

# Iran's Defensive Strategy: A Realist Analysis of Regional Behaviour and Security Concerns

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**Abstract :** This paper theoretically analyses Iran's foreign and defence policies through the prism of defensive realism, this is done viz-a-viz the mainstream framing of Iran's foreign and defence policies as aggressive expansionism. Iran's actions in the middle-east region, its military developments, and its nuclear ambitions are evaluated. The argument is that Iran's actions focus primarily on defensive strategies for survival and security in an anarchic international system, not on a desire to expand its territory or influence. The paper uses a qualitative methodology and data from secondary sources such as military spending records, intelligence reports and peer-reviewed journals. The study concludes that Iran's backing for proxy groups, its nuclear program, and its military actions are best seen as reactions to perceived and actual threats, such as hostile encirclement by other states especially the United States of America, economic sanctions, and fear of foreign interventions. By applying a structural realist framework, this study offers a crucial corrective to policy-driven analyses that often overlook the security imperatives shaping Iranian decision-making, contributing an alternative understanding of Iran's role in global politics.

**Keywords:** Defensive realism, Iran, Foreign and defence policies, Aggressive expansionism

## Introduction

Iran's foreign and defence policies have long been subject to international scrutiny, often framed through the lens of aggressive expansionism. Media outlets, policymakers, and analysts frequently label Iran's actions, such as its support for non-state actors within its self-proclaimed "Axis of Resistance" as evidence of a deliberate strategy to establish regional hegemony, often referred to as a "Shia Crescent" (Nasr, 2006). This narrative gained significant traction in Western policy circles, culminating in concrete actions such as the United States' designation of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization in 2019, explicitly citing its "global terrorist campaign" (U.S. Department of State, 2019). This perspective portrays Iran as a revisionist power actively seeking to overturn the existing regional order through force and subversion.

However, a closer examination of Iran's strategic environment, military developments, and historical experiences suggests that its behaviour can be more accurately understood through the lens of defensive realism. A prominent theory in international relations, defensive realism posits that the primary motivation of states in an anarchic international system is not power maximization but the assurance of their own survival (Waltz, 1979). From this perspective, Iran's actions are calculated responses to severe and persistent existential threats. These threats include decades of crippling economic sanctions (Congressional Research Service, 2021) and a profound sense of military encirclement by the United States, which maintains significant military bases in surrounding countries (Cordesman, 2019). In response, Iran has developed a national security strategy centred on asymmetric warfare and strategic deterrence, recognizing it cannot match its adversaries' conventional military power (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2020).

This strategic calculus is also deeply influenced by historical traumas that have ingrained a "never again" mentality into the nation's security doctrine. The 1953 coup d'état (Kinzer, 2008) and the brutal Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), during which Iran stood largely alone against an internationally-backed aggressor (Parsi, 2007), solidified its belief in self-reliance. Consequently, this paper argues that Iran's policies, while viewed by its rivals as aggressive, are fundamentally defensive. Its ballistic missile program serves as a primary deterrent against attack; its support for regional allies creates strategic depth; and its controversial nuclear program is pursued as the ultimate insurance policy for regime survival. While acknowledging that specific Iranian actions, such as the IRGC's intervention in the Syrian Civil War, provide compelling evidence for the expansionist narrative, this paper will re-examine these and other policies through a defensive realist framework. This interpretation challenges the prevailing narrative and presents a more nuanced understanding of Iran's behaviour within the complex geopolitics of the Middle East.

## Materials and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, theory-testing case study design to analyse Iran's foreign and defence policies. The central methodological approach is congruence analysis, which systematically assesses whether the empirical evidence of Iran's actions aligns with the theoretical predictions derived from defensive realism. This method allows for a structured evaluation of the argument that Iran's behaviour is motivated by security and survival, rather than expansionist ambitions. The main sources of data for this paper include:

1. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI): Provides comprehensive data on military spending, arms imports, and conflict-related statistics.
2. Reports from the U.S. Department of Defence and other intelligence agencies: Highlight Iran's military capabilities and regional interventions.
3. Peer-Reviewed Journals: Articles from international relations and political science journals such as *International Security*, *International Politics*, and *Middle East Policy*.

The analysis in this paper integrates these sources to construct an argument that views Iran's foreign policy as defensive rather than expansionist. By integrating these diverse sources, the analysis examines how Iran's regional relationships, military capacities, and nuclear program align with the core principles of defensive realism. The focus is not merely on describing Iran's policies but on systematically testing the explanatory power of a key international relations theory against a real-world case.

### **Aggressive Expansionism Argument**

Iran's support for regional proxies and its nuclear programme have been viewed by some as part of a larger agenda to expand its influence and power. Analysts from The Brookings Institution and The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (Chubin, 2004; Gause, 2014) have argued that Iran seeks to dominate the Middle East by supporting militia groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, aiming to create a "Shia Crescent" stretching from Iran to Lebanon. This view has been supported by Western intelligence reports which highlight Iran's involvement in military operations across the region, notably in Syria and Iraq. Gause (2014) argues further that beyond mere sectarian affinity, Iran's support for groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, various militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen constitutes a deliberate strategy to create an arc of influence. This network, according to this scholarly view, allows Tehran to project power deep into the Arab world, challenge the regional status quo, and engage in conflicts by proxy, thereby insulating the Iranian state from direct retaliation while pursuing hegemonic goals (Chubin, 2004).

Another significant argument centres on the foundational ideology of the 1979 Islamic Revolution as an inherently expansionist force. Aarabi (2019) contends that the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) is not geographically limited to Iran's borders. This perspective asserts that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was established not only to protect the revolution at home but also to export its ideals abroad. In this frame, Iran's foreign policy is inseparable from its revolutionary identity, which compels it to support Islamist movements and challenge existing, Western-aligned governments across the Muslim world. Takeyh (2011) reinforces this by explaining that for Iran's clerical leadership, the exportation of the revolution was not merely an ideological quest but a means of ensuring its own security, effectively merging regime survival with a strategy of regional expansion and positioning Tehran as the leader of an anti-imperialist, pan-Islamic bloc.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and the subsequent support of Shia militias in Iraq also fit within the framework of Iran's expansionist strategy. Experts such as Karmon (2015) have suggested that these military involvements are part of a broader effort by Iran to exert influence in the Arab world, positioning itself as a regional hegemon. Iran's leadership, particularly under Ayatollah Khamenei, is often described as seeking to spread the Islamic Revolution across the region, establishing Iran as the leader of the Muslim world (Aarabi, 2019).

Furthermore, Iran's nuclear ambitions have been interpreted as a sign of its intention to project power beyond its borders. Critics argue that the pursuit of nuclear capabilities is a clear signal of Iran's intent to challenge the global order and balance of power, especially in the Middle East (Eslami, 2024). This perspective has been further supported by the United States and Israel, both of which consider Iran's nuclear programme as an imminent threat to their national security (Menon, 2013). They argue that the acquisition of a nuclear weapon, or even a latent capability, would provide Iran with a powerful deterrent, creating a "nuclear shield" under which it could more aggressively support its proxies and challenge its adversaries without fear of major conventional retaliation. This view, strongly supported by scholars like Moti (2024), posits that the nuclear program is designed to secure the regime against existential threats, thereby liberating it to pursue its revisionist agenda in the Middle East with greater impunity. It is seen as the capstone of an expansionist policy, intended to cement Iran's position as an unchallengeable regional hegemon.

### **Defensive Realism and Iran's Foreign and Defence Policies**

Iran's foreign and defence policies are best understood not through the lens of revisionism or aggression, but within the framework of realism, which is a theory rooted in the idea that in an anarchic international system, states must act to ensure their own survival. Claims that Iran behaves aggressively overlook the structural realities and security imperatives that shape its behaviour, especially in a region saturated with hostile actors and nuclear-armed rivals.

Realist theory emphasises that in the absence of a central authority to guarantee state security, states rely on self-help. Kenneth Waltz's structural realism makes clear that the anarchic nature of the international system compels all states, regardless of regime type or ideology, to prioritise survival (Waltz, 1979). Within the structuralist school of realism, there are two main schools of thought: defensive realism and offensive realism. Defensive realists, argue that states aim to maintain the existing balance of power for survival. They opine that the anarchical structure of the international system encourages states to maintain moderate and reserved policies to attain security. They further contend that aggressive expansion upsets the tendency of states to conform to the balance of

power theory, thereby decreasing the primary objective of the state, which is to ensure its security (Oguejiofor, 2024). In this context, Iran's defence strategy becomes intelligible. Surrounded by U.S. military bases (Posen, 2014), facing adversaries such as Israel with an estimated 90 nuclear warheads (Federation of American Scientists, 2025), and lacking the protection of any alliance like NATO, Iran's development of deterrent capabilities is not only rational, it is predictable.

States facing existential threats from nuclear-armed adversaries have historically pursued one of two options: develop their own nuclear arsenal or rely on extended deterrence. India developed nuclear weapons in response to perceived threats from both a nuclear-armed China and a conventionally superior Pakistan (Ganguly, 1999). North Korea pursued the same course in response to what it viewed as persistent U.S. military and nuclear threats (Cha, 2012). In contrast, countries under the NATO umbrella rely on the United States for nuclear deterrence, a cornerstone of the alliance's collective security (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2022). Iran has no such guarantees. Its strategic isolation leaves it with few alternatives but to pursue its own means of defence (Parsi, 2012). To expect Iran to refrain from pursuing defensive capabilities while under threat violates the logic of deterrence theory.

Equally important is the concept of the security dilemma, which explains how defensive actions by one state may appear offensive to others, leading to a cycle of mistrust and escalation. Robert Jervis's (1978) seminal work provides the analytical framework for understanding how Iran's military build-up—including missile development and support for regional allies—can be misinterpreted as aggression. This dynamic is not unique to Iran; it is a systemic feature of international politics.

The failure to distinguish between military capability, intention, and perception is at the heart of many mischaracterisations of Iran's actions. Iran's relationships with regional groups, its ballistic missile program, and its nuclear hedging posture can be interpreted as defensive in intent, aimed at deterring more powerful foes (Slavin, 2013). Yet, due to regional mistrust and geopolitical rivalries, these same actions are perceived as threatening. This is not evidence of Iranian aggression—it is a textbook case of the security dilemma (Jervis, 1978).

Furthermore, Iran faces security dilemma intensifier in the form of geographic encirclement. U.S. military bases within 1,000km of Iran include Iraq (Al-Asad, Erbil, Baghdad with more than 5,000 troops), Kuwait (Camp Arifjan, Ali Al Salem with over 13,500 troops), Bahrain (Naval Support Activity 9,000 personnel), UAE (Al Dhafra with more than 5,000 personnel), and Qatar (Al Udeid with approximately 10,000 personnel). This totals more than 40,000 U.S. military personnel in Iran's immediate periphery (Farhat, 2024, Military OneSource, 2025, Hoffman, 2025), representing unprecedented encirclement in modern international relations, comparable only to Soviet positioning during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Moreover, the narrative that frames Iran as a uniquely aggressive actor often rests on selective analysis. Similar or more expansive behaviours by other states are routinely normalised. For instance, NATO's eastward expansion is framed in Western discourse as defensive alliance-building, despite Russian interpretations of it as a direct threat and encirclement (Mearsheimer, 2014). The United States maintains a significant military presence with bases in over 80 countries, projecting power far beyond what Iran is capable of, yet this is framed as maintaining global order (Vine, 2020). Israel conducts regular cross-border military operations, yet these are consistently described as acts of self-defence (Amnesty International, 2022).

This selective application of international norms reveals an analytical inconsistency. When identical actions are deemed defensive for one state but aggressive for another, the distinction is often based not on the behaviour itself but on political alignment and a pre-existing narrative. A realist approach demands consistent application of principles, irrespective of which state is under examination. Dismissing Iran's legitimate security concerns while legitimising far more assertive policies by its adversaries reflects a hierarchical bias wherein some states are presumed to have legitimate security interests, and others are not (Parsi, 2012).

Ultimately, Iran's behaviour conforms to the expectations of rational state conduct under anarchy. It is not seeking chaos or domination; it is acting to avoid subordination and strategic defeat (Mearsheimer, 2014). Realism does not suggest that Iran is above criticism, but it insists that analysis must begin with a sober understanding of the structural forces at play. Characterising Iran's self-defensive measures as inherently aggressive and expansionist ignores the security pressures that any state would face in its position.

It is therefore evident that Iran's foreign and defence policies reflect the imperatives of survival in a hostile and anarchic international environment. Its actions are shaped by the same strategic logic that has guided state behaviour for centuries: secure the regime, deter adversaries, and preserve sovereignty (Waltz, 1979). Far from being an outlier, Iran is operating according to the very realist principles that define international relations. Any interpretation that labels these actions as aggressive without acknowledging these imperatives lacks analytical integrity and fails to provide a coherent basis for understanding Iran's place in the global order.

## **An Analysis of Iranian Statecraft Through a Defensive Realist Lens**

### ***Iran's Regional Strategy: Defensive Realism in Action***

Iran's actions in the Middle East, specifically its support for groups like Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, Hamas, and the Houthis, are often cited as evidence of Iran's expansionist goals. However, these actions are more consistent with a defensive strategy aimed at preserving its sovereignty and countering external threats through what is referred to within Iran as "forward defence".

#### **1. Hezbollah and Southern Lebanon**

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The formation of Hezbollah in 1985 was a direct response to the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon from 1982 to 2000. As noted by Chubin (2004), Hezbollah was not a tool of Iranian aggression but rather a reaction to Israeli military activities in Lebanon. Iran's support for Hezbollah should be understood as a form of asymmetric warfare—a strategy designed to balance against a more powerful adversary (Israel) without direct confrontation.

2. **Iraqi Shia Militias and ISIS**

Iran's support for Iraqi Shia militias during the rise of ISIS in 2014 exemplifies Iran's defensive realism. The Iraqi government, under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, invited Iranian forces to assist in the fight against ISIS (Sayah, 2017). Iran's military involvement was not designed to expand its influence in Iraq but to defend its own borders from the spread of Sunni extremism. The early cooperation between Iran and the U.S. against ISIS further underscores the defensive nature of Iran's regional strategy.

3. **Hamas and the Palestinian Cause**

Iran's relationship with Hamas is often framed as an effort to counter Israeli influence in the region. While Iran's support for Hamas has been inconsistent, especially due to differences over Syria (Segall, 2017), its support can be seen as part of a broader strategy of balancing against Israel's military dominance in the region. This is a classic example of regional balancing rather than offensive expansion.

4. **The Houthis in Yemen**

Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen, which intensified following Saudi intervention in 2015, further illustrates Iran's defensive approach to regional security. Iran's involvement in Yemen should be understood as a response to Saudi Arabia's aggressive regional policies, rather than an attempt to extend its control over Yemen (Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021).

While analysts like Gause (2014) interpret this as creating an 'arc of influence' for hegemonic goals, a defensive realist perspective reframes this as establishing 'forward defence' to deter a conventionally superior adversary.

***Iran's Nuclear Programme: Deterrence, Not Aggression***

Iran's nuclear programme has been at the forefront of international concern, with critics arguing that Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology is part of an aggressive expansionist strategy. However, a detailed examination of Iran's nuclear history reveals that its programme is rooted in deterrence rather than aggression.

1. **Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Compliance**

Iran has remained a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), unlike Israel, India, and Pakistan. This adherence to international safeguards indicates that Iran's nuclear ambitions are motivated by security concerns rather than a desire for nuclear hegemony. Iran's commitment to the NPT has been verified by multiple IAEA inspections, suggesting that its nuclear programme has not violated international norms (Menon, 2013).

2. **Intelligence Assessments and the Absence of Weapons Development**

Despite Western fears, there is no evidence to suggest that Iran is actively pursuing nuclear weapons. According to the CIA World Factbook (2018), and corroborated by U.S. intelligence agencies, there has been no active weapons development in Iran's nuclear programme since 2003. Moreover, Iran has subjected its nuclear facilities to some of the most intrusive inspections under the JCPOA, further supporting the view that Iran's nuclear efforts are defensive in nature. Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Commander in Chief of all military forces, has consistently emphasized that the possession, development, and use of nuclear weapons are religiously prohibited within Shia doctrine (Eslami, 2024).

3. **Defensive Motivations Behind Nuclear Development**

Iran's nuclear programme can be seen as a response to the external threat of regime change. Following the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the inclusion of Iran in the "Axis of Evil," Iran's nuclear programme took on greater significance as a deterrent against U.S. military intervention. The 2003-2013 period, when Iran's nuclear programme expanded rapidly, coincided with heightened fears of foreign military intervention. This pattern of behaviour suggests that Iran's nuclear activities are motivated by a desire to secure its regime rather than to project power (Karim, 2012).

***Iran's Military Capacity and Regional Influence***

Iran's military spending and capabilities are frequently cited as evidence of its aggressive expansionism. However, when compared to its regional rivals, Iran's military budget and capacity for power projection appear relatively modest.

1. **Military Expenditure Comparison**

Iran's military budget in 2024 was \$7.9 billion, a fraction of Saudi Arabia's \$80.3 billion and Israel's \$46.5 billion (SIPRI, 2025). Moreover, Iran's military spending represents only 2.01% of its GDP, compared to 7.30% in Saudi Arabia and 8.78% in Israel. These figures suggest that Iran is militarily constrained compared to its regional adversaries, making it unlikely that Iran is pursuing an expansionist agenda.

The tables below provide insight into military and defence priorities in Iran viz-a-viz it's major rivals in the region; Saudi Arabia and Israel. Table 1 shows the Military spending and share of GDP for Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel in 2024. Table 2 displays the annual military expenditures (in billion USD) for the same countries from 2020 to 2024, alongside the total expenditure over the five-year period and the average share of GDP allocated to military spending in each country. Among the three nations, Iran has the lowest military budget during the years under review, with significantly lower total expenditures compared to Israel and Saudi Arabia. The figures expose the relative scale of military spending compared to national GDP.

**Table 1: Military spending and share of GDP for Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel in 2024**

Country	Military Expenditure (Billion USD)	GDP Percentage
Iran	7.9	2.01
Saudi Arabia	80.3	7.30
Israel	46.5	8.78

Source: SIPRI 2025

**Table 2: Military Expenditure and Average Share of GDP (2020–2024) for Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia**

Country	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	5-year Total (2020–2024)	Average Share of GDP (2020–2024)
Iran	3.35 billion	5.70 billion	7.46 billion	7.39 billion	7.89 billion	31.79 billion	2.17%
Israel	21.82 billion	24.34 billion	23.41 billion	27.50 billion	46.51 billion	143.57 billion	5.76%
Saudi Arabia	64.56 billion	63.19 billion	70.92 billion	77.77 billion	80.33 billion	356.77 billion	7.40%

Source: SIPRI 2025

## 2. Military Interventions: A Comparative Analysis

Iran has only intervened militarily in one conflict since 1979, which is in Syria. In contrast, Saudi Arabia has engaged in three major military interventions (Yemen, Bahrain, and various African interventions) since the 2010s. Turkey has conducted five interventions in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Cyprus, while Israel has conducted over 15 military operations across multiple borders. These statistics reveal that Iran's military interventions are not as frequent or expansive as those of its regional rivals, further challenging the narrative of Iranian aggression.

## Discussion

### *Regional Dynamics and the Security Dilemma*

Iran's behaviour should be understood in the context of the security dilemma, a concept that explains how states' actions to enhance their security can inadvertently create insecurity in other states. For Iran, a state historically surrounded by rival powers and often threatened with regime change, its strategies of nuclear development, missile capability, and proxy support are not primarily expansionist, but defensive mechanisms shaped by a hostile regional environment.

As Mearsheimer (2001) argues, states facing existential threats will pursue strategies of balancing rather than bandwagoning with the more powerful states. Iran's posture reflects this logic: the support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, Shi'a militias in Iraq, and other regional groups is not about territorial expansion but about countering the dominance of Israel and Saudi Arabia, and constraining the United States in the region. Proxy warfare has been central to Iran's regional strategy, providing depth and deterrence. By sustaining non-state actors, Iran projects influence without direct confrontation.

Furthermore, Iran's nuclear programme can be interpreted as a classic example of nuclear deterrence, aimed at ensuring regime survival in an environment of constant threat from nuclear-armed adversaries. The U.S. nuclear umbrella over Israel and Saudi Arabia only reinforces Iran's need for a credible deterrent to secure its sovereignty. The CSIS (2025) report emphasizes that Iran's pursuit of enrichment, even under heavy pressure, is primarily motivated by deterrence against existential threats. At the same time, threats to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), while diplomatically risky, reveal Iran's willingness to leverage nuclear ambiguity to enhance bargaining power (The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2025).

Thus, Iran's behaviour reflects the dynamics of the regional security dilemma rather than simple aggression. Its balancing acts are defensive strategies aimed at securing sovereignty in an environment defined by asymmetries of power and persistent threat. The paradox, however, is that these same strategies fuel counterbalancing by adversaries, perpetuating insecurity and making conflict escalation more likely.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that Iran's foreign and defence policies are best understood through the lens of defensive realism. Contrary to the prevailing narrative of aggressive expansionism, this analysis shows that Iran's actions reflect rational, security-driven responses to a persistent state of existential threat. Faced with military encirclement, crippling economic sanctions, and explicit threats of foreign intervention, Iran has adopted a strategy rooted in deterrence and self-preservation, not territorial conquest. The evidence examined (from its development of asymmetric military capabilities and support for regional allies as a form of "forward defence" to its pursuit of a nuclear program as a potential security guarantee) is more consistent with a state seeking to ensure its survival in an anarchic system than one pursuing regional hegemony.

The implications of this finding for international policy are significant. If Iran's actions are primarily defensive, then policies centred on "maximum pressure," military threats, and punitive sanctions are likely to be counterproductive. Such measures intensify the security dilemma by validating Tehran's worst fears, thereby reinforcing the very behaviour they seek to prevent. A more effective diplomatic strategy would acknowledge Iran's legitimate security concerns. This could involve creating regional security forums, pursuing verifiable arms control agreements that include Iran's adversaries, and offering credible security assurances in exchange for concessions on its nuclear and missile programs. Moving beyond the aggressor-victim framework opens avenues for pragmatic solutions that can enhance regional stability rather than fuel a cycle of escalation.

Theoretically, this study reaffirms the enduring explanatory power of structural realism in a non-Western context, demonstrating that the systemic pressures of anarchy often override ideology or regime type in shaping state behaviour. It serves as a critical corrective to analyses that attribute Iranian foreign policy solely to its revolutionary identity, showing instead how its actions align with the timeless logic of balancing against superior threats. The case of Iran provides a textbook example of the security dilemma in action, where one state's defensive measures are perceived by its rivals as offensive provocations, highlighting the tragic nature of conflict in international relations.

Finally, while this paper focuses on the structural drivers of Iran's foreign policy, it acknowledges that its framework does not fully capture the role of domestic politics. Future research could build on this analysis by employing a neoclassical realist approach to investigate how internal variables, such as factional competition between hardliners and moderates, economic pressures, and public opinion, filter and shape Iran's response to external threats. Such work would provide an even more nuanced understanding of Iranian statecraft and contribute further to the critical scholarship challenging simplistic narratives of its place in the global order.

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