from attacking Iran while enrichment is paused and future talks are pursued. Finally, Europe should deepen its cooperation with GCC partners, as avoiding or containing a renewed Israel-Iran war is a shared priority. A new 'E3/EU-G3-GCC', platform with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) could lead regional de-escalation efforts. Given the interlinkages between the Gaza crisis, the Iran dossier, and stability in the Levant region,

this would provide Europeans with a much stronger basis on which to pursue comprehensive security in the Middle East. The effectiveness of diplomacy is constrained by competing national interests, structural power imbalances, and lack of enforcement mechanisms, all of which align with Realist expectations that international cooperation is conditional and interest-driven. Thus, diplomatic intervention functions more as a tool of strategic management than a pathway to sustainable peace in the Israel–Iran rivalry.

Economic Sanctions and Political Pressure Mechanisms in the Israel–Iran Rivalry (2015–2025)

Between 2015 and 2025, economic sanctions against Iran have intensified in both scope and sophistication. These sanctions have targeted Iran's oil exports, banking systems, shipping networks, and access to global financial markets. The objective has been to reduce Iran's economic strength and, by extension, its ability to fund regional alliances and proxy engagements that form part of its strategic rivalry with Israel. Empirical developments, however, show that while these sanctions have significantly disrupted Iran's economic performance, they have not achieved their intended political objective of fundamentally altering Iran's strategic orientation. Instead, Iran has demonstrated sustained economic adaptation and strategic resilience, including the diversification of trade relationships beyond Western markets and increased engagement with emerging economies in Asia and other non-Western blocs (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

Economic sanctions and political pressure mechanisms constitute one of the most persistent and strategically significant instruments of external intervention in the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025. These mechanisms have been primarily deployed by the United States and its allies as tools of coercion intended to limit Iran's regional influence, constrain its nuclear development, and weaken its capacity to sustain asymmetric military operations. Within a Realist analytical framework, such measures are not neutral economic policies but strategic instruments of power designed to alter the behaviour of rival states within an anarchic international system. A key analytical observation in this study is that sanctions have produced asymmetric outcomes. On one hand, they have created measurable economic pressure, including inflationary stress, currency depreciation, and reduced foreign investment inflows. On the other hand, they have simultaneously contributed to the strengthening of Iran's internal economic restructuring strategies and the expansion of alternative economic alliances. This suggests that sanctions operate more effectively as instruments of economic disruption than behavioural transformation in the context of high-stakes geopolitical rivalry.

In addition to economic restrictions, political pressure mechanisms have played a critical role in shaping Iran's international environment. These mechanisms include diplomatic isolation efforts, coordinated voting strategies in international organizations, public condemnation campaigns, and sustained lobbying by allied states aimed at limiting Iran's diplomatic space. These strategies intend to reduce Iran's legitimacy within the international system and constrain its ability to form strategic alliances. However, empirical analysis indicates that Iran has maintained selective diplomatic engagement, particularly with states willing to pursue pragmatic cooperation based on mutual interests, thereby limiting the effectiveness of political isolation strategies (Council on Foreign Relations, 2024).

The interaction between economic sanctions and political pressure has generated a feedback cycle of resistance and adaptation. Rather than weakening Iran's strategic resolve, sustained pressure has contributed to a reinforcement of defensive foreign policy behaviour, particularly in relation to its rivalry with Israel. This includes increased reliance on asymmetric strategies, expansion of regional partnerships, and greater investment in non-conventional deterrence mechanisms. From a Realist perspective, this outcome reflects the predictable behaviour of states under coercive pressure, where survival and strategic autonomy take precedence over compliance.

Rather than isolating Iran in a way that reduces tensions, sanctions have contributed to the hardening of geopolitical blocs within the Middle East. This has intensified the rivalry by deepening mistrust, reducing diplomatic flexibility, and encouraging both sides to adopt more entrenched strategic positions. As Byman (2021) notes, external pressure on Iran often strengthens its reliance on non-state actors and proxy networks, thereby indirectly expanding the geographical and operational scope of the rivalry. The persistence of sanctions between 2015 and 2025 also highlights their limited effectiveness as tools of conflict resolution in deeply entrenched geopolitical rivalries. While they may succeed in creating economic constraints, they rarely produce strategic compliance when core national interests are perceived to be at stake. Instead, sanctions tend to reinforce the perception of hostility and contribute to long-term strategic confrontation rather than reconciliation.

Economic sanctions and political pressure mechanisms have played a significant but ultimately limited role in shaping the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025. Their primary impact has been economic disruption and diplomatic pressure; however, they have failed to produce meaningful strategic transformation in Iran's behaviour. Instead, these mechanisms have contributed to adaptation, resistance, and the entrenchment of rivalry dynamics. This outcome reinforces the Realist argument that states under sustained coercive pressure do not simply comply, but rather adjust their strategies to preserve autonomy and survival within the international system.

Military Interventions and Strategic Deterrence Measures in the Israel–Iran Rivalry (2015–2025)

Within the Realist framework, military intervention is understood as a central instrument of state survival, power projection, and balance of power maintenance. This dimension of external intervention is closely linked to the limitations observed in diplomatic and economic mechanisms discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3. The failure of sustained diplomatic engagement and the limited behavioural impact of sanctions contributed to a gradual escalation in reliance on military deterrence strategies. In this sense, military intervention emerges as the highest level of coercive response when softer instruments are insufficient to alter strategic behaviour.

Military interventions and strategic deterrence measures constitute the most direct and coercive form of external involvement in the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025. Unlike diplomatic engagement and economic sanctions, which operate through persuasion and pressure, military intervention reflects the hard power dimension of international politics, where actors rely on force, capability demonstration, and strategic deterrence to influence behaviour.

Between 2015 and 2025, military intervention in the Israel–Iran rivalry has taken both direct and indirect forms. Direct interventions include precision strikes, targeted

attacks on military infrastructure, and defensive military operations designed to neutralize perceived threats. Indirectly, military deterrence has been maintained through forward deployment of forces, arms transfers, intelligence coordination, and strategic military partnerships between Israel and its allies. These measures are primarily aimed at preventing Iran from achieving regional military dominance and constraining its operational freedom within the Middle East security environment.

Empirical developments, particularly the 2025 escalation phase, demonstrate that military interventions played a significant role in shaping the tempo and intensity of the conflict rather than resolving it. While coordinated military responses helped to contain immediate escalation and prevent wider regional war, they did not eliminate the underlying strategic rivalry. Instead, military actions reinforced a pattern of reciprocal deterrence, where each actor continuously adjusts its capabilities in response to perceived threats from the other side (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025).

A key analytical observation is that strategic deterrence in this context operates on mutual fear logic, where both Israel and Iran engage in continuous signalling of military capability to prevent full-scale confrontation while simultaneously preparing for potential escalation. This creates a paradoxical situation in which deterrence stabilizes immediate conflict but sustains long-term hostility. As Byman (2021) notes, such environments encourage the expansion of asymmetric strategies, including proxy warfare and covert operations, rather than direct resolution of conflict.

External military intervention has contributed to the strengthening of defensive alliance structures in the region. Israel's security partnerships with Western allies have enhanced its deterrence capacity, while Iran has increasingly relied on regional proxy networks to offset conventional military disadvantages. This has transformed the rivalry into a hybrid security competition, where conventional military strength is supplemented by indirect and asymmetric capabilities; however, despite the apparent effectiveness of military deterrence in preventing full-scale war, its long-term impact remains limited. The persistence of mutual suspicion, repeated escalation cycles, and continuous military preparedness indicates that deterrence has not resolved the structural causes of the rivalry. Instead, it has institutionalized a state of managed hostility, where conflict is controlled but not eliminated.

Military interventions and strategic deterrence measures between 2015 and 2025 have played a crucial role in containing escalation and maintaining a fragile balance of power in the Israel–Iran rivalry. However, their effectiveness is primarily operational rather than transformational. While they prevent total war, they simultaneously reinforce long-term strategic competition. This outcome supports the Realist argument that in anarchic international systems, military capability and deterrence remain central to state behaviour, but they do not guarantee conflict resolution.

Proxy Engagement and Indirect Conflict Involvement in the Israel–Iran Rivalry (2015–2025)

On a broader scale, the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2015 and 2025 does not take place directly between the two states. Instead, it unfolds through a web of proxy actors and indirect engagements that allow both sides to pursue strategic objectives without entering full-scale conventional war. This pattern reflects a practical adaptation to the constraints of modern deterrence, where confrontation is costly, politically risky, and strategically destabilizing. From a Realist perspective, this reliance on proxies is not

accidental but deeply strategic. In an international system where survival and influence matter most, states often delegate violence to allied actors when direct engagement becomes too dangerous or politically expensive. In the case of Iran, this logic is visible in its long-standing support for aligned groups across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. These networks function less as independent actors and more as instruments of strategic depth, giving Iran the ability to project influence far beyond its territorial borders. (IISS, 2025)

What is particularly striking in the 2015–2025 period is that proxy engagement did not decline despite increased international pressure; instead, it became more embedded in the structure of the rivalry. As diplomatic efforts fluctuated and sanctions intensified, both Israel and Iran increasingly relied on indirect channels of confrontation. Iran's regional partners continued to serve as pressure points against Israeli security interests, while Israel responded through intelligence operations, targeted strikes, and disruption of supply and command networks linked to these groups. This has gradually reshaped the rivalry into something more complex than a traditional state-to-state conflict. Rather than a single battlefield, it now resembles a dispersed system of overlapping confrontations across multiple territories, particularly in Syria, Lebanon, and parts of Iraq. The effect of this dispersion is that escalation becomes harder to control, since actions taken in one theatre often trigger responses in another. In practical terms, this makes the conflict more unstable even when the two main actors are not directly engaged in war.

Another important observation is that proxy warfare introduces a level of ambiguity into the rivalry. When attacks occur through non-state actors, attribution becomes contested, and responsibility is often politically interpreted rather than clearly established. This ambiguity increases the risk of miscalculation because both sides tend to interpret indirect actions as extensions of state policy. Over time, this has created a pattern where retaliation is expected, even when the original action is not officially acknowledged. Efforts by external actors to reduce or manage this form of engagement have had limited success. Traditional tools such as sanctions, diplomatic negotiations, and military deterrence are designed primarily for state-based actors, not decentralized networks. As a result, proxy systems tend to survive pressure by adapting, fragmenting, or shifting operational space. The resilience of these networks explains why the rivalry has remained active despite sustained international intervention efforts (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2025).

What emerges clearly from the evidence is that proxy engagement has a dual effect. On one hand, it reduces the likelihood of direct war between Israel and Iran by creating buffers of indirect confrontation. On the other hand, it sustains a continuous cycle of tension that spreads across the region and keeps the rivalry active in multiple forms. In this sense, proxy warfare does not resolve conflict; it manages it in a way that keeps it perpetually alive but controlled. Ultimately, between 2015 and 2025, proxy engagement has become one of the most stable yet destabilizing features of the Israel–Iran rivalry. It stabilizes the system by preventing direct war, but destabilizes it by expanding the geography, duration, and complexity of conflict. This paradox captures the essence of the rivalry in the contemporary Middle East: a conflict that is no longer always direct, but is constantly present.

Multilateral and Institutional Interventions in the Israel–Iran Rivalry (2015–2025)

The multilateral and institutional interventions represent the formal attempt to regulate the Israel–Iran rivalry through rules, monitoring systems, and collective diplomatic frameworks. Unlike bilateral diplomacy or coercive instruments such as sanctions and military deterrence, these interventions rely on the assumption that shared institutions can moderate strategic behaviour even in deeply hostile relationships. In practice, however, the Israel–Iran rivalry shows the limits of this assumption. Institutions such as the United Nations system and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have remained active in monitoring developments linked to nuclear compliance, regional security concerns, and escalation risks. Yet their influence has largely remained procedurally focused on reporting, verification, and diplomatic signalling rather than enforcement or behavioural transformation.

Recent strategic assessments of Middle Eastern security dynamics highlight that institutional responses between 2015 and 2025 have been increasingly shaped by great power fragmentation within global governance structures, where consensus is difficult to sustain and implementation depends heavily on political alignment among major actors (International Crisis Group, 2025). This fragmentation reduces the capacity of multilateral institutions to act as neutral stabilizers in high-intensity rivalries. A key empirical pattern is that institutional interventions tend to become most visible during escalation periods rather than during stable phases of the conflict. In moments of crisis, international organizations issue resolutions, call for restraint, or facilitate emergency dialogue. However, once immediate tensions decline, institutional engagement tends to weaken, reflecting a broader limitation: these bodies are reactive rather than structurally preventive.

More recent analyses of global security governance also suggest that multilateral institutions are increasingly operating in a contested legitimacy environment, where their authority is challenged by competing geopolitical narratives and selective compliance by states involved in strategic rivalries (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2025). In the case of Israel and Iran, both actors engage with institutions selectively, adopting recommendations that align with their strategic interests while resisting those that constrain core security objectives. From an analytical standpoint, this pattern confirms that institutional effectiveness is conditioned by power politics. Rather than standing above the rivalry, institutions function within it. Their influence depends less on legal authority and more on the willingness of powerful states to support enforcement. Where such consensus is absent, institutional outcomes remain largely symbolic.

What is particularly significant in the 2015–2025 period is that multilateral frameworks have not prevented escalation cycles, but they have helped maintain a minimum level of structured communication. Even during heightened tensions, institutional channels have provided spaces for limited dialogue, verification mechanisms, and diplomatic signalling. This reduces complete systemic breakdown, even if it does not resolve underlying conflict dynamics.

However, this stabilizing function should not be overstated. The evidence suggests that institutional mechanisms do not alter the strategic calculations of Israel or Iran. Instead, they operate alongside other intervention forms diplomatic, economic, military, and proxy-based without fundamentally reshaping them. In this sense,

institutions are better understood as background stabilizers rather than active conflict resolvers. Between 2015 and 2025, multilateral and institutional interventions have contributed to managing the visibility of the Israel–Iran rivalry rather than transforming its structure. They provide procedural order in a system still driven by strategic competition. As recent scholarship on global governance notes, international institutions increasingly function as “constraint managers” rather than “conflict solvers” in high-intensity geopolitical rivalries (International Crisis Group, 2025; SIPRI, 2025).

4. CONCLUSION

The core finding is that the rivalry has operated through four dominant channels: proxy warfare, targeted military strikes, cyber operations, and diplomatic containment efforts. Iran’s strategy has largely relied on building and sustaining non-state alliances across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, while Israel has prioritized intelligence penetration, precision airstrikes, and disruption of Iranian entrenchment efforts in the region. Both states have consistently pursued deterrence rather than outright confrontation, but with repeated calibrated escalations.

The overall implication is that the Israel–Iran rivalry represents a model of “managed conflict” in contemporary international relations one that is unstable but deliberately contained. However, this containment is fragile. The continued expansion of proxy networks, advancements in military technology, and uncertainty in regional alliances increase the risk of miscalculation that could escalate into open war. Therefore, the study implies that long-term stability in the Middle East will depend not only on bilateral restraint between Israel and Iran but also on broader regional diplomacy and more coherent engagement from global powers to reduce tensions and manage escalation pathways. Based on the analysis, the following policy recommendations are essential in managing the Israel-Iran rivalry:

- i. External actors should institutionalize sustained multilateral diplomacy by strengthening structured dialogue among Israel, Iran, and key international stakeholders, including the United States, the European Union, Russia, China, and the United Nations. Consistent diplomatic engagement should be prioritized to reduce miscalculations, prevent escalation, and improve the effectiveness of conflict management efforts.
- ii. External actors should adopt coordinated and balanced conflict management strategies by supporting United Nations-led arms control initiatives, strengthening oversight of military and intelligence assistance, and promoting regional security cooperation. These measures should reduce the proliferation of proxy conflicts, discourage actions that intensify hostilities, and enhance collective responsibility for regional stability.
- iii. The international community should strengthen and expand the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) framework or develop a comparable multilateral agreement that addresses nuclear activities, missile development, and regional security concerns. Such a framework should combine diplomatic engagement, credible verification mechanisms, and appropriate economic incentives to promote compliance and reduce tensions between Israel and Iran.
- iv. Policymakers and international organizations should apply the lessons of the Israel-Iran rivalry to future conflict management initiatives by investing in early-

warning systems, strengthening adherence to international law, and promoting preventive diplomacy. These measures should enhance timely intervention, improve accountability for violations of international norms, and reduce the likelihood of prolonged regional conflicts.

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