

The Escalation of the Iran-US Conflict and Saudi Arabia's Response: A Political Security Analysis of Middle East Stability

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the escalation of the conflict between Iran and the United States. It analyzes Saudi Arabia's strategic response within the broader framework of regional political security and stability in the Middle East. Although previous studies have discussed the Iran-Saudi rivalry and the geopolitical tensions between Iran and the United States, most analyses remain fragmented and address these issues separately within the frameworks of foreign policy or specific regional conflicts. Consequently, limited research has comprehensively examined how the escalation of the Iran-US conflict interacts with Saudi Arabia's strategic response and how this interaction influences regional security dynamics. This study employs a qualitative research design using the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant scholarly works. Data were collected from the Dimensions Database and Scopus Database, focusing on peer-reviewed publications from 2021 to 2026 that specifically discuss the escalation of the Iran-US conflict and Saudi Arabia's geopolitical strategies. The findings indicate that the Iran-US confrontation represents a multidimensional geopolitical rivalry shaping regional security structures, alliance formations, and proxy conflicts across the Middle East. In response, Saudi Arabia adopts adaptive strategies through a combination of balancing and hedging, reflected in regional security cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and domestic policy adjustments. However, the intensification of geopolitical rivalry also contributes to structural instability, political polarization, and increasing regional uncertainty, suggesting that sustainable Middle Eastern stability depends on the capacity of regional and global actors to manage strategic competition and develop inclusive collective security mechanisms.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the study of international relations, regional security dynamics are often shaped by interactions among geopolitical rivalries, strategic alliances, and proxy conflicts involving both state and non-state actors. The Middle East represents one of the most complex regional security environments within the global system, characterized by intense power competition, ideological polarization, and the involvement of major powers in various political and military confrontations. In this context, geopolitical rivalries do not merely reflect competition for military or economic capabilities but also involve struggles for political influence, ideological legitimacy, and the formation of a regional security architecture that significantly shapes regional stability (Albarasneh, 2025). These dynamics often manifest through proxy conflicts, sectarian mobilization, and the formation of strategic security coalitions that seek to maintain or rebalance power in the region.

One of the geopolitical dynamics that most significantly shapes the Middle East's security environment is the contentious relationship between Iran and the United States, which has evolved since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Relations between the two countries have fluctuated between confrontation and limited diplomatic engagement, creating a complex and often unstable pattern of interaction in regional security politics. In this context, Iran has developed a security assistance model that emphasizes the construction of regional alliance networks, support for non-state actors, and the use of asymmetric

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strategies to counterbalance the dominance of the US-led security order (Divsallar & Azizi, 2024). This strategic approach indicates that the Iran-United States conflict cannot be understood solely as a bilateral dispute, as its implications extend beyond direct interstate rivalry and influence broader regional security structures through the involvement of multiple actors and ideological narratives that reinforce geopolitical fragmentation in the Middle East.

The escalation of tensions between Iran and the United States is therefore closely connected to the wider dynamics of regional security politics, particularly through the strategic rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the longstanding confrontational relationship between Washington and Tehran. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry intensified following the Arab Spring and has been manifested through proxy conflicts and sectarian mobilization in several regional theaters such as Yemen and Syria (Albarasneh, 2025). At the same time, United States policy toward Iran has alternated between confrontation and diplomatic engagement since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, reflecting the complexity of Washington's strategic approach to managing regional security dynamics (Fawcett & Payne, 2023). In parallel, Iran's development of a security assistance model aimed at expanding regional alliances and counterbalancing the United States' influence through asymmetric strategies and ideological networks further complicates the region's strategic landscape (Divsallar & Azizi, 2024). These interconnected dynamics suggest that the escalation of the Iran-United States conflict serves as a structural driver shaping the broader geopolitical competition within the Middle East security system.

Within this regional security environment, the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia represents a central factor influencing the configuration of conflict and stability in the Middle East. This rivalry is rooted in historical, ideological, and political differences that intensified after the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution, when both states increasingly competed for regional leadership and influence (Özyakar, n.d.). The competition frequently manifests through proxy conflicts across several regional arenas, particularly in Yemen and Syria, where Iran and Saudi Arabia support opposing actors and thereby prolong the dynamics of regional instability (Ali, 2023). In addition, sectarian narratives associated with Sunni and Shia identities have reinforced political polarization and complicated diplomatic efforts to resolve regional conflicts (Gul et al., 2021). Although recent diplomatic developments indicate the possibility of improved relations, structural tensions and historical legacies of rivalry continue to present major obstacles to sustainable security and stability in the Middle East (Albarasneh, 2025).

In response to the escalation of tensions between Iran and the United States, Saudi Arabia has developed a multidimensional security strategy aimed at maintaining its geopolitical influence while countering perceived threats associated with Iranian regional activities. One manifestation of this strategy was the military intervention in Yemen through Operation Decisive Storm in 2015, which was justified by claims regarding Iranian support for the Houthis. However, several studies suggest that Iran's direct involvement in the conflict has been relatively limited (Walsh, 2023). Beyond military intervention, Saudi Arabia has also sought to strengthen regional alliances with Gulf Cooperation Council members and expand security cooperation with the United States to balance Iranian influence in the region. At the domestic level, the narrative of an Iranian threat has also been utilized by Saudi political leadership to reinforce internal legitimacy and promote national cohesion in addressing regional security challenges (Haar & Pierce, 2021). Nevertheless, some analyses indicate that an increasingly assertive security posture may indirectly strengthen Iran's strategic position, as prolonged conflict could strain Saudi Arabia's resources and deepen geopolitical fragmentation in the region (Spindel, 2023).

Although previous studies have examined the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry, the conflict between Iran and the United States, and their implications for regional security, much of the existing literature tends to analyze these dynamics separately within the frameworks of foreign policy analysis or specific regional conflicts. As a result, there remains a limited understanding of how the escalation of the Iran-United States conflict interacts with Saudi Arabia's strategic responses and how these interactions shape the broader regional security configuration in the Middle East. Addressing this limitation is academically significant because the interaction between global rivalry and regional power competition can restructure alliance patterns, influence strategic balancing behavior, and redefine the distribution of power within the Middle East security system. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining the relationship between the escalation of the Iran-United States conflict and Saudi Arabia's strategic response through a political security analysis framework that emphasizes the interaction between global geopolitical rivalry, regional competition, and regional security stability. Based on this analytical perspective, this research aims to analyze the escalation of the Iran-United States conflict and Saudi Arabia's strategic response and to assess their implications for the stability of Middle East security from a regional political security perspective.

2. METHOD

This research is a qualitative study using a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach. This method was used to identify, evaluate, and interpret all relevant research findings regarding the Iran-US Conflict Escalation and Saudi Arabia's Response: A Political Security Analysis of Middle East Stability. This approach aims to systematically collect and analyze data from various relevant sources to provide an in-depth understanding of the topic under study. The data in this study were sourced from the Dimensions database (<https://app.dimensions.ai>) and Scopus (<https://www.scopus.com>) with publication intervals spanning the last five years to ensure that the data used is current and relevant to the Iran-US Conflict Escalation and Saudi Arabia's Response: A Political Security Analysis of Middle East Stability.

The data eligibility criteria in this study were established to ensure that only relevant, high-quality literature was included in the analysis. These criteria include (1) scholarly articles published in reputable national and international journals; (2) studies specifically addressing the Iran-US Conflict Escalation and Saudi Arabia's Response: A Political Security Analysis of Middle East Stability; (3) publications published in the last five years (2021-2026); and (4) articles available in full text and in English or Indonesian.

After the relevant literature was identified and selected according to these criteria, the collected data were analyzed systematically to understand the dynamics of the Iran-United States conflict, Saudi Arabia's strategic responses, and their implications for regional stability in the Middle East. The analysis process involved identifying the main themes in the selected literature, classifying studies by their focus on geopolitical rivalry, regional security dynamics, and policy responses, and synthesizing the findings to explain patterns of interaction between the Iran-United States conflict and Saudi Arabia's strategic behavior. Furthermore, the analysis examined how these dynamics shape the configuration of regional security and stability in the Middle East by identifying recurring themes, strategic patterns, and relationships among key variables discussed in the literature. This analytical process enabled the study to systematically examine the interactions among conflict escalation, regional power competition, and security stability in the Middle East. The research procedure is shown in Figure 1.

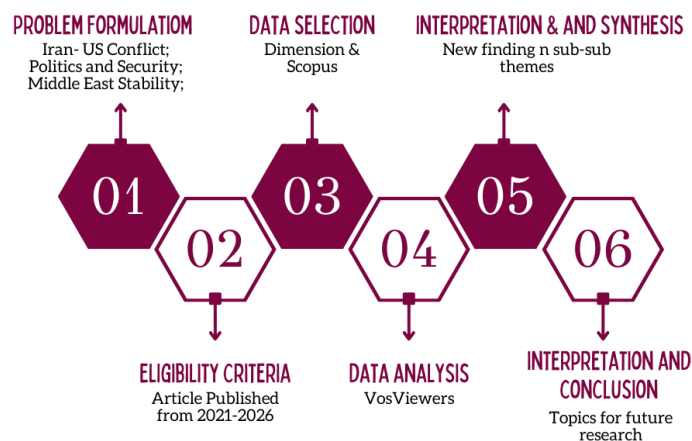


Figure 1. Research procedure

Figure 1 shows that this research was conducted in several stages: problem formulation, determination of eligibility criteria, data selection, data analysis, data interpretation and synthesis, and conclusion. The problem formulation stage is important to limit the topic discussed, namely, the Escalation of the Iran-United States Conflict and Saudi Arabia's Response: A Political Security Analysis of Middle East Stability. Eligibility criteria were determined to filter for data matching the topic with relevant keywords such as “(Iran-United States Conflict and Security Politics and Middle East Stability)” or “Iran-US Conflict and Security Politics and Middle East Stability”. Next, data were selected from the Dimensions database, and filters were applied to data published in the last five years (2021-2026). After the data selection process, the collected articles were imported into VOSviewer for data analysis and to create visualizations of relationships between keywords and research themes related to the escalation of the Iran-United States conflict and Saudi Arabia's strategic responses. The results of the VOSviewer visualization were then analyzed thematically to identify key variables, patterns of geopolitical interaction, and their implications for regional security dynamics in the Middle East. Finally, the results of the interpretation and synthesis were used to formulate conclusions regarding the relationship between the escalation of the Iran-United States conflict, Saudi Arabia's strategic response, and their implications for Middle East stability.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

1. Data Selection Results

The indexer database search returned 176,185 records, including 25,018 open-access records and the remainder closed-access records. Of these 25,018 records, 10,536 were articles, and 14,482 were books and proceedings. This leaves 4,643 records for subsequent analysis. The distribution of these records is shown in Figure 2.

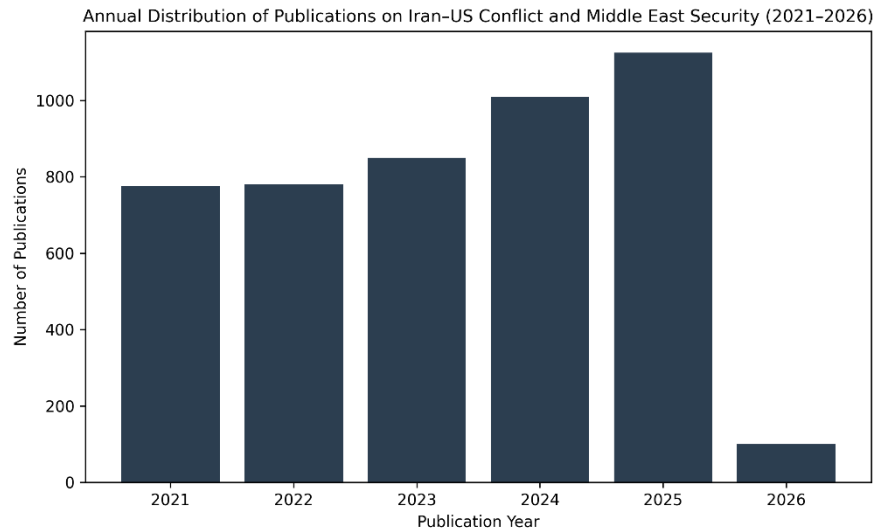


Figure 2. Distribution of the number of data over the last five years

Based on scientific publication data indexed in the Dimensions Database on the conflict between Iran and the United States and its implications for security dynamics in the Middle East region, a change in the number of publications is evident between 2021 and 2026. In 2021, the number of publications was approximately 780 articles; in 2022, it increased marginally to approximately 785, indicating relatively stable literature production during that period. In 2023, the number of publications increased to approximately 850 articles, indicating a rise in studies addressing the topic. A greater increase was observed in 2024, with the number of publications reaching approximately 1,010, indicating an expansion of academic contributions to the study of the Iran-United States conflict and regional security issues. This upward trend continued in 2025, with approximately 1,125 articles published, the highest number in the observed time period.

Meanwhile, in 2026, approximately 100 publications were recorded. This figure does not directly reflect the year's overall research output, as the data is likely preliminary and may not yet include all publications indexed by the end of the year.

From an analytical perspective, the rising number of publications between 2021 and 2025 indicates that the Iran-United States conflict has become a significant topic in international security studies. The growing number of publications suggests that the escalation of geopolitical tensions, regional proxy conflicts, and shifts in Middle Eastern security architecture have stimulated greater scholarly attention. Therefore, the publication trend illustrated in Figure 2 reflects not only the growth of academic interest but also the increasing complexity of geopolitical developments surrounding the Iran-United States rivalry and its implications for regional stability.

disease, community, intervention, and support indicate that this cluster is related to research exploring the impact of policies, social intervention programs, and environmental factors on public health.

Concepts such as individual, experience, need, and work suggest that analyses in this cluster often treat individuals and communities as the primary units of analysis to understand how health policies or social interventions affect people's quality of life. Furthermore, the occurrence of keywords such as science, measure, effect, and contribution reflects an empirical approach to assessing the effectiveness of health policies or social programs implemented by governments and community organizations.

Interestingly, there is also a connection to concepts such as energy and economic growth, suggesting that the literature in this cluster highlights the relationship among economic development, energy policy, and public wellbeing. This indicates that security dynamics in the Middle East are not only interpreted through military or geopolitical frameworks but also through broader human development perspectives.

Analytically, the existence of this cluster indicates that discussions of regional instability are increasingly linked to human security considerations, including health vulnerability, economic resilience, and community wellbeing. As a result, the literature represented in this cluster emphasizes the social consequences of conflict and development challenges that accompany geopolitical tensions in the region.

Overall, the green cluster represents a research perspective more oriented toward human development, public health, and social welfare, arising from development policies or specific structural conditions in society.

Based on the cluster division, researchers can conduct more in-depth studies of several topics, as follows.

Discussion

1. Geopolitical Dynamics of the Iran-US Conflict in the Middle East

The strategic rivalry between Iran and the United States has deep historical roots, linked to geopolitical dynamics, economic interests, and security considerations that have developed since the Iranian Revolution. The revolution marked a turning point, significantly transforming bilateral relations between the two countries, shifting from a cooperative relationship to one marked by political antagonism and strategic tension. Following the revolution, the United States severed diplomatic relations with Iran and began positioning the country as a key actor challenging its strategic interests in the Middle East. Within the framework of foreign policy, the United States then used economic and financial sanctions as instruments of pressure to limit Iran's regional influence and curb its ambitions to develop its nuclear program (Raynor, 2022). Efforts to defuse tensions emerged through the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear deal designed to curb nuclear proliferation by limiting Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for easing economic sanctions (Rees, 2023). The agreement is also inseparable from changes in the global geopolitical configuration, including the shift in US foreign policy toward Asia and the growing economic influence of China, which has led to new opportunities for economic cooperation within the international system (Valadbaygi, 2023).

Regionally, the rivalry between Iran and the United States has become increasingly complex due to Iran's involvement in various regional conflicts and its competition with other Middle Eastern countries for influence. Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen is often perceived as part of an effort to expand Iran's geopolitical influence in the region, triggering strategic responses from other countries that feel threatened by this growing influence (Walsh, 2023). Several regional actors have exploited narratives of Iranian aggressiveness to strengthen the formation of security alliances and justify certain military interventions, ultimately influencing US strategic calculations in the Middle East (Bilgin, 2022). In addition to geopolitical rivalries, the escalation of conflict in the region is also influenced by other structural dynamics, such as the emergence of unusual violent incidents that can trigger broader waves of social unrest in sensitive areas like Jerusalem (Weiss et al., 2024). Furthermore, hydro-political conflicts over water scarcity in various riparian countries in the Middle East also have the potential to trigger military tensions (Al-Muqdad, 2022). Furthermore, spatial shifts in conflict actors, such as the emergence of new dominant groups in conflict areas like Iraq and Syria, can alter patterns of violence and expand the conflict arena in the region (Idler & Tkacova, 2024).

Based on these research findings, the geopolitical dynamics of the conflict between Iran and the United States in the Middle East can be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon involving the interaction of global power rivalry, regional competition for influence, and changes in the local conflict structure. This rivalry not only reflects the strategic opposition between the two countries but also shapes the regional security architecture through alliances, proxy conflicts, and power-balancing policies pursued by various regional actors. From a political security perspective, these conditions indicate that the Iran-United States conflict has the potential to create structural instability in the Middle East, especially when non-traditional factors, such as resource struggles, social dynamics, and the transformation of conflict actors, complicate regional dynamics. Therefore, understanding the Geopolitical Dynamics of the Iran-US Conflict in the Middle East requires an analytical approach that focuses not only on bilateral relations between the two countries, but also on the systemic interactions between global interests, regional rivalries, and local security dynamics that collectively determine the region's political stability.

2. Saudi Arabia's Strategic Response to the Iran-US Conflict

The transformation of Saudi Arabia's security policy over the past few decades has marked a significant shift from a relatively cautious foreign policy to a more proactive strategy oriented toward regional security and stability. This shift in orientation was influenced by the growing perception of strategic threats in the Middle East, particularly the geopolitical rivalry with Iran, as well as by fluctuations in the United States' regional security commitments. In this context, Saudi Arabia developed a comprehensive security approach by strengthening its intelligence system, enhancing border controls, and establishing a specialized counterterrorism unit to address non-traditional security threats (Almakaty, 2025). Furthermore, the Saudi Arabian government has implemented extremism rehabilitation programs, such as Counseling and Care, which focuses on the social reintegration of former extremists through psychological support and professional skills training as part of a national deradicalization strategy. These efforts are further reinforced by economic reforms under Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the national economic structure to strengthen domestic stability and the country's capacity to maintain regional geopolitical influence (Makhliyo, 2025).

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia's security strategy is also realized through the formation and strengthening of strategic alliances to address power dynamics in the Middle East (Jackson, 2023). One important initiative is the establishment of the Islamic Military Counterterrorism Coalition, which reflects the collective efforts of Muslim countries to improve regional security coordination against the threat of transnational terrorism (Erdogan, 2022). Furthermore, efforts to normalize relations with Israel indicate a significant shift in Saudi Arabia's geopolitical orientation, increasingly emphasizing strategic cooperation to balance Iran's influence in the region (Abdullah et al., 2024). The formation of this security alliance resembles the pattern of balancing strategies observed in other regions, such as Southeast Asia, where countries like Vietnam employ flexible diplomacy, or bamboo diplomacy, to maintain balanced relations with major powers (Ponka & Nguyen, 2025). Meanwhile, Indonesia implements a smart diplomacy approach that integrates military diplomacy and soft power to strengthen defense cooperation while maintaining strategic autonomy amidst geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China (Sunadi & Achyar, 2025). From a broader geopolitical perspective, this balancing strategy serves as a hedge, allowing regional countries to maintain foreign policy flexibility without becoming entangled in great-power rivalries (Khusumawati, 2025).

Based on these research findings, it can be inferred that Saudi Arabia's strategic response to the escalating Iran-US conflict is not solely oriented toward the military dimension but also reflects a multidimensional security strategy that integrates regional alliance-building, domestic reform, and adaptive geopolitical diplomacy. In the context of the Iran-US conflict, this strategy allows Saudi Arabia to strengthen its geopolitical position as a key actor in the Middle East security architecture while mitigating the risk of uncertainty in the United States' security commitments. This approach suggests that Saudi Arabia is adopting a combination of balancing and hedging strategies to maintain national security and stability, and to preserve its regional influence amid escalating geopolitical rivalries. However, this increasingly assertive policy orientation also has the potential to deepen regional security fragmentation, making Middle East stability highly dependent on regional countries' ability to manage power dynamics and build more inclusive security cooperation mechanisms.

3. Implications of the Iran-US Escalation for Middle East Stability

Political and security stability in the Middle East region is influenced by various interacting structural factors, including local leadership patterns, geopolitical rivalries between countries, and historical legacies that shape regional political dynamics. In the context of countries with fragile government institutions, the presence of leaders oriented toward long-term stability, often referred to as "bounded rulers," can contribute to reduced levels of violence and increased local security because they tend to prioritize government continuity over short-term political gain (Harsch & Troy, 2024). However, this local stability is often distorted by regional geopolitical rivalries, particularly the strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which plays out through proxy conflicts, the mobilization of sectarian identities, and the competition for political influence in various Middle Eastern countries (Albarasneh, 2025). Furthermore, regional stability is also influenced by broader historical and structural factors, such as the legacy of colonialism in Central Asia, which shapes contemporary political configurations and complicates efforts to build sustainable peace (Lottholz & Bonacker, 2022). In North Africa, particularly the Maghreb, post-Arab Spring dynamics have also demonstrated how internal conflicts, domestic power struggles, and institutional instability exacerbate regional security challenges (Rafa & Amour, 2023).

Furthermore, regional stability is also significantly influenced by increasingly complex socio-economic and human security factors resulting from climate change, food security, and protracted armed conflict. Climate change in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean has increased societal vulnerability through increased extreme temperatures, water scarcity, and deteriorating air quality, all of which directly impact public health, particularly for vulnerable groups such as refugees and conflict-affected populations (Neira et al., 2023). This situation has been further exacerbated by disruptions to the global food supply chain following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has led to increased food insecurity in many Middle Eastern countries dependent on wheat imports from conflict-affected areas (Al-Saidi, 2023). Furthermore, although the Middle East region receives significant security support from democratic states, levels of social and economic security remain relatively low due to high levels of political securitization unmatched by inclusive governance reforms (Springborg, 2024). From a more constructive perspective, several studies also suggest that local community resilience and adaptation strategies can play a crucial role in mitigating the impact of regional instability and enhancing communities' ability to cope with multidimensional crises (Daoudy et al., 2022).

Based on the synthesis of these research findings, it can be inferred that the escalation of the conflict between Iran and the United States has broad implications for Middle East stability, as it not only affects the balance of military power but also reinforces geopolitical fragmentation, deepens regional rivalries, and exacerbates socio-economic vulnerabilities. Conflict escalation can expand proxy conflicts among regional actors, deepen identity-based political polarization, and heighten security uncertainty in the region. At the same time, these dynamics could also exacerbate humanitarian crises related to food security, climate change, and economic instability. Therefore, the implications of the escalation of the Iran-United States conflict on Middle East stability must be understood within a comprehensive security framework, which not only highlights the military and geopolitical dimensions but also takes into account aspects of human security, local governance, and the adaptive capacity of communities in the face of ever-growing geopolitical pressures.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Based on a synthesis of research findings, the escalation of the conflict between Iran and the United States is a complex, multidimensional geopolitical phenomenon that extends beyond bilateral strategic rivalry and shapes the regional security configuration in the Middle East. This conflict influences alliance dynamics, competition for influence among states, and the emergence of proxy conflicts, thereby reinforcing regional security fragmentation. In this context, Saudi Arabia's strategic response demonstrates adaptive efforts through a combination of balancing and hedging, manifested in strengthened regional security cooperation, domestic reforms, and more proactive geopolitical diplomacy. However, the intensification of this geopolitical rivalry also has the potential to deepen the region's structural instability by strengthening political polarization, heightening security uncertainty, and exacerbating socio-economic vulnerabilities driven by factors such as food security, climate change, and protracted conflict. Thus, the stability of the Middle East region depends heavily on the ability of regional and global actors to constructively manage power competition and build more inclusive and sustainable collective security mechanisms.

Future research should more deeply examine how the dynamics of the conflict between Iran and the United States shape the transformation of the regional security architecture and influence the foreign policy strategies of key Middle Eastern countries. In addition, empirical studies that integrate geopolitical, human security, and socio-economic resilience dimensions are important for comprehensively understanding the long-term impact of conflict escalation on regional stability and global security governance.

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