

IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND ITS IMPACT ON MIDDLE EASTERN REGIONAL SECURITY IN THE 2020–2024 PERIOD



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Abstract

Iran's nuclear program has become a strategic issue influencing the security architecture of the Middle East, particularly during the 2020–2024 period. Since the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, Iran's nuclear development has continued to create new tensions with regional states, particularly Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. This research aims to analyze the impact of Iran's nuclear program on regional security in the Middle East using the framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which emphasizes the interconnection among states within a conflict-prone region. The research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach, relying on literature studies from academic journals, international organizations' reports, and official documents from governments and international institutions. The findings indicate that Iran's nuclear program not only exacerbates regional instability but also encourages the formation of new alliances, such as the normalization of relations between Israel and Gulf states through the Abraham Accords. Moreover, the nuclear issue further reinforces the rivalry between the pro-Iran bloc and the pro-West bloc, which has implications for the consolidation of regional defense strategies. Therefore, Iran's nuclear program serves as a key factor in shaping the direction and prospects of Middle Eastern regional security during the 2020–2024 period.

Keywords: Iran, Nuclear Program, Regional Security, Regional Security Complex, Middle East

INTRODUCTION

The Iranian nuclear issue has long been one of the main focuses in international security discourse, particularly in the Middle East. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the country has sought to achieve technological independence, including in the field of nuclear energy, citing domestic energy needs and civilian research purposes. However, the development of Iran's nuclear program since the early 2000s has raised suspicions within the international community, especially the United States and its allies, that Iran was attempting to develop nuclear weapons. These suspicions gave rise to a series of international sanctions and lengthy negotiations, which eventually culminated in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015.

Since the early 2000s, Iran gradually advanced its uranium enrichment capabilities through the construction of nuclear facilities such as Natanz and Fordow, sparking international concerns that the program could be diverted toward military purposes. This tension culminated in prolonged negotiations resulting in the JCPOA in 2015, an agreement that limited Iran's enrichment capacity in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023; Chatham House, 2021). However, following the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and the reinstatement of sanctions, Iran progressively loosened restrictions, increased the number of centrifuges, expanded its uranium stockpile, and raised enrichment levels since 2019–2020 (Chatham House, 2021).

Between 2020 and 2024, reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) noted that Iran enriched uranium to levels of up to 20%, and since 2022, enrichment increased to around 60%, far exceeding JCPOA limits (IAEA, 2023a; IAEA, 2024). Independent technical analyses indicated that this significantly reduced Iran's "breakout time"—the estimated period required to produce weapons-grade material (Institute for Science and International Security, 2024). Although diplomatic efforts were made to revive the JCPOA, tensions persisted, while IAEA quarterly reports remained the main source of verification for Iran's nuclear developments (IAEA, 2023b; Institute for Science and International Security, 2024).

The JCPOA was initially regarded as a major step in easing tensions, as it imposed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in return for partial sanctions relief. However, the U.S. decision under President Donald Trump to withdraw from the deal in 2018, coupled with the reimposition of stringent economic sanctions, pushed Iran to gradually breach JCPOA provisions, including higher levels of uranium enrichment. This situation deepened regional security uncertainty, particularly during the 2020–2024 period.

During this period, Iran engaged in a series of military and political escalations that further undermined regional stability. In early 2020, Iran launched ballistic missile attacks on U.S. military bases in Al-Asad and Erbil in retaliation for the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, demonstrating Tehran's willingness to directly target U.S. interests in the region (USMCU, 2020). In May of the same year, a "friendly fire" incident occurred when the Iranian Navy support vessel *Konarak* was accidentally struck by a Noor missile during a military exercise in the Gulf of Oman, killing 19 personnel and injuring 15 others (BBC News, 2020). By 2024, tensions escalated further when Iran launched "Operation True Promise I," a large-scale attack using drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles against Israel in response to the assassination of a senior IRGC official and its regional allies (Institute for the Study of War, 2024).

A few months later, on October 1, 2024, Iran carried out “Operation True Promise II,” launching approximately 180 ballistic missiles, including the use of its new hypersonic missile “Fattah-2,” showcasing Iran’s technological advancements in testing Israel’s air defense systems (Reuters, 2024). In response, Israel targeted Iranian military facilities, including the Parchin and Khojir complexes linked to solid-fuel production for ballistic missiles, as confirmed by independent satellite imagery (Reuters, 2024). These events highlight that between 2020 and 2024, Iran not only enhanced its military capabilities but also expanded the scope of conflict through cross-border strikes and advanced missile technologies.

For the Middle East, the Iranian nuclear issue is not only about the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction but also about its implications for regional power configurations and balance. Israel perceives Iran’s nuclear program as an existential threat, while Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain regard Iran’s growing power as a destabilizing factor and a reinforcement of Shi’a political influence in the region. This rivalry contributed to the emergence of new security blocs, such as the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab states as a means of consolidating strength against Iran.

Signed on September 15, 2020, at the White House in Washington, D.C., the Abraham Accords represented a major turning point in Middle Eastern politics. Mediated by the United States under President Donald Trump, the agreement normalized diplomatic relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain as the first signatories (Britannica, 2020). Soon after, Sudan and Morocco also joined, although implementation in Sudan was delayed due to domestic political challenges (Britannica, 2020). The core provisions of the agreement included the establishment of official diplomatic ties, economic, tourism, technological, and security cooperation, as well as a commitment to interfaith tolerance and regional peace (Britannica, 2020). The normalization was widely seen as an effort to build a new strategic bloc aimed at stabilizing the region and counterbalancing Iran’s influence, which many Gulf Arab states perceived as a threat (Reuters, 2025).

At the same time, the involvement of external powers further complicated the regional security dynamics. The United States remained a key actor seeking to constrain Iran’s nuclear ambitions, while Russia and China leaned more toward supporting Iran both diplomatically and economically. Within the framework of the Regional Security Complex Theory, Middle Eastern security dynamics are shaped not only by intra-regional interactions but also by the penetration of external actors such as the U.S., Russia, and China.

The United States continued to play a central role through diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and negotiation initiatives aimed at limiting Iran’s nuclear ambitions—for example, recent nuclear talks mediated by Oman, which discussed uranium enrichment levels and sanctions relief (Reuters, 2025). Meanwhile, Russia and China strengthened their support for Iran: Russia expanded bilateral trade, integrated banking systems, and increased military cooperation including joint exercises; China remained one of Iran’s main trading partners, purchasing Iranian oil despite international sanctions, while engaging in limited military cooperation such as drone components, and providing diplomatic backing for Iran in international forums (Brandeis University, 2024; CNA, 2025).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the preparation of this research, a preliminary study on the topic to be examined is required. A literature review is important for the author to build the theoretical or conceptual framework that will be used to analyze this study. The following are several references employed by the author.

A journal article by Papageorgiou, Eslami, and Duarte (2023), titled “*A ‘Soft’ Balancing Ménage à Trois? China, Iran and Russia Strategic Triangle vis-à-vis US Hegemony*” (Papageorgiou et al., 2023), explains that Iran, Russia, and China have formed a strategic partnership in facing U.S. hegemony. This relationship also strengthens Iran’s position in diplomacy and security, including the nuclear issue, thereby directly impacting security dynamics in the Middle East.

Next, an article by Bazoobandi (2024) titled “*Iran’s Strategies in Response to Changes in US–China Relations*” (Bazoobandi, 2024) emphasizes that Iran leverages changes in U.S.–China relations to expand its maneuvering space in both economic and regional security aspects. This approach demonstrates how Iran employs adaptive strategies amid global rivalries.

Furthermore, a report published by RUSI in 2022, titled “*Chain Reactions: The Iranian Nuclear Programme and Gulf Security Dynamics*” (RUSI, 2022), highlights the growing concerns of Gulf states regarding Iran’s nuclear program, which is perceived as a factor that could shift the regional security balance and undermine confidence in U.S. security guarantees.

In addition, an article by Neumann (2025) titled “*Peace Through War: Western Pressure and Iran’s Turn to the East*” (Neumann, 2025) argues that Western pressure has instead reinforced Iran’s foreign policy orientation toward the Eastern bloc, thereby deepening the involvement of Russia and China in the Middle East’s security architecture.

Another relevant study is by Angelina Mariska (2024), titled “*The Impact of the Taliban Government in Afghanistan on Central Asian Regional Security in 2021*,” which highlights how the Taliban’s return to power has implications for the stability of its surrounding regions. This article stresses that the Taliban’s resurgence is not merely a domestic Afghan issue but also generates a domino effect on cross-border security in Central Asia. The findings are relevant as they illustrate how political dynamics in one country can directly influence regional security configurations, aligning with the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT).

The above studies reveal several similarities, particularly their focus on the influence of Iran’s nuclear program on regional security dynamics and the involvement of external actors such as the United States, Russia, and China. However, this research differs in terms of the period under study, the perspective on the Middle East region, and its specific research objectives. This study examines the impact of Iran’s nuclear program on Middle Eastern regional security during the 2020–2024 period, analyzed through the lens of Regional Security Complex Theory.

Therefore, studying Iran’s nuclear program during the 2020–2024 period is highly relevant in understanding the regional security dynamics of the Middle East. This issue not only reflects the traditional rivalries among states in the region but also demonstrates the interplay of domestic, regional, and global factors. Using the regional security perspective, this research seeks to explain how Iran’s nuclear program contributes to both stability and

instability in the Middle East, as well as its implications for the long-term regional security architecture.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as a Framework for Analyzing Regional Security

In this section, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) will be discussed as the main analytical framework of this research. RSCT was developed by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver within the Copenhagen School of Security Studies and rests on the assumption that security threats are essentially regional in nature, as geographically proximate states are closely interconnected in their security dynamics. Buzan (2001) defines a regional security complex as a group of states that share geographical proximity and strong security interdependence, meaning that the security of one state cannot be separated from that of others within the same region.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) later expanded this concept by introducing the processes of securitization and desecuritization. Securitization refers to the process through which an issue is framed as a security threat by political elites or security actors through speech acts, and when accepted by the public, the issue is treated as a matter of security. Conversely, desecuritization occurs when an issue is removed from the realm of security. This shows that RSCT is not only about geographical proximity, but also about how certain issues are perceived and constructed as threats by states in a given region.

A key element of RSCT is the notion of security interdependence, where the instability of one state directly affects the stability of others. Internal conflicts, regime changes, or military build-ups often trigger concerns among neighboring states due to the potential domino effects on regional stability (Grabowski, 2020). Moreover, while the focus of RSCT is on regional interactions, the influence of external great powers cannot be ignored. Global powers often intervene diplomatically, economically, or militarily, thereby reshaping the balance of power in a region. Such involvement can either contribute to stability or escalate polarization and rivalries among regional states (Qadri, 2024).

Amable (2022) further emphasizes two main variables in shaping a regional security complex: internal and external. Internal variables include geographical proximity, cultural, political, and social similarities that create a basis for security interdependence. For example, a security issue in one state often spreads rapidly to its neighbors due to shared borders and historical conflict legacies. External variables, on the other hand, include transnational issues such as terrorism, global economic crises, or the proliferation of weapons, as well as the penetration of great powers that can shift regional dynamics.

Specifically, in the case of nuclear issues, RSCT demonstrates how the development of a nuclear program by one state is not only perceived as a global threat but also generates immediate tensions among regional states (RUSI, 2022). Thus, RSCT provides an essential framework to explain how regional security interactions produce both conflict and cooperation, while simultaneously reflecting the involvement of external powers that shape the long-term structure of regional security.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs an explanatory approach with a descriptive-qualitative analysis method. The explanatory method is used to examine the causal relationships between variables, in which Iran's nuclear program serves as the independent variable that influences

regional security dynamics. At the same time, both internal and external variables, as outlined by Amable (2022), are analyzed to understand how they interact and form a broader regional security complex in the Middle East. The qualitative approach is considered most appropriate because this study does not rely on numerical measurements, but rather seeks to interpret the meanings, perceptions, and implications behind political and security developments in the region.

The scope of this research is defined within the 2020–2024 period. The selection of this timeframe is not arbitrary but grounded in significant political and security milestones. The year 2020 marked an escalation in Iran’s nuclear activities, which once again heightened concerns regarding regional security. On the other end, the Abraham Accords of 2024 represent a pivotal turning point in the Middle Eastern political-security constellation, particularly through the normalization of diplomatic relations between several Arab states and Israel. By focusing on this period, the study aims to capture the progression of security dynamics, beginning from the nuclear issue to the strategic realignments that reshaped the balance of power in the region.

Data in this research is collected primarily through documentary studies. Sources include official state reports, publications from international organizations, and official statements directly related to Iran’s nuclear program. To complement these, secondary data is gathered from academic journals, scholarly books, and online articles that discuss the Iranian nuclear issue and its implications for Middle Eastern security. These sources provide the foundation upon which the analysis is built, ensuring that the study reflects both primary evidence and scholarly interpretations.

The analysis is carried out through a descriptive-qualitative method, which focuses on interpreting and understanding rather than quantifying. Following Meleong (2018), qualitative research emphasizes the exploration of phenomena such as behavior, perception, and motivation, all of which are particularly relevant in understanding state actions in the security domain. In this study, qualitative analysis is applied to connect Iran’s nuclear activities with broader regional dynamics, while also examining how external powers, regional alliances, and shifting geopolitical patterns shape the Middle Eastern security architecture.

Through this narrative-qualitative approach, the research aims not only to present data but also to explain the complex interplay of factors influencing regional security. The method enables the researcher to trace causal linkages, highlight patterns, and provide a comprehensive account of how Iran’s nuclear program contributes both to the destabilization and to the reconfiguration of the Middle East’s security environment during the 2020–2024 period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Iran’s Nuclear Program as a Trigger for the Regional Security Complex

Since 2020, the development of Iran’s nuclear program has become one of the most crucial issues affecting security stability in the Middle East. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA, 2023) reported that Iran has increased its uranium enrichment capacity up to approximately 60 percent at facilities such as Fordow and Natanz. This figure far exceeds the 3.67 percent limit previously agreed upon under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

(JCPOA), raising international concerns that Iran is edging closer to the capability of producing nuclear weapons (Fitzpatrick, 2023).

Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this issue can be understood as a process of securitization, where the technical aspect of uranium enrichment is perceived not merely as a domestic issue for Iran but as a strategic threat to the entire region. Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Israel, responded to this development with strong political rhetoric, enhanced intelligence cooperation, and joint military exercises aimed at deterrence against Iran's potential threat (Vakil, 2022).

From the perspective of internal variables, the geographical proximity between Iran and the Gulf states makes every technical advancement in Iran's nuclear program perceived as a direct threat. Historical tensions, particularly sectarian conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites, further reinforce political polarization in the region. Proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon illustrate that the rivalry between Iran and the Gulf states extends beyond diplomatic levels into military and ideological domains (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2021). Thus, Iran's efforts to expand its nuclear capacity are increasingly understood not merely as technical measures but as part of a hegemonic strategy with implications for regional stability.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of external variables, nuclear proliferation is closely linked to global dynamics. The United States, for instance, has tightened economic sanctions on Iran since its withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, with these measures continuing throughout the 2020–2024 period (Katzman, 2022). Conversely, Russia and China have taken more flexible positions by offering diplomatic backing and economic cooperation to Iran, which complicates the regional security configuration further (Qadri, 2024). The involvement of great powers adds a new dimension to the regional security complex, as external actors directly shape the strategic calculations of Middle Eastern states.

Overall, Iran's nuclear program during 2020–2024 has functioned as a major catalyst for the formation of a regional security complex in the Middle East as described by RSCT. Technical escalation in the form of uranium enrichment up to 60 percent has not only triggered political and military tensions but also reinforced the interdependence of security among states in the region. Neighboring states perceive their national security as inseparable from Iran's actions, while external involvement broadens the conflict's dimensions. Hence, Iran's nuclear program has become one of the most significant factors in accelerating securitization and deepening security tensions in the Middle East.

Internal Variables in the Regional Security Complex

Within the framework of RSCT, internal variables play a crucial role in shaping patterns of security interdependence in the Middle East. These variables include geographical proximity, cultural, political, and social similarities, as well as historical conflict experiences. In the context of Iran's nuclear program, these internal aspects reinforce the securitization process of the nuclear issue, thereby contributing to the consolidation of a regional security complex.

Iran's geographical position bordering Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and relatively close to Israel makes it a central actor in regional security dynamics. Such geographical closeness creates a condition in which any military escalation or conflict in Iran directly affects neighboring countries. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), geographical proximity is a

primary factor in the formation of a regional security complex, as it creates a domino effect in threat perception. In Iran’s case, ballistic missile tests or uranium enrichment advancements immediately provoke responses from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel, given that potential threats could easily reach their territories (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2021).

Beyond geography, cultural and political variables also play a significant role. Sectarian polarization between Sunnis and Shiites has long been a driver of rivalry in the region. Iran, as a Shiite-majority state, is often positioned in opposition to Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia. This rivalry is institutionalized in both countries’ foreign policies. Sectarian-based solidarity shapes political and military alliances in the Middle East, thereby reinforcing security interdependence (Nasr, 2022). For instance, Iran’s support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen is perceived as Shiite political expansion, heightening Sunni states’ concerns.

The region’s long history of conflict further strengthens securitization patterns. The Iran Iraq War (1980-1988) left deep scars and collective trauma for regional states. In addition, the Arab Israeli conflict and Gulf rivalries serve as historical precedents that make states more sensitive to new threats emanating from Iran (Byman, 2021). Against this historical backdrop, Iran’s technical actions such as uranium enrichment or missile tests, are easily perceived as existential threats. RSCT highlights that historical conflicts reinforce security interdependence, as past experiences shape states’ defensive and rapid reactions to perceived threats.

Table 1.
Summary of Internal Variables

Internal Variable	Key Findings	Implications for RSCT
Geographical Proximity	Iran borders Iraq, the Persian Gulf, and is close to Israel.	Iranian threats quickly perceived; creates security domino effect.
Cultural, Political, Social Ties	Sunni–Shiite polarization and ideological alliances.	Sectarian rivalry reinforces political-military polarization.
Historical Conflict Experience	Iran–Iraq War, Arab–Israeli conflict, Gulf rivalries.	Conflict legacies accelerate securitization; strengthen security interdependence.

Source: Author (2025)

External Variables in the Regional Security Complex

In addition to internal factors, external variables significantly shape the Middle East’s regional security complex. These include transnational issues, global crises, weapons proliferation, and great power penetration. External actors often intensify or redirect regional security dynamics by introducing military, economic, or diplomatic instruments that affect stability (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

Transnational issues such as terrorism, cross-border conflicts, and arms smuggling increase the complexity of regional threats. According to Gause (2021), non-state armed groups such as Hezbollah and Shiite militias backed by Iran serve as instruments to project Iran’s influence beyond its borders. This fosters the perception that Iran’s nuclear program could have direct implications for non-state networks, further destabilizing the region.

The nexus between global energy crises and regional security is also notable. Oil price fluctuations or embargoes on Iran not only impact domestic economies but also destabilize

international markets, affecting Iran's relations with Gulf states. Colgan (2022) emphasizes that energy and security are deeply intertwined in the Middle East, making Iran's nuclear program perceived not only in military terms but also as a threat to global economic stability.

Weapons proliferation, particularly weapons of mass destruction, is another key dimension. The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI, 2022) reported that Iran's enrichment of uranium up to 60 percent raised concerns about a shortened breakout time toward nuclear weapons capability. Regional states view this proliferation as a direct threat, accelerating securitization processes.

The involvement of the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union further complicates security dynamics. The United States has imposed strict sanctions and bolstered military cooperation with Israel and Saudi Arabia, while Russia and China emphasize diplomatic and economic engagement through energy cooperation and arms trade (Katz, 2021). Such great power involvement often creates new polarizations, as their support for different sides reinforces the rivalry between pro-Western and pro-Iran blocs.

Table 2.
Summary of External Variables

External Variable	Key Findings	Implications for RSCT
Transnational Issues	Terrorism, cross-border militias, arms smuggling.	Spread instability; reinforce cross-border threat perceptions.
Global Economic Crisis	Energy embargoes, oil price fluctuations.	Destabilizes energy markets; intensifies policy polarization.
Weapons Proliferation	Uranium enrichment to 60% (IAEA, 2023).	Accelerates securitization; shortens breakout time.
Great Power Penetration	US, Russia, China, EU involvement in military, diplomacy, economy.	Deepens polarization; complicates regional dynamics.

Source: Author (2025)

Impacts on Regional Security

The interplay between internal and external variables has produced significant effects on Middle Eastern security. RSCT posits that regional security emerges from interlinked threats among states, and in Iran's case, the nuclear program has become the primary catalyst for alliance shifts, militarization, and political polarization.

First, Iran's nuclear issue spurred the formation of new alliances. The Abraham Accords (2020) are a clear example, as Arab states such as the UAE and Bahrain normalized ties with Israel in response to their shared perception of the Iranian threat (Miller, 2021).

Second, militarization has intensified. Gulf states accelerated purchases of advanced air defense systems from the US and Europe, while Israel expanded joint military exercises with its allies. This created a security dilemma, further escalating regional tensions.

Third, political polarization has deepened. Iran continues to position itself as a challenger to Western hegemony and as the protector of Shiite groups, while pro-Western blocs have become more consolidated. This polarization reinforces regional security interdependence as explained by RSCT, since the stability of one state is increasingly contingent on the responses of others

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Iran's nuclear program and its implications for the Middle East security landscape demonstrates that the region operates as a highly interdependent Regional Security Complex (RSC). The escalation of uranium enrichment to approximately 60% between 2020-2024 is not merely a technical development but a driver of securitization, in which neighboring states particularly Israel and the Gulf monarchies perceive Iran's advances as existential threats. This perception is reinforced by internal variables, such as geographical proximity, sectarian polarization between Sunni and Shia, and the historical legacy of conflicts that amplify distrust and accelerate responses to even small security shifts.

Externally, the involvement of major powers including the United States, European Union, Russia, and China adds layers of complexity by intertwining global security agendas with regional rivalries. These dynamics confirm Buzan and Wæver's (2003) proposition that regional security is shaped by a web of interrelated threats and perceptions, rather than isolated national interests. In this sense, Iran's nuclear trajectory functions as both a catalyst and a mirror of broader structural tensions in the Middle East.

In conclusion, the Iranian nuclear issue illustrates how technical capabilities can evolve into central security concerns, triggering diplomatic maneuvering, military readiness, and alliance-building across the region. The convergence of internal and external variables underscores the fragile balance of power and the persistent volatility of the Middle East security architecture. Unless diplomatic mechanisms or regional security frameworks are strengthened, the nuclear question will remain a pivotal factor sustaining the securitization process and reinforcing the Middle East as one of the most contested and unstable Regional Security Complexes in the world.

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