

Mideast in 'transition phase': Balance of terror instead of balance of power



By Asgar Ghahremanpour
Editor-in-chief

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

This interview with Professor Mehran Kamrava, a distinguished scholar of Middle East studies, was conducted following the region's dramatic developments. The core of this interview is to examine the question of whether the Middle East, after the events of October 2023 and the Iran-Israel conflict, has entered a "new order" or is merely experiencing a more violent phase of chronic instability. Dr. Kamrava, emphasizing that the region is in a "transition phase" with uncertain outcomes, analyzes the prevailing balance of terror, the renewed marginalization of the Palestinian issue, and the consequences of US policies. He also specifically points to the opportunities and threats facing Iranian diplomacy, including the potential shift in the Persian Gulf's security equations and the necessity of revising its negotiation approach. This interview provides a profound analysis of the complex power dynamics in one of the most sensitive contemporary junctures in the Middle East.

Mr. Dr. Kamrava, greetings and respect, First of all, thank you for accepting Iran Daily's invitation for an interview regarding the new outlook and developments in the Middle East. Given your expertise and valuable written works in regional studies, many of which have been translated into Persian and are taught in Iranian universities, the questions in this dialogue are focused on this field.

IRAN DAILY: The first question relates to the region's structural developments following the events of October 2023. Some experts consider these developments a sign of the formation of a "new regional order," while others believe the region has entered a more violent phase of "chronic instability." In your opinion, has the Middle East entered a new order, and if the answer is positive, what are the most important features of this order?

KAMRAVA: Currently, it must be acknowledged that with the military defeat of the Axis of Resistance, the previous balance of power and political equations between Iran, the United States, Israel, and the countries of the Persian Gulf have been transformed. We are in a "transition phase" where its end point is still unknown. The policies during Mr. Trump's presidency disrupted all previous calculations and equations, and the final shape of the regional order is still ambiguous. The question is, are we moving toward multipolarity in the region? For example, for the first time, we see countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar expressing serious concern about the possibility of a US military attack on Iran and striving and lobbying to prevent it. Also, for

the first time, Iran has practically used its missile capability and warned regional countries that in the event of a US attack, American targets and bases on their soil may be targeted. Therefore, we are not yet aware of the final form of this order.

Another point worth mentioning is the issue of the United Arab Emirates. This country, after withdrawing from Yemen and even disengaging from Socotra Island, where it had significant influence, is at a historical juncture. Currently, nationalism in this country has taken on a military form. This government might exploit the current situation—with the perception that the Iranian government has been weakened due to the 12-day war or internal developments—to take action against the three Iranian islands. Overall, we are in a phase where the region's security, military, and diplomatic structures are completely transforming. Although last year such plans by the UAE seemed far-fetched, today, in the event of another US and Israeli attack on Iran, there is a possibility of this country exploiting the situation to change the security structure of the Persian Gulf. Therefore, I emphasize that we are in a transition phase with uncertain outcomes.



Mehran Kamrava

The limited 12-day war between Iran and Israel is considered an almost unprecedented experience in re-defining the rules of regional deterrence. In your opinion, will this event make future conflicts in the Middle East more controllable, or conversely, has it made the situation more dangerous and complex? What we witness in the region today is the rule of a "balance of terror," not a balance of power. All actors fear each other: Iran fears another Israeli attack, Israel fears another Iranian missile retaliation, and the Arabs fear Iranian targeting of American bases. This situation has inherently made conditions more complex and dangerous. To exit this situation, this balance of terror needs to transform into a balance of power with new definitions and perceptions. Overall, it seems the current situation has become somewhat more dangerous and complex.



The photo shows part of a world map on a globe, focusing on the Middle East region.

The Palestinian issue had been marginalized in regional politics in recent years, but recent developments have once again placed it at the center of attention. Has Palestine once again become the axis of regional politics, or are regional states still trying to contain and manage it?

Although the Palestinian issue has been raised again, it is not in the way one might think. Living conditions in Palestine have become more difficult, and the possibility of establishing a functional Palestinian government in the occupied territories has moved further from reality. If establishing such a government was difficult before October 2023, it now seems almost impossible. While the name of Palestine is once again on the lips of the international community, in practice and objective conditions, achieving the freedom of Palestine, which was already problematic, has unfortunately become considerably more difficult.

The Middle East is witnessing intense rivalries among regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. In your opinion, is the region moving toward a fragile balance among these powers, or is the risk of sliding toward broader wars still high?

As long as there is ideological enmity between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Zionist regime,

the possibility of rivalry and even war persists. Today, even in Turkey, discourse about the possibility of conflict with Israel is raised. Although it does not seem that Israel intends to attack a NATO member, the intensity of this rivalry in the mindset of Turkish officials is such that they envision the possibility of war. Therefore, in answer to your question, yes, the risk of sliding toward broader wars remains high.

The new US National Security Strategy document in 2025 indicates changes in Washington's approach toward the Middle East. In your opinion, what changes has this document created in America's perspective, and what is its consequence for the region?

We should not focus solely on this document. This document, more than representing a macro and stable approach in US foreign policy, reflects the views of Mr. Donald Trump and his circle. After his presidential term ends, priorities may change again. However, it cannot be denied that due to having powerful allies like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, which have deep relations with the US, Washington sees no necessity for direct and extensive intervention in the region.

Considering recent developments in Venezuela and also the beginning of the new year

with Trump's warmongering positions, what is your assessment of Trump's foreign policy in 2026? Given the domestic protests in Iran and the government's managerial approach toward them, will anything specific happen in his policy toward Iran before the end of the Trump administration? Or can the US midterm elections hinder interventionist policies? Current US foreign policy is highly personal and influenced by Mr. Trump's style of "warlike diplomacy" and bullying. He deals with countries like Greenland, Iran, and Venezuela with the claim that Latin America is the United States' "backyard." It seems Trump is primarily seeking short-term military conflicts that he can quickly win and dominate news headlines.

In your opinion, what is the greatest strategic threat to the Middle East in the next decade, and why?

Regional instability is rooted in several key factors: environmental crises (especially water scarcity, which Iran is also grappling with), secessionist movements in some countries including Iran, and the weakening of central governments which calls into question their ability to govern the country effectively.

If you were to analyze the Middle East ten years from now, what would you consider the most important shaping factor, and why?

It seems the answer to this question is encompassed within the factors mentioned in the previous question.

Please briefly share your view on the impact of recent protests in Iran on the future of Iran-US negotiations. Considering recent rumors, is this discourse merely part of Trump's negotiation style, or is there a real possibility for dialogue?

In my opinion, the United States, especially since the beginning of the new round of Mr. Trump's presidency, has a strong desire for negotiation. This desire is not necessarily for resolving the crisis but is largely influenced by Trump's own personality and ambitions. In my view, this was an exceptional opportunity for Iran to obtain concessions from the US if it had been willing to negotiate from the outset. The desire for negotiation exists from the American side, but it seems Iran either lacks the necessary resolve or, due to ideological reasons, is unwilling/unable to negotiate with the US. While almost all countries, from the European Union to the Persian Gulf states and even Zelenskyy, have learned how to engage with Trump, unfortunately, the Islamic Republic has not developed this capability within itself. In my opinion, the possibility of negotiation is still high. Iran often announces readiness for negotiation when domestic protests occur. If the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Supreme National Security Council have the necessary resolve and permission, the current conditions could even be a suitable opportunity for negotiation.



Current US foreign policy is highly personal and influenced by Mr. Trump's style of "warlike diplomacy" and bullying. He deals with countries like Greenland, Iran, and Venezuela with the claim that Latin America is the United States' "backyard." It seems Trump is primarily seeking short-term military conflicts that he can quickly win and dominate news headlines.



Smoke and flames erupt from an Israeli airstrike in Gaza City on July 21, 2025.

AP

