

# The Dynamics of Conflict in the Middle East: Actors, Instruments of Tension, and the Role of Sectarian Violence and the Israel-Palestinian War

Amirali R. Davoudpour

Iranian Canon of Medicine and Law, Administrative Wing of Law and Healing Association, Iranian Watchdog of Medicine and Law, Tehran-Iran

Email of the corresponding author: [davoudpour@canmedlaw.org](mailto:davoudpour@canmedlaw.org)

Accepted and published August, 2024 , DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13293690>

This article is published under CC BY creative common license that Allows others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as they credit the original creator.

---

## Abstract

The Middle East remains one of the most volatile regions in the world, with conflicts deeply rooted in historical, religious, and geopolitical factors. This article explores the key actors who benefit from and perpetuate these tensions, including Israel, extremist Islamic groups, arms dealers, and avengers of violence. It also analyzes the tools of tension creation, such as news engineering, the instrumentalization of religion and history, and geopolitical factors like water scarcity and migration. Special emphasis is placed on the roles of sectarian violence and the Israel-Palestinian conflict, which have both fueled and been exacerbated by the region's broader dynamics. By examining these elements, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the ongoing conflicts and potential paths to peace.

The hope for a violence free Middle-East with expansion of economic, tourism and trade borders remains elusive without finding proper solutions to the overwhelming tensions in the region.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Internationalism, Gaza Crisis

---

## Introduction

The Middle East has long been a focal point of conflict, driven by a complex interplay of historical grievances, religious tensions, and strategic interests. Among the most significant factors contributing to the region's instability are sectarian violence and the enduring Israel-Palestinian conflict. These issues not only act as immediate triggers for violence but also serve as catalysts for broader regional instability. In previous works, the potential for unifying Middle Eastern values has been explored as a necessary response to the disparate standards imposed on Middle Eastern identity (Davoudpour, 2024a). Additionally, the misuse of terms such as "Democracy" and "Terrorism" to manipulate perceptions and policies concerning the Middle East has been critically examined (Davoudpour, 2024c). These studies have underscored the importance of addressing religious sectarianism, colonial legacies, modern nationalism, and the region's genetic commonalities to foster a more cohesive and peaceful Middle East.

This article builds on these insights by emphasizing the need to understand the motivations and methods of key actors in the region, as well as the historical and religious narratives they exploit. Such understanding is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate conflict and promote peace. The foundations of contemporary Middle Eastern society are deeply rooted in the Islamic empires and the reign of the Islamic Caliphates up until the 7th and 8th centuries A.D., alongside the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (Davoudpour, 2024d). While a comprehensive overhaul of Islamic teachings is neither feasible nor necessary, fostering respect for these teachings through societal reforms, along with promoting economic, trade, and tourism cooperation, offers a potential pathway toward stability (Davoudpour, 2024e). This article will explore these themes, with a particular focus on the roles of sectarian violence and the Israel-Palestinian conflict in shaping the region's current dynamics.

### Classification of Actors Perpetuating Tension

1. **Israel and Its Strategic Interests** Israel's role in the Middle East is pivotal, especially in the context of its conflict with the Palestinians. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most enduring and

polarizing issues in the region, shaping not only Israeli and Palestinian lives but also influencing the broader Middle Eastern geopolitics. Israel's approach to security, which includes targeted assassinations of Palestinian leaders and military operations in the Gaza Strip, has often been criticized for exacerbating tensions and undermining peace efforts (Lynfield, 2020). Furthermore, Israel's settlement expansion in the West Bank has been a major point of contention, leading to accusations that it is not genuinely interested in a two-state solution (United Nations, 2022). Israel's strategic goal of maintaining its security and regional dominance often clashes with Palestinian aspirations for statehood, creating a cycle of violence and retaliation. In the course of ongoing Gaza crisis in July-2024, the assassination of Ismail Haniye the chief peace negotiator of Hamas in Tehran<sup>1</sup> revealed that the global attempts to reach a peace agreement is often deliberately breached by the Israeli government.

2. **Extremist Islamic Groups** Extremist Islamic groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, ISIS, and Al-Qaeda have significantly contributed to the sectarian violence in the Middle East. These groups often exploit religious and sectarian identities to mobilize support and justify their actions (Byman, 2021). Hamas, for instance, emerged as a major force in Palestinian politics in the late 1980s, advocating for armed resistance against Israel. Its charter explicitly calls for the destruction of Israel, and its violent confrontations with Israeli forces have led to multiple wars, most notably the Gaza Wars of 2008-09, 2012, 2014, and 2021 (Jones & Milton-Edwards, 2021) and the most important war of 2024 with more than 186,000 direct and indirect casualties (Khatib et al., 2024), leading to destruction the infrastructure of Gaza and activation of the convention of Genocide in the International Court of Justice<sup>2</sup> and provisional and advisory measures against Israel and some of its

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ismail\\_Haniyeh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ismail_Haniyeh)

<sup>2</sup> International Court of Justice. (2024, January 26). *Order of 26 January 2024* (Document No. 192-20240126-ORD-01-00-EN). Case No. 192 - Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), Incidental Proceedings: Provisional measures. <https://www.icij.org/en/case/192/orders>

allies<sup>34</sup> again. Hezbollah, another key player, operates with the backing of Iran and has been involved in conflicts across Lebanon and Syria, further intensifying Sunni-Shia tensions in the region (Saab, 2021). These groups' activities contribute to a broader pattern of sectarian violence, particularly between Sunni and Shia Muslims, which destabilizes the region and perpetuates cycles of revenge and retaliation.

3. **Arms Dealers and the Death Merchants** The global arms trade is a critical factor in sustaining conflicts in the Middle East, particularly those driven by sectarian and nationalist motivations. Major arms producers, such as the United States, Russia, and European countries, supply weapons to various factions in the region, fueling the cycle of violence (SIPRI, 2023). For instance, during the Syrian Civil War, multiple external actors provided arms to different factions, with the U.S. and Russia backing opposing sides, thus prolonging the conflict and deepening sectarian divisions (Weiss, 2022). The proliferation of arms in the region has not only escalated conflicts but also empowered non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas, who use these weapons to challenge state authorities and intensify sectarian violence.
4. **Avengers of Lost Ones** The cycle of revenge is a powerful driver of violence in the Middle East, particularly in the context of sectarian conflicts and the Israel-Palestinian war. Groups and individuals who have suffered losses in these conflicts often seek retribution, leading to further violence (Khashan, 2020). In the Israel-Palestinian context, the desire for revenge has fueled acts of terrorism, military reprisals, and civilian casualties on both sides. This cycle of violence is perpetuated by deeply ingrained narratives of victimization and martyrdom, which are often exploited by political and religious leaders to mobilize support and justify continued hostilities (Jones & Milton-Edwards, 2021). The impact of these narratives is particularly evident in the ongoing clashes

---

<sup>3</sup> International Court of Justice. (2024, July 19). *Alleged breaches of certain international obligations in respect of the Occupied Palestinian Territory (Nicaragua v. Germany)*, Order. General List No. 193. <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/193/orders>

<sup>4</sup> International Court of Justice. (2024, July 19). *Legal consequences arising from the policies and practices of Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem*, Order. General List No. 186. <https://www.icj-cij.org/en/case/186/orders>

between Israelis and Palestinians, where each new round of violence begets another, leaving little room for reconciliation.

### **The Role of Sectarian Violence in the Middle East**

Sectarian violence, particularly between Sunni and Shia Muslims, is one of the most persistent and destructive forces in the Middle East. This divide is rooted in historical, theological, and political differences dating back to the early years of Islam. The conflict over who should lead the Muslim community after the Prophet Muhammad's death led to the formation of two main branches of Islam: Sunni, which represents the majority, and Shia, which is dominant in countries like Iran and Iraq (Nasr, 2022).

1. **Sunni-Shia Conflict** The Sunni-Shia divide has been a major source of tension in the region, exacerbated by the geopolitical ambitions of regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran. These two nations, representing the Sunni and Shia blocs respectively, have engaged in a proxy war across the Middle East, supporting opposing factions in conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon (Valbjørn, 2022). In Syria, for example, the Assad regime, backed by Shia-majority Iran and Hezbollah, has fought against a predominantly Sunni opposition supported by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. This conflict has not only devastated Syria but also deepened sectarian animosities across the region, with far-reaching consequences for regional stability (Weiss, 2022).
2. **The Role of External Powers** External powers have often exacerbated sectarian conflicts in the Middle East by aligning with one side or the other for strategic reasons. The United States, for instance, has historically supported Sunni-majority countries like Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, while Russia has aligned itself with Shia-majority Iran and the Assad regime in Syria (Gause, 2019). These alliances have turned local sectarian conflicts into broader geopolitical struggles, with devastating consequences for civilian populations. The involvement of external powers has also made it more difficult to resolve these conflicts, as any potential settlement must account for the interests of both local and international actors.
3. **Impact on Regional Stability** Sectarian violence has a profound impact on the stability of the Middle East. It not only leads to widespread death and displacement but also undermines the social

fabric of the region, making it difficult for communities to coexist peacefully (Lewis, 2021). The Sunni-Shia divide has also contributed to the rise of extremist groups like ISIS, which exploited sectarian tensions to gain support and territory in Iraq and Syria. The collapse of state authority in these countries has created a power vacuum that has been filled by militias and other non-state actors, further complicating efforts to restore peace and stability (Byman, 2021).

### **The Israel-Palestinian Conflict: A Catalyst for Regional Instability**

The Israel-Palestinian conflict is a central issue in Middle Eastern politics and a major source of tension both within and outside the region. The conflict, which began in the early 20th century with the rise of Zionism and Arab nationalism, has evolved into a complex struggle over land, identity, and sovereignty.

1. **Historical Context** The roots of the Israel-Palestinian conflict lie in the competing national aspirations of Jews and Arabs in the early 20th century. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, in which the British government expressed support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, was a turning point in the conflict. The declaration was seen by Arab leaders as a betrayal, leading to decades of violence and unrest (Morris, 2021). The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent wars in 1948, 1967, and 1973 further deepened the conflict, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and the occupation of Palestinian territories by Israel (Khalidi, 2020).
2. **The Role of Religion** Religion plays a significant role in the Israel-Palestinian conflict, particularly in the context of Jerusalem, a city sacred to Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. The status of Jerusalem, which Israel considers its undivided capital and Palestinians claim as the capital of a future Palestinian state, is one of the most contentious issues in the conflict. Religious narratives are often used by both sides to justify their claims to the land and their actions in the conflict. For example, Jewish settlers in the West Bank often cite biblical promises as the basis for their right to the land, while Palestinian leaders invoke Islamic teachings to rally support for their cause (Friedland & Hecht, 2021).

3. **Impact on Regional and Global Politics** The Israel-Palestinian conflict has far-reaching implications for regional and global politics. It has been a major factor in the rise of anti-Israel sentiment across the Arab world, fueling extremist movements and contributing to the radicalization of populations (Gerges, 2021). The conflict has also strained relations between Israel and its neighbors, particularly Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan, leading to periodic outbreaks of violence and instability. On a global level, the conflict has polarized international opinion, with the United States and most Western countries supporting Israel, while much of the developing world, including many Muslim-majority countries, supports the Palestinian cause (Smith, 2021).
4. **Attempts at Peace** Despite numerous attempts at peace, including the Oslo Accords of the 1990s and the Camp David Summit in 2000, the Israel-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved. The failure of these peace efforts can be attributed to a range of factors, including mutual distrust, the influence of extremist groups, and the lack of political will on both sides (Ross, 2020). The continued expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the blockade of Gaza have further complicated the situation, making it difficult to achieve a two-state solution, which is widely considered the most viable path to peace (Lustick, 2021).

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The Middle East's conflicts, particularly those driven by sectarian violence and the Israel-Palestinian war, are deeply entrenched, with multiple actors and factors contributing to the region's instability. The Sunni-Shia divide has been a major source of tension, exacerbated by the geopolitical ambitions of regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran. The involvement of external powers has turned local sectarian conflicts into broader geopolitical struggles, with devastating consequences for the region's stability.

The Israel-Palestinian conflict, with its roots in historical grievances and religious narratives, continues to be a central issue in Middle Eastern politics. The failure to resolve this conflict has not only perpetuated violence between Israelis and Palestinians but has also contributed to broader regional instability. The conflict has fueled anti-Israel sentiment across the Arab world, radicalized populations, and strained relations between Israel and its neighbors.

The tools used to perpetuate these conflicts, such as news engineering and the instrumentalization of religion and history, ensure that the region remains mired in violence. The manipulation of narratives and the exploitation of religious and historical grievances make it difficult to achieve peace and reconciliation. The influx of arms into the region further complicates efforts to resolve these conflicts, as it empowers non-state actors and perpetuates cycles of violence.

## Conclusion

The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, particularly those driven by sectarian violence and the Israel-Palestinian war, are the result of a complex interplay of state and non-state actors, each with its own motivations and objectives. The tools used to perpetuate these conflicts, from misinformation and propaganda to the exploitation of religious and historical narratives, ensure that the region remains unstable and prone to violence. To address these challenges, the international community must adopt a multifaceted approach that considers the diverse interests and tactics at play. This includes promoting dialogue and understanding among the region's various factions, addressing the root causes of conflict, and reducing the flow of arms into the region. Only by tackling these issues head-on can there be any hope for lasting peace in the Middle East.



## References

1. Byman, D. (2021). *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad*. Oxford University Press.
2. Davoudpour, A. R. (2024a). A Nation Called the Middle East: In Middle Eastern Internationalism. *Journal of Iranian International Legal Studies*, 2(1). ISSN 2957-2169. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13292922>
3. Davoudpour, A. R. (2024b). A Stronghold of Apartheid: A Short Breakthrough in Gaza Crisis from Monetary Perspectives and Values. *Journal of Iranian International Legal Studies*, 1(1). ISSN 2957-2169. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13204480>
4. Davoudpour, A. R. (2024c). Abusive democracy: Your rights are ignored by our people. *Journal of Iranian International Legal Studies*, Vol. 1(1). ISSN 2957-2169. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13203337>
5. Davoudpour, A. R. (2024d). God, Teacher, Nation and the Importance of Transcendental Jurisdiction to Quran. *Journal of Iranian International Legal Studies*, 1(1). ISSN 2957-2169. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13253066>
6. Davoudpour, A. R. (2024e). The necessity of developing new non-governmental systems in dealing with multiple international standards (LLM. dissertation). <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.12385.52325/1>
7. Friedland, R., & Hecht, R. (2021). *To Rule Jerusalem*. University of California Press.
8. Gause, F. G. (2019). *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*. Cambridge University Press.
9. Gerges, F. A. (2021). *Making the Arab World: Nasser, Qutb, and the Clash That Shaped the Middle East*. Princeton University Press.
10. Jones, C., & Milton-Edwards, B. (2021). *Hammas: The Islamic Resistance Movement*. Polity Press.
11. Khalidi, R. (2020). *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance*. Metropolitan Books.

12. Khashan, H. (2020). Understanding the Middle East's Cycle of Violence: Revenge as a Driver of Conflict. *Middle East Quarterly*, 27(1), 1-12.
13. Khatib, R., McKee, M., & Yusuf, S. (2024). Counting the dead in Gaza: difficult but essential. *The Lancet*, Online First. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(24\)01169-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(24)01169-3)
14. Lewis, B. (2021). *The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years*. Scribner.
15. Lustick, I. S. (2021). *Paradigm Lost: From Two-State Solution to One-State Reality*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
16. Lynfield, B. (2020). Israel's Policy of Targeted Assassinations. *Middle East Eye*.
17. Morris, B. (2021). *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War*. Yale University Press.
18. Nasr, V. (2022). *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. W.W. Norton & Company.
19. Ross, D. (2020). *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
20. Saab, B. Y. (2021). *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*. Georgetown University Press.
21. Selby, J. (2020). *Water, Power and Politics in the Middle East: The Other Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*. I.B. Tauris.
22. SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute). (2023). Trends in International Arms Transfers. *SIPRI Yearbook 2023*.
23. Smith, C. D. (2021). *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: A History with Documents*. Bedford/St. Martin's.
24. United Nations. (2022). *UN Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territory*. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.
25. Valbjørn, M. (2022). *The Politics of Sectarianism in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*. Oxford University Press.
26. Weiss, M. (2022). *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*. Regan Arts.