Changing Geopolitics of West Asia: An Analysis of Regional Conflicts and Humanitarian Consequences

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Abstract

West Asia (the Middle East) is experiencing a radical 'structural change,' as a result of evolving relations between the Great Powers, asymmetrical warfare, maritime security challenges and serious fragility of states in the region.This research paper reviews the current geopolitical landscape in West Asia, key factors of the conflict such as the U.S. Iran rivalry, dynamics of the proxy network, militarisation of Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz, multi-state instability of Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. In addition, the study assesses the cascading humanitarian impacts such as mass displacement, food insecurity, destruction of critical infrastructure, disruption of supply chains and economic instability. The paper concludes with a discussion of strategic approaches to conflict mitigation, the protection of civilian infrastructure, maritime stability and dialogue in the region.

Keywords: *Geopolitics, West Asia, Regional Conflict, Maritime, Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb*

Introduction

West Asia is a territory of international geopolitical value for its energy resources, sea trade and complex historical conflicts. The regional security architecture has evolved and become more complex than before, and it is no longer based on ‘balance of power' but on the concepts of ‘fragmented' and

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'multi-layered' security, with asymmetric conflicts, proliferation of drones and missiles, proxy warfare, and shifting alliances gaining significance.

The possibility for a de-escalation in the region has been shown in the diplomatic developments that took place, such as the Saudi–Iran normalization that was achieved in 2023 with the help of Beijing. However, there are common strategic conflicts and they are often confrontational.The participation of external actors, the operations of non-state actors and the volatility of key maritime channels like the Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz have added to the local security landscape.

These geo-political developments have implications in much more than just a military and strategic arena. West Asia conflicts have led to displacement, food insecurity, economic instability, destruction of infrastructure and disruption of global trade and energy markets. So, an analysis of the shifting geopolitics of West Asia must be linked to its humanitarian and economic implications in the context of strategic competition.

Theoretical Framework

Neorealism

Neorealism gives an account of international politics in terms of an absence of central authority and the resulting fear of survival and security on the part of states (Waltz, 1979). This can be discussed with regard to the competition between Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Israel and the participation of the United States, China and Russia in West Asia today. The struggle for strategic influence, military strength and regional alliances is an ongoing battle over power and security.

Regional Security Complex Theory

The theory of Regional Security Complex (RSC) developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) is relevant due to the high level of interdependence of security

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issues in West Asia. Refugee inflows, armed groups, military operations, and economic impacts resulting from conflict in one country can impact security calculations in neighbouring countries. Hence, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and the Gulf cannot be regarded as entirely distinct security zones.

Human Security Theory

The concept of human security, as opposed to state security, replaces the focus on the security of States with the security and well-being of individuals and communities (UNDP, 1994). It serves as a valuable lens to look at displacement, food insecurity, poverty, destruction of infrastructure, loss of livelihoods and disruption of health and education services. This outlook hence is linking geopolitical developments to their implications for civilian population.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research with an analytical approach using secondary data. No primary field survey or interview was carried out. The study is an in-depth analysis based on systematic review and interpretation of documentary and statistical sources which covers geopolitical developments and their humanitarian implications.

Secondary data were gathered from reports and databases produced by the UN agencies, UNHCR, UNCTAD, World Bank, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) and other reputable international research bodies. The data and reports were chosen relevant to the research objectives and with the assumption that they are credible and had recently been published.

The analysis is based on the following six areas:

1. ***Geopolitical competition:*** U.S.-Iran relations, regional power competition and proxy wars.

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2. ***Maritime security:*** developments in Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz.
3. ***Political fragility in the states:*** Instability, institutional weakness and external involvement in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.
4. ***Humanitarian impacts:*** displacement, food insecurity, health, water, electricity and transport infrastructure damage.
5. ***Economic effects:*** inflation, economic slowdown, disruptions in trade, energy risks and costs in supply-chains.
6. ***Regional and global implications:*** impact on energy security, global maritime trade and regional stability.

Key indicators used in the analysis are the number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), the number of population in need of humanitarian assistance, food security conditions, damage to infrastructure, economic growth/contraction, oil flows, maritime traffic, rerouting of shipping and freight costs. These indicators can then be linked to measurable humanitarian and economic outcomes, giving insight to geopolitical developments.

The study is conducted in a document analysis way, where information given in the various reports is compared and interpreted thematically. The analysis does not try to build statistical causality; it looks into the relationships and patterns between geopolitical developments, regional conflict and humanitarian consequences.

Changing geo-political environment in the Middle East

USA and Iran: Rivalry and Asymmetric Conflict

The U.S.-Iranian ties are still significant in the geopolitics of the West Asian region. The competition between the two nations is not just military deterrence but also the playing out of sanctions, forming alliances in the region and indirect confrontation through armed groups. Iran's regional ties with Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen have been instrumental in a wider regional security environment that allows for conflicts to spill over borders.

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The rise of the use of drones and missile systems has also brought a shift in the regional security landscape. These technologies can equip non-state actors and smaller military forces with relatively cheap options of threatening military bases, ports and energy infrastructure. As a result, security of critical infrastructure has become closely linked with geopolitical competition throughout the region.

The situation also illustrates the need to consider the security of West Asia beyond the state-state prism. There are complex webs of overlapping political, military and economic ties between state actors, non-state armed groups and external actors.

This section covers maritime militarisation in Bab el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz.

Weakness in maritime security has become an integral part of West Asian geopolitics. The Bab el-Mandeb is the strait that links the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, and the Strait of Hormuz links the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman.

The straits of Bab el-Mandeb and Red Sea

Attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea have resulted in substantial changes to international shipping routes. The number of vessels was diverted around the Cape of Good Hope, resulting in longer voyages, higher costs and strain on global supply chains, reported UNCTAD.

The disruption demonstrates how a regional security crisis can have repercussions in countries far removed from the region of West Asia. The longer routes that are used will consume more fuel, cost more for insurance and take longer to deliver and can put extra pressure on the prices of goods that are traded internationally.

Strait of Hormuz

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The Strait of Hormuz is still one of the world's major energy choke points. According to EIA data, approximately 20 million barrels per day of petroleum passed through the Strait in 2024, and one-fifth of the world's liquefied natural gas (LNG) trade was transited through the waterway.

This is due to the focus on the energy transport sector in this narrow strait and its potential impact on international energy markets.This is because the Gulf is a narrow strait and geopolitical issues in the area can have implications for international energy markets. There is some capacity to diminish reliance upon the maritime transportation through the Gulf, through the use of alternative infrastructure such as the oil pipeline running between Saudi Arabia and other continents.

Regional conflict and state fragility

Yemen

The situation in Yemen is a protracted state of political disintegration, armed conflict, economic suffering, and humanitarian crisis. There are long-term humanitarian needs because of conflict, weak institutions and limited access to essential services. As of early 2025, there are an estimated 4.8 million IDPs in Yemen, according to UNHCR.

The fighting even has a maritime element, as a result of events related to the Houthis have impacted shipping through the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. In Yemen, therefore, the link between internal conflict, regional security and international sea trade is evident.

Syria

The widespread displacement and destruction of infrastructure and economic difficulties in Syria have been caused by the long conflict. The humanitarian situation is still very vulnerable despite the political and security context. In December 2025, UNHCR estimated there were some 6.5 million IDPs in Syria, and millions of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries.

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The Syrian case also shows the need for external intervention and the role of several local, regional and international actors in determining the dynamics of the conflict.

Iraq

The political competition, armed groups and external security pressures, plus the dependency on oil make Iraq a challenge. Iraq's dependence on oil for growth makes its economy highly vulnerable, and developments related to conflict can impact production, exports, and government revenues, the World Bank states.

In the Iraqi example, what is therefore at stake is the interplay between political stability, sovereignty, economic dependency and geopolitical competition in the region.

Lebanon

Political, economic and security crises are overlapping in Lebanon. The economy continued to be fragile and rely on reforms and political and security stability during the 2025 recovery, according to the World Bank.

Economic impacts of conflict are also significant. According to the World Bank's 2025 recovery and reconstruction needs assessment, Lebanon needs about US$11 billion, of which a significant portion has been allocated for infrastructure, housing, energy, transport and water.

Comparative Analysis of Regional Flashpoints

Country	Core Geopolitical Driver	Key Actors	Major Vulnerability
Yemen	Fragmented statehood and Red Sea maritime conflict	Houthi Movement, STC, Saudi/UAE coalition	Institutional fragmentation, food insecurity and infrastructure destruction

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Syria	Protracted civil conflict and foreign intervention	Government forces, foreign military actors, local militias	Territorial fragmentation, economic crisis and displacement
Iraq	Proxy competition and sovereignty pressures	PMF, U.S. forces and regional actors	Political gridlock and vulnerability to cross-border attacks
Lebanon	Institutional paralysis and regional escalation	Hezbollah, UNIFIL and regional actors	Currency collapse, banking crisis and refugee pressures

Broadly, the comparison shows that while there are variations in the specific drivers of instability among these countries, they share some common structural features such as: state institutions are weak; the state is subjected to external intervention; the economy is vulnerable; and there are armed non-state actors.

Humanitarian Consequences

The humanitarian response has been affected by a series of interrelated crises caused by geopolitical competition and persistent military conflicts in West Asia.There are interrelated humanitarian crises resulting from geopolitical competition and long-standing conflict in West Asia. Conflict acts in conjunction with a lack of economic stability, institutional strength and environmental pressures which further exacerbate the vulnerability of civilians.

Mass Displacement

Both Syria and Yemen have been facing a long-running displacement crisis. Large numbers of people have been displaced internally, and neighbouring countries have hosted large numbers of refugees.

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The paper also estimates that there are over 6.8 million IDPs in Syria, and over 4.5 million IDPs in Yemen. These displacement trends have led to significant strains on host communities and the infrastructure.

Food Insecurity

Food security has been largely impacted by the conflict in certain areas of West Asia. Conflict and turmoil disrupt food imports, transportation and access to vital commodities, as well as agricultural production. Port, road, electricity and water damage also negatively affect communities' access to sufficient food.

Yemen is experiencing long-standing conflict and economic challenges, which have led to food insecurity and malnutrition in the country. The same difficulties are apparent in other countries in conflict, where higher food prices, food chain disruptions, and a drop in household incomes have made it harder to afford basic food.

Destruction of Critical Infrastructure

- Essential infrastructure which has been impacted by conflict includes:
- Water-processing facilities
- Electricity networks
- Ports
- Grain-storage facilities
- Medical facilities
- Transportation systems
- Loss of such infrastructure diminishes the role governments and humanitarian groups can play in delivering basic services.

Economic Collapse and Poverty

Another widespread impact of geopolitical conflict is economic turmoil. The socioeconomic vulnerability has increased due to currency depreciation,

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collapse of the banking system, high unemployment, disruption of trade and decrease in investment, especially in fragile states like Lebanon and Yemen.

Global Implications

West Asia is a region of geopolitical change affecting beyond its borders.

Energy Security

The risks within the energy transportation corridors can drive risk premiums in the international oil market and uncertainty in international energy supply.

Global Supply Chains

Commercial vessels have to undertake longer routes due to disruptions in the Red Sea, resulting in longer transport times, higher insurance costs, freight rates, and cost of internationally traded goods.

Great Power Competition

West Asia continues to be a significant region of strategic rivalry between the US, China, and Russia. Meanwhile, the United States has a substantial security footprint, China is pursuing its economic agenda to ensure the security of its energy and trade supply lines, and Russia enters the region through diplomatic and strategic means to enhance its regional footprint.

Discussion

The analysis shows that traditional interstate rivalry is inadequate for an explanation of the geopolitics of contemporary West Asia. The competition between States, the use of proxy forces, non-state armed groups, maritime insecurity, technologic developments and institutional fragility are all influencing regional security today.

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Many of the hallmarks of the current regional situation are the interplay between geopolitical competition and human insecurity. In addition to direct acts of violence, civilian populations are also impacted by military confrontation in the form of displacement, food insecurity, economic collapse, destruction of infrastructure and disruption of essential services.

Another significant aspect is the security on the sea. The vulnerability of Bab el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz shows how regional conflict can have repercussions in international energy markets and global supply chains.

Policy Recommendations

The following measures can be considered based on the analysis:

1. Maritime security mechanisms: Regional and international mechanisms and collaboration should be reinforced to improve the safety of commercial shipping in the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb and Strait of Hormuz areas.
2. Enhancing the protection of civilian infrastructure: Improvements should be made to the protection of civilian infrastructure, including water, electricity, health, transport, and other civilian infrastructure during an armed conflict.
3. Regional dialogue: Communication avenues between regional powers should be enhanced to help prevent miscalculation and escalation.
4. Humanitarian and institutional support: Long-term support should be integrated with humanitarian assistance to support essential public services, livelihoods and institutional capacity of the local community.
5. Economic recovery: Fragile states need coordinated support for infrastructure rehabilitation, economic recovery and restoration of key public services.

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Conclusion

The geopolitical rearrangements of West Asia illustrate a shift to multipolar competition, asymmetric warfare, proxy wars and growing strategic vulnerability of West Asian maritime choke points. The complex security situation is the result of interplay between regional powers, external actors and non-state actors with conflicts becoming increasingly transnational.

It has especially devastating humanitarian impacts. Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon remain plagued with populations displaced, struggling with economic and livelihood challenges, food insecurity and institutional breakdown. Meanwhile, turbulence in the strategic shipping lanes has repercussions for the energy market and international supply lines.

This will necessitate a transition of focus from military and zero-sum solutions to regional dialogue, maritime security arrangements, protection of civilian infrastructure, economic stabilization and continued humanitarian investment for long-term stability.

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