

Analytical Review

THE “GREATER ISRAEL” IDEA, U.S.-ISRAELI STRATEGY, AND REGIONAL ESCALATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A GEOPOLITICAL REVIEW

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Running title: Greater Israel narrative, regional escalation, and Middle East strategic insecurity

Abstract

This review examines the recurring claim that Israeli and U.S. policy, especially during confrontation with Iran and allied groups, indirectly advances a “Greater Israel” project. It separates three layers: the historical roots of maximalist territorial ideas, the actual security practice of the modern Israeli state, and the way regional audiences interpret wars across Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and the Gulf through themes of dispossession and strategic redesign. While earlier Revisionist Zionist thought did include expansive ideas, these cannot be treated as identical to current official policy. Still, repeated wars, settlement expansion, U.S. Israeli alignment, and Gulf insecurity have strengthened perceptions that regional conflict often works in Israel’s strategic favor.

Keywords: Greater Israel, Revisionist Zionism, Israel Iran tensions, U.S. Israel alignment, regional escalation, Gulf security, Middle East geopolitics, strategic dependency

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Peer Review Statement: This manuscript has not undergone external peer review, as it represents a structured synthesis and analysis of existing evidence. The methodological approach adheres to established standards to ensure rigor, transparency, and scientific validity.

Data Synthesis and Analysis

Data were synthesized using meta-analysis (fixed/random effects) with heterogeneity assessed by I^2 and Cochran's Q. Where pooling was not feasible, narrative and thematic syntheses were applied. Network meta-analysis and meta-regression were conducted where appropriate, in accordance with PRISMA and Cochrane guidelines.



Introduction:

The phrase “Greater Israel” occupies an unusual place in Middle Eastern political language. It is at once a historical reference, a polemical slogan, a cartographic imagination, and a contemporary accusation. In many Arab, Iranian, Turkish, and South Asian discussions, it is used to describe a suspected long-term project of Israeli territorial aggrandizement extending beyond the occupied Palestinian territories into a broader remaking of the regional order. In academic terms, however, such claims require careful parsing. A distinction must be maintained between ideological motifs found in strands of Revisionist Zionism, electoral rhetoric used by Israeli right-wing actors, the legal and military reality of Israeli policy in Gaza and the West Bank, and the wider U.S.-led security architecture in the Gulf.

The issue has re-emerged with particular force since the Gaza war, the January 2024 and subsequent International Court of Justice provisional-measures orders in the South Africa v. Israel case, the April 2024 Israeli strike on Iran's diplomatic compound in Damascus, Iran's unprecedented direct missile-and-drone strike on Israel, and the spillover effects involving Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Iraqi militias, and Gulf energy insecurity. For many observers, these events are not interpreted as isolated crises; they are read as nodes in a cumulative pattern linking occupation, deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and regional fragmentation. Whether that interpretation is ultimately persuasive or not, it has become geopolitically consequential in its own right.

2. Historical genealogy: ideology, rhetoric, and the problem of overextension

The historical roots of the "Greater Israel" idea are commonly traced to Revisionist Zionism and to Ze'ev Jabotinsky, who argued in the 1920s that Zionist settlement could not proceed through Arab consent and would instead require an "iron wall" of force beyond the capacity of the indigenous population to break. Jabotinsky was a central founder of Revisionist Zionism and a major intellectual precursor of the Israeli right. That historical record is important, but it does not by itself establish that the present-day Israeli state is pursuing a formal Nile-to-Euphrates doctrine. Rather, it shows that coercive security doctrines and maximalist territorial imaginaries have deep roots in one influential ideological stream.

This distinction matters. The modern use of "Greater Israel" often collapses ideological ancestry, party rhetoric, settlement expansion, biblical symbolism, and real military policy into a single category. That can create analytical imprecision. Yet there is also a reason the term persists. It persists because official and quasi-official language has periodically echoed maximalist notions of sovereignty. The original 1977 Likud platform famously declared that "between the Sea and the Jordan there will only be Israeli sovereignty," a formulation that remains politically salient in debates about annexation, Palestinian statehood, and permanent control over the occupied territories. Even when not expressed in cartographic terms, such language reinforces the perception that Israeli state practice is structurally incompatible with Palestinian self-determination.

3. From historical idea to contemporary narrative

The contemporary power of the "Greater Israel" narrative derives less from antiquarian ideology than from present-day events. These include settlement expansion in the West Bank, the status of East Jerusalem, the devastation in Gaza, repeated strikes in Syria, targeted operations against Iran-linked networks, and the integration of Israel into parts of the Gulf security system after the Abraham Accords. In regional perception, especially among Palestinians, Lebanese communities in the south, Iraqi Shi'a factions, Yemeni Houthis, and segments of Arab public opinion, these developments form a connected landscape of domination rather than separate case files.

That perception intensified after the ICJ's January, March, and May 2024 interventions on Gaza, which did not determine the merits of the genocide case but did find plausible rights under the Genocide Convention at risk and ordered Israel to take provisional measures, including steps connected to humanitarian protection and access. Those proceedings helped internationalize the legal dimension of the Gaza war and gave further force to arguments that the conflict could no longer be understood merely as a self-contained counterterrorism campaign. For many in the Global South, including South Africa, Malaysia, Türkiye, and parts of Latin America, the legal

track reinforced suspicion that regional violence was being normalized under the language of security.

4. The 2024–2026 escalation cycle and the logic of alliance entrapment

A more rigorous way to frame the central claim is not to ask whether a secret blueprint exists, but whether repeated escalatory sequences generate outcomes functionally favorable to Israeli military primacy and U.S.-aligned regional security dependency. The April 1, 2024 strike on the Iranian diplomatic compound in Damascus, which Iran said killed senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps officers, was one such turning point. Iran's direct retaliatory attack on Israel on April 13–14, 2024, involving drones and missiles, marked the first overt Iranian strike from its own territory against Israel. That exchange punctured earlier assumptions that the conflict would remain confined to deniable or proxy channels.

Once direct exchange became thinkable, the strategic environment of the Gulf also changed. Qatar hosts Al Udeid Air Base, a core U.S. military hub, while Bahrain hosts U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and the U.S. Fifth Fleet. These installations are not incidental. They are integral to deterrence, surveillance, logistics, and maritime security in a region where the Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world's most critical oil chokepoints. In 2025, nearly 15 million barrels per day of crude oil moved through the strait, with most flows destined for Asia; China and India alone accounted for 44% of those crude exports. This means that any Israeli-Iranian confrontation is never simply bilateral. It is structurally linked to Gulf monarchies, Asian energy importers, shipping insurers, and global inflation.

From this perspective, the concept of “GCC entrapment” becomes analytically useful, though it should be used with caution. The argument is not that Gulf states lack agency. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and others pursue their own diplomacy, hedge among Washington, Beijing, Moscow, and regional actors, and participate in OPEC+ coordination. Saudi-Iranian diplomatic restoration in 2023, brokered by China, demonstrated precisely that Gulf politics cannot be reduced to U.S. control. Yet Gulf states remain embedded in an American-led defense architecture that limits their room for maneuver when confrontation escalates. In practical terms, they may seek de-escalation while simultaneously hosting the infrastructure that makes escalation sustainable.

5. Energy, shipping, and the material geography of crisis

The geopolitical importance of the Strait of Hormuz explains why conflict narratives in the region often move rapidly from ideology to infrastructure. The strait links the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and Arabian Sea and remains central not only to oil markets but also to LNG, petrochemicals, insurance pricing, and shipping routes. The Red Sea disruptions associated with Houthi attacks had already demonstrated how quickly maritime insecurity can reroute vessels around the Cape of Good Hope and raise war-risk premiums. A Hormuz-centered crisis magnifies those effects because alternative export pathways are limited.

This material geography also explains the interest of non-regional powers. According to the IEA, Asia is the principal destination for Hormuz crude, with China and India heavily exposed; Japan and South Korea are also particularly reliant. South Korea has publicly sought assurances over vessel safety, while Indian officials have emphasized the economic risks of any prolonged disruption. Europe is less directly dependent on Hormuz crude than Asia, but still exposed through price transmission, LNG markets, and industrial supply chains. Thus, even where the

“Greater Israel” thesis is not accepted, the broader claim that regional escalation reshapes global hierarchies of vulnerability is plainly credible.

6. Counter-arguments and analytical limits

A professional review must also take seriously the counter-argument that the “Greater Israel” thesis overstates coherence and imputes excessive intentionality to a highly fragmented strategic environment. Israel’s mainstream security establishment generally frames its military posture around deterrence, border defense, anti-missile interception, the Iranian nuclear file, and the suppression of armed non-state actors such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Likewise, U.S. policy is often driven by force protection, alliance maintenance, energy-market stabilization, and nuclear non-proliferation rather than by a territorial redrawing project. The 2025 U.S. Annual Threat Assessment treated Iran as a major regional threat actor, and intelligence debates have focused on capabilities, enrichment, missiles, and proxy networks rather than on any endorsement of a “Greater Israel” doctrine.

There is also the problem of evidence. Historical maximalism, settlement policy, annexationist rhetoric, and repeated regional wars do not automatically prove a single concealed master plan. Some outcomes attributed to deliberate regional redesign may instead reflect security dilemmas, domestic political incentives, institutional path dependence, and incremental escalation without a unified final map. Over-interpretation can reduce explanatory precision. A rigorous account must therefore distinguish between documented policy, ideological residue, military opportunism, and retrospective narrative construction.

7. Discussion

The strongest version of the argument is not that a literal Nile-to-Euphrates program is being formally implemented. That claim remains weakly evidenced. The stronger and more defensible claim is that a combination of historical memory, settlement-colonial realities, legal impunity concerns, regional military asymmetry, and U.S.-backed security infrastructure has created conditions in which many populations experience Israeli and U.S. actions as part of a larger reordering project. Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, Lebanese civilians in the south, Syrian border communities, Iraq-based militia constituencies, and Gulf states exposed to missile, drone, and shipping risks all read the same conflict through different local histories, but with a shared sense of asymmetrical vulnerability.

In that sense, the “Greater Israel” idea functions geopolitically even when it is not demonstrably operational as state doctrine. It acts as a unifying interpretive frame for disparate crises: settlement expansion, the siege and destruction in Gaza, cross-border exchange with Hezbollah, the targeting of Iranian personnel in Syria, Houthi maritime disruption, and the embedding of Israel within a normalized Gulf security environment after the Abraham Accords. Narratives matter in international politics because they shape alliance trust, domestic legitimacy, threat perception, and the horizon of diplomatic compromise. A narrative that large publics across the region regard as plausible cannot be dismissed simply because it is polemical. It must be analyzed as a force multiplier in its own right.

8. Conclusion

The “Greater Israel” thesis should neither be accepted uncritically nor dismissed reflexively. Historically, maximalist territorial thinking did exist in Revisionist Zionist ideology and later

echoed in strands of right-wing Israeli rhetoric. Politically and legally, however, contemporary Israeli state practice cannot be reduced to a single historical slogan. The more serious issue is structural: repeated cycles of war and coercion are generating outcomes that deepen Palestinian dispossession, harden Israeli military primacy, expose Gulf states to alliance dependence, and magnify Asian and global vulnerability through energy chokepoints. That reality is sufficient to explain why the idea of a wider regional redesign continues to resonate.

For scholarship and policy alike, the urgent task is not speculative cartography but institutional de-escalation: credible diplomacy on the Iranian nuclear file, enforceable humanitarian and legal constraints in Gaza, protection of civilian shipping routes, reduced dependence on military signaling from regional bases, and a regional security architecture not premised exclusively on permanent confrontation. Without such changes, the Middle East will remain vulnerable to a self-reinforcing cycle in which ideology, infrastructure, and insecurity continually reproduce one another.



Ethical Statement

This is a research-based manuscript prepared and structured in a scientific narrative review format. Modern AI-assisted tools were used to access current and authentic information from digital archives, bibliographic databanks, online libraries, research articles, academic repositories, and encyclopedias.

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Literature Search and Information Management

Literature retrieval was conducted using a structured and reproducible search strategy in accordance with PRISMA-S reporting standards. Search strategies were independently evaluated using the PRESS framework to ensure methodological quality, accuracy, and completeness. Grey literature was systematically identified using the CADTH *Grey Matters* framework to enhance coverage of unpublished, non-indexed, and policy-relevant sources, thereby minimizing publication bias and improving evidence comprehensiveness.

Risk of Bias and Evidence Quality

Risk of bias was assessed using validated, design-specific tools (RoB 2, ROBINS-I, QUADAS-2/3, AMSTAR 2, Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, and CASP). The certainty of evidence and strength of

recommendations were evaluated using the GRADE framework, ensuring a standardized and reproducible assessment across study designs.

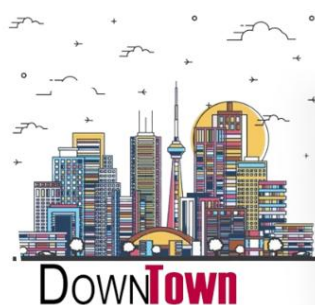
Review Typology and Reporting

Review designs were classified into standard categories (scoping, umbrella, rapid, qualitative, and mixed-methods), with reporting aligned to established guidelines (PRISMA-ScR, PRIOR, PRISMA-RR, ENTREQ, and PRISMA/MMAT) to ensure methodological rigor and transparency.



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