Israel–Iran–United States Conflict – Historical Background and Recent Issues

Mains: *GS II – International Issues*

Why in News?

Recently, USA and Israel are engaged in war against Iran and it is important to know the historical background and recent issues.

What is the historical background?

- **Pre-1979: Limited Cooperation –** Before 1979, Iran under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi maintained relatively cordial ties with Israel.
- Despite not formally recognizing Israel in strong diplomatic terms, Iran engaged in economic and security cooperation.
- Both countries shared concerns regarding Arab nationalism and Soviet influence in the region.
- Iran also maintained close strategic relations with the United States, which viewed the Shah as a key ally in its Cold War containment strategy.
- Thus, prior to 1979, the triangular relationship was not adversarial but strategically aligned.
- **The 1979 Watershed Moment –** The turning point came with the Iranian Revolution, which replaced the pro-Western monarchy with an Islamic Republic led by clerical leadership.
- The new regime adopted a strong anti-Israel and anti-U.S. ideological stance, portraying Israel as illegitimate and the United States as an imperial power interfering in regional sovereignty.
- The subsequent U.S. Embassy hostage crisis (1979–81) severely damaged Iran–U.S. relations. Diplomatic ties were severed, and mutual mistrust became institutionalized.
- Iran's new foreign policy emphasized resistance against Western influence and support for anti-Israel movements.
- **Emergence of proxy conflict (1980s–2010s)**
- **Iran's "axis of resistance" –** Over the decades, Iran developed strategic partnerships with non-state actors to expand its regional influence.
- Key among these were:
    - Hezbollah in Lebanon
    - Hamas in Gaza
    - Various Shia militias in Iraq and Syria
- Through financial, military, and logistical support, Iran cultivated what it termed the

“Axis of Resistance.”

- These groups opposed Israeli policies and resisted U.S. military presence in the region.
- For Israel, Hezbollah’s missile arsenal in Lebanon and Hamas’s operations in Gaza constituted direct security threats. For the United States, attacks by Iran-linked militias on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria deepened hostilities.
- **Israel’s security doctrine –** Israel has long adhered to a doctrine of pre-emption and deterrence, particularly regarding existential threats.
- It has conducted covert and overt operations targeting Iranian assets in Syria and allegedly inside Iran to prevent advanced weapon transfers and nuclear development.
- The shadow war included cyber operations, targeted assassinations of nuclear scientists, and airstrikes on Iranian military infrastructure in Syria.
- **The nuclear question**
- **Iran’s nuclear program –** Iran insists its nuclear program is for peaceful energy purposes.
- However, enrichment activities and reduced transparency raised international concerns about possible weaponization.
- Israel considers a nuclear-armed Iran an existential threat. The United States also views Iran’s nuclear ambitions as destabilizing to regional security.
- **The JCPOA (2015) –** In 2015, Iran and world powers signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agreement restricted Iran’s uranium enrichment levels in exchange for sanctions relief.
- However, in 2018, the United States under President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal, calling it inadequate. Sanctions were reimposed under a “maximum pressure” campaign. In response, Iran gradually increased uranium enrichment beyond JCPOA limits.
- The collapse of the deal significantly heightened tensions among the three actors.
- **Escalation in the 2020s**
- **From proxy to direct confrontation –** The October 2023 conflict between Israel and Hamas marked another turning point.
- Israel accused Iran of backing militant operations.
- While Iran denied direct involvement, regional hostilities intensified.
- By 2024 and 2025, the long-running shadow conflict transitioned into direct exchanges.
- Missile and drone attacks were launched between Iranian and Israeli territories, marking an unprecedented escalation.
- **Open military engagement (2025–26) –** In mid-2025, Israel reportedly carried out extensive airstrikes on Iranian nuclear and military facilities.
- Iran retaliated with missile barrages targeting Israeli cities.
- The United States entered the confrontation more directly, conducting strikes against Iranian strategic sites, citing intelligence assessments of nuclear weapon proximity.
- In early 2026, joint Israeli-U.S. operations reportedly targeted high-value Iranian leadership and infrastructure.
- Among those reportedly killed was Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, marking a historic escalation.
- Iran responded with drone and missile attacks on Israeli urban centers and U.S. bases in the Gulf region.

- Maritime tensions also increased, especially around the strategically crucial Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of global oil supplies transit.



What are the core drivers of conflict?

- **Ideological conflict –** Iran's Islamic revolutionary ideology rejects Israel's legitimacy and challenges U.S. regional dominance. Conversely, Israel frames Iran's rhetoric and support for armed groups as existential threats.
- **Security dilemma –** Each actor perceives its military actions as defensive, while rivals interpret them as aggressive.
- This classic security dilemma has fueled an arms race involving missile systems, drones, and cyber capabilities.
- **Regional power competition –** Iran seeks strategic depth through influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.
- Israel and the U.S. aim to prevent Iranian regional hegemony.
- **Nuclear proliferation concerns –** A nuclear-armed Iran could trigger proliferation in West Asia, with countries like Saudi Arabia potentially pursuing similar capabilities.
- Thus, the nuclear question has global implications.

What are the global and regional implications?

- **Energy security –** Instability in the Strait of Hormuz affects global oil prices and energy markets.

- **Great power politics –** China and Russia have adopted diplomatic positions favoring de-escalation while expanding ties with Iran.
- **International law –** Questions arise regarding pre-emptive strikes, sovereignty, and proportionality under international humanitarian law.
- **Humanitarian concerns –** Civilian casualties and displacement have increased with urban missile exchanges.

What can be done for long-term regional stability?

- Revival or renegotiation of a nuclear agreement with stronger verification mechanisms.
- Regional security dialogue involving Gulf States.
- De-escalation channels between military establishments.
- Multilateral mediation under the United Nations framework.

What lies ahead?

- The Israel–Iran–United States conflict has evolved from ideological hostility and proxy warfare into direct interstate confrontation.
- Its roots lie in the 1979 transformation of Iran's political system, compounded by nuclear disputes and regional power struggles.
- The current phase marks one of the most dangerous moments in West Asian geopolitics, with implications for global energy security, non-proliferation regimes, and international stability.
- For UPSC aspirants, the issue exemplifies how ideology, geopolitics, security dilemmas, and international institutions intersect in shaping modern conflicts.
- Understanding its historical depth and structural drivers is essential for analyzing contemporary international relations and India's strategic interests in the region.

Reference

The Times of India| Israel-Us and Iran War

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