Intervention from Above: The United States, Russia, and Power Transition in the Middle East

Kylie Poulin
The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran was a watershed moment in contemporary Middle East history. Prior to the revolution, Iran benefitted from its positive relationship with the United States and had become a thriving power in the region due to significant revenues in the oil industry. Iran had also developed positive, though largely concealed, relations with another rising power and American ally in the region – Israel. As Iranian power increased in the 1960s and 1970s, Iran’s self-perceived potential for regional leadership grew along with it. In 1971, the Iranian Minister of Court considered Iran to be “rapidly assuming leadership not only over the Persian Gulf, but over the Middle East and the entire oil-producing world” (Ala 2008, 185). The Shah’s regime sought “a political role equivalent to its new economic and military capabilities” and began pursuing “the materialization of [the Shah’s] long-sought dream of making Iran the region’s preeminent power” (Parsi 2007, 41). Maintaining positive relations with Israel complicated Iran’s developing ambitions. Iranian leadership relied upon the support of other Arab states in the regions – states that strongly opposed Israel in the polarized Arab-Israeli dynamic of the region. The bilateral relationship grew strained in the 1970s as Iran began to gravitate toward Israel’s Arab enemies in its strategic pursuit of regional leadership.

The revolutionary overthrow of the Shah and subsequent installation of the theocratic Khomeini regime in Iran in 1979 had a profound impact on Middle East politics. The revolution led to a rapid termination of Iranian-American and Iranian-Israeli relations and a drastic decline in Iranian power (Correlates of War 2010). Israel assumed Iran’s role as the United States’ main Middle East proxy and, with American support, rose to a dominant position in the region. As a foremost Middle East ally of the United States and a regional center of power, Tel Aviv was inherently affected by the new Iranian regime’s central foreign policy tenets of intense anti-Americanism and strengthened resolve to secure Iranian regional hegemony. The post-revolutionary environment thus firmly established and intensified the bilateral antagonism that had
emerged between Israel and Iran in the 1970s. Over the course of the past three decades, hostilities between Israel and Iran have only increased.

While Israel has focused on maintaining power, and therefore security, in its hostile regional neighborhood, Iran has focused on developing its capabilities to challenge Israeli power and rise to a hegemonic position in the Middle East. Israel’s dominant position thus appears far from secure when considering revisionist forces emanating from Iran. Former U.S. Ambassador Richard Haass speculated a new era was beginning in the Middle East in the early 2000s, in which Israel and Iran would constitute the two most powerful states in the region. Considering Iran to be “a classical imperial power, with ambitions to remake the region in its image and the potential to translate its objectives into reality” meant Israel’s “situation will further deteriorate – as will that of the United States – if Iran develops nuclear weapons” (Haass 2006, 6). Largely perceived as a rogue state with hegemonic aspirations, Iran’s unrelenting pursuit of a nuclear weapons program and belligerent attitude toward Israel have constituted a primary issue in contemporary regional politics and have caught the attention of the world’s great powers.

Both the United States and Russia have long been engaged in the complex politics of the Middle East and the Israeli-Iranian conflict proves no exception.1 The two great powers have landed on opposing sides of the regional clash and have contributed to the establishment of Israel and Iran’s respective positions, particularly in the context of their own long-standing strategic rivalry. The United States and Israel together constitute a dyadic pair with a shared interest in upholding the status quo of the region and ensuring Israel’s security through its preponderance of power in the Middle East. Russia and Iran together form a second dyadic pair, characterized by their shared dissatisfaction with U.S. dominance in the international system and its extra-regional influence in the Middle East. Russia is among the few states maintaining a partnership with Iran’s revisionist regime, as a conflict between Israel and Iran grows more and more likely.
The phenomena of these bilateral relationships – between the United States and Israel, Russia and Iran, and the nuances in between – together generate a lens through which to view the power politics of the Middle East and provide a basis for further inquiry into how the great powers participate in the politics of the region. While the nuances of these relationships have received extensive media and scholarly attention on individual bases (e.g. U.S. support to Israel, Russia’s reluctance to support punitive economic sanctions against Iran, Iran’s nuclear ambitions), the nexus of this dynamic quartet has far greater theoretical and political implications than scholarship has thus far uncovered.

Power transition theory (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980) and its regional adaptation (Lemke 1996, 2002; Lemke and Werner 1996) initially appear an incompatible theoretical framework for defending the Israeli-Iranian power dynamics in terms of Israeli dominance and an imminent Iranian challenge to that dominance. Common measures of national power employed in power transition research, such as the Correlates of War Composite Index of National Power, are (often multidimensional) operationalizations that favor volume. Investigating Israeli-Iranian relations through this framework would suggest Iran has a preponderance of power relative to Israel in the Middle East, due to such factors as a significantly larger population, greater iron and steel production, higher energy consumption, and significantly more military personnel. This study, however, defends power transition conventions of the Israeli-Iranian conflict using per capita-based measurements of power and a contextual analysis of relations that supports an Israeli preponderance of power and revisionist Iranian role in the Middle East. Douglas Lemke’s regional adaptation of power transition theory further accounts for American and Russian participation in the subsystem power dynamics.

This paper thus seeks to explain the involvement of the United States and Russia in the shifting power dynamics between Israel and Iran since 1979 using power transition theory
(Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980) and its regional adaptation (Lemke 1996, 2002; Lemke and Werner 1996). More specifically, it aims to support the notion of an Israeli-dominated Middle East hierarchy and demonstrate great power participation in regional power transition through a case study involving Israel, Iran, the United States, and Russia. Lemke’s regional adaptation of power transition theory (PTT) considers great power intervention to generally overrule regional power transition dynamics “unless great power intentions and preferences strongly correlate with the structure of local relations” (2002, 50). This study argues that the United States and Russia share fundamental interests with their respective regional allies and the principles of regional power transition have thus persisted. The two great powers have actively contributed to the Israeli-Iranian transition, as the clash between Israel’s position of regional dominance and Iran’s revisionist ambitions grows imminent.

**Review of Previous Literature**

As models seeking to explain power distribution and interstate relations, theories of conflict and war have important and relevant implications that apply in times of peace, as well. That is, theoretical frameworks can help clarify relations between countries even when not presently engaged in conflict or war. The international relations discipline employs three main levels of analysis to understand interstate conflict: psychological states of individual leaders, domestic national environments, and factors in the international system (Waltz 1979). In implementing power transition theory as a theoretical framework, this study focuses on the third type of systemic IR analysis.

A divide within systemic analysis has led its theorists to think about the international system in two distinct ways, either as hegemonic or pluralistic (see Kohout 2003). Pluralistic theories, often associated with the classical realist school of thought (Morgenthau 1948), focus on bi- or multipolar
distributions of power in an anarchic international system. In seeking explanations for interstate conflict, the tradition and its subsequent conclusions have contributed to perhaps one of the most equivocal ideas in IR theory – the balance of power (see Haas 1953). Pluralistic IR theory understands balance of power as both a structural theory of the international system and a prescriptive mechanism for stability. Balance of power theory as understood here posits that the international system will remain peaceful so long as power is distributed at low concentrations among a wide range of states. The likelihood of international conflict or war increases when one nation possesses a preponderance of strength. Thus balance of power theory supports the notion that power parity among nations leads to increased system stability.

Hegemonic theories, developed in large part with the neorealist response to classical realism, consider the aforementioned balance of power notion to be a structural characteristic of the international system and not an adequate theory of stability. Hegemonic theory views power preponderance as stabilizing to the anarchic international system, whereas power parity among several states or the decline of a leading nation is more likely to induce war. Long cycle theory (Modelski and Thompson 1989), hegemonic stability theory (Gilpin 1981), and power transition theory (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980) are most notable in this tradition, with all three all emphasizing the order that a preponderant hegemon provides to the international system.

Power transition theory (Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980), however, diverges in several notable ways from both its classical realist and neorealist counterparts. To begin, power transition theory (PTT) views the international system as hierarchical, as opposed to anarchical, with each state having a designated role based on its level of power. The strongest state in the system, known as the dominant state, creates the rules and order of the system referred to as the status quo that all subordinate states must recognize. As a hegemonic theory, PTT considers this evident preponderance of power by one state as stabilizing to the system. Subordinate states making
gains relative to the preponderant state begin to disrupt the system and pose a potential threat to the hegemon. Such power gains are viewed as a necessary, but not sufficient, determinant of conflict and war.

Power transition theory focuses equally on the relative satisfaction of a state gaining power in the system as an explanation for systemic conflict. If the rising state is satisfied with the status quo as determined by the dominant state, conflict is unlikely. If, however, the state is dissatisfied with the status quo and seeks to change it, approaching power parity with the dominant state will likely produce interstate conflict or war. Power transition theory considers power parity to exist not when the challenger achieves exact power equality with the dominant state, but when they reach the power threshold of 80% relative to the dominant state (Organski and Kugler 1980, 44-49). PTT thus supports a preponderant peace and explains interstate war as a result of a dissatisfied challenger state achieving 80% power parity with the system’s dominant state.

While power transition theory and related scholarly works generate interesting accounts for interstate conflict, Waltz’s (1979) three levels of analysis possess an inherent constraint in producing viable explanations for interstate war today. An ad hoc regional level has emerged in the large chasm between national and international (i.e. global) analysis to provide comprehensive theoretical explanations for the type of conflict most prevalent in the 21st century. Waltz perhaps could not have foreseen a rise in the pertinence of regional theory, as its importance was greatly catalyzed by the end of bipolarity in the 20th-century. As noted by Lake and Morgan, “the importance of regional relations have expanded with the end of the Cold War… regions are a substantially more important venue of conflict and cooperation than in the past… The task is to incorporate regional politics into our existing approaches and theories” (1999, 6).

The dissolution of worldwide ideological competition between the United States and the Soviet Union caused a shift in the likelihood of conflict occurring between the rival superpowers to
conflict between small states concerned with geographically proximate threats. The umbrella of the Cold War had created an East-West schism and essentially forced states to align with the democratic West (i.e. the United States) or the communist USSR. The two global superpowers were constantly battling for influence in all corners of the world and created a highly polarized international security structure. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, this structure dissolved and left the question of how a new system would be ordered and what security strategies would be implemented therein (Buzan 1991; Lemke 1997; Stein and Lobell 1997). Lacking the motif of protection provided by the competing superpowers, small states began focusing their attention on the nearby threats most immediate to their security – those in their own neighborhood. As this study intends to demonstrate, however, this shift has far from rendered the great powers regionally irrelevant.

The international relations discipline has generally overlooked regional accounts for interstate conflict, due in large part to the historical dominance of systemic, rather than sub-systemic, order (Kelly 2007, 198). Although attempts have been made, systemic theories largely fail to adequately translate into explanations for regional interstate conflict without appropriate adaptation. Regional subsystems, a source of definitional contention themselves (Bueno de Mesquita 1981; Kelly 2007; Lake and Morgan 1997; Lemke 1996, 2002), are highly idiosyncratic and do not necessarily mirror the characteristics of the international system. Thus “imposing a global theory on regions may raise interesting questions, but we should not assume the answers will be the same” (Lake and Morgan 1997, 7). This does not render systemic theories useless for understanding regions. It does, however, imply skewed results when systemic theories are simply extrapolated to regional contexts. Subsystem theories of conflict and war must therefore carefully consider nuances of regions, howsoever defined, to prompt “greater accuracy and more sophisticated theory” (Kelly 2007, 201).
In a significant contribution to both power transition theory and the growing field of regional theory, Douglas Lemke developed a nuanced adaptation of the systemic PTT with his multiple hierarchy model (1997, 2002; Lemke and Werner, 1996). Lemke’s model operates on the assumption that rather than consisting of only one hierarchical global system, the international system is comprised of the global system in addition to many regional subsystems, each with their own hierarchy of power and status quo. Though adapted for regional cases, much of the original power transition elements (Organski 1968; Organski and Kugler 1980) still apply. The dominant state in a region shapes the region’s status quo and the subsystem remains stable so long as this dominant state maintains power preponderance. Following PTT, however, “if [a] local challenger is dissatisfied about some element of its local situation, parity will provide it the opportunity to redress this grievance, and war will follow” (Lemke and Werner 1996, 239). The relative power parity threshold for regional conflict is reduced from 80% to 70% in the multiple hierarchy model, as “there is more uncertainty among developing states about when they are at parity than among great powers” (Lemke 2002, 99). Thus a rising state’s dissatisfaction with the status quo and 70% relative power parity with the system’s dominant state are precursors to intraregional conflict.

The regional refinement of the systemic power transition theory emerges in Lemke and Werner’s presentation of the “international power cone” shown in Figure 1 (1996, 238). Country A represents the dominant state of the entire global hierarchy, with the subsequent letters (B, C, D, E, and F) representing dominant states of various regional subsystems. As indicated by the figure, the global system is the only one able to interact with all other regional subsystems. These subsystems can be nested, as evidenced by hierarchy E’s position under hierarchy B, but most are primarily limited to exerting influence over only their own regional subsystem.
The most notable implication of the international power cone, particularly for this study, is the porousness of regional subsystems and their subsequent structural vulnerability to intervention from above. Lemke and Werner clarify the significance of such vulnerability, noting, “the status quo of the local hierarchy therefore might well be created, defended, or simply affected by more powerful external actors” (1996, 238). This intervention from above can greatly influence regional actors, whose behavior may not manifest in the way systemic PTT would suggest. Lemke notes:

“[great power interference] would be likely to obscure any consistent pattern between structural characteristics such as relative power or status quo evaluations and the occurrence of war between minor powers. Great power interference would be the ‘cause’ of such wars, and the correlates of such interference would be great power intentions, preferences, etc., rather than the structure of local relations between the minor powers” (2002, 52).

Lemke specifies, however, that this outcome is likely to occur “unless great power intentions and preferences strongly correlate with the structure of local relations,” at which point great powers are more likely to act as participants, rather than bullies, in regional power dynamics (2002, 52). In other words, influence from above has the potential to mitigate or exacerbate, rather than simply overrule, regional power transition if the great power interests align with regional power interests.

Theorists have not identified a normative influence behavior in the possibility of top-down intervention, but it can be easily imagined in several ways, from diplomatic relations and economic
aid to direct military intervention. This important feature of porousness in the multiple hierarchy model acknowledges a regional nuance distinct from systemic IR theory and the adaptation has been both well established and well received (see DiCicco and Levy 1999). The lingering deficit of the multiple hierarchy model, however, is the lack of subsequent study attempting to investigate practical applications of Lemke’s theory. Not only is there minimal follow-up regional studies on Lemke’s multiple hierarchy model, but the academic tradition has also remained largely unresponsive in investigating cross-system influence of major powers in the global system on power transition dynamics in regional subsystems. This study aims to modestly address that deficit with a case study of the United States and the USSR/Russia as great power participants in the regional power transition between Israel and Iran.

**Methodology**

This study begins with an analysis of the quantitative indicators used regularly to operationalize power transition theory’s two conditions – gross domestic product (GDP) per capita as a measure of national power and military expenditures as an indicator of status quo evaluation (Lemke 2002, 98-104; Lemke and Werner 1996; see also de Soysa et al. 1997). GDP per capita figures have been taken from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook and military expenditure figures from Correlates of War (COW) Project, which provides comprehensive annual reports on military, demographic, and industrial factors contributing to national power. Israeli and Iranian figures for these two data sets will be plotted and compared from 1979-2007 (the last available data COW data set) to identify important trends in the data and demonstrate that power transition dynamics have been developing between the two countries since 1979.

International relations, however, do not constitute a purely (or even primarily) quantitative discipline. IR analysis is nothing if not multidimensional, and shades of grey often play the largest
role in informing systemic events and relationships. The present argument has a rich contextual element that cannot afford to be ignored. The remainder of this study is thus primarily comprised of a qualitative analysis of Middle East power transition dynamics between Israel and Iran and the relevant involvement of the United States and Russia in the regional power balance. The aim of the qualitative analysis is twofold: to demonstrate both Israel’s dominance and Iran’s dissatisfaction and hegemonic aspirations within the regional system, as well as investigate the extent to which the United States and the USSR/Russia have been active and opposing participants in the unfolding power transition dynamics between Israel and Iran. This analysis ultimately provides a contextual argument for the ongoing power transition between Israel and Iran and the development of their respective bilateral relationships with the United States and Russia, considering each state’s strategic motivations and interests therein. This study will examine such information as statements from leaders and government officials to discern the intentions and foreign policy goals of all four countries, relevant policies and directives implemented therein, past scholarship on the bilateral great power-regional power relationships, and data on bilateral arms trade between the United States-Israel and Russia-Iran.

**Israeli-Iranian Power Transition: A Quantitative Approach**

This study’s quantitative approach will first look at GDP per capita data for Israel and Iran to investigate relative power between the two countries from 1979 to 2007. Iran’s ability to reach a 70% power parity threshold relative to Israel would theoretically enable it to challenge Israel’s regional dominance according to multiple hierarchy model principles. Correlates of War military expenditure data for both countries will then be assessed as an indicator of status quo evaluations. As noted by Lemke and Werner, “it is necessary to determine who is undergoing an extraordinary military buildup” when considering what states express dissatisfaction with the regional status quo.
and qualify as legitimate contenders for power in a system (1996, 244). Though the later contextual analysis will consider many other indicators of Iranian dissatisfaction (e.g. rhetoric, regime doctrine), “it is reasonable to expect dissatisfied states are disproportionately likely to undergo an extraordinary military buildup” (Lemke 2002, 104). This study expects the two quantitative elements to support the hypothesis of an ongoing power transition between Israel and Iran as the foundation of its broader argument for great power participation in the regional power transition.

*Israeli and Iranian Power, 1979-2007*

Power is an elusive concept and the way it is measured in political science is largely determined by the primary factors of interest (e.g. economic, demographic, military factors). The data used in this study to compare trends in Israeli and Iranian power from 1979-2007 was derived from the CIA World Factbook data on GDP per capita for each country. GDP (gross domestic product) and GNP (gross national product) have been standard measures of power in both systemic and regional power transition studies since its theoretical foundations (de Soysa et al. 1997; Lemke 2002; Lemke and Werner 1996; Organski 1958; Organski and Kugler 1980). The Correlates of War (COW) Composite Index of National Capabilities began emerging as an additional operationalization in power transition studies in the 1970s, combining demographic, industrial, and economic factors into a single measure of national power (Singer 1972).

GDP/GNP and COW measures essentially translate volume into national power, but possess inherent limitations in systems where power dynamics do not necessarily favor volume. This study considers the Middle East hierarchy to be one such system. Israel, despite being one of the smallest countries in the region, is an arguable stronghold of regional power. Volume-based power operationalizations would likely indicate otherwise. Using GDP per capita as an operationalization of power to investigate parity between Israel and Iran accounts for differences in their respective
populations and their relative power capabilities therein, rather than simply organizing the regional hierarchy on the basis of mass quantities. The per capita aspect considers each country’s power as a function of its demographic resources and, this study argues, is more indicative of the nature of contemporary Middle East power dynamics than volume-based operationalizations would be.

Figure 2 shows a joint representation of GDP per capita trends for Israel and Iran during the given time period.

As seen in Figure 2 above, both Israel and Iran experienced steady growth in GDP per capita from 1979 to 2007. Israel maintained a clear preponderance of power, and subsequent dominance, relative to Iran throughout the entirety of the time period studied. Understanding the data in terms of power transition principles, however, requires a calculation of the ratio between the two countries’ GDP figures during the time period. This trend of relative power between Iran and Israel is shown in Figure 3.
Figure 3

Perhaps the most evident observation made from Figure 3 is that Iran still remains rather far from the 70% power parity threshold that power transition theory deems necessary for a rising state to challenge a dominant state. Also evident is that Iran experienced a significant decline in power relative to Israel in the mid-to-late 1980s. During this time, the new Islamic regime was struggling with a rapid loss of the power it had accrued under the Shah in the 1970s and was engaged in a nearly-decade long war with Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime from 1980-1988. Both countries experienced upward growth for the majority of this 1979-2007, however, and Iran’s power parity relative to Israel largely began to recover and increase following the turn of the first post-revolutionary decade (see Figure 2). Beginning in 1988, four subsequent occurrences played an important role in shaping a new phase of Iran’s national and foreign policies: the end of Iran’s war with Iraq in 1988, the death of Islamic revolutionary leader Ruhollah Khomeini and the end of the Cold War in 1989, and U.S. military presence in the region during the Gulf War in 1990. These events largely tempered Iranian resolve at increasing its power to both ensure its security and pursue its regional hegemonic aspirations.
The timing of the upswing in relative power parity between Iran and Israel is interesting in the context of American and Russian involvement in the Israeli-Iranian power transition. As noted, the Cold War ended in 1989 and two years later, in 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. These events signified an end to the bipolarity that characterized much of the 20th-century and caused a major shift in the great powers’ actions throughout the world. For instance, the United States enjoyed largely unchallenged influence as the singular dominant state in the international system and the Russian Federation, which had comprised the political center of the Soviet Union, was no longer tethered in its foreign relations by the ideological constraint of communism. Israel and Iran’s respective relationships with the United States and Russia inevitably altered with the times (to be discussed at length in the qualitative portion of this paper). Thus it is not unreasonable to consider the relative power parity between Iran and Israel in Cold War bipolarity and post-Soviet terms. As Figure 4 shows, coinciding with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Iran’s subsequently strengthened relationship with great power Russia, Iran’s power parity relative to Israel has enjoyed modest, but mostly steady, growth.
A limitation of using GDP per capita as the central indicator of national power and relative parity in a power transition context is its inability to account for certain other important contributors to national power. In the case of Israel and Iran in particular, Israel possesses a significant token of power that would be likely to deter an Iranian challenge even in the event of 70% power parity – the region’s sole nuclear arsenal, which inherently poses a weighty deterrent to any potential non-nuclear challengers. Though Iran has demonstrated modest growth vis-à-vis Israel and its growth trend may likely continue, the nuclear issue remains Iran’s ultimate obstacle to power parity and one that will be addressed in more detail later in this paper.

Status Quo Evaluations: Military Expenditures and Iranian Dissatisfaction

Lemke’s regional adaptation of power transition theory considers military expenditures to indicate a rising state’s dissatisfaction with the system’s status quo on the basis that “military buildups are a preparation for potential war” (2002, 105; Lemke and Werner 1996; Werner and Kugler 1996). In other words, dissatisfied revisionist states seeking to change the status quo are likely to prepare for confrontation with the system’s dominant state by undergoing a military buildup as they simultaneously pursue the power parity necessary to challenge the status quo. The military expenditures for Israel and Iran from 1979 to 2007 are displayed in Figure 5 below.
Iran’s substantial military expenditures in the 1980s are a result of its eight-year war with Iraq from 1980-1988 and are thus rather misleading in the context of Iran’s dissatisfaction with Israel, as those expenditures were largely unrelated to Israel at the time. Iran’s new regime expressed its discontentment with Israel and the Israeli rise to dominance following the revolution in 1979, but it was mostly preoccupied with defending itself against Iraq in the chaotic decade following the Islamic revolution. As noted in the previous section, Iran strongly reasserted its focus on gaining power and pursuing its hegemonic aspirations at the beginning of the 1990s. The Gulf War in 1990 reinforced the pervasive anti-American sentiment that existed among Iranian elites. Iran feared further American intervention in the Gulf and resented the United States for upholding Israel’s dominance and preventing Iran from fulfilling its perceived destined hegemonic role in the region. Iran’s relationship with the Russian Federation strengthened notably at this time. Among other bilateral collaborations between Russia and Iran, bargain prices in the post-Soviet arms industry enabled Iran to begin a significant defensive military buildup as it attempted to ensure its security, as well as pursue a leveraged position of power in the region (Pollack 2005, 252). Israel sensed an increasing threat emanating from Iran in the early 1990s and similarly pursued increased security.
through military strength. This distinction of policy between decades coincides with the end of the Cold War and collapse of the Soviet Union and, like the GDP per capita data illustrating Israel and Iran’s relative power parity, important trends emerge from splitting military expenditure data into Cold War bipolarity and post-Soviet periods.

![Figure 6](image)

A similar trend appears in Iran and Israel’s respective military expenditure data as with the GDP per capita data. That is, there is a marked shift between the decade following the 1979 Iranian revolution and the nearly-two decades in the post-Soviet period, during which the relationships between the regional powers and their respective great power patrons were notably strengthened. After Iran’s war with Iraq and a change in Iranian leadership following Ayatollah Khomeini’s death in 1989, Iran’s focus turned toward its own position in the Middle East hierarchy and, by extension, the obstacle Israel and the United States posed to Iranian ambitions. The Correlates of War military expenditure data shows increases in both Israeli and Iranian military expenditures from 1992-2007 (i.e. the post-Soviet, post-bipolarity period) and Iran narrowing the gap between the two in the early 2000s. Though power transition theory does not posit a particular threshold for relative military
expenditures as it does for relative power parity, such data is telling in Iran’s commitment to its military buildup and expression of its dissatisfaction with the regional status quo. The ratio of Iran’s military expenditures to those of Israel from 1992-2007 is depicted in Figure 7.

![Iran:Israel Military Expenditures](image)

Figure 7

As indicated in Figure 7, the ratio of Iran’s military expenditures to those of Israel has grown considerably in the 1992-2007 period, during which Iran sharpened its focus on regional power dynamics and developing an aggressive, revisionist foreign policy doctrine. According to power transition principles, this growth in Iranian military expenditures is an important indicator for a potential Israeli-Iranian conflict in the Middle East hierarchy.

Using military expenditures as an operationalization of status quo evaluation also possesses some analytical limitations. A rising state’s dissatisfaction with the status quo and/or the system’s dominant state is likely to manifest itself in many idiosyncratic ways in each case. While it is reasonable to expect a dissatisfied rising state to strengthen its defense capabilities and military resources prior to an expected conflict, this paper also considers it necessary to confirm military expenditure trends with explicit expressions of dissatisfaction from the rising state in question. In this case study, Iranian leaders and policies have provided a multitude of such expressions that
further strengthen the argument for Iran’s dissatisfaction with the regional status quo and will be considered in the qualitative analysis.

The qualitative portion of this study has found data on GDP per capita and military expenditures to indicate steady Iranian growth relative to Israel in both areas, although the growth is more modest in the measure of GDP per capita. The post-revolutionary period from 1979-1991 certainly contributed to bilateral antagonism between the two countries, but the oscillating data for this period largely reflects foreign policy priorities and undertakings of each of the two countries often unrelated to the other. It is thus somewhat misleading in understanding the bilateral dynamics between Israel and Iran. A shift occurred at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s in which Iran adopted a much more aggressive, hegemony-seeking foreign policy and focused on increasing its power and subsequent position in the Middle East hierarchy. This was largely in response to Israel’s dominance and, by extension, the perceived threat posed by the United States’ extra-regional influence in the Gulf. Data from both sets for the period 1992-2007 reflects this shift, as Iran and Israel each demonstrated steady growth and Iran exhibited signs of closing the gap between itself and Israel. This paper finds the quantitative representations of power parity and status quo dissatisfaction to be a reasonable foundation for developing a contextual argument for an ongoing Israeli-Iranian power transition, as well as investigating the American and Soviet/Russian great power involvement that has occurred therein.

Defenders of the Status Quo: Israeli Regional Dominance and American Participation in the Middle East Hierarchy

**Israeli Dominance in the Middle East**

The idea of a hegemon, or dominant state, in the Middle East region is a contentious issue. Many scholars would argue there is no hegemon in the Middle East and power is constantly in flux,
or that the United States acts as an extra-regional hegemon in this area of the world (Ehteshami 2004; Hudson 1996). While the United States’ presence in the Middle East exerts significant influence on the power dynamics of the region and projects undeniable American dominance, which will be an important element of this study, Israel has developed some critical attributes that position it as an arguable intra-regional hegemon.

Several important factors contribute to this study’s consideration of Israel as the Middle East’s dominant state. Israel’s regional qualitative military edge and possession of the region’s sole nuclear arsenal, as well as its relationship with the international system’s power-projecting American hegemon, are among them. Israel’s position is unique, however, as the Jewish state is isolated in an overwhelmingly Arab and Persian neighborhood and is the constant target of hostilities against both its people and its very existence. Israel’s interest in maintaining the status quo and protecting its advantaged regional position is less about projecting its influence throughout the Middle East and more about simply ensuring its security. There exists a common “perception of Israel as a regional superpower that views its relationship with the wider Arab world in terms of a ‘zero-sum’ game,” and “the old mantra that Israel has no foreign policy, only a defense policy, remains the dominant prism through which the Jewish state views its immediate external environment” (Jones 2002, 115).

Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War coincided with a decline of Egyptian dominance in the Middle East region during the mid-20th century and a subsequent weakening of the pan-Arabism that drove Egyptian power (see Hinnebusch 2002, 35-40). As regional client states of the United States, both Israel and Iran experienced a significant and concurrent rise in power throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In the latter decade, the advent of significant Iranian oil revenues and a strengthened Iranian military allowed the Shah’s regime to further consider, and begin pursuing, its regional hegemonic ambitions. Iran benefitted considerably from its relationship with the United
States at this time, as the Shah “astutely advanced Iran’s interests and role, winning concessions from Washington that other U.S. allies dared not dream of” (Parsi 2007, 38). The 1979 revolution in Iran dismantled the U.S.-supported regime, however, and dissolved Iran’s relationship with the Western superpower. Iran’s encouraging growth in power experienced a downturn in the early 1980s and its progress was further thwarted by its war with neighboring Iraq.

In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, Israel remained one of the United States foremost regional partners in the Middle East and stood to benefit from regional events unfolding in the 1980s. Of the Iran-Iraq War, the head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, David Kimche, noted “Our big hope was that [Iran and Iraq] would weaken each other to such an extent that neither of them would be a threat to us” (Parsi 2007, 112). While security considerations continued to constitute the core of Israel’s foreign policy doctrine, a preoccupied and weakened Iran and Iraq largely cleared the path for Israel’s rise to dominance in the 1980s. Israel’s power was largely drawn from, and its dominance largely characterized by, the foundations of its defense doctrine developed shortly after Israel’s creation in 1948: a qualitative military edge and a nuclear arsenal.

Israel’s focus on developing a regional qualitative military edge (QME) emerged in the mid-20th century, upon recognition that “Israel is and will continue to be quantitatively inferior vis-à-vis the Arab world and, therefore, in order to balance this, Israel must develop a very strong qualitative edge” (Steinitz 2003). Israel wanted to alert the Arab world that it could not be easily defeated. Advantages such as sophisticated military technology and superior combat training for Israeli troops initially characterized Israel’s QME and proved effective in Israel’s 1967 Six-Day War victory. France was Israel’s main great power patron in the early decades of its existence and provided much support to the primary development of Israel’s QME as part of Israel’s grand security strategy (Wunderle and Briere 2008, 5). The United States eventually assumed France’s
role as Israel’s great power patron in the early 1970s and has been committed to helping Israel maintain its QME since.2

In the mid-20th century, Israel pursued an additional guarantor of security through its development of the region’s sole nuclear arsenal. As Arab states in the region have secured access to competitive military technology and combat training, Israel has increasingly relied on its unstated nuclear capabilities as a deterrent to regional threats and challenges. Israel’s nuclear weapons remain shrouded in a certain amount of secrecy, as they have never been formally acknowledged. Current Israeli president Shimon Peres has commented, “The suspicion and fog surrounding this question are constructive, because they strengthen our deterrent” (2003). It is generally accepted that Israel, a notable non-signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), possesses these weapons and thus retains a strong deterrent against threats emanating from its hostile Arab neighborhood. As noted in a Washington Institute for Near East Policy report, “the ultimate expression of Israel’s QME is its not-so-secret possession of a nuclear arsenal” (Wunderle and Briere 2008, 6). Israel’s nuclear advantage also guides subsequent arming of states in the region:

The Arabs arm themselves to counterbalance the Israelis, but also the Iranians and other Arabs; the Israelis seek to counterbalance the collective force of all states in the region… in the Middle East half-a-dozen arms races overlap with and reinforce each other (Rodman 1991, 15).

A study of power transition theory in the twenty-first century by foremost power transition scholars notes, “The Middle East is stable because Israel now is a preponderant nuclear power” (Tammen et al. 2000, 39). The authors warn, however, “If Iran or Iraq were to achieve nuclear parity, few doubt the region would remain stable” (39). Thus to a large extent, Israel’s military edge and nuclear arsenal characterize its preponderance of power in the Middle East hierarchy for the time being.
With a rising, nuclear-ambitious Iran expressing its dissatisfaction of the status quo, however, an ongoing transition between Israel and Iran threatens to upset the power balance in the region.

Iran remains highly aware that its main obstacle to challenging Israeli dominance and facilitating a power transition in the Middle East is its lack of nuclear weapons capabilities. Should Iran succeed in overcoming that obstacle, it poses a danger to Israel’s position of dominance and, more fundamentally, its security. The discovery of Iranian attempts to enrich uranium, a necessary process for building a nuclear bomb, in 2003 contributed significantly to the likelihood of a confrontation between Iran and Israel (New York Times May 9, 2003). Facing intense international criticism, Iran claimed to have shut down its nuclear research during that same year, but has since resumed its research program, presumably in 2005 (Vaez and Ferguson 2011, 4-5). Israel was left with no choice but to acknowledge Iran as an evident existential threat and, “although aware that it [could not] solve this problem on its own through military means, [it] has nonetheless continued to relentlessly develop its military options, including securing a second-strike capability against Iran” (Schiff 2006, 31).

Israel’s ties with the conservative Arab world improved slightly with the emergence of a growing regional coalition opposing Iran’s rise. Israel’s status as the likely target of Iran’s potential nuclear program made it a natural partner of such a coalition, though “an ideologically-expansionist, nuclear-emboldened Iran clearly represents a threat to the energy-rich Sunni-ruled Gulf nations,” as well (Wunderle and Briere 2008, 11). Conservative Arab regimes, many of whom also receive support from the United States, seemed logical regional partners for Israel at this time. Israel’s grievances with the Arab world are, however, deep-seated. Israel still faced intense opposition to the Middle East Peace Process and asymmetric threats from terrorist organizations operating in many of its neighboring states. Such threats make the prospect of a successful anti-Iranian coalition tenuous at best. Iran’s rise has provided Israel and the Arab world “a partially shared threat
perception but not [yet] a confluence of interests or an ability to act on their nascent alliance”
(Wunderle and Briere 2008, 2). The potential for regional partnership provided, if not a solution to
Iran’s aggressive hegemonic and ideologically expansionist ambitions, then at least a deterrent
potentially capable of protecting Israel’s position for a few years longer.

The Participatory Role of the United States

This study considers the United States to be a great power participant in the unfolding of the
Israeli-Iranian power transition, as a patron of Israel and defender of the regional status quo. This
position inherently situates the United States against that of the USSR/Russia, which will be
considered later through Soviet and Russian contributions to Iran’s revisionist agenda. Apart from
possessing interests that align with their Israeli and Iranian partners, the two great powers’
engagement in a strategic rivalry is an important basis for understanding some of the U.S. and
USSR/Russia’s motivations for establishing regional proxies in the Middle East and their respective
involvement in the Israeli-Iranian conflict.

In the context of the Cold War, opposing mid-20th century policies in the Middle East
exacerbated tensions between the United States and its Soviet rival. A Middle East settlement
following Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War proved a particularly divisive issue for the great
powers. In a 1969 memo from Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin to U.S. President Richard Nixon,
Dobrynin asserted, “It is also known that the US and USSR have long been conducting an exchange
of views on Middle East settlement… the situation in the Middle East in the meantime, far from
going normalized, is further deteriorating” (National Security Archive 2007, 88). In reference to
Israel, Dobrynin later accused the United States of believing that “an aggressor, if it is victorious or
has influential patrons, has the right to do anything it pleases,” noting, “the Soviet Union, like most
countries in the world, vigorously opposes and will oppose such a ‘system of law’” (National
With heightened tensions over events in the region, President Nixon is reported to have “elaborated upon [the] idea that the main thing now in the Middle East is to avert a ‘tragic development’ of events that might lead to confrontation between the USSR and the United States” (National Security Archive 2007, 92).

The superpowers thus continued to exert their adversarial influences in the Gulf region, but increasingly relied on offshore balancing strategies in order to avoid a direct Cold War confrontation. Offshore balancing is a neorealist political strategy in which “an insular great power like the U.S…. [relies] on a balance of power approach that devolves to other states the costs and risks of their defense” (Layne 2009, 8). Rather than becoming directly involved in a region of strategic interests, a great power will delegate the responsibility of protecting its interests and opposing regional threats to selected regional forces or proxies. Offshore balancing allows great powers to exercise influence in a region without being accused of taking imperialist or overly authoritative measures to achieve their strategic ends. During the Cold War, smaller regions provided alternative ideological battlegrounds for the United States and the Soviet Union to act out their rivalry: “Regional conflicts were at the crux of the Cold War… the majority of violent superpower competition was instead played out in Third World disputes” (Herrmann 1992, 432). The Middle East proved no exception. The United States and Soviet Union were both intent on securing allegiances amidst the chaotic domestic politics of Gulf countries and ensuring the success of their respective ideologies in shaping political revolutions that were occurring at the time. Establishing proxies to translate their power meant regional leverage vis-à-vis their Cold War enemy.³

The 1969 Nixon Doctrine introduced American reliance on regional proxies to uphold defense and security structures that aligned with U.S. interests within a region. This allowed the United States to focus their foreign policy resources on containing the Soviet threat. The Nixon
Doctrine was, in essence, a codified offshore balancing strategy that sought “suitable states to assume regional leadership responsibilities in close cooperation with the U.S.” (Fürtig 2007, 628). The United States still acted as a dominant extra-regional force in regions such as the Middle East, particularly in the later decades of the 20th-century, but increasingly engaged in offshore balancing in order to avoid outright accusations of imperialist intentions (see Layne 2009). Ironically, the United States most heavily relied on the Shah of Iran to translate and project its power in the region before the 1979 Iranian Revolution irrevocably changed the bilateral relationship between the two countries. It is worth noting that throughout the mid-20th century, the United States also developed strong strategic relationships with the Arab regimes in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, providing them with substantial military and political support as part of its regional grand strategy (see Fürtig 2007; McHale 1980, 645-647; Sharp 2009). The United States’ relationship with the democratic Israeli regime, however, has persisted as perhaps the most salient focus of American Middle East policy and its regional offshore balancing strategy.

The United States began supplying aid to Israel soon after Israel established itself as an independent state in 1948. The arms trade aspect of the U.S.-Israeli relationship was initially modest and it was not until Israel’s Six-Day War in 1967 that the United States essentially took over France’s earlier role as Israel’s main great power patron. By 1974, Israel had become the largest recipient of U.S. foreign aid. Between 1971 and 2010, U.S. aid to Israel averaged more than $2.6 billion per year, two-thirds of which was in the form of military aid separate from the countries’ dyadic arms trade (Sharp 2010, 21). American bilateral arms trade with Israel between 1979 and 2007 averaged $670.5 million per year, over three times the average value of Soviet/Russian exports to Iran during the same period (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2010).

There is also a history of strong American domestic support for U.S. aid to Israel, both among the American population and through various lobbyist groups in Congress. The United
States’ seemingly unconditional support for Israel has, at times, become a contentious foreign policy issue (see Herrmann 1991, 45; Mearsheimer and Walt 2006; Sharp 2010). Succinctly put, “[t]he United States government has accepted the existence of Israel as a basic foreign policy interest… [though] agreement on the importance of Israel’s security does not preclude heated arguments over what is necessary to achieve this security” (Herrmann 1991, 45). For the purposes of this study, the most notable fact of the matter is the United States’ demonstrated commitment to Israel as its main regional proxy in the Middle East since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 altered the context of American involvement in the region. The nature of the United States’ participation in the Middle East power transition studied at present is twofold: it has actively supported and helped to uphold Israel’s position of dominance in the region while actively opposing the rise of a revisionist, hegemonic-seeking Iran.

Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 provided a first post-revolutionary occasion for the United States to express its support of Israel. The United States feared an exacerbation of the conflict in Beirut and its potential implications for Israeli security, as well as impending American attempts at negotiating Palestinian-Israeli peace agreements. Though the United States’ involvement was primarily focused on securing stability and driving out all foreign actors involved in the conflict, it upheld its support for Israel in its role as Israel’s great power patron. In a letter to Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin, U.S. President Ronald Reagan acknowledged American efforts “to urge that no further actions be taken against Israel that could only worsen the situation” (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2000, hereafter IMFA). Over the course of the summer of 1982, the U.S. pledged troops to help usher the Palestine Liberation Organization out of Beirut and prevent civil unrest. In a press conference following American demands for a cease-fire in August 1982, Reagan commented, “[The United States] has an obligation to ensure Israel’s survival as a nation” (IMFA 2000).
Though the United States support for Israel has been a primary element of U.S. foreign policy since the middle of the 20th-century, the overthrow of the Shah an the U.S. loss of its Iranian Middle East proxy provided an opportunity for the U.S.-Israeli partnership to officially gain primacy and secure its power in the region. In October 1983, a year after the invasion of Lebanon, U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz proposed that Israel be officially declared “America’s main partner in the Middle East” and President Reagan signed National Security Decision Directive 111 (NSDD 111) entitled “Next Steps Toward Progress in Lebanon in the Middle East” (see Primakov 2010, 214). NSDD 111, which has been declassified in part, states, “Above all else, [the United States needs] to reassert American leadership in the wide range of challenges we face in the Middle East… We must regain the initiative in the Middle East by acting once more in a bold way” (National Security Council October 29, 1983, 2). The directive demonstrated the United States’ continued commitment to exercising extra-regional leadership in the Middle East, but also indicated reliance on Israel as the linchpin of the United States’ Middle East policy in the post-revolutionary regional environment (Thomas 2007, 129).

The United States was also eager to demonstrate its dissatisfaction with the new revisionist Iranian regime in the 1980s, made most explicit by its eventual support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war. The U.S. viewed post-revolutionary Iran as a legitimate threat to vital American interests in the Middle East, including Israel’s security and its dominant regional position. American opposition to Iran’s Khomeini regime at the time proved stronger than its opposition to Saddam Hussein’s authoritarian Iraqi regime. The United States eventually decided to take sides and provide economic aid, exports licenses, and intelligence to Iraq during wartime (Parsi 2007, 113). The support it provided to Iraq demonstrated the United States’ post-revolutionary stance toward Iran and the measures it was willing to take in order to forestall Iranian attempts to manifest its regional ambitions.
The end of the Cold War in the late 1980s and collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had important implications for United States policy, Middle East and otherwise. The United States ascended into a unipolar position in the international system and was thus afforded considerable unchallenged influence in regions throughout the world. In 2006, Council of Foreign Relations President and former U.S. Ambassador Richard Haass published an assessment of different eras in modern Middle East history, considering the end of the Cold War to have “brought about a fourth era in the region’s history, during which the United States enjoyed unprecedented influence and freedom to act” (2006, 4). Despite an evident lack of power with which to challenge the United States, threats to the U.S. still emanated from dissatisfied states in the major and minor political systems all over the world, especially the Middle East. At the turn of the decade, the United States developed awareness that “the end of the Cold War did not change [American] interests that are intrinsic to the Middle East, but it radically changed the threats to them” (Herrmann 1991, 44). Iran increasingly demanded a place in U.S. foreign policy – if not yet attention, than at least acknowledgment of its efforts to increase its power and challenge the status quo of the region, particularly if the only way to achieve power parity with Israel was the development of an Iranian nuclear program. The United States was determined to stymie such challenges and, in doing so, continued to protect Israel’s position of regional dominance. Two elements of the United States’ Middle East policy in the early 1990s focused on preserving the regional status quo by supporting Israel’s dominance and ameliorating its hostile environment – an active maintenance of Israel’s qualitative military edge and a focus on mediating the Middle East Peace Process.

Israel’s qualitative military edge (QME) has been a long-standing, though at times ambiguous, element of American Israeli policy. The principle was first developed when Israel was mainly a beneficiary of France, but the United States largely assumed its patronage of Israel’s QME when it took over France’s role as Israel’s main great power patron. Although “Israel and the
United States often differ on the exact meaning and definition of QME and its application in the region… the United States will [nevertheless] continue to implicitly guarantee the security of Israel in the foreseeable future” (Wunderle and Briere 2008, 7). In the early 1990s, Israel was well aware of Iran’s military buildup in support of its more aggressive foreign policy and its hegemonic intentions. Israel appealed to its American patron to help maintain its security in the presence of growing regional threats and, under the precept of QME, the United States greatly increased the volume of its bilateral arms trade with Israel. Though arms trade between the two had reached an all-time low of $24 million in 1989, it spiked dramatically to $1.216 billion in 1991 and $1.293 billion in 1992 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2012). U.S. support for Israel indicated continued U.S. involvement in the region and lent Israel “offensive options and the perceived possibility of anti-missile defenses, [allowing it to] aspire to a secure superiority” (Herrmann 1991, 60). Nuclear considerations aside, Iran’s defensive buildup would have to grow exponentially in order to meet the 70% power parity threshold necessary to challenge Israel’s dominance in the region.

U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton made the Middle East Peace Process an important part of their respective Middle East policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The peace process aimed to improve historically adverse relations between Israel and the Arab countries in the Middle East region. Success could, most ideally, mean Arab support for Israel’s dominance and a reduction of threats to the regional status quo. The undertaking was inevitably challenging and faced opposition from many forces in the region, including Iran. Iran demonstrated its intense dissatisfaction with the Middle East Peace Process by ramping up its hostilities toward Israel. Without the power to directly challenge a U.S.-supported, nuclear-armed Israel, Iran revisited its reliance on various terrorist groups active in the region to carry out attacks on Israeli targets throughout the early 1990s, as it had done in Lebanon in 1982 (Pollack 2005, 256-257). In
remaining an active opponent of Israel’s dominance in the Middle East, Iran found a way to express its dissatisfaction and intensify the growing regional rivalry without engaging in a war for which Iran was not yet prepared.

The Clinton Administration was prepared to take measures to combat the growing Iranian threat to Israel’s security and the regional status quo. In addition to prioritizing the Middle East Peace Process when he took office in Washington in 1993, President Clinton adopted a Middle East policy of “Dual Containment” against the Iranian and Iraqi regimes perceived as hostile to American and Israeli interests in the region. Dual Containment sought to isolate both Iran and Iraq, limit their influence over the balance of power in the Middle East, and in turn strengthen the coalition of American allies in the region. Iran was, at the time, considered “a theocracy with an abiding antagonism toward the United States” that posed a regional threat to the stability and democratic values advanced by the United States and Israel (Lake 1994, 49). The United States was particularly cognizant of the threat Iran posed to Israel’s regional and the United States’ extra-regional dominance in the Middle East. Iran’s continued support of terrorist activity against Israeli targets and inevitable interest in acquiring nuclear weapons to gain power parity with Israel drove the United States to spearhead an international ostracism of Iran and its belligerent pursuits.

Under the umbrella of Dual Containment, the United States made a commitment to “work energetically to persuade [America’s] European and Japanese allies, as well as Russia and China, that it is not in their interest to assist Iran to acquire nuclear weapons or the conventional means to pose a regional threat” (Indyk 1993). Washington’s attempt at curbing imports that would support an Iranian nuclear program was primarily designed “to counter Iran’s quest for domination of the Persian Gulf” (Lake 1994, 53). The U.S. also aimed to cut off Iran’s economic ties by urging countries to cease existing trade with Iran and impose economic sanctions against the Iranian regime. Clinton administration officials furthered their anti-Iranian efforts through assertive rhetoric
condemning Iranian activities. In an October 1994 address at Georgetown University, Clinton’s Secretary of State Warren Christopher remarked:

> Iran is the world’s most significant state sponsor of terrorism and the most ardent opponent of the Middle East peace process. The international community has been far too tolerant of Iran’s outlaw behavior. Arms sales and preferential economic treatment, which make it easier for Iran to divert resources to terrorism, should be terminated. The evidence is overwhelming: Iran is intent on projecting terror and extremism across the Middle East and beyond. Only a concerted international effort can stop it (1994).

The statement left no room for question regarding the American position on Iran and its tactics in pursuing its revisionist ambitions. Not only did Christopher’s statement confirm the U.S. perception of Iran as an aggressive threat to the regional status quo, but also accomplished a subtle dig at post-Soviet Russia, who by this time had defected from efforts at Western integration and was a known Iranian economic partner and arms supplier. Neither Russia nor Iran, however, intended to heed American warnings.

The United States had taken many steps in the 1980s and early 1990s to discourage Iran’s aggressive policies and the development of an Iranian nuclear program, including official designation of Iran as a state-sponsor of terrorism, an American ban on Iranian imports to the United States (Executive Order 12613), and the 1992 Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act. In the 1992 legislation, the United States sought cooperation from the international community on preventing Iran’s weapons capabilities:

> It shall be the policy of the United States to oppose, and urgently to seek the agreement of other nations also to oppose, any transfer to Iran or Iraq of any goods or technology… wherever that transfer could materially contribute to either country’s acquiring chemical, biological, nuclear, or destabilizing numbers and types of advanced conventional weapons (Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act of 1992, Sec. 1602).

The act went on to outline the implementation of punitive sanctions against individuals or countries in violation of this policy, as the United States remained determined to prevent Iran’s revisionist rise and protect the Israeli-dominated status quo of the Middle East.
When Iran struck a nuclear reactor deal with Russia in 1995, President Clinton declared the issue of Iran a national emergency in Executive Order 12957. The order stated, “the actions and policies of the Government of Iran constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States” (Clinton 1995). The United States increased its pressure on Russia to cease cooperation with Iran on both armament and nuclear technology issues before seeking sanctions against Russia for its involvement in Iran’s nuclear technology acquisitions. When Iran filed a claim against the United States with the International Court of Justice a year later, the United States’ defense of the issue further clarified its perception of Iran as an enemy to both itself and Israel. The American representative at The Hague argued, “Iranian terrorism is aimed directly at the United States and American citizens” (Murphy 1996, 19) and “Iran is implacably opposed to the existence of the sovereign state of Israel” (25). Furthermore, “the United States has consistently stated throughout this period that its policy is to take necessary steps to protect its foreign policy and national security interests if Iran acts in a threatening manner” (Murphy 1996, 46).

A shift in Iranian political leadership in 1997, however, provided an interesting anomaly in American and Israeli post-revolutionary relations with Iran. By this time, the Iranian population had grown frustrated and disillusioned with the lack of follow through on promises made by President Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Khamene’i as the country faced economic, demographic, and social hardships. A candidate in the 1997 presidential elections, Mohammad Khatami, emerged victorious on a platform of economic and social reform. Whereas Iran has historically grappled with balancing ideology and pragmatism in its foreign policy, and its post-revolutionary leaders had thus far strongly prioritized ideology, Khatami almost immediately attempted to bring much more pragmatic considerations to the forefront (see Ramazani 1998; 2004). As president, Khatami
quickly pursued a conciliatory foreign policy toward the United States and understood the
subsequent necessity of also mollifying Iran’s hostile relationship with Israel.

In a highly publicized interview with CNN journalist Christiane Amanpour, President
Khatami spoke of Iran’s relationship with the United States, stating, “There must first be a crack in
this wall of mistrust to prepare for a change and create an opportunity to study a new situation…
[with] understanding between our two nations, a better future for both countries and nations may be
forged” (Transcript 1998). The Clinton administration, despite being restrained in its initial reaction
to Khatami’s statements, proved open to entertaining the placated shift in Iranian foreign policy.
President Clinton acknowledged, “[the United States has] real differences with some Iranian
policies, but I believe those are not insurmountable,” also saying, “I hope that we have more
exchanges between our two people and that the day will soon come when we can enjoy again good
relations with Iran” (The Washington Post January 30 1998, A28). The United States grew
cautiously convinced of Khatami’s intentions to transform the post-revolutionary Iranian regime.

The Khatami regime recognized the inherent necessity of improving Iran’s relationship with
Israel if it hoped to achieve any degree of rapprochement with the United States. Given historical
grievances against Israel’s existence in the Middle East, however, it would not be an easy task. The
global Islamic Summit Conference’s Tehran Declaration of 1997 seemed to offer a still-hostile
stance on Israel, “condemn[ing] the continued occupation by Israel of Palestinian and other Arab
territories” and “the expansionist policies and practices by Israel,” while “emphasiz[ing] the need
for Israel to desist from state terrorism which it continues to practice in utter disregard for all legal
and moral principles” (Islamic Summit Conference December 11, 1997, 4). Khatami also
acknowledged Iranian opposition to the Israel-Palestine issue, noting, “Israeli intransigence in the
course of the current peace process, and its failure to honor its own undertakings has enraged even
U.S. allies in the region” (Transcript 1998). This left Israel in a complicated position vis-à-vis Iran.
Though Khatami had minimized Iran’s hostile anti-Israeli rhetoric and blatant displays of Iranian dissatisfaction with the regional status quo, he did not reverse them. Israel remained understandably wary of Iran’s intentions. Iranian hard-liners soon removed the need for such considerations, however, as the radical sentiment behind the 1979 revolution persisted and Iranian conservatives were determined to undermine Khatami’s reformist regime.

It is important to consider whether or not attempts at Iranian-American and Iranian-Israeli rapprochement even had the potential to succeed. Improved relations between the Khatami and Clinton administrations had already faced several setbacks in their short duration. Working to overcome major barriers to U.S.-Iranian cooperation, the United States felt that Iran’s proposed concessions were largely disproportionate to the concessions Iran was demanding from the United States. For instance, Iran sought to have all imposed economic sanctions lifted and all of Iran’s remaining assets in the United States unfrozen. The United States, who had made several significant conciliatory gestures by this point, was not receiving Iranian cooperation on the major issues that prompted the sanctions in the first place – namely, Iran’s support of (notably anti-Israeli) terrorist organizations, its pursuit of nuclear weapons, and its strong opposition to the Middle East Peace Process (Pollack 2005, 338). This perceived incompatibility of action taken in the interest of positive collaboration had already placed a strain on the countries’ freshly restored bilateral relations.

In addition, as noted earlier in reference to the Tehran Declaration, Iran ultimately remained strongly opposed to Arab-Israeli reconciliation and was strongly pro-Palestinian. As the United States’ main regional partner in the Middle East, Israel continued to be a foremost priority of U.S. foreign relations. The United States would likely not develop lasting relations with a state whose deep-seated ambitions included not only replacing Israel as regional hegemon, but also potentially opposing the very existence of the Israeli state. By the time George W. Bush was elected U.S.
President in November 2000, the prospect of renewed Iranian-American relations, and any softening of Iranian-Israeli hostilities, had essentially dissolved.

In a devastating strike against the United States on its own soil, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 rendered terrorism a complex and ambiguous non-state enemy of the U.S. and signaled a new phase of American engagement in the Middle East. The attacks led to the emergence of an essential aberration in U.S. foreign policy referred to as the Bush Doctrine, under which the hawkish, neoconservative Bush administration launched a war on terror and once again established a military presence in the Middle East. The Bush Doctrine was characterized, generally, by action taken on the part of the U.S. to target countries suspected of harboring the terrorists responsible for the attacks. It also included a policy of regime change, in which the United States sought to replace hostile Arab regimes with pro-Western democracies. The United States executed its plan twofold, targeting the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and later the Hussein regime in Iraq, on the basis of its suspected arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. With the war on terror, the dominant United States largely redefined the greatest perceived threat to the 21st-century world.

As a constant target of asymmetric terrorist attacks in the Middle East, Israel supported the war on terror and its potential to eliminate one of the major threats to its regional security. In addition, a U.S. military presence in the region added a tangible layer of protection and security against anti-Israeli hostilities. It was unlikely that any potential challenger would issue attacks against Israeli targets with American troops present in the region. Iran, on the other hand, was opposed to U.S. military presence in the region, particularly in lieu of its regional objectives. While U.S. involvement in the Middle East continued to thwart Iran’s hegemonic aspirations, the salience of that particular concern was temporarily sidelined and replace with a strong Iranian fear of being included in Bush’s regime change policy. Iran’s greatest fear was an American invasion of Iran on
the premise of replacing Iran’s theocratic government with a democracy, as the U.S. had attempted in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The United States accepted Iran’s strategic support for American undertakings in the region, particularly in the dismantling of the Hussein regime in Iraq. Iranian support ultimately proved incompatible with American interests, however, as Iran remained openly opposed to the Middle East Peace Process and continued its support of certain terrorist organizations. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union Address famously included Iran in an “Axis of Evil” with Iraq and North Korea, essentially declaring it an enemy of the United States once again. Interpreting Bush’s words as a threat of military action, Iran quickly withdrew its support of the United States and once again grew increasingly hostile toward both U.S. intervention and Israeli dominance in the region. Iran’s revisionist ambitions were greatly tempered in the mid-2000s as a result and it became narrowly focused on its pursuit of a nuclear weapons program to bolster its regional position. The Iranian nuclear question and the resulting potential for an Israeli-Iranian confrontation has since become one of the defining foreign policy issues of contemporary international relations.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, addressing the Iranian nuclear issue and spearheading international efforts to curb Iran’s ability to develop a nuclear weapons program has been a United States foreign policy priority. The United States has gone through both the United Nations Security Council and the International Atomic Energy Association to press for punitive sanctions against Iran and continuous inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities (see Vaez and Ferguson 2011). It has also pressured great powers in the international system to refrain from and/or cease cooperation with Iran on its nuclear program, targeting Iran’s Russian partner in particular. An increase in belligerent anti-Israeli rhetoric emanating from Tehran has further concerned the United States with regard to Iran’s nuclear program. Explicit denunciations of Israel and Israeli regional dominance, combined with Iran’s relentless nuclear ambitions, has greatly
intensified the bilateral regional tension and brought the possibility of an Israeli-Iranian power transition conflict closer to fruition in the latter half of the 2000s.

**Revisionist Forces: A Dissatisfied Iran and Russia’s Regional Participation**

*Iran’s Dissatisfaction with the Regional Status Quo*

Growing Iranian discontent with the Shah’s policies became manifest in 1979 when an Islamic revolution ousted the Shah from power. Domestic roots of the revolution have been studied extensively (see Arjomand 1985; Kurzman 1996; Rasler 1996), though the complexity of motivations behind the movement makes pinpointing an exact cause difficult. The Iranian population had many different grievances with the Shah’s regime, ranging from discontentment with the government’s secularism to suffering hardship as a result of the regime’s economic policies. While the foundations of the revolution were fragmented from the outset, there were persistent religious and xenophobic undercurrents to the revolution. Ruhollah Khomeini, poised to become the first Supreme Leader of the new Islamic state, emerged as a central mobilizing figure of the revolution on a platform of Islamic ideals and ardent anti-Americanism. After a power vacuum emerged due to the deposition of the Shah, Khomeini and the radical mullahs seized control and established their authority as leaders of the new Islamic Republic of Iran.

The revolution had swift and considerable implications for Iran’s relations with both its former American patron and Israel, which had thrived under the Shah’s regime. Distinguishing Iran’s consideration of the United States and Israel is, at times, a difficult undertaking – though it expresses specific issues with each of the countries, Iran views the United States and Israel as closely interwoven and Israel as an extension of unwelcome American influence in the Middle East. Iran’s dissatisfaction with Israel’s dominance in the Middle East hierarchy thus implies a strong
dissatisfaction with the United States, as well. Resistance to U.S. influence and American patronage of Israel is a noteworthy impetus for Iran’s revisionist ambitions in the Middle East.

Following the revolution, the Khomeini regime “quickly reversed the political-strategic orientation of the former regime, and the process of de-Westernization began” (Rubinstein 1981, 599). Not only were Iranian politics traumatized by a deep-seated resentment of historic foreign intervention and dominance, but many Iranians also still sought retribution against the United States for its participation in the 1953 coup of former Iranian leader Mohammad Mossadeq and the Shah’s installation (Pollack 2005, 155). In casting off its role as a regional U.S. proxy, post-revolutionary Iran sacrificed the American support that inherently lent it considerable power in the mid-20th century. Khomeini was not interested in being a mere channel of power for the United States, convinced that great powers seeking domination in the Middle East intended to “keep [Iran] backward, to keep us in our present miserable state so they can exploit our riches, our underground wealth, our lands and our human resources” (Khomeini 1981, 34). Iran was evermore determined to fulfill what it believed to be its natural role as regional hegemon. Iran’s key geostrategic location, vast natural resources, and rich history and culture all contributed to the long-standing Iranian sentiment of deserved regional authority (see Chubin 2000; Haass 2006, 6; Herzig 2004, 506; Parsi 2006, 498-504). Though “regional primacy has been the norm rather than the exception for Iran throughout its three-thousand-year history,” the issue of Iranian hegemony quickly became a defining characteristic of the Islamic Republic’s new regime (Parsi 2007, 39).

Khomeini openly exhibited resentment toward the United States’ extra-regional dominance in the Middle East, as American influence prevented Iran from rising to its perceived rightful position of power. Post-revolutionary Iran grew intent on gaining enough power to both rise to a dominant position in the region, export the Islamic revolution, and be able to limit foreign (i.e. American) intervention and influence in the Middle East as much as possible. Khomeini declared,
We have often proclaimed this truth in our domestic and foreign policy, namely that we have set as our goal the world-wide spread of the influence of Islam and the suppression of the rule of world conquerors… We wish to cause the corrupt roots of Zionism, capitalism, and Communism to wither throughout the world (Schirazi 1997, 8).

Iran, however, had suffered a significant loss of power following its revolution in 1979 and was further weakened by its eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s (Correlates of War 2010). Its expression of dissatisfaction with American participation in the region’s power balance and the United States’ support of Israel were as of yet unable to be acted upon.

While Iran endured a notable loss of power following the revolution, Israel became the main American regional proxy and the region’s dominant state with a preponderance of military strength. Post-revolutionary relations between the two Middle East countries, who had a largely cooperative relationship during the mid-20th century, quickly grew hostile. Iran continued its attempts to export Islamic revolutions to its Arab neighbors, gain their support in Iran’s quest for regional leadership, and take a strategic stance against perceived sources of regional animosity (see Parsi 2006). As the avowed enemy of a Palestinian state and a channel for unwelcome U.S. influence in the region, Israel was identified as a major source of anti-Arab animosity and became a strategic target of Iran’s increasingly hostile foreign relations. In his book Islam and Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini asserted, “All of [Iran’s] troubles today are caused by America and Israel. Israel itself derives from America,” and later referred to Israel as “the tool of tyrannical superpowers” and “the universally recognized enemy of Islam and the Muslims” (1981, 187, 440, 197).

As a Jewish state, Israel was also inherently excluded from Iran’s attempts at using pan-Islamism to unite the region. Iran hoped to strengthen its ties with its Arab neighbors through their common religion, as Iran’s Persian roots precluded its participation in pan-Arab ideologies that dominated the region at the time. Iran considered Islam, despite its internal division of Shi’a and Sunni, to be a promising unifier of the region with the potential “to bridge the Persian-Arab divide
and establish a normative framework that included, rather than excluded, Iran from the peoples of the region” (Parsi 2006, 510). Israel’s ostracism from an Islamic coalition would further isolate the state, as Iran hoped to fortify relations with other Arab states and gain their support for its regional leadership intentions.

This pronounced Iranian shift toward expressing explicit opposition to Israel had clear implications for the region and its next anticipated power transition. Khomeini viewed “submission to the demands of the pseudo-state of Israel… [as] a sign of weakness, servility, and treachery to Islam and the Muslims” and, foreshadowing a future conflict between Iran and Israel, warned, “Every Muslim has a duty to prepare himself for battle against Israel” (1981, 191, 276). Though as of yet unable to secure power parity to directly challenge Israel’s dominance since 1979, post-revolutionary Iran quickly established the second requirement of regional power transition: an evident dissatisfaction with the status quo set forth by Israel and its American patron. Over the course of the past three decades, Iran has openly expressed this dissatisfaction in numerous ways.

Though Iran was greatly preoccupied with its war with Iraq in the 1980s, it maintained a strategic involvement in regional events that coincided with its hegemonic aspirations. This mostly involved supporting Sh’ia populations and radical opposition groups in Sunni-majority countries in its attempts to export its revolution and inspire Islamic uprisings. Iran also kept watch on the actions of its new Israeli enemy. In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon. Though the motivations and implications of the Israeli invasion were multidimensional and highly interrelated to other countries and causes throughout the region, as most Middle Eastern politics are, a main impetus was targeting armed militants of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) based in Lebanon and carrying out attacks against Israeli targets (see Yaniv and Lieber 1983).

Khomeini viewed Israel’s attack on Lebanon and the PLO as an Israeli attempt to extend its influence in the region and undermine the pan-Islamic platform of post-revolutionary Iranian
foreign policy (Parsi 2007, 102-104). Apart from providing support to Lebanon’s Shi’a population against the Israelis, Iran also played a significant role in the establishment of Hizballah, an umbrella organization designed to coordinate and integrate the activities of existing radical Shi’a groups opposing Israel’s presence in Lebanon. Iran provided Hizballah with “organizational structure, training, material support, moral guidance, and often operational direction” (Pollack 2005, 201) The group carried out attacks against Israeli and American forces in Lebanon under the same tenets of pan-Islamism and anti-Americanism that guided Iranian foreign policy. Hizballah has not only been a primary non-state antagonist of Israel since that time, but has remained a client of Iran, receiving funding from the Iranian government and training from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (see Fuller 2007). Through its patronage of Hizballah, Iran established a way to fight Israel in Lebanon and carry out indirect attacks on what it perceived to be Israel’s increasing threat to Islamic movements in the Middle East. The Israeli invasion of Lebanon provided Iran an early opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to challenging Israel’s dominant position in the Middle East and take action to that end where Iran was able.

In June 1989, Iranian Supreme Leader and the central figure of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, died. He left a weakened Iran struggling with postwar reconstruction in the hands of new Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i and Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. As the highest religious authority of Iran’s theocratic state, much of Iran’s political power was consolidated under Khamene’i. The transition did not render Khomeini a mere predecessor and figure of Iran’s past, however, as both Iranian society and its politics embraced Khomeini’s legacy. According to many Iranians, “Khomeini was the source of all legitimacy in post-revolutionary Iran… [and] Khamene’i had to careful to remain firmly within the parameters outlined by the Imam” (Pollack 2005, 242). This meant adopting hard line policies that appealed to
the radicals who had ensured the Islamic Republic’s lasting power through its first post-revolutionary decade.

This change in Iranian leadership notably coincided with a momentous shift in the international system later that year. On December 3, 1989, Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President George H.W. Bush declared the Cold War officially over. The consequences of the superpower détente emerged in full two years later when the Soviet Union collapsed, disintegrating from a 70+ year Cold War superpower into 15 politically autonomous states. The end of the Cold War had significant implications for the highly polarized international system. The defining ideological clash of the 20th-century evaporated and the allegiances carefully constructed by each side stood to be rendered politically obsolete in the aftermath. Iran was no exception to those affected, as a unipolar United States reasserted its extra-regional dominance in the Middle East and the Russian Federation developed into an ideologically liberated strategic partner for Iran.

Iran emerged from the turn of the decade with a strategic reorientation under its new leadership, albeit still in line with Khomeini’s revolutionary and post-revolutionary principles. Iran felt threatened by the United States’ 1990 Desert Storm military operation in Kuwait, regarding great power encroachment in its neighborhood as a hindrance to its ambitions. Iran was thus intent on executing a significant defensive military buildup that would allow it to defend itself against not only foreign intervention in the Gulf, but any attack or threat within the region that deterred an Iranian rise in power. The setbacks suffered during Iran’s eight-year war with Iraq, a strengthened and regionally dominant Israel, and the reintroduction of U.S. military presence in the region led Iran to construct a more aggressive, hegemonic-seeking foreign policy in the early 1990s under Khamene’i and Rafsanjani. Though Iran “bec[a]me a renewed concern for the Arab Gulf” at this time, however, it remained acutely aware of its weaknesses (Herrmann 1991, 57). Iran possessed insufficient military power and bilateral arms trade resources to achieve its goals.\(^7\) Despite its
opposition to great power influence in the Gulf, Iran finally sought the necessary support that it had rebuffed in its post-revolutionary decade and forged stronger ties with post-Soviet Russia in the interest of strengthening its own regional position relative to Israel and the United States’ regional dominance.

In the early 1990s, Iran faced another threat centered on Israel and facilitated by the United States – George H.W. Bush and his successor, Bill Clinton, became heavily focused on mediating the Middle East Peace Process between Israel and its Arab neighbors. The peace process was “anathema to both Iran’s ideology and its strategic position” (Pollack 2005, 245). The pursuit of a harmonious balance between Israel and its Arab neighbors threatened Iran’s attempt at securing Arab support for its leadership through pan-Islamism. As a state openly hostile to Israel’s regional leadership, the prospect of peace process success also stood to ostracize Iran from regional politics entirely and therein endanger its ability to challenge Israel’s dominance when it finally did reach appropriate power parity. Combined with its openly anti-status quo and anti-Semitic tilt, Iran’s ardent opposition to the Middle East Peace Process also proved Iran’s biggest obstacle to eliminating American influence in the region. The United States’ intent focus on peace process success was so great that,

when the Israelis made it clear to Washington that they were alarmed enough by the latest round of the Iranians’ misbehavior to call into question their ability to take further steps on the peace process… Washington [would] take steps against Iran in an effort to reassure Jerusalem and keep the process moving forward (Pollack 2005, 260).

American policy toward Iran was thus largely based on its protection of Israel and advancing its own interests in the region. Much to Iran’s dismay, the U.S. was not relinquishing offensive strategies or vacating the region, particularly as a slowly recovering and ambitious Russia secured growing influence in Iran at this time.
Iran continued its antagonism of Israel during this time period, mostly through its continued support of terrorist organizations that were attacking Israeli targets worldwide. These included Iran’s Hizballah client organization and the PLO, which had been a main actor in Beirut in 1982. Iran was relentless in expressing its dissatisfaction with Israeli dominance, even when it lacked the power to directly challenge Israel. Israel still held a tenable preponderance of power in the region with its lone nuclear arsenal and the deterrent effect it had on potential challengers. Iran knew its greatest hope for achieving power parity to address Israeli and American dominance in the region was a nuclear weapons program. Even the United States, in its nearly unconditional protection of Israel and the regional status quo, would have to tread carefully against a nuclear Iran. If Iran’s defensive military buildup at the turn of the decade was considered preliminary evidence of its intentions to challenge Israel’s dominant position, then Iran’s January 1995 deal with Moscow to build a nuclear reactor in the Iranian city of Bushehr lent that evidence considerable foundation. It also signified a strengthened partnership with its post-Soviet Russian patron.

The 1997 shift in Iranian leadership, mentioned briefly in the previous section, temporarily altered Iran’s foreign policy doctrine and subdued its bold expressions of aspiring to regional leadership. President Khatami developed a foreign policy doctrine “based on nonviolence and friendly relations with all countries as long as they recognize Iran’s independence and do not pursue an aggressive policy towards it” (Ramazani 1998, 181). Khatami made marked efforts at retaining assertions of Iranian independence and opposition to foreign intervention, while taking a conciliatory approach designed to reverse Iran’s reputation as a belligerent and dangerous state that required ostracism from the regional and international communities. He even went so far as to openly embrace the doctrine of a democratic peace in Iranian foreign policy and, at the Islamic Summit Conference of 1997, issued a joint statement of the Islamic community’s collaborative priorities in which the participants:
Consider[ed] the revival of the Islamic civilization a peaceful global reality; express[ed] their concern at tendencies to portray Islam as a threat to the world, and emphasize[d] that the Islamic civilization is firmly and historically grounded in peaceful coexistence, cooperation and mutual understanding among civilizations, as well as constructive discourse with other religions and thoughts… Also emphasize[ing] that effective, constructive and meaningful participation of Islamic countries in the management of international affairs is essential for maintaining peace and security in the world, and establishing the new world order on the basis of equality, justice, and promoting morality and Divine values (Islamic Summit Conference December 11, 1997, 14 and 24).

The Tehran Declaration documented this new Iranian commitment to regional and international cooperation. Iran under Khatami began to embrace its Arab neighbors as partners, rather than attempt to coerce them into supporting the prospect of a hegemonic Iran.

Forces in Iran, however, were dissatisfied with Khatami’s new orientation and were prepared to challenge it. Perhaps foreshadowing the fate of conciliation, Iranian scholar R.K. Ramazani noted in 1998, “Khatami’s [ambitious and visionary] agenda… will inevitably be challenged by the constraints of both domestic and international power politics (187). Khatami’s conservative counterparts ensured that Iran’s friendship with the West and Israel would prove to be only a blip in post-revolutionary Iranian foreign policy. Following the 1997 elections, Iranian hard-liners, who upheld the revolutionary tenets of securing a regional leadership position and expelling American influence from the Middle East, went to work regaining the power to challenge Khatami and his ideologically blasphemous rapprochement with the United States. In the summer of 1999, the hard-liners concentrated their efforts and launched a campaign against Khatami’s reformist regime. It appeared the spirit of the radical religious impetus behind the revolution had preserved its momentum and was determined to maintain control over the Islamic Republic. This was not least of all due to the nature of a theocratic state. Ayatollah Khamene’i, who had largely opposed Khatami’s reshaping of Iran’s foreign policy, possessed an undeniably powerful trump card as Supreme Leader. Ultimately, “Iran was ruled by a regime in which the lion’s share of power – and everything
that truly mattered – was in the hands of people who were not ready or interested in improving ties with the United States” (Pollack 2005, 342).

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks redefined American involvement in the Middle East and Iran’s subsequent reaction. Iranian support for the United States was offered primarily in order to avoid becoming a target of the Bush Doctrine and its policy of regime change. Iran also had a strong interest in staying apprised of U.S. military operations, fearing post-regime change chaos in neighboring Afghanistan similar to that which had occurred after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Iran did, however, support the U.S. overthrow of longtime enemy Saddam Hussein and sought to stay informed on military operations in Iraq. By knowing when to get involved, Iran was able to entertain the idea of helping establish a Shi’a dominated Iraqi government in the political vacuum that would emerge in the aftermath of deposing Hussein. Iranian and American interests in the region, however, proved to be irreconcilable. Iran continued its support of various terrorist organizations as the United States fought its war on terror. Iran also remained adamantly opposed to the Middle East Peace Process and Israel’s regional dominance, which the United States was fighting to uphold. Bush’s inclusion of Iran in the “Axis of Evil” in the 2002 State of the Union Address severed the temporary bilateral cooperation between the two countries and inspired a new Iranian determination to improve its regional position in the Middle East hierarchy.

Current Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assumed power in August 2005 on a platform virtually as far from that of his predecessor, the moderate Khatami, as one can imagine. The highly increased threat perception emanating from Iran in recent years is largely due to Ahmadinejad’s belligerent policy positions and strongly anti-Western and anti-Israeli rhetoric. In some ways, Ahmadinejad seems to represent the embodiment of Iran’s desire for a regional power transition. He has also been the primary instigator of Iran’s continued pursuit of a nuclear weapons
program in the face of international sanctions, International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) inspections, and regional and international criticism. As noted, the Iranian nuclear matter now constitutes the major issue surrounding Iran’s possibly imminent attempt at rising to power in the Middle East. Iran’s nuclear ambitions are nothing if not persistent, as a nuclear arsenal represents the ultimate expression of power parity to wield in the face of a dominant Israel and an influential United States.

The Participatory Role of the Soviet Union & Russia

As an atheist state with uncompetitive technology relative to its American rival, the Soviet Union had its work cut out for itself securing alliances in the Middle East during the 20th-century Cold War. With a resurgence of Islamic and nationalist sentiment throughout the region, many Arab regimes were resistant to the idea of foreign influence, particularly the ideological caveats tied to establishing relations with the communist Soviet Union. Nonetheless, the USSR remained actively engaged in the Middle East throughout the 20th-century. It established strong ties with several Arab regimes, particularly Syria, and strived to infuse communist overtones into the revolutionary fervor sweeping the region (see Holbik and Drachman 1971; McInerney 1992; Primakov 2010, Ch. 5; Spechler 1986). The Soviet Union faced no dearth of difficulty in doing so.

The persistence of Soviet Middle East policy in the face of such difficulties was largely strategic. Motivated by its zero-sum competition with the United States, the USSR’s “complex and ambivalent” policy in the region was also “motivated by both calculations of profit and damage limitation, of opportunism and conservatism” (Chubin 1983, 923). The Soviet Union was highly aware of the Gulf region’s proximity to its southern border, its rich natural resources, and the domestic political instability many of the countries were experiencing at the time. It was equally aware of its American rival’s attempts at increasing its foothold in the region and the presence of
two American intelligence collection stations in northern Iran gathering data on Soviet nuclear and missile testing in Central Asia (Rubinstein 1981, 599). Soviet Middle East policy was therefore as defensive as it was offensive, simultaneously aimed at ensuring control of its own security and advancing its power projection and potential profit in the Middle East.

To this end, no country stood to be as ideal a partner for the Soviet Union as Iran. According to zero-sum principles, the overthrow of the Shah in 1979 translated into a loss of a regional proxy for the United States and an opportunistic gain for the Soviet Union. Considering Iran’s crucial geostrategic position bordering the Soviet Union, the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean, and the strongly anti-American Khomeini regime that replaced the Shah, post-revolutionary Iran became “the logical place for [Soviet] entry into Gulf politics” (Chubin 1983, 945). It was, however, far from a smooth entry for the USSR and the revolution itself was only a precursory condition to developing a Soviet/Russian-Iranian relationship that could challenge that of the United States and Israel.

An initial obstacle the USSR faced in establishing relations with Iran was the Khomeini regime’s rapid adoption of a “nonalignment” foreign policy doctrine in the bipolar framework of the international system. Khomeini famously claimed that Iran “[has] turned its back on the East and the West, on the Soviet Union and America, in order to run our country for ourselves” (1981, 306; see also Ramazani 1989; Rubinstein 1981, 600). The Soviets nonetheless maintained an interest in developing a relationship with the anti-American, post-revolutionary Iran. The Iranians had shifted more toward intense anti-Americanism than anti-Sovietism, which proved an important factor in seeking to strengthen Soviet-Iranian ties. As suggested by Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev in a report to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), “the most salient consideration shaping Soviet policy toward Iran is Tehran’s anti-American and anti-Western orientation” (Rubinstein 1981, 616). Several other changes in Iranian policy after the revolution also appealed...
to Soviet strategic interests in the region, including the cessation of operations at the American intelligence bases in northern Iran and the permissible open existence of the communist, pro-Moscow Tudeh Party in Iran. Despite ideological differences, the Tudeh Party had supported Khomeini in opposition to the Shah and had aligned itself with the revolution. The amalgamation of these factors “virtually eliminated all the persistent sources of tension between Moscow and the Shah” (Rubinstein 1981, 601).

Though previous obstacles to cooperation between the Soviet Union and Iran were seemingly eliminated with the revolution, however, new problems soon arose. Iran’s policy of nonalignment meant that although the new regime was opposed to American involvement in the Middle East, it was also wary of a strong Soviet presence and therefore not intent on using the revolution as an opportunity to transfer Cold War allegiances. Iran was focused on assuming regional leadership and constructing a regional system that would be impervious to all great power presence in the Gulf, which included the USSR. Thus “Iran’s role as the guarantor of security in the Persian Gulf required that the Soviet Union stay out of the region” (Parsi 2006, 504). This posed an initial complication to establishing bilateral relations in the first post-revolutionary decade.

Soviet Middle East policy at the time of the revolution further complicated its post-revolutionary courtship of Iran. In December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan against a mujahedeen guerilla movement rising in resistance to the pro-Soviet communist Afghan government that had been installed in April 1978. There was great opposition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, not least of which came from Iran. Perceived as a manifestation of Iran’s greatest fear of foreign domination, the Soviet military intervention was interpreted by Iran as a threat against the whole Middle East. As stated by Iranian Foreign Minister Sadeq Ghotbzadeh, “the military intervention of the government of the Soviet Union… is considered a hostile measure not
only against the people of [Afghanistan] but against all Moslems of the world” (Rubinstein 1981, 607). The event proved an additional setback to a prompt establishment of Soviet-Iranian relations.

The USSR demonstrated its commitment to forming a partnership with Iran once again during the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. Iran and Iraq shared a complex and hostile historical relationship and the Soviet Union found itself caught between its standing partnership with Iraq and its attempts to gain the confidence of the new Iranian regime. Angered by Hussein’s aggressive actions toward Iran, the USSR quickly declared neutrality at the beginning of the conflict and halted the Soviet supply of arms to Iraq (Primakov 2010, 309). The declaration of neutrality appeared more of a formality, however, as the USSR’s role in the conflict continued to oscillate throughout the eight-year war. The Soviets saw larger potential for strategic gains in Iran and, despite declaring neutrality, made an offer of Soviet arms to the Khomeini regime in October 1980 in an attempt to gain Iran’s trust. Constituting yet another setback to the Soviet-Iranian relationship, the offer was denied by Iran, who again demonstrated its opposition to foreign intervention in Iranian affairs (Primakov 2010, 309; Rubinstein 1981, 610). The Soviet strategic partnership with Iran was thus stalled until profound changes in the regional and international environment at the end of the 1980s finally presented the opportunity for a strengthened Moscow-Tehran alliance.

With Iran’s strategic reorientation under President Rafsanjani and Ayatollah Khamene’i beginning in 1989, the Soviet Union finally gained an opportunity to act as a great power patron to Iran. Iran was economically weakened after its eight-year war with Iraq and was intent on postwar reconstruction, as well as executing a significant military buildup. These policy priorities led Iran to seek improved relations with the Soviet Union on the basis of securing economic aid and armaments it had initially refused in 1980. In 1989, President Rafsanjani negotiated a long-term economic and trade agreement with the Soviet Union worth US$15 billion (Herzig 2004, 504). Bilateral arms trade between the two countries also skyrocketed at this time, with an 88% increase
in Soviet arms exports to Iran between 1989 and 1991 (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute 2010). The great power-regional power relationship between the two countries finally began to take shape as the world transitioned into the post-Cold War, post-Soviet era.

The end of the Cold War and disintegration of the Soviet Union are often considered in conjunction, particularly where implications for the international system are concerned. The end of the Cold War suggested a weakened Soviet Union no longer able to legitimately challenge the United States in the 20th-century bipolar system.\(^\text{10}\) The collapse of the USSR announced by Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev on December 25, 1991 provided the evidence of such deterioration and formally remove the United States’ bipolar counterpart from the international power structure. The Russian Federation, which had comprised the political center of the Soviet Union and emerged as the largest autonomous state after the collapse, was not intent on remaining marginalized. Russia was determined to find ways to remain both internationally relevant and a disturbance to United States foreign policy. As stated by former Soviet Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov following the collapse, “The international situation requires that Russia be not merely a historically great power, but a great power right now” (Garnett 1997, 66).

The implications for Russia’s foreign relations at this time, particularly with Iran, were nonetheless an understandable cause for concern. The Soviet Union’s rival superpower position vis-à-vis the United States had possessed strong appeal for the anti-American Khomeini regime and provided a basis of mutual interest for establishing Soviet-Iranian relations. The Soviet collapse “depriv[ed] the Islamic Republic [of Iran] of its main potential counterbalance to the threat posed by U.S. global pre-eminence” (Herzig 2004, 505). The setback did not constitute a deal breaker for Russian-Iranian relations, however, and the bilateral partnership strengthened in the early 1990s as Russia began to more actively participate in Iran’s challenge to American and Israeli dominance in the Middle East.
Though not as effective a strategy as it might have been in the bipolar Cold War environment, Iran’s strengthened relationship with Russia was essentially a strategic response to Israel’s relationship with the United States. Not only did Iran know it was unable to develop the capabilities to challenge Israel for regional hegemony on its own, but Russia and Iran shared an important mutual role in their respective political systems. Gresh (1998, 72) argues, “the Moscow-Tehran alliance is rooted in the fact that both countries are up against the efforts of various powers which, for different reasons, are trying to keep them out of regional and international structures.” In the post-revolutionary and post-Soviet world, Russia and Iran have both developed into anti-status quo states with notions of being denied the power and subsequent dominance their territory, history, and culture should afford them.

The removal of the Communist ideological stipulation inherent to Soviet-era foreign relations also benefited the Russian-Iranian relationship. No longer motivated by spreading Communist ideals and perpetuating the crude dichotomy of East versus West, Russia was now free to embrace more creative and profitable foreign policy strategies (Gresh 1998, 71; Herrmann 1992, 458; Primakov 2010, 75). The theocratic state of Iran thus became a much more justifiable partner than its Islamic regime had allowed it to be in the Soviet era. The adversarial notion of East vs. West did not simply disappear with the collapse, however, and the mutual anti-American leaning of both countries made a military strengthened Iran ideal for challenging American dominance and its Israeli partner in the Middle East. Iran was able to take advantage of bargain prices in the post-Soviet arms industry to begin its military buildup. Russia, in turn, was able to enter the profitable international arms market to help facilitate the revival of its struggling economy.

Russia and Iran’s respective geostrategic locations also proved to be mutually beneficial in the establishment of their bilateral relationship. After the Soviet collapse, Russia was intently focused on maintaining influence and power projection capabilities among the former Soviet sphere
consisting of 15 newly autonomous states (see Garnett 1997; Gresh 1998; Herzig 2004; Trenin 2006). Iran’s geostrategic location positions it on the Caspian Sea, bordering former Soviet republics Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan (see Appendix A). Iran’s proximity to both Central Asia and the Persian Gulf thus placed it at the cross-section of sustained Russian influence in the former Soviet space and anticipated Russian influence in the politically and economically valuable Middle East. The geography of the Russian-Iranian partnership benefitted Iran, as well. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the immediate threat of superpower intervention and dominance emanating from Iran’s north and liberated the populations of Iran’s Muslim Central Asian neighbors from the yoke of secularism. Though “Islamic unity may be no more than a slogan… there is no denying Middle Eastern influence on the development of radical Islam in the Caucasus” and Iran’s partnership with Russia posed an undeniable opportunity for Iran to use pan-Islamism to generate Central Asian support for its hegemonic aspirations (Gresh 1998, 74).

The two countries’ similar identities, mutual interest in challenging American dominance, and advantageous geographic locations indicate how Russia’s great power “intentions and preferences strongly correlate with the structure of local relations” and suggest that Russia was able to contribute to Iran’s revisionist ambitions in the Middle East hierarchy without overpowering power transition dynamics in the region (Lemke 2002, 52). Neither Russia nor Iran sought the type of warm friendship that the United States and Israel shared, nor was Iran interested in being perceived as a mere translator of Russian influence in the Middle East. Understanding the opportunity to profit from each other’s position, the Russian-Iranian partnership was a natural one and was highly strategic on both sides from the start. It was their respective strategic interests, which proved highly complementary, that contributed greatly to both the development of the Russian-Iranian dyad in the 1990s and Iran’s notable rise throughout the 1990s and 2000s.
Russian-Iranian nuclear cooperation was perhaps one of the foremost defining characteristics of its relationship in the 1990s. In a bold challenge to nuclear non-proliferation efforts and the United States’ explicit attempts to deny Iran nuclear potential (e.g. the Iran-Iraq Arms Non-Proliferation Act of 1992), the two countries struck the Bushehr nuclear reactor deal in January 1995. By that time, Iran had made several attempts at securing a deal for its first nuclear power plant, soliciting technology from various countries throughout Europe and Asia. Most countries deferred or rejected Iran due in large part to American pressure. Iran’s attempts included two Bushehr deals struck with the USSR/Russia in 1990 and 1993 that fell through, mostly due to financial setbacks. The 1995 deal, valued at $800 million, arranged for the construction of Iran’s nuclear power plant and detailed further cooperation between the two countries regarding nuclear fuel, further project financing, and installation of the reactors (Koch and Wolf 1998). Iran had finally achieved its foray into nuclear energy and Russia had openly defied U.S. attempts to gain international cooperation on isolating the Iranian threat, choosing to assist in the escalation of the Iranian threat rather than cede to a dominant United States. In other words, the Bushehr deal was a strategic win-win for both countries.

Russia and Iran largely portrayed the Bushehr reactor as being intended for research and energy purposes only. This portrayal was, more or less, the two countries’ attempts to avoid the worst of inevitable international backlash. For the most part, Russia publicly denied both Iran’s perceived threat to the Middle East status quo and its ambitions for a nuclear weapons program. In response to American efforts to convince Moscow to cancel the deal, Russia argued the United States was trying to deny Russia profit from developing a position in the nuclear technology market. Everyone, including the Russians, knew these public justifications to be false indicators of both the nature and implications of the deal and the motivations behind it. With the Bushehr deal, Russia and Iran had successfully demonstrated an outright rejection of U.S. dominance and found “a way
of expressing independence and obtaining leverage over the West” (Tarock 1997, 210). Their strategic interests had again coincided and benefitted Iran’s revisionist position in the Middle East hierarchy.

On June 20, 1995, Russia and the United States signed the Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement stipulating that Russia was to end all military sales to Iran once existing Russian-Iranian contracts were completed (Freedman 2002, 2). Russia’s cooperation, however, proved a formality. Russia was not interested in following American orders and openly violated these commitments as it continued its arms trade and nuclear collaboration with Iran through the mid-to-late 1990s (Broder 2000). In September 1995, just two months after the agreement was signed, Moscow and Tehran furthered such expressions of defiance by expanding the Bushehr deal to include two more nuclear reactors, thereby increasing the total value of the deal to $2 billion. Russia clearly profited from the deal, but understanding its motivations for collaborating with Iran requires consideration far beyond financial profit:

Russia’s cooperation with Iran… does not stem solely, or even primarily, from financial reasons. Because Russia views its relations and cooperation with Iran as important to national security, it will not jeopardize those relations for the sake of short-term material incentives or fear of U.S. condemnation (Shaffer 2001).

Russia’s commitment to Iran had strengthened considerably in just a few short years.

The Russian-Iranian relationship had solidified by the mid-to-late 1990s. Russia was actively contributing to Iran’s conventional military buildup and nuclear ambitions, and provided symbolic support as a great power patron whose strategic interests of challenging American dominance in the Middle East aligned with those of its Iranian partner. Iranian President Rafsanjani celebrated Iran’s relationship with Russia and remarked that “the new relations between them were so strong as not to be affected by adverse international politics,” implicitly referring to Russia’s refusal to give into U.S. pressure to cancel the Bushehr deal (Tarock 1997, 208). In the summer of
1995, the Iranian Speaker of the Parliament conveyed to deputy chairman of the Russian Duma that the “two strategic states of Iran and Russia can limit the expansion of U.S. hegemony in the [Middle East] region” (Tarock 1997, 208).

Iran’s attempts at conciliation with the West under President Khatami, however, proved an obstacle to continued improvement of Russian-Iranian relations late in the decade. Khatami’s efforts undermined many of Russia and Iran’s mutual strategic interests and dissatisfaction with American dominance. Russian notions of challenging American dominance in the regional and international systems became more pronounced when Vladimir Putin, a strong adherent to notions of Russia’s great power role in the international system, took office in Moscow in 1998. Russia’s foreign policy doctrine under Putin asserted, “A new Russia, based on a solid foundation of national interests, has now acquired a full-fledged role in global affairs” (Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation 1998). From Russia’s perspective, this role included balancing U.S. dominance in regions bordering the former Soviet space. The Middle East remained, as ever, an important battleground for Russian influence vis-à-vis the United States and Russia was not willing to relinquish its Iranian regional partner.

Despite increased bilateral tension over Iran’s new Khatami-era foreign policy, Iran had not abandoned its relationship with Russia, either. Russia and Iran’s confluence of strategic interests, as well as domestic Iranian opposition to Khatami’s moderate policies, ultimately re-established the bilateral partnership at the turn of the century. Iran continued its bilateral arms trade with Moscow as Russia abrogated the 1995 Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement throughout the latter half of the 1990s (Freedman 2002, 2). As Russia underwent an economic revival beginning in 1998 and rose to a more dominant position in the international system, the likelihood of Iran being able to maintain close ties with both the U.S. (attempted under Khatami) and Russia problem-free seemed minimal. The reassertion of the Ayatollah Khamene’i’s supreme control over the Iranian government in 1999
brought an end to Iran’s conciliatory efforts with the West and set Russian-Iranian relations back on course.

Russia’s increasingly resolute dissociation from the West at the turn of the century coincided with a growing Russian notion of its rightful leadership position in the international system. Preliminary suggestions of Russia’s new role as a revisionist state only further facilitated its ability to support Iran’s similar intentions and indirectly challenge the United States via Iran’s challenge to the regional status quo in the Middle East:

In the dawn of the twenty-first century, Russia’s new hegemonic ambitions – and its desires to confront, embarrass, or even weaken the United States and the West – have enabled the Islamic Republic of Iran to better advance its own Islamic hegemonic designs (Milani 2007, 328).

Iran benefitted greatly from Russia’s turn away from the West. Feeling empowered by its profitable in the oil and gas industries in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Russia adopted a much more assertive foreign policy and its strategy in the Middle East was largely characterized by “the desire to stand up to the United States – and to use Iran’s nuclear program as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the West” (Milani 2007, 331). Russia openly disagreed with the President Bush’s identification of Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil” in 2002, standing by its regional partner despite having given Russian support for the United States’ war on terror. There was no denying that the Russian-Iranian relationship had carried over into the 21st-century world.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, Russian cooperation on Iran’s nuclear ambitions continued to most notably define its participation in the Middle East power transition and its partnership with Iran. As mentioned earlier, a nuclear weapons program would signify the ultimate representation of Iranian power parity relative to Israel, and a likely basis for an Iranian challenge to the regional status quo. In 2005, the year Iran is suspected to have resumed its nuclear research program, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated, “no country will ever force
Russia to abandon its nuclear commitment to Tehran,” adding, “no one, including the U.S., will deny our right to continue building the atomic electricity station in Bushehr” (Rizvi 2010, 1).

Russia has also used its position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council to complicate American attempts to curb Iran’s nuclear program. In several instances, Russia has been able to stall U.S.-proposed punitive sanctions against Iran for Uranium Enrichment in 2004 and 2006 by expressing its intention to oppose relevant council decisions and has consistently demonstrated its unwillingness to cooperate with the United States on the Iranian nuclear issue (see Aras and Ozbay 2006, 142; Vakil 2006). Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov opposed the United States’ sanction strategy outright, stating, “Russia on principle doesn’t think sanctions can achieve a settlement, especially in the Middle East where there’s so much going on” (Klesser 2006). Even when faced with international pressure to participate in multilateral economic sanctions against Iran, Russia refused and instead only offered support for diplomatic avenues of negotiating with Tehran. Russia has demonstrated that it does not plan to abandon its Iranian strategic partner and it continues to help enable Iran to manifest its status-quo challenging ambitions in the Middle East.

Discussion

The 1979 Iranian Revolution caused a shift in Middle East’s politics that has since produced an Israeli-dominated regional hierarchy. Israel’s hegemony in the system is primarily based on ensuring its security against a multitude of threats emanating from its hostile Arab neighborhood, and not necessarily on projecting power or ideology in a traditionally hegemonic way. In the post-revolutionary period, particularly the second and third post-revolutionary decades (i.e. approximately 1990-2007, the endpoint of this study), the Islamic Republic of Iran has expressed its dissatisfaction with the Middle East’s current hierarchy and has sought the power to challenge
Israel’s dominance and reshape the regional status quo. According to power transition principles and Lemke’s multiple hierarchy model, the Middle East’s status as a regional subsystem makes it structurally vulnerable to intervention from the international system above (see Figure 1, page 8). Israel and Iran have therefore not been the sole actors in the Israeli-Iranian power transition dynamics – great powers in the international system have taken advantage of the porousness of the Middle East system and have participated in the regional politics unfolding between Israel and Iran.

The United States and the Soviet Union/Russia have actively participated in establishing Israel and Iran’s respective roles in their regional hierarchy. The United States has acted as a defender of the Israel-dominated status quo in the region, while the Soviet Union/Russia has contributed to Iran’s revisionist rise in the Middle East. The ability of these great powers to participate in regional power transition dynamics without subjugating regional politics to their strategic interests is due to Lemke’s theoretical stipulation that great power participation is possible when “great power intentions and preferences strongly correlate with the structure of local relations” (Lemke 2002, 52). The United States and Israel have a mutual interest in ensuring Israeli security, preventing the rise and nuclear agenda of Iran, eliminating terrorist networks and their subsequent threats to American and Israeli targets, and sustaining extra-regional American and intra-regional Israeli dominance in the Middle East. Russia and Iran hold similar revisionist, power-seeking roles in their respective hierarchies and each occupy a geostrategic position that stands to benefit the other. They also share an important dissatisfaction with American dominance in the Middle East hierarchy (and, in Russia’s case, in the international system as well). The confluence of interests within both of the great power-regional power pairs have enabled the United States and Russia to facilitate the regional power transition between Israel and Iran, without overpowering or trumping regional power transition dynamics.
As the Israeli-Iranian conflict continues to unfold to present, the question that remains is whether or not the United States and Russia will be able to sustain these roles without intervening further. Should the hostilities between Israel and Iran approach the brink of military confrontation, it is unlikely that the United States, at least, would stand by inactively and allow an Iranian attack on Israel to occur. Speculation of a possible preemptive Israeli attack on Iran has also emerged in the most current developments in the conflict. The United States is likely to discourage and/or prevent such an attack from happening, as it would exacerbate Iranian grievances tremendously and provide Iran further incentive to strive to make its regional hegemonic aspirations a reality. The extent to which Russia would be able or willing to protect Iran from Israeli attacks or American intervention remains unknown. It is interesting to consider this question in the context of Russia’s relationship with Iraq in the mid-20th century and subsequent American intervention in Iraqi politics in both the 1990 Gulf War and the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq.

There are, however, significant differences between Russia’s great power participation in support of Iran’s hegemonic aspirations since 1979 and Soviet relations with a hegemonic-seeking Iraq in the mid-20th century. Bilateral arms trade between Iraq and the Soviet Union began in 1958 during Iraq’s Kassem regime. The USSR remained a significant Iraqi arms supplier following the 1968 Ba’thist coup that placed Saddam Hussein in a de facto leadership position in Baghdad (Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr was the head of the state until 1979, when Hussein officially assumed the position). Iraq indicated interest in a partnership with the Soviet Union on the basis of seeking Soviet help with constructing a legitimate and sustainable political system, but by the early 1970s “the USSR’s relationship with Iraq was primarily one of partnership in economic matters and in the field of military hardware” (Primakov 2010, 304-308). Iraq was not struggling economically, however, as it profited greatly from its oil revenues. Its partnership with the USSR was therefore not necessary to its economic prosperity. In addition, the Ba’thist Iraqi regime strengthened its
relationship with great power France after securing power in 1968 and France slowly began to replace the Soviet’s position of influence in Iraq. Iraq began to distance itself from the Soviet Union in the mid-to-late 1970s as it pursued economic and military security independent of its bilateral relationship with the Soviets (Fukuyama 46-48). In terms of their common interests, “the apparent similarities between Ba’thist and Communist ideology are not sufficient by themselves to ensure a close and continuing collaboration between the two countries” (Fukuyama 2). The bilateral relationship had grown strained by the time Iraq invaded Iran in 1980 and the Soviet Union expressed its disapproval of Iraq’s policy by cutting off its arms supply to Iraq and making an offer of Soviet arms to Iran (Rubinstein 1981, 610). While the USSR did resume its arms supply to Iraq in the later years of the war after Iran’s refusal to accept the Soviet offer, the USSR’s relationship with Iraq was not the same. By the time the United States intervened militarily in the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the Soviet-Iraqi bilateral relationship had dwindled considerably. The Soviet Union was no longer in a position to protect Iraq against American influence.

The Russian-Iranian bilateral relationship has not, as of yet, suffered such setbacks. Russia maintains a strong commitment to Iran’s nuclear ambitions and has, on several occasions, indicated its willingness to defend Iran against the United States’ attempts to isolate the Islamic regime. The strength of the Russian-Iranian relationship is due, in large part, to its confluence of strategic interests and not just economic and military partnership. As posited by Lemke, this alignment of intentions and preferences with Iran allows Russia a facilitative role in Iran’s regional ambitions that it did not occupy with Iraq. Russia’s persistent support of Iranian ambitions in defiance of American policies and pressure throughout the 1990s and 2000s indicates a likely continuation of Russia’s commitment to protecting Iran in its regional hierarchy. That being said, whether or not Russia would risk involvement if the United States progressed its participatory role and took further, more assertive steps against Iran’s revisionist rise remains unknown. Though this study has chosen
2007 as its end date based on available data, events that have occurred in the interim to present have indicated that Iran’s nuclear and hegemonic ambitions have strongly persisted and the possibility of an Israeli-Iranian conflict grows each day. The role that the great power participants would have in such a conflict, should it occur, remains to be seen.

**Conclusion**

This study has found support for its hypothesis of great power participation in a regional subsystem power transition. Traditional volume-based conceptions of power transition operationalization initially appear incompatible with Israeli-Iranian relations, suggesting Iran possesses a significant preponderance of power relative to Israel in the region. This study maintained its support for an Israeli-dominated Middle East hierarchy and sought to demonstrate power transition’s applicability to Israel and Iran using GDP per capita measures of national power and a detailed contextual analysis of their contemporary bilateral relations. Though modest in some respects, comparative analyses of Israeli and Iranian GDP per capita and military expenditures from 1979-2007 suggest that Israel and Iran have demonstrated quantitative power transition characteristics in the Middle East hierarchy since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. These power transition dynamics have been particularly pronounced since the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, when several major events in the regional and international systems strengthened Iranian resolve at expressing its dissatisfaction with Israel’s regional dominance. This paper’s subsequent contextual analysis demonstrated Israel’s rise to dominance following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Iran’s subsequent dissatisfaction and focus on challenging Israel’s position, further supporting the application of power transition principles to Israel and Iran’s contemporary regional relations.

As a regional subsystem nested within the larger international system, the Middle East hierarchy has notably remained structurally vulnerable to intervention from great powers above.
The United States and the Soviet Union/Russia have been active participants in the regional power dynamics between Israel and Iran. Due to sharing mutual interests and preferences with their respective regional client states, the United States and Russia have been able to facilitate the regional power transition without overruling power transition principles. Structural characteristics of regional power transition such as the regional status quo, power parity, and relative dissatisfaction thus remain intact in the case of Israel and Iran. As Israel and Iran clash in their quest for seeking and maintaining regional dominance, respectively, their American and Russian great power partners continue to contribute to their client state’s position in the regional hierarchy. Russia has continued to brazenly aid Iran in its pursuit of nuclear weapons, which remain Iran’s primary unattained key to challenging Israel’s position of dominance. The United States has continued to support its Israeli partner and provide security for its position against the threats emanating from its neighborhood, none of which are so dangerous as Iran’s interrelated nuclear and hegemonic ambitions. The result has been a compelling and volatile regional dynamic that has caught the world’s attention and become a definitive issue of contemporary international relations.
Bibliography


Appendices

Appendix A: Reference Maps of the Middle East

Middle East: Political maps during Cold War (L-1976) vs. contemporary (R-2008)

Source: Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection, University of Texas at Austin.

Appendix B: U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Military Grant</th>
<th>Economic Grant</th>
<th>Immig. Grant</th>
<th>ASHA</th>
<th>All other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1949-1996</td>
<td>68,030.9</td>
<td>29,014.9</td>
<td>23,122.4</td>
<td>868.9</td>
<td>121.4</td>
<td>14,903.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>3,132.1</td>
<td>1,800.0</td>
<td>1,200.0</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>3,080.0</td>
<td>1,800.0</td>
<td>1,200.0</td>
<td>80.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>3,010.0</td>
<td>1,860.0</td>
<td>1,080.0</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>4,131.85</td>
<td>3,120.0</td>
<td>949.1</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2,876.05</td>
<td>1,975.6</td>
<td>838.2</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2,850.65</td>
<td>2,040.0</td>
<td>720.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>3,745.15</td>
<td>3,086.4</td>
<td>596.1</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2,687.25</td>
<td>2,147.3</td>
<td>477.2</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2,612.15</td>
<td>2,202.2</td>
<td>357.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>2,534.5</td>
<td>2,257.0</td>
<td>237.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2,503.15</td>
<td>2,340.0</td>
<td>120.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,423.9</td>
<td>2,380.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2,583.9</td>
<td>2,550.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>2,800.0</td>
<td>2,775.0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>109,001.55</td>
<td>61,348.4</td>
<td>30,897.0</td>
<td>1,613.2</td>
<td>151.05</td>
<td>14,991.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes

1 See Primakov 2010 and Oren 2007 for respective overviews of Russian and American historical presence in the region. Note: the backgrounds of the authors generate some discernable biases in the accounts, though they remain good sources on the general history of events.

2 See the section on U.S. support to Israel for a more detailed discussion of American commitment to Israel’s QME; see also Wunderle and Briere 2008.

3 For a detailed overview of U.S.-Soviet intervention in the Middle East in the context of their Cold War rivalry, see Şayigh and Shlaim 1997.

4 Interestingly, the Soviet Union was the first country to acknowledge Israel’s independence in 1948, further demonstrating the complex, interwoven nature of the relationships being studied.

5 See Appendix B for a more detailed breakdown of foreign aid during the time period considered in this study, generated for a 2010 Congressional Research Service study on U.S. foreign aid to Israel.

6 Iran argued that economic sanctions imposed by the United States in the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 were in violation of the Algiers Accord that the two countries had signed as they negotiated the release of American hostages in Tehran in 1981. The case was ultimately overruled on a lack of substantial evidence provided by Iran.

7 Post-revolutionary Iran had developed strong bilateral arms trades with China and North Korea in the 1980s, but the volume of arms began to decrease in the early 1990s as Russia assumed the role of Iran’s main arms trade partner. All data derived from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Trend Indicator Values of arms exports to Iran from 1979-2007.

8 The quoted text is a summation of Brezhnev’s comments by Alvin Rubinstein from his cited work. Brezhnev wrote: “The revolution in Iran, which was a major event on the international scene in recent years, is of a specific nature. However complex and contradictory, it is essentially an anti-imperialist revolution, though reaction at home and abroad is seeking to change this feature. The people of Iran are looking for their own road to freedom and prosperity. We sincerely wish them success in this, and are prepared to develop good relations with Iran on the principles of equality, and, of course, reciprocity.” Report of the Central Committee of the CPSU to the 26th Congress of the CPSU, Feb. 23, 1981 (Moscow), 23.

9 Though bilateral relations had begun to deteriorate slightly by 1980, the Soviet Union had a positive relationship with Iraq and had been supplying Iraq with weaponry beginning in 1958.

10 This excludes both countries’ arsenals of nuclear weapons. Both the U.S. and Soviet Union had acknowledged the principle of mutually assured destruction, in which nuclear warfare between the two would essentially bring about a global doomsday. Both had remained committed to avoiding such engagement at all costs. The consideration of the Soviet Union’s inability to challenge the United States in 1991 is thus based on all other factors apart from the nuclear arsenals, to which, this author believes, there was very minimal chance of recourse at this point in time.

11 The quoted text is a summation of Rafsanjani’s comments by Adam Tarock from his cited work, originally documented in “Interview with Ali Akbar Rafsanjani,” Middle East Insight, July/August 1995, p. 13.