

Middle East: Scenarios for Development of Security Situation and Implications for Ukraine

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Introduction

The operation by the United States (US) and Israel against Iran (28 February 2026) and the memorandum of understanding between Washington and Tehran signed in Versailles on 18 June 2026 have conclusively destroyed the previous architecture of Middle Eastern security, which rested on the American security umbrella and the logic of the Abraham Accords. The region is entering a long period of reconfiguration in which the rules of the game are being written anew, in real time. For Ukraine this is not abstract geopolitics but a space that directly affects Russia's oil revenues, the supply of Iranian weapons, the diplomatic capital of Western partners and the opportunities for building its own long-term presence in the region.

Iranian factor

Course of conflict and contours of deal. Operation “Epic Fury” (28 February 2026) ended with the elimination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the pragmatist Ali Larijani; power passed to Ali Khamenei’s son – Mojtaba Khamenei. The memorandum signed on 18 June recorded an obvious asymmetry of concessions, closely tied precisely to the question of the Strait of Hormuz: Tehran obtained the lifting of the naval blockade and the unfreezing of assets in exchange only for preserving the status quo on its nuclear program. Yet the document is barely operative – Donald Trump formally withdrew from the arrangements as early as July 2026¹.

Strait of Hormuz as key problem. Until February 2026, the threat of closing the strait was an instrument of deterrence, valuable precisely because it had never been used. The war broke that taboo: Iran carried out the blockade, and the card changed its nature – from hypothetical to proven and repeatable^{2,3}. Even after the deal, Iran closed the strait again at least twice, citing alleged violations of the memorandum, notably Israel’s actions in Lebanon⁴. Tellingly, the strait was reopened only after Iran achieved a separate objective – a halt to Israel’s war against Hezbollah. This instrument is structurally stronger than a hypothetical nuclear weapon: it is reversible and calibrated (unlike the irreversible nuclear threshold), legitimized by the rhetoric of an “inalienable right” to the security of its own waters, produces an instant global economic effect through oil prices and is a geographic given that cannot be destroyed by strikes.

Collapse of Israeli strategic axiom. For Israel, the thesis that “maximum pressure leads to regime collapse” was practically an article of faith rather than a mere working hypothesis; the war disproved it – instead of collapse came the consolidation of the system around an external threat. Israel’s tactical superiority did not convert into a strategic result – the more precise the strikes, the more clearly they outlined the line that cannot be crossed without catastrophic consequences⁵.

Shift of strategic paradigm: “Islamic Republic 3.0”. The new leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) concluded that Ali Khamenei’s restraint had encouraged rather than deterred escalation; the new doctrine combines a readiness to escalate and to talk⁶.

Crisis of “arbiter” after Ali Khamenei’s death. Mojtaba Khamenei is a structural problem as a factor of domestic political tension: unlike his father, he is a product of one of the sides (the IRGC) rather than an arbiter above them all. The fault lines within the Corps already exist, merely frozen by the war; reconstruction and the lifting of sanctions will sharpen the fight over the redivision of economic enclaves⁷. The letter in which Mojtaba Khamenei authorizes the conclusion of the memorandum while placing his own disagreement on record attests to the destruction of a key safeguard of Iranian strategic culture – the concept of Maslahat-e Nezam (“expediency of the system”), which previously allowed the supreme leader to balance between the pragmatic-statist line (the diplomats, President Masoud Pezeshkian) and the revolutionary-messianic line (the IRGC). Without a single interpreter of doctrine, the IRGC by default reverts to its basic identity of resistance (muqawama), within which compromise with the United States is perceived not as a pragmatic decision but as a threat to the very existence of the Islamic republic; for the elites, a display of weakness is more dangerous than direct military confrontation⁸. This institutional unsettledness is confirmed by outside expertise as well: Western commentators reasonably point to the institutional vacuum and the autonomy of IRGC-controlled proxy networks, which continue to attack shipping in the Strait of Hormuz regardless of the diplomatic track, – Tehran can no longer simply “switch off” these networks even where the political will exists⁹. The situation is deteriorating: according to the latest reports (July 2026), Mojtaba Khamenei has not appeared in public for a long time, which feeds rumors about his health or even death and is already openly provoking a struggle among elite groups for dominance¹⁰.

Strait of Hormuz turns from asset into burden. Arab analysts note that blocking the strait proved a more effective instrument of pressure on Washington than Iran's nuclear program, on which tens of billions of dollars and years of sanctions have been spent, – the spike in oil prices and Trump's invocation of the Great Depression of 1929 forced the United States to the negotiating table⁷. Yet the bet on a single lever made Tehran's behavior entirely predictable and consolidated the region and the West against it: the summit of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Ankara for the first time bluntly demanded the reopening of the strait, Britain and France declared their readiness to protect shipping, and the attacks on tankers in Omani waters cost Iran its relations with a traditionally close partner⁷. The market, meanwhile, adapted faster than Tehran expected: after a peak of \$120 per barrel, the price fell to \$79 despite continued attacks on tankers – the economic blackmail weakens with every month, turning the strait from a strategic instrument of deterrence into shackles that rather constrain the maneuverability of the regime itself⁷.

Escalation instead of de-escalation: memorandum de facto suspended. On 7 July 2026 the United States resumed strikes on Iran, and on 8 July Trump publicly stated that the Versailles memorandum of 18 June had effectively lapsed. On 12 July the IRGC announced the closure of Hormuz; in response, on 13 July Trump ordered a new wave of strikes (some 140 targets), reinstated the naval blockade and announced a 20 percent fee for transiting the strait. The administration officially notified Congress of the resumption of hostilities, insisting on its constitutional right to continue them without separate authorization – contrary to the demand of both chambers to halt the operation or obtain approval; the dispute between Capitol Hill and the White House is escalating in parallel with the war⁸.

Washington's wager: control instead of freedom of passage. The newly introduced 20 percent fee for transiting Hormuz is, in our view, more a form of racketeering or classic imperialism than a strategy for ensuring freedom of navigation. The two sides' strategic goals diverge fundamentally: Washington seeks to push Iran out of the strait, Tehran – to secure recognition of its regional primacy, which is why direct talks are blocked and the mediation in Doha (Steve Witkoff, Jared Kushner) yields no breakthroughs^{6,8}.

Scenarios: (1) implementation of the 60-day track, with stabilization through episodic calibrated closures of Hormuz as a permanent bargaining instrument; (2) collapse of the talks and a return to escalation – a scenario already partly realized in July 2026; (3) internal fragmentation driven by the struggle over resources. A full-scale US ground operation against Iran remains unlikely given the enormous financial costs and the political risks for Trump ahead of the elections; the baseline scenario is a return to negotiations provided there is sufficient pressure on Iran^{6,8}.

Implications for Ukraine: the volatility of Hormuz is a direct, uncontrollable factor of pressure on Russia's oil revenues, independent of Western sanctions. The new wave of attacks on tankers again amplifies the volatility of oil prices – structurally advantageous to Russia and harmful to the world economy; the escalation also carries a direct human cost, including Ukrainian citizens among those affected⁶. The thesis about Iranian weapons supplies to Russia now needs reassessment: according to Western analysts, Tehran most likely suspended active deliveries to Moscow as early as spring 2026, while the flow has partly reversed – Russia itself is transferring weaponry to Iran (Su-35 fighters, Mi-28 helicopters, missiles) to replenish its arsenal during the truce⁹.

Palestinian–Israeli conflict (Gaza, Lebanon/Hezbollah)

No local conflict in the region can any longer be viewed in isolation: for years Iran built the “Axis of Resistance” so that a conflict at any point would automatically activate synchronized pressure in the other nodes. This is confirmed by the fact that Iran secured the reopening of Hormuz only after the halt of Israel’s war against Hezbollah in Lebanon – the Lebanese front has de facto ceased to be an autonomous theater.

Lebanon: negotiations between states, not with Hezbollah. The main track is negotiations between the governments of Israel and Lebanon rather than direct dialogue with Hezbollah: Beirut has officially committed itself to disarming the organization, but the Lebanese state is structurally incapable of delivering on this – the army and the security agencies have neither the capacity nor sufficient political will for the forcible disarmament of an actor embedded in the country’s own political system. This is a systemic, not a temporary, problem: Israel will not leave the occupied territories of southern Lebanon while Hezbollah keeps its weapons, and the Lebanese government has no tools to fulfill that condition, which makes the knot unresolvable in the short term⁶.

Gaza after end of active phase: controlled stagnation. The situation is not a settlement but a freezing of the status quo: instead of the agreed “yellow line” (~53% of the territory under Israel under the October 2025 deal), Israel has expanded its control to ~60% with a target of 70%, squeezing ~2 million Palestinians onto an ever smaller patch of territory. In early July, Hamas announced the dissolution of its government and the transfer of power to the technocratic NCAG committee, but the transition is blocked – the committee remains outside Gaza because of Israel’s objections, and disarmament has not taken place. The Board of Peace chaired by Trump was to oversee reconstruction, but, according to the Financial Times (FT), its fund is effectively empty; the International Stabilization Force (a planned 20,000 personnel) is only beginning to deploy, with no clear timetable¹⁰.

Growing discontent inside Gaza. An unprecedented challenge to Hamas rule is the “June 26” protest movement – an organic reaction of an exhausted population to the factions’ inaction after the US–Iran memorandum of understanding (MOU). The organizers are horizontal networks of volunteers and bloggers, not parties; the slogan is the right to a peaceful life instead of the narrative of a “religious monolith”. Hamas crushed the mobilization with terror and threats, while the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) – historically a secular Marxist organization – under IRGC patronage threatened activists with a tribunal for supporting the protest. A mass turnout did not materialize, but analysts assess this as an irreversible erosion of Hamas’s legitimacy rather than its victory¹¹.

Crisis of Palestinian leadership. The unresolved Palestinian question remains the main “provider of legitimacy” for Iran on the Arab street. The battle over the succession to the 91-year-old Mahmoud Abbas between the pragmatist Hussein al-Sheikh (backed by Riyadh and Washington, but with minimal street support) and the popular but imprisoned Marwan Barghouti remains unresolved: Abbas retains the posts of president of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and head of Fatah, and the elections have been postponed until 28 November 2026. This preserves the gulf between formal power and street legitimacy – the main structural risk to the stability of the PA¹².

Israel as “unpredictable actor” – structural consequence. Until 2023 there existed a narrative of Israel as an “anchor of stability” against the Iranian arc; the successive wars destroyed that narrative in the perception of Arab capitals. This is a stigma of the state, not the government – elections in Israel will not change it. The case of Benjamin Netanyahu’s secret visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), disclosed by him without coordination for the sake of pre-election publicity, illustrates a readiness to sacrifice partners for domestic political dividends¹.

The academic framing of this process is fixed in regional expertise as well: Arab analysts apply the “center–periphery” model to the Iran–Palestine link – by analogy with the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, which weakened the movements associated with it, the weakening of Iran as the “center” of the axis of resistance may weaken Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad as the “periphery”. At the same time, there is scholarly debate over Israel’s status: on one view (The New York Times, April 2025), Israel has already become a regional hegemon after the campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon; on another, it remains structurally dependent on the United States in the military, diplomatic and economic spheres and cannot play the role of hegemon without resolving the Palestinian question¹³. The same analysts caution that the war against Iran began without a mandate from the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and without consultations with traditional allies – a symptom of the transition from international law to the logic of “transactionalism” (privileges in exchange for material benefits), which is structurally disadvantageous for the Palestinians, whose main resource is moral and legal legitimacy rather than military force¹³.

Implications for Ukraine: relations with Israel remain largely declarative. The European Union (EU) sanctions package against settlers, adopted on the same day as the sanctions over the deportation of Ukrainian children, is an insufficiently used legal precedent for the terminology of occupation. The grain scandal (ships carrying stolen grain despite the intelligence dossier that had been handed over) shows that political support from Israel does not convert into real concessions where commercial interests intersect, – this should be made the subject of a separate, consistent dialogue with Tel Aviv rather than a side conclusion.

Prospects for normalization between Israel and Arab countries

The war of 2026 definitively buried the idea of a grand Arab–Israeli alliance bypassing the Palestinians¹. Riyadh has made clear: Israel's integration into the region is impossible without an irreversible path to Palestinian statehood – this distinguishes the Saudi case from the UAE/Bahrain model of 2020.

Saudi Arabia acts as a strategically autonomous actor, not a passive victim. Saudi analysts and former senior officials directly accuse Israel of attempting to ignite a war between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Iran so as to remain the “only actor” in the region; Riyadh deliberately refrained from a retaliatory strike, although it quietly delivered strikes¹. Relations with Tehran went through an acute phase (attacks on Aramco facilities, the expulsion of diplomats), but the KSA's strategic choice is its own non-aggression pact with Iran, separate from Israel, since seating Iran and Israel at the same table is impossible.

The UAE chose the opposite vector – a deepening of ties with Israel (the deployment of Iron Dome on Emirati territory), which drew criticism from regional elites (Hamad bin Jassim, the idea of a “Gulf NATO” without the UAE) and a trend toward the isolation of Abu Dhabi within the Gulf. The UAE's exit from the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) (as of 1 May 2026) further strained relations with Riyadh.

Qatar has acquired an elevated role as a financial intermediary in unblocking Iranian assets – a rise in Doha's diplomatic weight. Pakistan acts as the second key mediator on the Iranian track: it was through Islamabad that technical negotiations proceeded and the sides' proposals were conveyed, which makes the Qatar–Pakistan link the main channel of de-escalation alongside direct contacts in Doha.

Structural conclusion: no Gulf actor is prepared to build a security architecture around an anti-Iranian coalition led by Israel; economic stability has proved more important than ideological confrontation with Tehran.

Implications for Ukraine: the mediation experience of Qatar and Pakistan is a potential channel for humanitarian issues (prisoner exchanges, the return of children). The case of Farmak's return to the Saudi market demonstrates the KSA's growing trust in Ukraine regardless of the dynamics of Israeli–Arab normalization.

Syria and regional security

The new unified Syria is consolidating under Ahmed al-Sharaa: under the harsher version of the “March Pact”, the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) agreed to full administrative assimilation instead of autonomy; the government gained control over the oil resources of the north^{14, 15}. A sign of the gradual strengthening of institutional capacity was the first session of the new parliament on 12 July 2026, with Abdul Hamid al-Awak elected speaker, although the assembly’s mandate is limited to 30 months pending full elections¹⁶.

Israel’s double game. Tel Aviv supports the Druze in Suwayda under pressure from its own Druze community and strikes al-Sharaa’s forces, while with Damascus, through the mediation of Tom Barrack, only a narrow ceasefire has been achieved^{14, 17, 18}. This repeats the pattern from Iran and Lebanon: Israel acts against the strategic logic of Washington, which, on the contrary, views a centralized Syria under al-Sharaa as a priority for financial and oil-related reasons.

Turkish factor. Ankara has cemented its political and economic leadership in Syria; the appointment of Barrack as special envoy for Syria and Iraq is a signal of Washington’s bet on a Türkiye-centric approach. At the same time, closeness to Türkiye unsettles Arab neighbors (Cairo, Amman, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi), suspicious of the success of political Islam in Syria.

Hidden convergence of interests: Iran and Israel have an objective shared interest in the possible disintegration of Syria through a new civil war – each for its own reasons.

Russia’s influence in Syria has not merely weakened in a one-off way; it is in a process of continuous contraction following the withdrawal of a significant part of its forces; the status of the Khmeimim and Tartus bases is an indicator of this protracted rupture between Damascus and its former patron^{19, 20}.

Scenarios: (1) consolidation under al-Sharaa on the Turkish model; (2) fragmentation through escalation on the Kurdish/Druze tracks with Israeli backing; (3) regional isolation owing to Arab neighbors’ wariness of the Islamist project.

Relevance to Ukraine: Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s visit to Damascus (5 April 2026), with trilateral talks involving Türkiye, established a channel of cooperation in security and the exchange of wartime experience; that said, the success of the visit is linked not only to the Turkish factor but also to the support of Saudi Arabia²¹.

Implications for Ukraine: synthesis

The region is entering a long period in which its security architecture will be reshaped; this is a window of opportunity for new players – one that Ukraine will seize only by moving from tactics to a systemic approach.

Energy dimension – a three-speed mechanism of pressure on Russia's budget. Oil price dynamics have passed through two opposite regimes: before the escalation, a supply deficit weighed on the revenue side of the Russian budget, whereas the volatility of the war period, on the contrary, brought Russia windfall profits from price spikes. Ukraine's interest lies in a definitive Iranian–American agreement and the stabilization of prices at a low level, which depends on three factors moving at different speeds: the Strait of Hormuz (the fastest effect, but it remains a permanent bargaining instrument for Iran), Iranian oil exports (slow and partial owing to infrastructure degradation and banking barriers), and the UAE's exit from OPEC (a structural factor with a 2027+ horizon). Maximum pressure on the Russian budget will come not immediately after a deal but gradually.

Security dimension. The thesis that Iranian weapons supplies to Russia depend on the internal Iranian situation needs revision: by available estimates, Tehran most likely suspended active deliveries to Moscow as early as spring 2026, and the flow has partly reversed – Russia itself is supplying Iran with weaponry to replenish its arsenal⁹.

Diplomatic dimension. The Middle East crisis absorbs the diplomatic capital and media attention of the Trump administration – a “dispersal” factor that competes with the Ukrainian track. At the same time, this has opened for Ukraine the possibility of actively entering the Middle Eastern arms market and signing a series of defense agreements with Arab countries – the effect here is twofold, not merely a loss of attention. The precedent of the EU sanctions against settlers (parallel to the sanctions over the deportation of children) creates a legal toolkit of occupation terminology applicable to the Ukrainian discourse, but it is insufficiently used.

Security channel on the ground. Ukraine's presence in the region is a security imperative: Russia is structurally embedded through Iranian components in drones, sanctions evasion via regional hubs and the “weapons for energy” scheme – these networks must be broken on the ground.

Information dimension. Moscow is constructing an image of Ukraine as an “American project” for the audiences of the Global South – a counter-offensive in the Middle Eastern information space remains an insufficiently developed track.

From tactics to system. Ukraine must build its own long-term strategy in the region¹ rather than rely on tactical successes and asymmetric moves, which provide momentum at the moment of crisis but do not substitute for system and make Ukraine visible only at moments of escalation. It is important for Ukraine to be not a “dot in someone else's strategy” of the West's global re-architecture, but the subject of its own long-term game. The transition to systemic grounding requires three steps: a permanent information presence in the Arabic-language space (in the language of shared risks, not requests for assistance); clear financial math of the cost of strategic presence; and a coalition of diplomats, academic institutions, media, business and the diaspora instead of a solitary presence.

The already existing practical foundation includes the trilateral Ukraine–Syria–Türkiye format, launched by the president's visit to Damascus, and practical economic cases such as the restoration of Farmak's access to the Saudi market.

Recommendations for Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine

- › **Defense industry: from exporting hardware to technological partnership.** Focus on attracting the capital of Gulf countries into the defense-technology sector (DefTech) – joint ventures and the localization of production (unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), electronic warfare (EW) systems) on their territory or in secure hubs. Ukraine's main product today is the combat experience of integrating technologies into war, which should be converted into investment to scale up production at home.
- › **Legal track:** systematic work first and foremost with Europe, on basis of existing precedent. Do not abandon the public parallel of sanctions-based occupation terminology – it is consonant with Ukraine's established position, including its vote for United Nations Security Council Resolution 2334 (2016) on the illegality of Israeli settlements and its support for the two-state solution²². The priority is systematic work with European partners (the European Parliament, the legal services of the EU, where this terminology is already part of EU law), without pegging it to Washington's reaction.
- › **Information presence:** digital pragmatism. Abandon costly legacy media in favor of a digital strategy in the Arabic-language segment of networks (X, TikTok, Telegram, YouTube): work with local influencers and natives of Middle Eastern countries, factual content about shared threats (the impact of Iranian drones on Ukrainian grain storage and the food security of the Middle East). Finance this through co-production and grants from Western partners, mindful of the limits of the state budget. Facilitation by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) in obtaining such resources is important.
- › **Syrian vector:** tactical flexibility instead of "all-in" gamble. Treat the new Syria under al-Sharaa not as a long-term ally but as a window of opportunity with high risk. Narrow the priorities down to the security track: squeezing out the residual Russian presence (Khmeimim, Tartus) and shutting down the channels of Russian sanctions evasion. Synchronize public steps with Riyadh, Washington and Ankara.
- › **Optimizing personnel: working through existing hubs.** Assign the humanitarian track (children, prisoners – via Qatar and Pakistan) to the embassies in Doha and Islamabad under the coordination of the Special Representative for the Middle East and Africa. For monitoring shadow Russian–Iranian networks, engage actively with analysts of Ukraine's intelligence services and the Ministry of Finance.

¹ Analytical publications by Ihor Semyvolos on Facebook (March–June 2026) and his remarks at the Ukrinform round table "Ukraine – Middle East: New Architecture of Partnership".

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