

Nuclear Ambitions and National Security: Iran–Israel Standoff in the Post-JCPOA Era

Ajay Kumar

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science
St. Xavier's College, Simdega Ranchi University, Ranchi

Abstract: *The collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has significantly reshaped the security dynamics of the Middle East, intensifying tensions between Iran and Israel. While Iran maintains that its nuclear program serves peaceful and civilian purposes, Israel perceives Tehran's expanding nuclear capabilities as an existential threat to its national security. Following the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, diplomatic efforts to restore the agreement have repeatedly stalled, leading Iran to accelerate uranium enrichment beyond the limits established by the accord. This development has heightened concerns regarding nuclear proliferation, regional instability, and the possibility of direct military confrontation. The Iran–Israel rivalry extends beyond nuclear issues and encompasses ideological differences, proxy conflicts, cyber warfare, intelligence operations, and geopolitical competition across the Middle East. This article examines the evolving security dilemma between the two states in the post-JCPOA era by analyzing the strategic motivations behind Iran's nuclear ambitions, Israel's security doctrine, and the influence of major international actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and the International Atomic Energy Agency. The study argues that the absence of sustained diplomatic engagement has intensified mistrust and increased regional insecurity. It concludes that renewed diplomacy, multilateral cooperation, and strengthened non-proliferation mechanisms remain essential to preventing further escalation and ensuring long-term regional stability.*

Keywords: Iran, Israel, JCPOA, Nuclear Security, Middle East, National Security, Nuclear Proliferation

I. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East has long been characterized by geopolitical rivalries, ideological conflicts, and persistent security challenges. Among these, the strategic competition between Iran and Israel remains one of the most significant threats to regional peace. The rivalry is rooted in ideological differences following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which transformed Iran from an ally of Israel into one of its most vocal opponents. Since then, both countries have viewed each other through the lens of national security, often interpreting the other's actions as direct threats to their survival. The Iranian nuclear program has emerged as the central issue shaping this rivalry. Iran argues that its nuclear activities are conducted for peaceful purposes such as electricity generation, scientific research, and medical applications, consistent with its rights under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). However, Israel believes that Iran's enrichment capabilities could eventually enable it to develop nuclear weapons, thereby altering the strategic balance of power in the Middle East.

The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 represented a major diplomatic achievement. Negotiated between Iran and the P5+1 countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, and China—the agreement imposed strict limitations on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. The agreement was widely regarded as an effective mechanism for delaying Iran's potential pathway toward nuclear weapons while creating opportunities for diplomatic engagement. Nevertheless, the United States' withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 fundamentally altered the regional security environment. The reimposition of economic sanctions prompted Iran to gradually reduce its compliance with the agreement, increasing uranium enrichment levels and



expanding its nuclear activities. Consequently, mutual distrust deepened, diplomatic negotiations weakened, and military tensions intensified.

Simultaneously, Israel adopted increasingly assertive strategies to counter Iran's growing influence. These measures included intelligence operations, cyberattacks, targeted assassinations of nuclear scientists, and military strikes against Iranian-linked facilities in Syria. Iran, in turn, strengthened its regional alliances with non-state actors such as Hezbollah and other proxy organizations, contributing to a complex security environment that extends beyond conventional military confrontation. This article explores the Iran–Israel standoff in the post-JCPOA era through the perspectives of nuclear deterrence, national security, regional geopolitics, and international diplomacy. It seeks to evaluate how the collapse of the nuclear agreement has transformed security calculations for both countries and examines the broader implications for Middle Eastern stability.

II. MAIN THRUST

The JCPOA and the Changing Security Environment

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action represented one of the most ambitious nuclear non-proliferation agreements in recent history. Under the agreement, Iran accepted significant restrictions on uranium enrichment, reduced its stockpile of enriched uranium, redesigned the Arak heavy-water reactor, and permitted extensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In

return, international economic sanctions imposed on Iran were gradually lifted, enabling greater economic integration with the global economy. Initially, the agreement succeeded in reducing international concerns regarding Iran's nuclear program. The IAEA repeatedly confirmed Iran's compliance during the early years of implementation. The JCPOA demonstrated that diplomatic engagement could effectively address complex security challenges without resorting to military confrontation. However, the withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in May 2018 marked a turning point. Washington argued that the agreement failed to address Iran's ballistic missile program and regional military activities. Following the withdrawal, the United States adopted a "maximum pressure" strategy involving comprehensive economic sanctions intended to compel Iran to negotiate a broader agreement. Rather than limiting Iran's nuclear ambitions, these measures contributed to increased tensions. Iran gradually exceeded the enrichment limits established by the JCPOA, installed advanced centrifuges, and reduced cooperation with international inspectors. Consequently, the agreement effectively ceased functioning as a reliable framework for nuclear restraint. The collapse of the JCPOA illustrates the fragility of international arms control agreements when political commitments change. It also demonstrates how diplomatic failures can generate security dilemmas, where defensive actions undertaken by one state are interpreted as offensive threats by another.

Iran's Nuclear Ambitions and Strategic Motivations

Iran consistently maintains that its nuclear program is intended exclusively for peaceful purposes. Iranian leaders argue that nuclear technology is essential for energy diversification, medical research, agricultural development, and scientific advancement. As a sovereign state and signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran asserts that it possesses the legal right to enrich uranium for civilian purposes under international law. Nevertheless, several factors contribute to persistent international suspicion regarding Iran's long-term intentions. The expansion of uranium enrichment capabilities, the installation of advanced centrifuges, and limitations on IAEA monitoring have increased concerns among Western governments and regional rivals. From Iran's perspective, the pursuit of advanced nuclear technology is closely linked to national security. Surrounded by American military bases, regional conflicts, and hostile neighboring states, Iran perceives strategic vulnerability. The experiences of Iraq and Libya—both of which abandoned or lacked credible deterrence capabilities before experiencing foreign military intervention—have reinforced the belief among Iranian policymakers that technological and military strength serve as essential deterrents against external threats.



Economic sanctions have further influenced Iran's strategic calculations. Although sanctions have imposed severe economic hardship, they have also strengthened nationalist narratives emphasizing technological self-reliance and resistance against foreign pressure. Rather than abandoning its nuclear program, Iran has increasingly portrayed scientific advancement as a symbol of national sovereignty and independence. Beyond security considerations, Iran seeks greater regional influence. By demonstrating technological capabilities and strategic resilience, Tehran aims to strengthen its bargaining position in negotiations while enhancing its leadership role among regional actors opposed to Western influence.

Israel's National Security Doctrine

Israel has consistently regarded the prevention of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East as a fundamental national security objective. Unlike many states, Israel's small geographical size and population create a perception that even a limited nuclear attack could threaten its national survival. Consequently, Israeli security doctrine emphasizes preventing hostile states from acquiring nuclear weapons before such capabilities become operational. This approach has historical precedent. Israel destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981 and conducted a similar operation against a suspected Syrian nuclear facility in 2007. These actions established what is commonly known as the "Begin Doctrine," which advocates preventive military action against emerging nuclear threats.

In the post-JCPOA period, Israel has expanded its strategy beyond conventional military operations. Intelligence agencies have allegedly conducted cyber operations targeting Iranian nuclear infrastructure, including the well-known Stuxnet cyberattack. Reports have also linked Israel to targeted operations against Iranian nuclear scientists and strategic facilities, reflecting its broader strategy of delaying Iran's nuclear progress without initiating full-scale war. Israel also views Iran's regional alliances with Hezbollah, Hamas, and various armed groups in Syria and Iraq as part of a broader strategy of encirclement. Consequently, Israeli security policy integrates conventional military preparedness, intelligence operations, missile defense systems, and diplomatic engagement with Western allies to counter Iranian influence. The Israeli government argues that allowing Iran to approach nuclear weapons capability would fundamentally alter the

regional balance of power, increase deterrence against Israeli military operations, and encourage greater aggression through Iranian proxy organizations.

Proxy Warfare and Regional Security

The Iran–Israel rivalry extends far beyond the nuclear issue and increasingly manifests through proxy conflicts across the Middle East. Rather than engaging in direct military confrontation, both states rely on strategic alliances, intelligence operations, and regional partners to advance their national security objectives. This indirect form of conflict has intensified since the weakening of the JCPOA, making the region more volatile. Iran has cultivated relationships with armed groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and several militia organizations in Iraq and Syria. Tehran considers these groups part of its "Axis of Resistance," designed to deter Israeli and American military pressure while extending Iranian influence throughout the region. These alliances enable Iran to project power beyond its borders without engaging in conventional warfare.

Israel perceives these organizations as immediate security threats. Hezbollah's growing missile capabilities and Iran's military presence in Syria have prompted repeated Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian military infrastructure and weapons convoys. Israeli policymakers argue that preventing Iran from establishing permanent military positions near its borders is essential for national defense.

Consequently, Syria has become one of the principal arenas of the Iran–Israel confrontation. Cyber warfare has also emerged as an important dimension of this rivalry. Both countries possess advanced cyber capabilities and have reportedly conducted cyber operations against each other's critical infrastructure, financial systems, and government institutions. These operations illustrate how modern security competition increasingly extends into cyberspace, where



states seek strategic advantages without initiating full-scale military conflict. The continued use of proxy forces and cyber operations has complicated regional diplomacy. While these strategies allow both countries to avoid direct war, they also create persistent instability and increase the possibility of unintended escalation.

Role of Major Powers and International Organizations

The post-JCPOA security environment cannot be understood without considering the role of major international actors. The United States has remained Israel's closest strategic partner, providing military assistance, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic support. Following its withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, the United States adopted a policy of "maximum pressure," imposing extensive economic sanctions intended to weaken Iran economically and politically. However, many analysts argue that the sanctions failed to achieve their primary objective. Instead of abandoning its nuclear program, Iran accelerated uranium enrichment and reduced compliance with international monitoring. This outcome suggests that economic coercion alone may be insufficient to alter a state's strategic calculations when national security concerns dominate policy decisions.

Russia and China have adopted different approaches. Both countries supported the original JCPOA and have emphasized diplomatic negotiations rather than military confrontation. Russia has cooperated with Iran on energy and regional security issues, particularly in Syria, while China has expanded economic relations through long-term investment agreements. Their continued engagement has reduced Iran's diplomatic isolation and provided alternatives to Western pressure. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) remains the principal international institution responsible for monitoring Iran's nuclear activities.

Through inspections, technical verification, and regular reporting, the IAEA contributes significantly to transparency and nuclear non-proliferation.

Nevertheless, disagreements over access to nuclear facilities and reduced Iranian cooperation have complicated the Agency's monitoring efforts in recent years. The United Nations has consistently encouraged diplomatic solutions and peaceful dispute resolution. However, divisions among major powers within the Security Council have often limited the organization's ability to develop a unified approach toward the Iran–Israel conflict.

International Law and Nuclear Non-Proliferation

International law provides the legal framework governing nuclear activities through the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). Iran is a signatory to the treaty and therefore possesses the legal right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology under international safeguards. At the same time, it is obligated not to develop nuclear weapons and to cooperate with IAEA inspections. Israel occupies a unique position because it has neither signed the NPT nor officially acknowledged possessing nuclear weapons. This situation has generated debate regarding the consistency of global non-proliferation policies. Iranian officials frequently argue that international pressure disproportionately targets Iran while overlooking Israel's undeclared nuclear capabilities. From Israel's perspective, its policy of nuclear ambiguity has contributed to regional deterrence without encouraging open nuclear competition. Israeli leaders contend that their country's security environment differs fundamentally from that of other states because of repeated military threats since its establishment. These differing interpretations illustrate one of the central challenges facing international non-proliferation efforts. Legal obligations alone cannot eliminate security dilemmas when states perceive existential threats. Sustainable non-proliferation therefore requires not only legal agreements but also confidence-building measures, regional dialogue, and mutual security assurances.

Future Prospects and Policy Recommendations

The future of the Iran–Israel relationship will depend largely on whether diplomacy can regain credibility after the collapse of the JCPOA. Continued escalation risks triggering a broader regional conflict involving multiple state and non-state actors. Such a conflict would threaten global energy markets, international trade, and civilian populations throughout the Middle East.



A renewed nuclear agreement should incorporate stronger verification mechanisms while addressing broader regional security concerns. Future negotiations may also include discussions on ballistic missile development, regional proxy activities, and confidence-building measures among Middle Eastern states. Such an approach would acknowledge that nuclear issues cannot be separated entirely from wider geopolitical competition. Regional dialogue involving Gulf countries, Iran, Israel, and major international powers could reduce misunderstanding and improve crisis management. Although political obstacles remain substantial, sustained communication can lower the risk of accidental escalation. The international community should continue supporting the IAEA by ensuring adequate resources for inspections and technical verification. Strengthening international monitoring enhances transparency and reduces uncertainty regarding nuclear activities. Finally, confidence-building measures—including humanitarian cooperation, academic exchanges, and regional economic initiatives—could gradually reduce hostility.

While such measures may not immediately resolve strategic disputes, they contribute to creating conditions more favorable for long-term diplomatic engagement.

III. CONCLUSION

The post-JCPOA era has fundamentally transformed the security landscape of the Middle East. The weakening of the nuclear agreement has intensified mistrust between Iran and Israel, increased concerns regarding nuclear proliferation, and expanded regional competition through proxy warfare, cyber operations, and military deterrence. Both countries justify their policies on the basis of national security, yet their actions frequently reinforce each other's perceptions of threat, creating a persistent security dilemma. Iran views its nuclear program as an expression of sovereign rights, technological advancement, and strategic deterrence. Israel, by contrast, considers any significant expansion of Iran's nuclear capabilities an unacceptable threat to its national survival. These contrasting perspectives have complicated diplomatic efforts and increased the possibility of military confrontation. The involvement of global powers, including the United States, Russia, China, and international organizations such as the IAEA, demonstrates that the conflict extends beyond bilateral relations. It represents a broader challenge to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and the effectiveness of multilateral diplomacy. Ultimately, military solutions alone are unlikely to provide lasting security. Sustainable peace requires renewed diplomatic engagement, credible verification mechanisms, regional confidence-building measures, and respect for international law. Reviving constructive dialogue remains the most effective means of reducing tensions and preventing further escalation. Although achieving comprehensive peace will be difficult, continued diplomacy offers the strongest foundation for preserving regional stability and strengthening the global nuclear non-proliferation framework.

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