

The Iran war shatters the ‘axis’ myth in West Asia

written by Joseph Rozen | 05.04.2026

In recent months, a new narrative has gained momentum among scholars and experts, arguing that the war in West Asia has led to a competition among newly formed axes. On one side stands the “Indo-Abrahamic” alliance — the high-tech trio of India, Israel and the United Arab Emirates. On the other stands a Sunni bloc comprising Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Pakistan.

It is a compelling narrative, anchored in concrete steps these countries recently took to strengthen their security cooperation. The Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA), signed in September 2025 in Riyadh, reinvigorated a long-standing defence relationship, adding a formal commitment to mutual defence in the face of aggression. Qatar received a similar overture from Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari during a visit to Doha in late 2025.

When Turkey signalled its interest in joining this arrangement in early 2026, the “axis” narrative seemed to solidify into something real, a kind of “Sunni NATO”, comprising Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and even Egypt. Although such a framework would stop short of a mutual defence clause, it carried the potential to meaningfully deepen cooperation among the most influential states in the Arab world and to form a defence corridor stretching from West Asia into South Asia.

One of the main justifications for this grouping was the crisis around Somaliland. When Israel officially recognised Somaliland’s independence in December 2025, bolstering the UAE’s strategic management of the Port of Berbera, it sent shockwaves through the Arab League. Saudi Arabia’s immediate pivot towards the central government in Mogadishu, supported by Turkish and Egyptian military aid, looked like a confrontation with the UAE-Israel partnership. The underlying UAE-Saudi rivalry, already simmering over diverging interests in Yemen and Sudan and competing economic ambitions, added further fuel.

Another accelerant was the Israeli strike against Hamas leadership on Qatari soil in September 2025. For Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Egypt, witnessing the growing defence ties between Israel, India and the UAE was not merely diplomatic theatre; it was a strategic threat signal. The fear of exposure to similar

actions in the future demanded a coordinated response.

Then came the war against Iran, and it reshuffled the deck entirely. Yesterday's apparent rivals found themselves facing a common adversary, and regional interests began to converge in ways that cut across the supposed dividing lines. The axis narrative collapsed like a house of cards.

Although the war against Iran might appear to reinforce the case for a "Sunni NATO", it exposes the structural weaknesses of the security pacts between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Egypt. More tellingly, it cannot explain the converging interests between some of these players and the international efforts to stabilise the region. Here is why the axis competition narrative is weak.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have maintained a "special" defence relationship for decades, built on Saudi capital and Pakistani nuclear deterrence. What we are seeing now is merely an upgrade and formalisation of an existing insurance policy. Strengthening ties with Ankara and Islamabad does not mean Saudi Arabia is choosing sides or drifting from the United States.

The decisive proof came when Iran attacked Saudi Arabia — Pakistan did not respond militarily. A country that had committed, only months earlier, to defend Saudi Arabia in the event of aggression stood aside. It was optics. Moreover, Pakistan leveraged the war to position itself as a credible mediator between Iran and the United States, working directly with Tehran to ensure the continued stable flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz, regardless of Saudi interests.

Qatar proved to be a valuable US partner throughout the war against Iran, paying the political price of hosting Al-Udeid (the largest American military base in West Asia). More striking still, one of the core motivations that had driven Qatar towards broader security arrangements — the Israeli strike on its territory — underwent a complete reversal. Following Iran's attack on Qatar, Doha signalled to Washington its willingness to expel Hamas leadership from its territory. A state that for years financed and cultivated one of Iran's most important proxies was now drawing a line and getting closer to the United States in the process.

India, nominally placed in the UAE-Israel camp by axis theorists, remained conspicuously quiet throughout the Iran war. This is no surprise. India's interests pull in opposite directions simultaneously. On one hand, IMEC (the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor) depends on UAE ports, Saudi railways and

Israel's Mediterranean gateway. On the other hand, India's investment in Iran's Chabahar Port is its only land link to Central Asia and its critical bypass around Pakistan, and it had to guarantee energy flows to India following disruptions in the Hormuz Strait.

Caught between these two structural imperatives, India demonstrated a multifaceted policy, reducing the negative implications of the Iran war by maintaining direct dialogue with Tehran, while deepening cooperation with Israel, the UAE and the US, which, in return, granted a waiver to India for Russian oil imports.

The balancing act between protecting its equities in Iran and its deepening partnership with Western-oriented partners defines India's position more accurately than any axis framework can.

Beneath all of this lies the factor that axis narratives consistently underweight: the United States. Every country in these supposed competing camps operates within a security architecture managed in Washington. None of them, including Turkey or Saudi Arabia, wants to see the US exit the region. The opposite is true. It is no coincidence that every country mentioned above is also a member of the peace framework led by President Trump, with India participating as an observer.

When Saudi Arabia pushed behind the scenes for strikes against Iran, as leaked reports from March 2026 confirm, it did so knowing that only American or Israeli power could deliver the blow. When the UAE builds ports in Somaliland, it does so with the tacit understanding that the US Navy secures the surrounding waters. The "axes" are not fracturing away from the centre. They are jockeying for a better position within it.

The core mistake of the axis narrative is its linearity. It assumes that friendship with A requires enmity towards B. In contemporary geopolitics, this logic has long been obsolete. The Iran war confirmed it once more: there is no zero-sum game here.

Dismissing the axis narrative does not mean dismissing all of the dynamics that fed it. The structural argument is weak, but the security relationships developing beneath it are worth close attention.

The deepening defence ties between Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia

deserve careful monitoring. Not because they constitute a coherent anti-Western bloc, but because their long-term trajectory directly affects Israeli and Indian interests in the region. Turkey and Pakistan, in particular, warrant close attention. Both have demonstrated willingness to act as independent security actors in ways that complicate the stability that Israel and India depend on.

Pakistan's nuclear capability, combined with its deepening military relationship with Turkey, including drone technology transfers and joint military exercises, represents a qualitative shift that should not be normalised simply because it has not yet been directed at a specific adversary.

At the same time, the weakening of Iran adds a further dimension. With Iran diminished, Turkey faces a more open field. Ankara has already demonstrated its appetite for regional power projection. A post-Iran regional order could accelerate Turkey's bid to position itself as the dominant force in West Asia, bringing it into direct competition with Saudi Arabia over influence, trade routes, and the future architecture of regional security. This dynamic, while a source of concern, may also push Saudi Arabia and the broader Arabian Peninsula closer to Israel.

For Israel and India, this is not an abstract concern. A Turkey-Pakistan security partnership, even an informal one, creates new risk calculations for IMEC, for Israel's Red Sea access, and for India's strategic partnerships across West Asia. Thus, Riyadh, New Delhi and Jerusalem should pay close attention to these trends post-Iran war.

In any scenario this war unfolds, it has already proved that, in international relations, there is no zero-sum game. Understanding this is crucial in navigating a multi-dimensional geopolitical system wisely.

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