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Root Causes of the Iran–United States Conflict and Its Effect on the Safety of Lives and Properties in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Middle East remains one of the most volatile regions in the international system, and the rivalry between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran continues to sit at the centre of this volatility. This paper interrogates the root causes of the Iran–United States conflict and examines the extent to which the rivalry has endangered the safety of lives and properties across the region. Anchored on the Regional Security Complex Theory, the study adopted a descriptive and historical research design, combining primary data drawn from a purposive sample of 263 respondents across four security and foreign-policy institutions in Nigeria (Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, and Nigerian Defence Headquarters) with secondary data from books, journals and official reports. Findings, presented in frequency and percentage tables, show that 59 percent of respondents attributed the conflict to identifiable root causes, and 64 percent agreed that the conflict has significantly endangered the safety of lives and properties in the region. Qualitative interview data corroborate these findings, tracing the conflict to historical interventionism, ideological antagonism, competing geopolitical ambitions, Iran's nuclear programme, United States-led economic sanctions, and Iran's sponsorship of proxy militias, and linking these dynamics to recurring proxy wars, targeted assassinations, maritime confrontations and sectarian violence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and the Persian Gulf. The paper concludes that the conflict is not a single-issue dispute but a layered rivalry whose humanitarian costs are frequently under-analysed in the literature, and recommends sustained multilateral diplomacy, arms-transfer restraint and stronger protection mechanisms for civilians in proxy theatres.

Keywords: Iran; United States; conflict; root causes; Middle East; regional security; safety of lives and properties

1 Introduction

The relationship between the United States and Iran has, for over four decades, been one of the most consequential and closely watched rivalries in the international system. What began in the mid-twentieth century as a strategic partnership, anchored on American support for Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi and Iran's role as the "policeman" of the Persian Gulf, was fundamentally reordered by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The overthrow of the Shah and the ascendance of a theocratic order under Ayatollah Khomeini transformed Iran from a dependable American ally into a self-styled centre of resistance against Western, and particularly American, influence in the region (Ochim & Hassan-Haruna, 2023).

The historical record shows that American engagement with Iran did not begin as an adversarial one. It was only in August 1941, when Iran turned to the United States as a counterweight to the Anglo-

Soviet invasion, that Washington's footprint in Tehran expanded substantially, culminating in the 1953 restoration of the Shah after a Central Intelligence Agency-backed countercoup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. That episode, though decades removed from the present, remains a recurring reference point in Iranian political discourse and continues to inform Tehran's suspicion of American intentions (Ibrahim, 2021; Tabatabai, 2020).

Since 1979, the two states have been locked in a cycle of estrangement punctuated by episodes of acute crisis: the 1979–81 hostage crisis, the tanker war of the 1980s, the September 2002 disclosure of Iran's nuclear programme, the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and its collapse after the American withdrawal in 2018, and the January 2020 killing of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (Khalaji, 2020; Fitzpatrick, 2019; Byman, 2020). Each of these episodes has reverberated well beyond the bilateral relationship, shaping the security architecture of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and the wider Gulf.

A large body of scholarship has examined this rivalry through the lens of nuclear proliferation, sanctions policy, or great-power competition (Özdemir, 2021; Bryan, 2022; Mirza, Abbas & Qaisrani, 2022). Considerably less attention, however, has been paid to systematically tracing the specific root causes that sustain the conflict and to establishing, with empirical grounding, the extent to which the rivalry has translated into direct threats to the safety of lives and properties of ordinary people across the Middle East. This paper addresses that gap by drawing on both documentary evidence and primary survey and interview data collected from practitioners with direct professional exposure to Middle Eastern affairs.

Since the 1979 revolution, relations between Washington and Tehran have been characterised by diplomatic estrangement, economic sanctions and sporadic military confrontation (Parsi, 2017; Katzman, 2020). The 2018 American withdrawal from the JCPOA and the subsequent re-imposition of sanctions, followed by the 2020 assassination of General Soleimani, further inflamed an already combustible relationship (Fitzpatrick, 2019; Byman, 2020). Much of the existing literature, however, tends to treat the conflict primarily as a nuclear or military dossier, with comparatively little systematic inquiry into its underlying causal structure or its human cost (Entessar & Afrasiabi, 2020).

Existing case studies (Barzegar, 2010; Özdemir, 2021; Nejad, 2023; Yazhou, 2023; Farooq, 2024) have each illuminated fragments of the rivalry, yet none provides an integrated account of its root causes alongside a rigorous assessment of its consequences for civilian safety. This gap matters because policy responses that misdiagnose the drivers of the conflict, or that overlook its humanitarian toll, are unlikely to produce durable de-escalation. Nigerian foreign-policy and security institutions, which routinely monitor Middle Eastern developments for their bearing on West African energy markets, religious diplomacy and peacekeeping deployments, offer a useful vantage point from which to assess these questions empirically. This paper was therefore designed to close this gap by assessing the root causes of the Iran–United States conflict and examining the extent to which it has affected the safety of lives and properties in the Middle East.

The study pursued two specific objectives: (i) to assess the root causes of the Iran–United States conflict in the Middle East; and (ii) to examine the extent to which the Iran–United States conflict has affected the safety of lives and properties in the Middle East.

These objectives were guided by two corresponding research questions: (i) What are the root causes of the Iran–United States conflict in the Middle East? and (ii) To what extent has the Iran–United States conflict affected the safety of lives and properties in the Middle East?

2 Conceptual review

2.1 Conflict

Conflict is widely conceived as a struggle between parties whose interests, values or goals diverge to the point of incompatibility (Coser, 1957; Ogundipe & Oluwole, 2014). Albert (2002) frames it as any divergence of interest, objective or priority between individuals, groups or states, ranging from mere incompatibility of positions to its violent expression. Akinibi and Akinola (1999), citing North (1968), observe that conflict emerges whenever two or more actors seek to possess the same objects, occupy the same space, or pursue incompatible goals through mutually incompatible means. For the purpose of this paper, conflict is understood as a struggle between state and non-state actors over contested strategic values, security guarantees and spheres of regional influence, which, in the absence of an effective regulating mechanism, escalates into confrontational and occasionally violent behaviour.

2.2 Security

Security denotes freedom from existential threat and the capacity of a state to protect its territorial integrity, its interests and the well-being of its population (Nwagbosa, 2012; Amakiri, 2018). Arase (2013) defines it as the absence of threats to acquired values and, subjectively, the absence of fear that such values will be attacked, noting that security requires the specification of both a threat and a referent object. Contemporary security scholarship has broadened the referent object of security beyond the state to include the individual and community, giving rise to the human-security paradigm that underlies the safety-of-lives-and-properties dimension examined in this paper (Anekwe, 2018, cited in Isah & Bitrus, 2021).

2.3 Threat

A threat refers to any indication, circumstance or entity with the potential to cause harm, damage or danger to individuals, organisations, communities or states. Threats range from physical violence to cyber-attacks and can bear on physical, economic, social and political dimensions of stability. In the context of this paper, the threats generated by the Iran–United States rivalry are understood to include proxy warfare, missile and drone strikes, maritime confrontations, sanctions-induced economic hardship, and the sponsorship of armed non-state actors, each of which carries distinct implications for the safety of lives and properties.

2.4 The Middle East

The Middle East is a geopolitical region spanning the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Turkey, Egypt, Iran and Iraq (Hanafi, 1998; MacQueen, 2013). It hosts the origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, holds the bulk of the world's proven oil and gas reserves, and has, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, remained a theatre of recurrent geopolitical rivalry. It is within this contested and resource-rich space that the Iran–United States rivalry has unfolded, drawing in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states.

3 Theoretical framework

Three theories are commonly deployed in the study of Iran–United States relations: Securitization Theory, Neo-Realism, and the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). Securitization Theory, associated with the Copenhagen School and Ole Wæver (1993), explains how state actors transform

ordinary political issues into existential security matters through a "speech act" that legitimises extraordinary countermeasures (Buzan, Wæver & de Wilde, 1998). While useful for explaining how Iran has been discursively framed as a threat in American political discourse, the theory says comparatively little about the material, regionally distributed consequences of that framing.

Neo-Realism, developed by Waltz (1979), explains state behaviour through the anarchic structure of the international system, the primacy of the state as an actor, and the pursuit of relative power under conditions of a security dilemma. Although influential, Neo-Realism's exclusively systemic, global focus makes it less suited to explaining why the Iran–United States rivalry manifests with such varying intensity across different Middle Eastern sub-regions.

This paper is accordingly anchored on the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) as a refinement of neo-realism that privileges regional, rather than purely global, patterns of security interdependence. RSCT holds that because most security threats travel more easily over short distances than over long ones, states are activated in security terms primarily by their immediate neighbours, producing regionally clustered patterns of amity and enmity.

RSCT is well suited to this study because the Iran–United States conflict, although bilateral in form, is a regionally embedded rivalry that draws its intensity from Iran's proximity to and entanglement with Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and the Gulf states, and from the United States' extensive alliance structure with Israel, Saudi Arabia and the GCC. The theory's concepts of amity and enmity help explain the polarisation of regional actors into pro-Washington and pro-Tehran blocs, while its regional lens helps to situate proxy warfare, sectarian polarisation and civilian harm as direct, rather than incidental, consequences of the bilateral rivalry.

The theory has, however, been criticised for focusing too heavily on regional dynamics at the expense of global and domestic factors, for treating security complexes as more stable than they often are, and for privileging state actors over non-state actors such as terrorist organisations and militias (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). This paper addresses these limitations by explicitly incorporating non-state proxy actors, such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iraqi Shia militias, into its empirical analysis, and by treating the Iran–United States security complex as a dynamic rather than static configuration.

4 Empirical review

4.1 Root causes of the Iran–United States conflict

Barzegar (2010) attributes the post-9/11 intensification of Iran–United States tension to a contest over the two states' respective roles in Middle Eastern politics, arguing that each side regards the other's growing regional weight as a threat to its own national interests and security. The study, which combined quantitative and qualitative methods, concludes that the complex and interdependent nature of regional security requires both Iranian cooperation and American recognition of Iran's legitimate security concerns, but stops short of isolating the specific root causes of the rivalry, a gap this paper addresses.

Özdemir (2021) traces the deterioration of relations to the collapse of diplomatic engagement following the American withdrawal from the JCPOA, noting that the shift from President Obama's diplomacy-first approach to President Trump's "maximum pressure" strategy hardened positions on both sides and pushed the relationship to the brink of war following the killing of General Soleimani. Bryan (2022) situates the conflict within the strategic geography of the Strait of Hormuz, showing

how shared maritime interests have repeatedly been overridden by confrontational politics since 1979, disrupting global oil supply and pricing.

Nejad (2023), applying the Unified Model of Crisis to the Iran–Iraq War, traces the roots of hostility to ethnic, identity, ideological, religious and territorial disputes compounded by unresolved historical grievances, while Yazhou (2023) situates the broader Middle Eastern conflict pattern within the legacy of externally imposed regional definitions and colonial-era boundary politics inherited from British "Orientalism." Farooq (2024) traces the origins of hostility to the Cold War-era alliance politics that first drew Iran and the United States together and then tore them apart after the 1979 revolution, when Ayatollah Khomeini adopted an antagonistic posture toward what he considered continued American interference.

Herison (2024) finds that the conflict is triggered by American interests in the Middle East being disrupted by Iran, producing confrontation across military doctrine, geography, socio-political order and diplomacy, with the United States adopting an offensive posture and Iran a defensive one. Okpevra (2024) situates the rivalry within the broader "security dilemma" identified by Butterfield, categorising causal explanations for international conflict into psychological, sociological and political theories, each attributing war to different factors such as human nature, state organisation, or systemic anarchy.

Across this literature, three recurring causal clusters emerge: Iran's nuclear programme and the American perception of proliferation risk; United States-led economic sanctions and Iran's resistance to them; and Iran's sponsorship of proxy forces such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, which the United States regards as destabilising to its regional allies. None of the reviewed studies, however, integrates these causal clusters into a single empirically validated account grounded in the perceptions of foreign-policy and security practitioners, which is the gap this paper addresses.

4.2 Extent to which the conflict has affected the safety of lives and properties

Aaron (2015) documents how Iran's pursuit of regional hegemony through nuclear development and support for proxy groups has repeatedly threatened the security of United States allies and, by extension, the civilian populations of Iraq and Syria. The study notes that Iran's development of missile and naval capabilities directed at Israel and Gulf states has compelled successive American administrations to modify Middle East policy while expecting greater burden-sharing from regional partners, but its focus on policy adaptation leaves the direct human costs of these dynamics comparatively under-examined.

Riccardo (2015) cautions that even after the 2015 nuclear deal, Iranian activity that foments sectarianism in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere continued to endanger civilian life, and argues that containment is no longer viable in a regional context characterised by extreme violence, ethnic and sectarian fragmentation, and the proliferation of jihadist groups. Shokri (2016) highlights how the absence of a durable United States–Iran understanding has perpetuated the conditions for Islamist terrorism across the region, proposing a "point by point" diplomatic approach as an alternative to continued confrontation.

Jose and Fathun (2021), applying Regional Security Complex Theory to the study of proxy conflict, shows that the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA, the killing of Soleimani, and the Saudi–Iran proxy war in Yemen jointly exacerbated the human toll of the rivalry, redefining traditional security thinking as both countries sought bargaining leverage. Samin (2021) and Seyed (2021) both find that

unresolved Iran–United States and Iran–Israel tensions continue to generate security crises whose effects are felt well beyond the two principal antagonists, with Seyed (2021) proposing "regional awareness" as a pathway out of the prevailing security impasse.

Ma (2023) demonstrates that the securitisation of Iran in American political discourse, from the "Axis of Evil" framing under President Bush to the "Iran Threat Network" discourse of subsequent administrations, has been used to justify sustained military posturing in the Gulf, with direct implications for regional stability and civilian safety. Taken together, this literature confirms a strong, if unevenly measured, relationship between the Iran–United States rivalry and threats to civilian life and property, but stops short of quantifying practitioner perceptions of that relationship, a gap this paper's survey data addresses.

5 Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive and historical research design, combining a sample-survey approach with documentary and historical analysis. The historical component traced the evolution of Iran–United States relations from 1979 to the present, while the descriptive component captured the perceptions of foreign-policy and security practitioners on the conflict's root causes and its human costs.

The population of the study comprised 1,264 staff members drawn from four Nigerian institutions with direct professional exposure to Middle East affairs: the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos, Political Affairs Department (367); the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja, Middle East and Gulf Affairs Department (353); the Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Abuja, Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Department (312); and the Nigerian Defence Headquarters, Abuja, Defence Intelligence Agency unit (232), as summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Distribution of the study population.

Institution (Selected Department/Unit)	Population
Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (Political Affairs Department)	367
Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja (Middle East and Gulf Affairs Department)	353
Institute for Peace and Conflict Resolution, Abuja (Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Department)	312
Nigerian Defence Headquarters, Abuja (Defence Intelligence Agency Unit)	232
Total	1,264

Source: Researcher's field survey, August 2024.

Using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for determining sample size at N = 1,264, a sample of 291 respondents was drawn through purposive and judgmental sampling, a technique considered appropriate given the technical nature of the subject matter and the need for respondents with adequate working knowledge of Middle Eastern affairs. Two hundred and sixty-three (263) questionnaires, representing 90 percent of those distributed, were successfully retrieved and used for analysis, while twenty-eight (28), or 10 percent, were unreturned. This was supplemented with in-depth interviews involving twelve officials drawn from the four institutions.

Primary data were collected using a structured five-point Likert-scale questionnaire, on which respondents indicated Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree or Undecided, and semi-

structured interviews. Secondary data were sourced from books, peer-reviewed journal articles, official reports, newspapers and reputable online databases such as JSTOR, Wiley Online and Google Scholar. Quantitative data were analysed using simple percentages and frequency counts, while qualitative data from interviews and documentary sources were analysed thematically through content analysis. Both primary and secondary sources were combined deliberately to offset the limitations of any single data source and to strengthen the reliability and validity of the findings.

6 Findings and discussion

6.1 Profile of respondents

Of the 263 respondents, 171 (65 percent) were male and 92 (35 percent) were female. In terms of age, 121 respondents (46 percent) were aged 41 and above, 75 (28 percent) were aged 31–40, and 67 (25 percent) were aged 21–30, indicating a predominantly mature and experienced respondent pool. On educational qualification, 98 respondents (37 percent) held a B.Sc./B.A./HND, 82 (31 percent) held an OND/NCE, 58 (22 percent) held WAEC/NECO certificates, and 25 (10 percent) held a post-graduate qualification (M.Sc./M.A./MBA/PhD). On work experience, 86 respondents (33 percent) had served for more than fifteen years, 75 (28 percent) had served for 11–15 years, 68 (26 percent) for 6–10 years, and 34 (13 percent) for 1–5 years. This profile suggests that the data reflect the views of a substantially experienced and professionally qualified cross-section of Nigeria's foreign-policy and security community.

6.2 Root causes of the Iran–United States conflict

Table 2 presents the distribution of responses on the proposition that identifiable root causes underlie the Iran–United States conflict in the Middle East.

Table 2. Responses on the root causes of the Iran–United States conflict in the Middle East.

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	63	24.0
Agree	92	35.0
Disagree	47	17.9
Strongly disagree	36	13.7
Undecided	25	9.5
Total	263	100.0

Source: Field survey data, April 2025.

As Table 2 shows, 35 percent (92 respondents) agreed and 24 percent (63 respondents) strongly agreed that identifiable root causes underlie the conflict, a combined 59 percent endorsement. In contrast, 18 percent (47 respondents) disagreed and 14 percent (36 respondents) strongly disagreed, while 10 percent (25 respondents) remained undecided. This pattern indicates that a clear majority of practitioners consider the conflict to be causally rooted rather than incidental or accidental.

Interview accounts corroborated this finding. An official of the Nigerian Defence Headquarters, interviewed in March 2025, traced the conflict to a layered set of causes: Iran's historically grounded distrust of foreign interference dating back to repeated external interventions since antiquity; the

deposition of the Shah in 1979 and Iran's subsequent pursuit of regional influence through Shia proxy networks; and the reciprocal build-up of American military assets in the Gulf, including forward-deployed troops, naval assets and advanced aircraft, intended to counter Iranian asymmetric capabilities. A second respondent, an official of the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, added that Iran's distinct ethnic and sectarian identity as the region's principal Shia power, its absence of formal diplomatic relations with Washington, and its cultivation of an "Axis of Resistance" comprising Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, together explain why the rivalry has proved so durable and so resistant to conventional diplomacy.

These findings align closely with Barzegar (2010) and Özdemir (2021), both of whom identify competing regional ambitions and the collapse of diplomatic mechanisms as central drivers of the rivalry, and extend the literature by showing that practitioners themselves rank ideological, historical and geopolitical causes above any single-issue explanation such as the nuclear file alone. The finding also lends empirical support to the study's first research proposition, that the root causes of the conflict include Iran's nuclear programme, United States sanctions, and Iran's support for regional proxy forces.

6.3 Effect of the conflict on the safety of lives and properties

Table 3 presents the distribution of responses on the extent to which the Iran–United States conflict has affected the safety of lives and properties in the Middle East.

Table 3. Responses on the extent of the Iran–United States conflict's effect on the safety of lives and properties in the Middle East.

Response option	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	75	28.5
Agree	93	35.4
Disagree	42	16.0
Strongly disagree	28	10.6
Undecided	25	9.5
Total	263	100.0

Source: Field survey data, April 2025.

As Table 3 shows, 35 percent (93 respondents) agreed and 29 percent (75 respondents) strongly agreed that the conflict has significantly affected the safety of lives and properties, a combined 64 percent endorsement, the strongest agreement of the two propositions examined in this paper. Sixteen percent (42 respondents) disagreed, 11 percent (28 respondents) strongly disagreed, and 10 percent (25 respondents) were undecided.

This finding is consistent with Aaron (2015) and Jose and Fathun (2021), both of whom document how Iranian support for proxy militias and American military posturing have jointly fuelled violence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. A respondent from the Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs observed during interview that the seizure of the United States embassy in 1979, the eight-year Iran–Iraq war, the 1988 downing of an Iranian civilian airliner, and the more recent proxy confrontations in the Gulf collectively illustrate how bilateral hostility routinely translates into civilian and military casualties, displacement and the destruction of infrastructure. The respondent further noted that the

historically strained Iran–Israel relationship, in which Iran has supported Hezbollah's missile and rocket capabilities against Israel while Israeli officials have repeatedly characterised Iran as an existential threat, has become a recurring flashpoint with direct consequences for civilian safety in Lebanon and northern Israel.

The finding also resonates with Ma (2023), who shows that the discursive securitisation of Iran by American political elites has been used to justify military postures whose operational consequences are borne disproportionately by civilian populations in proxy theatres rather than by the principal antagonists themselves. Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative evidence lend strong empirical support to the study's second proposition, that the conflict has significantly increased threats to the safety of lives in the Middle East through proxy wars, military confrontations and targeted attacks.

7 Conclusion

This paper set out to assess the root causes of the Iran–United States conflict and to examine the extent to which the rivalry has affected the safety of lives and properties in the Middle East. The evidence, drawn from both documentary sources and primary data, shows that the conflict is not attributable to a single grievance but to an accumulation of historical interventionism, ideological antagonism, competing geopolitical ambitions, nuclear anxieties, economic sanctions and proxy warfare. These causes are mutually reinforcing rather than discrete, which helps explain the conflict's remarkable durability across successive American and Iranian administrations.

The study further concludes that the rivalry has measurable, and at times severe, consequences for civilian safety across Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon and the Gulf, consequences that are frequently obscured when the conflict is analysed narrowly through a nuclear or military lens. With 59 percent of surveyed practitioners affirming the conflict's identifiable root causes and 64 percent affirming its significant effect on civilian safety, the study provides empirical confirmation of relationships that the existing literature has largely treated as self-evident rather than tested. A regionally grounded, RSCT-informed understanding of the rivalry, one that foregrounds its causal structure and its human costs, is therefore indispensable to designing policy responses capable of reducing both the frequency of escalation and its humanitarian toll.

8 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Both Washington and Tehran should institutionalise a standing diplomatic channel, insulated as far as possible from domestic electoral cycles, to prevent single-issue escalations such as the JCPOA withdrawal from cascading into broader confrontation.
2. Regional and global powers should establish a dedicated civilian-protection mechanism for proxy theatres such as Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, with independent monitoring of attacks that endanger non-combatants.
3. Arms-transfer restraint should be pursued by major suppliers to the region, given the demonstrated link between the Iran–United States rivalry and the militarisation of Gulf security relationships.

4. Policy analysts and international organisations should move beyond nuclear-centric framings of the conflict and adopt integrated causal analyses that capture its ideological, historical and proxy dimensions, as these shape the conflict's human costs as much as its strategic ones.

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