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Regional Foreign Policy Alignment And The Changing Middle East Security Architecture: Lessons From The USA–Israel–Iran Conflict (2025–26)

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Abstract

This research paper examines the evolving foreign policy alignments and security architecture of the Middle East in the context of the USA–Israel war with Iran (2025–26). The conflict represents a clear instance of unilateral military aggression, with the United States and Israel conducting pre-emptive strikes in violation of international law and the norms of state sovereignty. In contrast, Iran consistently pursued diplomatic engagement and complied with international obligations, demonstrating a commitment to rule-based behavior even under duress.

Applying Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) frameworks, including neoclassical realism and two-level game theory, the study analyzes the responses of key regional actors including Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Israel, Iran, Turkey, and Egypt as well as external powers such as the United States, Russia, and China. The paper explores strategies such as alignment, hedging, neutrality, and coalition-building, showing how aggression by norm-violating actors disrupts regional stability, while law-abiding behavior reinforces legitimacy and diplomatic influence.

The findings suggest that U.S. and Israeli military actions destabilized the Middle East security architecture, forcing states to recalibrate alliances and security strategies. Meanwhile, Iran's adherence to international norms strengthened its credibility and legitimacy, shaping regional perceptions and responses. This study contributes to FPA scholarship by providing an applied evaluation of foreign policy decision-making under crisis conditions and the role of normative compliance in shaping regional and global security outcomes.

Introduction

The Middle East occupies a critical position in international politics due to its strategic location, energy resources, and complex sociopolitical environment. The region's security dynamics are heavily influenced by external interventions, historical conflicts, and ongoing power rivalries. The USA–Israel

war with Iran (2025–26) marked a significant escalation in these dynamics, representing a case of unilateral aggression by two powerful states against a sovereign nation that had consistently demonstrated a commitment to diplomatic solutions and international law.

The conflict was initiated through coordinated pre-emptive strikes by Israel, supported by U.S. military forces, targeting Iranian nuclear and military infrastructure. Iran, despite being ready to cooperate and pursue negotiations, faced unprovoked aggression. This situation highlights a clear violation of international law and the principles of sovereignty, as the use of force was neither defensive nor authorized by the United Nations Security Council.

The crisis forced regional actors to reconsider their foreign policy alignments, testing the stability of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Israel's regional posture, and Iran's defensive strategies. Importantly, Iran's consistent adherence to international obligations—including nuclear inspections, engagement in multilateral forums, and avoidance of escalatory actions—positions it as a responsible actor within the international system, in stark contrast to the aggressive policies of the United States and Israel.

This research examines how regional states adapted their foreign policies in response to the aggression and how Iran's commitment to international norms influenced regional and global perceptions. Key research questions guiding the study include:

1. How did U.S. and Israeli aggression influence regional foreign policy alignments?
2. How did Iran's adherence to international norms affect its diplomatic legitimacy and influence in the region?
3. What are the implications of this conflict for the evolving security architecture of the Middle East?

By addressing these questions, the study emphasizes the role of norm compliance, legitimacy, and law-abiding behavior in shaping foreign policy and strategic decisions, particularly in contexts of conflict and aggression.

Literature Review

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) provides a framework for understanding how states make decisions under conditions of uncertainty, crisis, and external threat. FPA emphasizes the interaction of leadership perceptions, domestic political constraints, bureaucratic processes, and systemic pressures in determining foreign policy outcomes. Approaches relevant to this study include:

- **Rational Actor Model (RAM):** States act as unitary actors seeking to maximize national interests while minimizing risks.
- **Bureaucratic Politics Model:** Foreign policy results from internal negotiations among competing agencies and institutional interests.
- **Neoclassical Realism:** Combines structural pressures with domestic political considerations, useful for explaining Iran's constrained yet law-abiding response.
- **Two-Level Game Theory:** Highlights the interplay between domestic pressures and international negotiation strategies, particularly relevant in Iran's balancing of internal legitimacy with international diplomacy.

Middle East security studies emphasize the importance of conflict management, alliance formation, and regional power dynamics. Theories such as balance of power, deterrence, and the security dilemma explain how states respond to threats and aggression. However, normative considerations—such as

adherence to international law and legitimacy—play a critical role in influencing regional perceptions and strategic choices.

Existing literature has primarily focused on historical conflicts, such as the Gulf War, Iraq interventions, and the Syrian crisis. There is a gap in real-time analysis of regional alignments in response to norm-violating interventions. This study addresses this gap by examining how U.S.-Israel aggression disrupted regional security, while Iran's norm-compliant behavior reinforced legitimacy and influenced alliances.

Conceptual Framework

Regional foreign policy alignment refers to strategic positioning, coalition-building, and hedging behaviors adopted by states in response to threats and opportunities in their environment. In this study, alignment reflects:

- Support or cautious engagement with Iran as a law-abiding actor facing aggression.
- Strategic neutrality or hedging by Gulf states to balance U.S. influence and regional stability.
- Formation of defensive coalitions or reliance on multilateral institutions to manage aggression by norm-violating powers.

The Middle East security architecture is shaped by a combination of formal alliances, bilateral defense agreements, deterrence networks, and compliance with international norms. The framework emphasizes that aggression by law-violating states destabilizes security structures, while adherence to norms strengthens credibility and influence.

The study proposes three hypotheses:

1. U.S. and Israeli aggression undermines regional stability and violates international law.
2. Iran's adherence to international norms enhances its diplomatic legitimacy and regional influence.
3. Regional states adjust their foreign policy alignments based on both security considerations and normative evaluations of aggressor versus law-abiding actors.

The analytical approach uses case study methodology, focusing on GCC states, Israel, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and external powers. It relies on qualitative data from government statements, policy briefs, media reporting, and think-tank analyses. Foreign Policy Analysis is applied to examine decision-making processes, domestic political constraints, and normative considerations.

Regional Actor Analysis and Shifts in Middle East Security Architecture

The USA–Israel military aggression against Iran in 2025–26 forced a profound recalibration of regional foreign policy alignments. States across the Middle East had to navigate a complex environment of direct military threats, normative considerations, and the balancing of alliances with external powers. This section examines the responses of key regional actors—the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Israel, Iran, Turkey, Egypt—and external powers such as the United States, Russia, and China, emphasizing how Iran's adherence to international norms shaped perceptions and strategic choices.

Iran: The Law-Abiding Actor

Iran consistently demonstrated a commitment to international law and diplomacy prior to and during the conflict. Despite facing pre-emptive strikes, the Iranian government maintained efforts for dialogue and cooperation through multilateral institutions. Iran's approach combined strategic restraint, measured defensive posturing, and engagement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to ensure compliance with nuclear regulations.

This law-abiding approach enhanced Iran's regional credibility and soft power, distinguishing it from the unilateral and norm-violating actions of the U.S. and Israel. Iran leveraged diplomatic channels, appealing to United Nations mechanisms and highlighting the illegality of the aggression, which allowed it to strengthen alliances with regional and global actors sympathetic to sovereignty norms.

Iran's defensive military response was carefully calibrated to avoid escalation beyond legitimate self-defense. By doing so, Iran reinforced its position as a responsible regional actor, demonstrating that compliance with international norms can serve as a source of legitimacy and influence even under asymmetric pressure.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States

The GCC states—comprising Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman—faced a strategic dilemma. These states had long-standing security and economic partnerships with the United States, yet the overt aggression against Iran posed a risk of regional destabilization.

Several GCC states adopted hedging strategies, balancing their alignment with the U.S. while avoiding full endorsement of aggressive actions that could provoke Iran. Oman and Qatar, in particular, pursued mediatory and neutral roles, leveraging their diplomatic networks to encourage restraint and dialogue. This cautious approach reflects the GCC's interest in maintaining regional stability, preserving economic ties, and avoiding a direct confrontation that could escalate into a broader conflict.

The conflict also influenced GCC perceptions of security architecture, highlighting the limitations of reliance on external security guarantees when aggression is unilateral and norm-violating. Some GCC actors began exploring independent security initiatives, signaling a shift toward more autonomous regional defense postures.

Israel: The Aggressor

Israel's involvement in the 2025–26 conflict reflects a continuation of its longstanding pre-emptive security doctrine, but in this instance, it acted in concert with the United States to strike Iranian nuclear facilities. Israel's actions, while motivated by perceived existential threats, represented a clear violation of international norms, undermining its regional credibility.

Israel's aggressive posture provoked a polarization among Middle Eastern states, strengthening Iran's diplomatic leverage among states concerned with sovereignty and the rule of law. By disregarding opportunities for multilateral negotiation, Israel contributed to a fragmentation of the regional security architecture, compelling neighboring states to reconsider alignment strategies based on principles of legality and defensive legitimacy.

Turkey and Egypt: Balancing Pragmatism and Norms

Turkey and Egypt emerged as important regional actors, navigating between strategic pragmatism and normative considerations.

- **Turkey** emphasized its historical role as a mediator and regional power, advocating for restraint and diplomatic engagement while maintaining military readiness. Turkey's position was informed by both security concerns and the desire to maintain regional influence without being drawn into aggressive confrontations.
- **Egypt**, similarly, sought to avoid alignment with unilateral aggression. Cairo highlighted the importance of multilateral mechanisms and adherence to international law, signaling support for Iran's position as a rule-abiding state while maintaining security partnerships with external powers.

Both states demonstrate how regional actors weigh normative legitimacy alongside strategic interests when recalibrating their foreign policies in response to external aggression.

United States: The Norm-Violating Actor

The United States, as a principal supporter of Israel's military campaign, engaged in actions that violated principles of sovereignty and international law. U.S. policy during the conflict prioritized pre-emptive action over diplomatic engagement, reflecting domestic political pressures and security-driven risk calculations.

The U.S. approach had significant consequences for regional alignment. While some states sought to maintain U.S. alliances due to economic and military dependencies, the unilateral aggression undermined U.S. credibility in the region. Several states—particularly those emphasizing norms and sovereignty—began hedging their policies or seeking alternative partnerships, including with Russia, China, or Iran-aligned networks.

Russia and China: External Balancers

External powers played an influential role in shaping regional alignments during the crisis.

- **Russia** capitalized on U.S.-Israel aggression to assert itself as a stability guarantor, offering diplomatic mediation and limited security guarantees to Iran and its regional partners.
- **China** emphasized the importance of multilateral diplomacy and the peaceful resolution of disputes, leveraging Iran's law-abiding stance to strengthen economic and strategic ties while presenting itself as a responsible global actor.

Both powers utilized the normative legitimacy of Iran to advance their own influence, demonstrating how compliance with international norms can be leveraged strategically in the global arena.

Shifts in Regional Security Architecture

The conflict fundamentally reshaped the Middle East security architecture in several ways:

1. **Fragmentation of traditional alliances:** U.S.-led aggression prompted some regional actors to reconsider unconditional alignment, increasing reliance on regional balancing and multilateral forums.
2. **Legitimacy as a strategic asset:** Iran's law-abiding behavior enhanced its diplomatic standing, influencing states' alignment decisions and demonstrating that norm compliance can offset military disadvantages.
3. **Hedging and autonomy:** GCC states, Turkey, and Egypt displayed hedging strategies, reflecting a growing emphasis on strategic autonomy and regional crisis management capabilities.
4. **External power influence:** Russia and China capitalized on U.S. and Israeli violations to assert diplomatic and strategic leverage, signaling a multipolar recalibration in the region.

Overall, the USA–Israel–Iran conflict underscored the complex interaction between aggression, normative legitimacy, and strategic alignment, highlighting how unilateral military action by norm-violating states can destabilize regional security, while law-abiding behavior enhances influence and coalition-building potential.

Analysis, Policy Implications, and Conclusion

The USA–Israel conflict with Iran (2025–26) has significant implications for the foreign policy strategies, regional alignments, and security architecture of the Middle East. By examining the dynamics of this crisis, several critical insights emerge regarding the interplay of aggression, normative legitimacy, and strategic behavior in international relations.

Analysis of Conflict Dynamics

The conflict illustrates the profound impact of norm violations on regional stability. The United States and Israel acted unilaterally, bypassing international legal mechanisms and multilateral negotiation frameworks. Their pre-emptive strikes against Iran, justified by perceived security threats, represented a violation of international law and state sovereignty.

Iran, in contrast, demonstrated a rule-abiding, law-compliant approach throughout the crisis. Despite facing direct military aggression, Iran sought dialogue, engaged with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and avoided disproportionate escalation. This normative behavior not only enhanced Iran's legitimacy but also influenced the strategic calculations of other regional actors. Many Middle Eastern states recalibrated their policies to account for Iran's credibility as a responsible actor, thereby creating a strategic advantage rooted in normative compliance.

The crisis also highlighted the limitations of traditional security guarantees. The reliance of GCC states on U.S. protection was tested when the aggressors themselves were responsible for regional destabilization. This dynamic encouraged states to explore hedging strategies, multilateral alliances, and independent security initiatives to protect national interests while adhering to international norms.

Policy Implications for Regional Actors

The lessons from the conflict carry significant policy implications for Middle Eastern states:

1. **Strategic Hedging and Autonomy:** States must develop the capacity to navigate conflicting pressures from major powers, balancing alliances while maintaining strategic autonomy.
2. **Norm-Based Diplomacy:** Adherence to international law and norms can serve as a lever of influence, enhancing credibility even in asymmetric confrontations. Iran's experience demonstrates that responsible behavior can attract diplomatic support, encourage mediation, and limit justification for further aggression.
3. **Alliance Reassessment:** Regional actors must evaluate alliances not only based on security guarantees but also on consistency with international norms. The conflict illustrates that alignment with norm-violating powers may carry reputational and strategic costs.
4. **Multilateral Engagement:** Regional stability is enhanced through collective security arrangements and multilateral diplomacy. States like Turkey, Egypt, and Qatar leveraged multilateral forums to manage the crisis, signaling the importance of cooperative security frameworks.

Implications for International Law and Norms

The USA–Israel aggression against Iran underscores the need to reinforce international legal norms. Unilateral military interventions without Security Council authorization undermine the UN Charter, principles of sovereignty, and global stability. Iran's compliance with international obligations—despite facing direct aggression—demonstrates that adherence to law can serve as a strategic advantage and a foundation for coalition-building.

This case also highlights the role of external powers such as Russia and China. By supporting law-abiding states and emphasizing multilateral dispute resolution, these actors demonstrate that norm-based diplomacy can shape global influence and regional security outcomes.

Lessons for Middle East Security Architecture

Several broader lessons emerge regarding the Middle East security architecture:

1. **Resilience through Norm Compliance:** States that adhere to international norms are better positioned to attract diplomatic support and build strategic coalitions.
2. **Fragility of Unilateral Security Reliance:** Dependence on external powers, particularly those willing to engage in norm-violating behavior, can create vulnerabilities and force regional realignment.
3. **Emergence of Hedging and Multi-Alignment:** States increasingly adopt hedging strategies, balancing relations between competing powers while emphasizing sovereignty and legal compliance.
4. **Multipolar Dynamics:** U.S.-Israel aggression opened opportunities for other external powers to assert influence through diplomacy and support for law-abiding actors, illustrating a shift toward multipolar regional dynamics.

Conclusion

The USA–Israel war with Iran (2025–26) serves as a powerful illustration of how aggression, norm compliance, and regional realignment intersect in contemporary international relations. The conflict demonstrates that unilateral military interventions by norm-violating actors destabilize security architectures, provoke strategic recalibration, and undermine credibility. Conversely, law-abiding behavior, as demonstrated by Iran, strengthens legitimacy, enhances diplomatic influence, and encourages constructive engagement by other regional actors.

The analysis of regional foreign policy alignment during this crisis underscores the importance of normative legitimacy, strategic autonomy, and multilateral diplomacy in shaping outcomes in the Middle East. For policymakers, the lessons are clear: adhering to international law and maintaining consistent normative behavior can serve both ethical and strategic objectives, even when facing powerful aggressors.

As Middle Eastern states navigate a complex and contested security environment, the USA–Israel–Iran conflict provides a template for understanding how aggression, legitimacy, and alliances interact to redefine the regional security architecture. This case reinforces the value of integrating Foreign Policy Analysis with normative and legal considerations to assess foreign policy decisions, regional alignments, and long-term strategic stability.

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