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The Arab–Israel Conflict in the 21st Century: From Territorial Disputes to Regional Power Politics

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Abstract

This research examines the 21st-century transformation of the Arab–Israeli conflict, tracing its evolution from localized territorial disputes between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism to a multifaceted theater of regional power politics. Utilizing frameworks of structural realism, constructivism, and colonialist theory, the paper analyzes how traditional "land for peace" paradigms have eroded in favor of a new regional security construct driven by shared anti-Iranian threat perceptions. Key milestones explored include the failure of the Oslo Accords, the long-term strategic repercussions of the 2005 Gaza disengagement, and the rise of Iran's "Axis of Resistance". Special emphasis is placed on the Abraham Accords as a catalyst for regional integration and the subsequent direct military escalations of 2023–2025, culminating in the "12-Day War" between Israel and Iran. The analysis further investigates the shifting roles of global powers—specifically the United States, Russia, and China—and Israel's strategic pivot toward Somaliland. The paper concludes that while military superiority has temporarily shifted the balance of power, the "one-state reality" and unresolved Palestinian grievances continue to pose a significant threat to long-term regional stability.

Keywords Arab-Israeli Conflict; Territorial Disputes; Regional Power Politics; Abraham Accords; Axis Of Resistance; Gaza Disengagement; Iran-Israel Shadow War; Palestinian Nationalism; Structural Realism; Normalization

Introduction

The trajectory of the Arab Israeli conflict in the twenty-first century represents a profound transformation from a series of localized territorial disputes into a multifaceted theater of regional power politics (Bhattarai et al., 2025) While the foundational elements of the struggle remain tethered to the competing national and religious claims over historic Palestine, the strategic landscape has been radically reshaped by the rise of non-state actors, the intervention of Eurasian powers, and a fundamental realignment of regional interests that has largely delinked the normalization of relations with Israel from the resolution of the Palestinian problem (Britannica, 2025; Salame & Zilber, 2024). This metamorphosis is characterized by the collapse of the traditional "land for peace" paradigm and its replacement with a regional security construct driven by the shared threat perception of Iranian expansionism (Okoro et al., 2024; Vakil & Quilliam, 2023).

Foundational Antagonisms and the Erosion of the Peace Paradigm

The contemporary conflict is rooted in a century-old struggle between Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, an antagonism that evolved from intercommunal violence in Mandatory Palestine into a major international

issue with the birth of the State of Israel in 1948 (Ali et al., 2022; Horowitz, 2024). The establishment of Israel, remembered by the Jewish state as the War of Independence and by the Arab world as the Nakba, or catastrophe, created a legacy of displacement that continues to fuel the current crisis. Academic analysis highlights how these foundational narratives Israel's claim to a "sacred past" based on biblical guarantees and the Palestinian assertion of indigenous rights have created an intractable context where identity and territory are inextricably linked (Hildebrandt-Wypych, 2022).

By the early 2000s, the optimism generated by the 1993 Oslo Accords had fundamentally eroded. The failure of the July 2000 Camp David Summit and the subsequent visit of Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount precipitated the Second Intifada, a period of unprecedented violence that marked the transition from state-level diplomacy to a more decentralized, asymmetric confrontation (Council on Foreign Relations, 2025). The "Passover Massacre" of 2002 and the subsequent construction of the West Bank barrier illustrated a shift in Israeli strategy from negotiation to containment and physical separation. This period also witnessed the death of Yasser Arafat in 2004, which removed the central symbolic figure of the Palestinian liberation movement and paved the way for the rise of Hamas as a dominant political and military force (CFR, 2025; Saima, 2009).

Table 1: Chronology of Strategic Shifts and Instability in the Early 21st Century

Key Milestones of the Early 21st Century (2000–2010)	Description and Strategic Significance	Source Citations
July 2000 Camp David Summit	Collapse of final status negotiations over Jerusalem and refugees.	(Ali et al., 2022; CFR, 2025)
September 2000 Second Intifada	Outbreak of mass violence; transition to suicide bombings and armed clashes.	(CFR, 2025; Saima, 2009)
June 2002 West Bank Barrier	Initiation of the separation wall to prevent militant infiltration.	(CFR, 2025)
August 2005 Gaza Disengagement	Unilateral Israeli withdrawal; evacuation of 21 settlements.	(CFR, 2025; Nguyenová, 2025)
January 2006 Hamas Victory	Hamas wins legislative elections, challenging Fatah's dominance.	(CFR, 2025; Smith, 2019)
July 2006 Second Lebanon War	34-day conflict with Hezbollah; shifts focus to non-state actors.	(Britannica, 2025; Lachapelle, 2006)
June 2007 Hamas Takeover of Gaza	Violent expulsion of Fatah; creation of a separate political entity in Gaza.	(Ali et al., 2022; Saima, 2009)

The structural realism framework suggests that during this decade, both Israel and Palestinian factions prioritized their perceived self-interests security for the former and liberation for the latter—above the cooperative goals envisioned in the Oslo framework (Arshaninova, 2018). This dynamic was exacerbated by the expansion of Israeli settlements, which scholars argue was part of a "dromoelimination" strategy intended to accelerate the pace of territorial control while freezing the peace process (Ghantous & Joronen, 2022; Nguyenová, 2025).

The Unilateral Shift and the Twenty-Year Legacy of the Gaza Disengagement

The unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005 stands as a pivotal moment in the twenty-first-century conflict. While initially framed by some as a bold peace initiative, a twenty-year retrospective suggests that the policy was designed to consolidate control over the West Bank by relinquishing a territory that was strategically burdensome (Huber et al., 2025). The disengagement bypassed the Palestinian Authority, thereby undermining its legitimacy and creating a vacuum that Hamas exploited to establish a

"resistance" stronghold (Gatnash et al., 2021).

Academic critics argue that the 2005 disengagement exemplified a "containment policy" that sought to manage the conflict rather than resolve it. This approach ultimately proved catastrophic, as it allowed Hamas to develop a state like military infrastructure and tunnel networks, culminating in the major escalations of the 2020s (Milton et al., 2023). Within Israeli society, the disengagement also triggered a deep internal fracture, leading to the rise of the "Hilltop Youth" and "Price-Tag" violence attacks by religious-nationalist settlers directed at Palestinians and the Israeli state as a form of retaliation for perceived threats to the settlement enterprise (Mathie, 2018).

The territorial focus of the early 2000s gradually gave way to a broader regionalized conflict as non-state actors became proxies for regional powerhouses. The 2006 Lebanon War, triggered by Hezbollah's capture of Israeli soldiers, demonstrated the limitations of conventional military power against a sub-state organization endowed with asymmetric capabilities (Lachapelle, 2006). The conflict resulted in the Winograd Report, which criticized the Israeli military's over-reliance on air power and exposed significant lapses in civil-military relations. This war also solidified Iran's role as a direct participant in the conflict through its support for Hezbollah, effectively expanding the battleground from the West Bank to the "security quadrant" of South Beirut (Kazan, 2018).

The Arab Spring and the Emergence of the Axis of Resistance

The uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011 introduced a "vicious circle of mutually reinforcing negative repercussions" for the Arab-Israeli peace process (SWP Berlin, 2012). Israel's strategic environment was fundamentally destabilized by the fall of reliable partners, most notably Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and the subsequent rise of Islamist influence in neighboring states (Bresheeth, 2012; SWP Berlin, 2012). Israeli elites viewed the potential democratization of the Arab world with skepticism, fearing that populist movements would adopt more hostile stances toward the Jewish state (Navot et al., 2017).

The Syrian Civil War further regionalized the conflict, allowing Iran to entrench its "Axis of Resistance" a coalition of state and non-state actors including the Assad regime, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthi movement along Israel's borders. This axis is defined less by territorial disputes than by an ideological commitment to opposing Western interests and what they term "Zionist colonialism" (Mens, 2024; Marzbanmehr, 2025). The Axis of Resistance operates under the military and intelligence leadership of the IRGC Quds Force, utilizing a strategy of "war without a war" to engage Israel through covert, proxy, and psychological means (Carl et al., 2025).

Table 2: Comparative Theoretical Perspectives on the Evolution of Arab-Israeli Relations

Theoretical Frameworks of the Conflict	Primary Focus and Academic Application	Core Arguments
Structural Realism	Security and survival of the state in an anarchic system.	Conflicts over Jerusalem and territory are fundamental instruments of change. (Arshaninova, 2018) ²⁸
Constructivism	Role of identity, norms, and narratives in shaping policy.	Ideological enmity (Iran-Israel) is primary; strategic goals are secondary. (Roomi, 2023)
Colonialist Narrative	Framing Israel as a settler-colonial entity.	Focus on the "logic of elimination" and the displacement of indigenous populations. (Salame & Zilber, 2024)
Game Theory	Mathematical modeling of strategic interactions.	Challenges the "land for peace" assumption as a flawed prerequisite for resolution. (Ahmad, 2021)

The regionalization of the conflict shifted the focus from the "land for peace" formula to a struggle for regional hegemony between Iran and its adversaries. This transformation was underscored by the Iranian nuclear program, which Israel views as an existential threat, leading to a long-running "shadow war" of cyberattacks and assassinations (Roomi, 2023).

The Abraham Accords: Normalization and Regional Integration

The most significant diplomatic shift of the twenty-first century occurred in 2020 with the Abraham Accords. By normalizing relations with the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, Israel effectively broke the "land for peace" paradigm that had governed Arab diplomacy since the 1967 war (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023). This normalization was driven by a shared threat perception of Iran and a perceived U.S. deprioritization of the region, leading Gulf Arab states to prioritize national security and economic interests over the traditional precondition of Palestinian statehood (Abouzeid et al., 2025).

The accords heralded a new era of "Arab-Israeli integration," fostering political, economic, and security cooperation that was previously unthinkable (Olson et al., 2024). This integration included the development of a regional security construct under U.S. CENTCOM, designed to create an integrated defense architecture against missile and drone threats. However, academic critics argue that this integration has "normalized normalization," with state-controlled media in Arab countries reframing the conflict to marginalize Palestinian nationalist aspirations (El-Nawawy & Elmasry, 2022). Furthermore, the lack of a meaningful Palestinian negotiation process remains a critical vulnerability that could limit the further expansion of the accords or trigger domestic backlash (Schwartz et al., 2022).

The impact of the Abraham Accords on the Palestinian cause has been complex. While Israel agreed to suspend plans to annex portions of the West Bank in exchange for relations with the UAE, scholars argue that the accords have effectively created a "one-state reality" where the Palestinian Authority is increasingly sidelined (Horowitz, 2024; Lustick, 2020). The integration of Israel into the regional order has put the "Muslim world under pressure," favoring Israeli strategic goals while isolating the Palestinian leadership (Smith, 2019; Tohme, 2021).

Direct Confrontation: The 2023-2025 Military Escalations

The paradigm of a "shadow war" was shattered by the Hamas-led attacks on October 7, 2023, which launched the deadliest conflict in the history of the Israeli Palestinian dispute (Pinfold et al., 2025). The war, which primarily targeted the Gaza Strip but involved related conflicts in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iran, brought the Palestinian issue back into the international spotlight and derailed the gradual improvement of regional relations. Israel's response, "Operation Iron Swords," aimed to eliminate Hamas as a political and military force, resulting in a humanitarian crisis of severe proportions (Ahmed et al., 2024).

The conflict escalated significantly in 2024 and 2025, moving from a proxy struggle to a direct military confrontation between Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Following the Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus in April 2024, Iran launched "Operation True Promise," its first direct missile and drone strike on Israel (Popalzay et al., 2025). This cycle of retaliation culminated in the "12-Day War" of June 2025. On June 13, 2025, Israel launched "Operation Rising Lion," striking Iran's nuclear and military infrastructure, including key sites like Natanz and Fordow. Iran responded with an unprecedented barrage of nearly 900 ballistic missiles and 1,000 drones, most of which were neutralized by Israeli defenses with Western support (Marzbanmehr, 2025; Roll, 2025).

Table 3: Escalation Matrix: Military and Humanitarian Impact of the 2023–2025 Crisis

Human and Strategic Costs of the 2023–2025 Crisis	Participants and Scope	Key Consequences
2023 Gaza War	Israel vs. Hamas and Palestinian militant groups.	Over 1.1 million displaced; massive infrastructure destruction. (Okoro et al., 2024)
2024 Operation True Promise	Iran vs. Israel (direct engagement).	First direct state-to-state missile exchange. (Marzbanmehr, 2025)
June 2025 "12-Day War"	Israel vs. Iran (large-scale aerial/missile conflict).	Humiliating defeat for Iran; hollowing out of nuclear/missile capacity. (Marzbanmehr, 2025)
2025 Lebanon Incursion	Israel vs. Hezbollah.	Displacement of 1 million+ in Lebanon. (CFR, 2025; Marzbanmehr, 2025)

The June 2025 war exposed critical weaknesses in Iran’s military doctrine, which had long emphasized asymmetry and proxies rather than conventional state-on-state warfare (Marzbanmehr, 2025). The conflict has left the Iranian regime at a "critical inflection point," facing a vanishing diplomatic off-ramp and the potential for eventual collapse or internal transformation (Middle East Institute, 2025).

Global Power Politics and the Eurasian Response

The role of global powers in the Arab-Israeli conflict has shifted from the Cold War-era polarization to a more complex configuration of interests. The United States remains the primary mediator and security guarantor for Israel, playing a decisive role in repelling Iranian attacks and fostering regional normalization (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023). However, the 21st century has also seen the "near-total absence" of significant Eurasian intervention during the height of the 2025 crisis (Roll, 2025).

Both Russia and China adopted a "reticent" stance during the 2025 Middle East war, prioritizing diplomatic rhetoric over concrete military or economic support for Iran. Russia’s primary objective was to avert direct U.S. intervention on behalf of Israel while preserving its nuclear dialogue with Tehran (Rezaei et al., 2014). Vladimir Putin’s refusal to provide more forceful support was attributed to Russia’s recognition of Israel as a "Russian-speaking country" due to the large diaspora and the ongoing "mutually acceptable security arrangement" between Moscow and Jerusalem regarding operations in Syria (Protassova et al., 2020)

China’s messaging mirrored Russia’s, condemning Israeli and U.S. belligerence while defending Iran’s right to a civilian nuclear program. Beijing utilized the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a platform to denounce Western "unilateralism," but it took no concrete steps, such as threatening sanctions, to mediate the conflict (Hofer, 2024). China’s primary interest in the region remains the stability of energy supplies and its Belt and Road investments, leading it to favor a stable balance of power rather than risking deep involvement in a combustible regional war (Zou et al., 2022)

Table 4: Geopolitical Responses and Strategic Alignments of Major Powers During the 2025 Conflict

Responses of Global Powers to the 2025 Crisis	Diplomatic Stance	Concrete Actions
United States	Direct military support for Israel; mediation of ceasefires.	Intercepted Iranian missiles; brokered normalization. (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023; Marzbanmehr, 2025) ⁴
Russia	Condemned Israeli attacks;	Sustained security coordination with Israel

	offered ineffective mediation.	in Syria. (Roll, 2025; Weitz, 2025) ¹⁵
China	Rhetorical condemnation of US/Israel; prioritized energy security.	Used SCO for diplomatic messaging; maintained trade with both sides. (Weitz, 2025)
India	Balanced rhetorical approach; refused to support SCO censure of Israel.	Maintained strategic autonomy; emphasized humanitarian concerns. (Weitz, 2025) ⁴²

Emerging Frontiers: Somaliland and the Red Sea Corridor

A notable development in the late 2025 landscape is Israel's strategic pivot toward the Horn of Africa. The recognition of Somaliland's sovereignty by Israel in late 2025, framed as being "in the spirit" of the Abraham Accords, serves as a direct counter-measure to the Houthi movement's maritime aggression in the Red Sea (The Guardian, 2025). Somaliland's territory, which already hosts a military base operated by the UAE, could serve as a forward base for intelligence monitoring of Iranian-backed activities in Yemen (Stevenson, 2020). This move has been condemned by Egypt, Turkey, and the African Union as an "expansionist policy" that interferes in the domestic affairs of Somalia. However, it reflects a broader Israeli strategy to establish an alliance of interests that stretches from the Persian Gulf to the Indian Ocean, securing vital maritime routes and intelligence nodes in the face of persistent regional instability (Nazir et al., 2024). This strategic expansion is also linked to the "Project 2025" doctrine, which calls for the recognition of Somaliland as a hedge against growing Chinese influence in Djibouti (Marsai, 2025).

Domestic Israeli Politics and the Religious-Nationalist Surge

Internal political dynamics within Israel have fundamentally shaped the trajectory of the 21st-century conflict. The rise of the religious far-right, which now occupies influential positions within the government and sections of the armed forces, has shifted the national consensus away from territorial compromise (Smith, 2019). This surge is exemplified by organizations like the Or Movement and KKL-JNF, which frame the population of the Naqab and Galilee as the "next phase of the establishment of Israel," utilizing a pioneer ethos updated for the "start-up nation" era (Getzoff, 2023).

The consequence of this political shift is a hardening of terms for any settlement with the Palestinians. Scholars point out that a majority of Israeli society now opposes a Palestinian state, and the government has no incentive to negotiate given the lack of external pressure from major allies (Haklai, 2011). The emergence of the "Hilltop Youth" as a third-generation religious-nationalist force has led to a "new era" of violence that targets the symbols of the state and religious monuments, further entrenching the religious dimension of the conflict (Mathie, 2018).

Media Framing and Academic Politicization

The Arab-Israeli conflict remains one of the most intensely contested subjects in global media and academia. Academic journals have been analyzed for biases that frame Israel as an active agent of "settler-colonialism" while portraying Palestinians as passive objects of these policies (Huber et al., 2025). Conversely, some studies suggest that US Middle East Studies have succumbed to political activism, such as the 2022 BDS boycott by MESA, which limits knowledge transfer and advocates for a permanent conflict approach to the region (Abouzeid et al., 2025).

Media representations also vary significantly. While Arab media outlets emphasize the Nakba and historical grievances, Western outlets often focus on security and the "terrorist-victim" paradigm (Salame & Zilber, 2024). The usage of tools like "Visualizing Palestine" and slogans like "From the River to the Sea" create a hostile learning environment in Western universities, illustrating how the regional power struggle is mirrored in the ideological battles of the diaspora and the international community (Milton et al., 2023).

The "One-State Reality" and the Hollowing Out of Sovereignty

By 2025, many observers have concluded that the two-state solution is dead, replaced by a "de facto single state" with layered and variegated sovereignty (Lustick, 2020). Decades of settlement expansion and military occupation have transformed the legal and physical geography of the West Bank to the point that a contiguous Palestinian state is no longer viable. In its place, a permanent occupation characterized by "dromoelimination" and administrative control has emerged (Ghantous & Joronen, 2022)

The Palestinian Authority, once seen as the government-in-waiting for a future state, has been severely debilitated by internal corruption and the rise of radical Islamist groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The 2023–2025 wars have further weakened the PA's sovereignty, fueling resentment and resistance among the population (Abouzeid et al., 2025). For many Palestinians, the struggle has shifted from the diplomatic "peace process" to a demand for civil rights and an end to refugee status, reflecting a new phase of Palestinian nationalism in the 21st century (Gatnash et al., 2021).

Conclusion: The Regional Balance of Power and the Future of the Conflict

The Arab-Israeli conflict in the twenty-first century has evolved into a centerpiece of regional power politics, where the quest for hegemony has superseded the quest for a localized peace. The transition from territorial disputes to a regional security construct has created a new order that integrates Israel into a pragmatic alliance of Sunni states, delinked from the resolution of the Palestinian issue (Vakil & Quilliam, 2023). However, the persistence of violence and the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza underscore that the territorial core of the conflict remains a "combustible pile of tinder" that can ignite a regional war at any moment (Mens, 2024).

The humiliating defeat of Iran in the June 2025 war and the "hollowing out" of its nuclear and missile capabilities have temporarily shifted the balance of power in favor of the Israeli-led alliance. Yet, the fundamental issues the status of Jerusalem, the right of return for refugees, and the expansion of settlements remain unresolved. The failure of deterrence and the unravelling of regional security credibility suggest that the "war without a name" will continue to evolve through covert networks, cyberattacks, and regional destabilization effort.

Ultimately, the 21st-century conflict is characterized by a "vicious cycle" where military superiority provides only temporary stability. The transition to regional power politics has effectively marginalized the Palestinian cause, but it has also ensured that the conflict remains a central part of the global political agenda, drawing the attention and resources of the international community (Salame & Zilber, 2024). The future of the region depends on whether this new regional order can move beyond military integration to address the deep-rooted grievances that have fueled the "century-old dilemma" (Britannica, 2025).

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