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The US–Israel–Iran War and Its Implications for Central Asia

Albina MURATBEKOVA
Eurasian Research Institute, Kazakhstan

Since the United States and Israel initiated Operation Epic Fury, a coordinated series of airstrikes against Iran's military installations on February 28, 2026 the international system has entered one of the volatile phases of geopolitical escalation in recent times. Confronting what Tehran described as the "Axis of Resistance," the U.S.–Israeli offensive rapidly precipitated a region-wide crisis, as Iranian retaliation extended across the Middle East, with all Gulf states except Oman coming under targeting. The killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei during the initial phase of the airstrikes, followed by coordinated counterattacks on U.S. assets in the region and the strategic closure of the Strait of Hormuz, collectively triggered a rapid and self-reinforcing escalatory spiral that propelled the conflict beyond its initial parameters.

While the ongoing attacks have already caused significant loss of life and damage to essential services, including the bombing of a girls' school in Iran that killed over 175 people, as well as the displacement of over 1 million civillians in Lebanon, the international community is focused on the geoeconomic and geopolitical ramifications of the conflict. In particular, the energy crisis resulting from Iran's blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, which accounts for approximately 20 percent of global seaborne oil trade and 20 percent of global LNG trade, has severely disrupted global energy markets, triggering price volatility and supply uncertainty. This disruption has not been confined to Asia alone, where China, India, Japan, and South Korea are major importers. European markets have likewise experienced significant strain, as reduced supply flows and rising energy prices have intensified existing economic pressures [Bendebka, 2026].

The conflict has also led to the closure of airspace in the Gulf region, halting global supply chains and international travel and thereby exerting additional pressure on the global economy. Beyond these immediate effects, the escalation has prompted a reassessment of the Middle East's regional security architecture. It has further contributed to a reconfiguration of the balance of power, accompanied by a noticeable decline in support from U.S. allies. The attack on Iran garnered quite limited backing from European partners and has, in turn, exposed growing discord within the NATO alliance. In particular, the public condemnation issued by several European leaders has raised questions about alliance cohesion and strategic alignment moving forward.

Iran's counterstrategy has driven these shifts. By leveraging proxy alliances, exerting control over critical energy chokepoints, and threatening vital maritime corridors, Tehran has been able to challenge the strategic aspirations of the United States and the traditional dominance of U.S.-led security frameworks [Bahrami, 2026].

For Central Asia, events in geographically proximate Iran are of critical importance. Given Iran's strategic location as a bridge between Central Asia and the Middle East, disruptions within Iran have immediate consequences for trade corridors, transit routes, and access to global markets. As a key regional partner for Central Asian states, developments in Iran have broad direct and indirect implications for the region.

At the official level, all Central Asian states have adopted a neutral stance, with foreign ministries issuing carefully worded statements calling for restraint and a political resolution. While maintaining this neutrality, they have consistently emphasized de-escalation and the importance of dialogue, largely driven by pragmatic considerations aimed at preserving regional stability and safeguarding their economic and security priorities. This approach, in fact, aligns with the positions of the majority of states. For instance, Asian powers such as China have remained on the sidelines, while European leaders have at times been compelled to respond to President Trump's statements.

Meanwhile, during recent years, engagement between Central Asian states and Iran has broadened. At the regional level, Iran's growing interest is reflected in its full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2023, following its long-standing participation since 2005. In addition, a free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union members and Iran came into force in May 2025, building on an agreement reached in December 2023. This agreement expanded the range of products covered and reduced duties on approximately 90 percent of goods, with significant potential to boost trade between the regions. Prior to this, since October 2019, Iran had been conducting trade under a temporary free trade agreement signed in 2018 [Altynbek et. al., 2025].

From a logistics perspective, the disruption of activity in the Persian Gulf has called into question the reliability of the region's key transport routes. In this context, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), long envisioned as an alternative to conventional maritime pathways linking Eurasia, has been significantly affected. The corridor comprises three main routes: the Western route via Azerbaijan, the Eastern route through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and the Trans-Caspian route relying on maritime links all aimed at reducing transportation time and costs between Europe and Asia. In particular, the eastern branch, which connects Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Iran's ports of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar and serves as a link between Europe and India, is now vulnerable due to escalating tensions in Iran. While some projections suggest that these disruptions could boost the importance of the Middle Corridor (the Trans-Caspian route), experts maintain that it is unlikely to fully replace the North–South Corridor as a comprehensive alternative. In any case, the eastern branch via the southern route currently poses certain risks and uncertainties for near-term transportation plans [Sputnik, 2026].

The military conflict has also created significant disruptions in food exports from Iran due to the temporary suspension of exports of food products and agricultural raw materials. Consumer markets in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been particularly affected by these challenges. As Iran is Turkmenistan's second-largest trading partner after Russia, the ongoing escalation has substantially impacted its domestic market dynamics. Uzbekistan, where Iran ranks among the top ten trading partners, has likewise been affected by disruptions to food supplies. In addition, a significant share of Uzbekistan's trade flows, including up to 60 percent of cargo from Türkiye and Europe, relies on the southern route through Iranian seaports, which has now been severely affected by the crisis. Similarly, other Central Asian states also depend, to varying degrees, on the transit of certain goods through Iran. Nevertheless, it should be noted that, despite steady growth in bilateral trade, Central Asian economies are not structurally dependent on Iranian exports [Eshanova, 2026]. At the same time, the energy crisis caused by the blockage of the Strait of Hormuz, which increased oil prices, has had positive consequences for the oil-exporting economies of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan [Abdraimov, 2026].

The ongoing escalation in West Asia continues to concern the global community. Amid such volatility, it is evident that the current escalation aligns with broader transformations in global power dynamics, in which the role of the United States as a global leader is being tested. Central Asian states, alongside other actors, are adopting a strategic posture of caution, closely observing ongoing developments while anticipating a negotiated settlement. At the same time, the deepening crisis poses risks to the region's economic integration efforts, particularly those linked to emerging transport and energy corridors connecting Central Asia with the Middle East and beyond. The escalation of the conflict directly threatens to disrupt these linkages by undermining trade flows, increasing transit uncertainties, and constraining access to southern routes. In this context, Central Asian governments are likely to prioritize diversification strategies, seeking to mitigate external shocks by expanding alternative trade routes and strengthening partnerships with a broader range of global actors. This recalibration reflects not only immediate concerns over regional instability but also a longer-term adaptation to an increasingly fragmented and competitive international order, where smaller and mid-sized states must navigate heightened uncertainty through strategic balancing and pragmatic diplomacy. Finally, the risk that a further escalation of ongoing regional tensions could trigger a wave of migration and refugees toward the countries bordering Iran should not be overlooked.

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EURASIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE
Mametova 48, Almali, 050004,
Almaty / KAZAKHSTAN

Office: +7 (727) 279 97 94 Fax: +7 (727) 279 24 26
ayu.edu.tr • eurasian-research.org
info@eurasian-research.org