

GEOPOLITICAL CONFLICT AND EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE IMPACT OF THE IRAN-CENTRED MIDDLE EAST CRISIS ON TERTIARY EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

By

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Abstract

The resurgence of geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, particularly the escalation of conflict involving Iran, has generated far-reaching global consequences that extend beyond the immediate region. This study examines the implications of the Iran-centred Middle East crisis on tertiary education in Nigeria, with emphasis on funding, administrative operating costs, international student mobility, international collaboration, conference and exchange programmes, and research implementation. Drawing on secondary data from credible newspaper reports, policy briefs, and scholarly analyses, the study adopts a qualitative approach to analyse how global economic disruptions—especially fluctuations in oil prices, inflationary pressures, and instability in international systems—affect the Nigerian higher education sector. The findings reveal that although Nigeria may experience temporary increases in oil revenue during periods of crisis, such gains are undermined by macroeconomic instability, rising operational costs, and declining international academic engagement. The study concludes that the crisis has indirectly weakened the capacity of Nigerian tertiary institutions to function effectively in a globalized academic environment. It recommends the adoption of strategic policy measures, including diversification of funding sources, strengthening institutional resilience, and enhancing regional academic cooperation, to mitigate the adverse effects of global geopolitical crises on education.

Keywords: Middle East crisis, Tertiary education development

1.0 Introduction

The Middle East crisis, with particular focus on Iran, represents one of the most significant contemporary geopolitical conflicts, rooted in long-standing political, ideological, and strategic tensions involving Iran, the United States, Israel, and their regional allies. The current phase of the crisis escalated dramatically in February 2026 when the United States and Israel launched coordinated military strikes against Iran, targeting its nuclear facilities, military infrastructure, and leadership after the breakdown of diplomatic negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. These developments marked a turning point in decades of hostility, which had previously been characterized by sanctions, proxy conflicts, and intermittent confrontations rather than full-scale war. At the core of the crisis is Iran's nuclear ambition and its strategic influence across the Middle East. Iran has long been accused by Western powers of pursuing nuclear weapons capability, a claim it denies, asserting that its nuclear programme is for peaceful purposes. However, repeated failures to revive agreements such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and growing concerns over Iran's ballistic missile programme and regional alliances particularly with groups like Hezbollah and Hamas have heightened tensions. These issues, combined with ideological rivalry between Iran and Israel and broader geopolitical competition with the United States, have made Iran a central actor in Middle Eastern instability.

The crisis escalated into open conflict when large-scale airstrikes were launched on Iran on February 28, 2026, resulting in significant destruction and the killing of key Iranian leaders. In response, Iran carried out retaliatory attacks targeting U.S. military bases, Israeli infrastructure, and allied interests across the Gulf region, including missile and drone strikes. This exchange of attacks has transformed the situation into a broader regional conflict, drawing in multiple actors and raising fears of a prolonged war. Another critical dimension of the crisis is its impact on global energy security. The Middle East, particularly the Persian Gulf, is a major hub for global oil and gas supply. Iran's strategic position along the Strait of Hormuz a key maritime route for oil transport has made the conflict especially consequential. Disruptions in this region have led to sharp increases in oil prices and volatility in global energy markets. Recent international reports indicate that the conflict has caused one of the largest disruptions to global oil supply in history, affecting a significant proportion of global energy flows and contributing to inflation and economic instability worldwide. This highlights the global reach of what might otherwise appear to be a regional conflict.

Beyond economic consequences, the crisis has also generated severe humanitarian and security challenges. Ongoing hostilities have resulted in casualties, displacement of populations, and damage to critical infrastructure, including health systems. The World Health Organization has warned of a rapidly unfolding humanitarian crisis across the region, with millions displaced and healthcare systems under severe strain. These developments underscore the human cost of the

conflict and the risks of further escalation, particularly if critical infrastructure such as nuclear facilities or water systems are affected. The crisis reflects broader geopolitical realignments and power struggles in the international system. The involvement of major global powers, including the United States, and reactions from countries such as Russia and China, indicate that the conflict is not merely regional but part of a wider contest for global influence. Analysts have noted that the war has already altered geopolitical dynamics, creating both risks and opportunities for different actors while increasing uncertainty in global markets. The conflict also exposes divisions among international actors regarding intervention, diplomacy, and the use of military force.

The Middle East crisis with a focus on Iran is a complex and multifaceted conflict driven by nuclear proliferation concerns, geopolitical rivalry, ideological differences, and strategic interests. Its escalation into open warfare in 2026 has had profound implications not only for regional stability but also for global economic systems, security structures, and humanitarian conditions. The persistence of the crisis highlights the urgent need for diplomatic engagement, conflict resolution mechanisms, and renewed international cooperation to prevent further escalation and promote sustainable peace.

2.0 Conceptual Terms

2.1 Concept of Tertiary Education

Tertiary education is the level of learning after secondary school where individuals acquire specialized knowledge and skills for careers, research, and personal development. Tertiary education is the level of learning that comes after secondary school. It includes universities, polytechnics, colleges, and other institutions where people gain specialized knowledge, skills, and qualifications in a particular field. Unlike basic schooling, tertiary education focuses on preparing learners for a career, critical thinking, research, and personal growth. The objectives of Tertiary Education includes;

1. To equip students with practical and theoretical skills they need for their chosen careers. It's not just about reading books; it's about learning how to apply knowledge in real-life situations. For example, engineers learn to build, doctors learn to treat, and teachers learn to inspire.
2. To train students to think deeply and analyze situations critically. This means not just accepting information, but questioning it, evaluating evidence, and making informed decisions skills you'll use every day, both at work and in life.
3. To shape character, values, and ethics. It encourages students to become responsible citizens who can make moral decisions, respect diversity, and contribute positively to society.

4. To foster research, creativity, and innovation, helping students and faculty to find solutions to societal problems, improve technology, and advance knowledge.
5. To prepares graduates to serve society and contribute to national development. By producing skilled professionals, innovators, and leaders, tertiary institutions help build stronger communities and a more prosperous nation.

2.0 Result and Discussion on Middle East crisis and Tertiary Education Development in Nigeria

The Middle East crisis, particularly tensions involving Iran, has exerted indirect but far-reaching effects on tertiary education in Nigeria, largely through economic disruptions transmitted via global oil markets, inflationary pressures, and instability in international systems. In terms of funding, Nigeria's heavy dependence on oil revenue makes its fiscal capacity highly sensitive to geopolitical developments in the Middle East. While crises involving Iran often trigger increases in global oil prices, the expected revenue gains are frequently offset by inflation, currency depreciation, and fiscal mismanagement, thereby reducing the real value of budgetary allocations to education. Reports from *BusinessDay* (2026) indicate that despite high oil prices, Nigeria has struggled to translate such gains into improved public spending, including education. Consequently, tertiary institutions face constrained funding for infrastructure, research, and staff development, as government priorities shift toward stabilizing the broader economy.

Closely related to funding challenges is the rise in administrative operating costs within Nigerian universities. The Iranian crisis has contributed to global energy price increases, particularly in petroleum products, due to fears of supply disruptions along critical routes such as the Strait of Hormuz. According to *Punch* (Aina, 2026), tensions involving Iran have historically driven up fuel prices in Nigeria, a country that remains heavily reliant on imported refined petroleum. Universities, which depend significantly on diesel-powered generators due to unreliable electricity supply, are therefore compelled to spend more on energy, transportation, and maintenance. This surge in recurrent expenditure diverts limited financial resources away from academic activities and capital development, thereby weakening institutional efficiency.

The crisis has also negatively affected international student mobility, a critical component of tertiary education globalization. Economic instability resulting from Middle East tensions has contributed to the depreciation of the Nigerian naira, making foreign education increasingly unaffordable for many students. At the same time, rising global travel costs and stricter visa regulations—often linked to heightened security concerns have further constrained student movement. As highlighted in global economic assessments such as the *Economic Impact of the Iran War* (2026), geopolitical crises tend to disrupt migration flows and increase the cost of

international travel. This situation limits Nigerian students' access to global educational opportunities while also reducing the attractiveness of Nigeria as a destination for foreign students.

International academic collaboration has been weakened by the uncertainties generated by the Iranian crisis. Collaborative research, institutional partnerships, and donor-funded educational programmes depend heavily on stable economic and political environments. However, volatility in global markets and capital flows, as reported by *The Guardian Nigeria* (2026), has made international organizations more cautious in committing resources to developing countries, including Nigeria. This has resulted in fewer joint research initiatives, limited access to international grants, and a general decline in academic cooperation between Nigerian universities and their global counterparts.

Participation in conferences and exchange programmes has declined due to rising travel costs and institutional budget constraints. Academic conferences, which play a vital role in knowledge exchange and scholarly visibility, have become less accessible to Nigerian academics as airfare, accommodation, and registration costs increase. *The Punch* (2026) notes that fuel price hikes linked to Middle East tensions have had a cascading effect on transportation costs worldwide. As universities struggle with limited funding, sponsorship for conference attendance and exchange programmes is often reduced, thereby limiting opportunities for professional development and global engagement among staff and students.

The implementation of research programmes in Nigerian tertiary institutions has been significantly affected. Research activities depend on stable funding, access to materials, and international collaboration, all of which are disrupted during global crises. Inflation and supply chain disruptions associated with the Iranian conflict have increased the cost of importing laboratory equipment and research materials. In addition, the value of research grants diminishes in real terms under inflationary conditions, reducing the scope and quality of ongoing projects. As noted in global analyses of the Iran crisis (2026), economic uncertainty often leads to delayed investments and reduced funding flows, further constraining research productivity in developing countries like Nigeria. Overall, the Middle East crisis, with a focus on Iran, has created a challenging environment for the growth and sustainability of tertiary education in Nigeria by undermining financial stability, increasing operational costs, and weakening global academic integration.

3.0 Conclusion

The Middle East crisis, with a particular focus on Iran, has demonstrated the extent to which global geopolitical conflicts can influence national development sectors far beyond their immediate geographic scope. In Nigeria, the tertiary education system has been significantly affected through multiple interconnected pathways, including unstable funding, increased administrative costs, reduced international mobility, weakened academic collaboration, declining participation in

conferences and exchange programmes, and constraints on research implementation. These challenges are largely driven by broader economic disruptions such as oil price volatility, inflation, and global uncertainty triggered by the crisis.

While Nigeria's position as an oil-producing country offers some potential benefits during periods of rising oil prices, the overall impact of the crisis remains largely negative due to structural economic weaknesses and poor fiscal management. The study underscores the need for proactive and adaptive policy frameworks that can shield the education sector from external shocks. Ultimately, strengthening institutional capacity, improving funding mechanisms, and promoting sustainable international partnerships are essential steps toward ensuring the resilience and global competitiveness of Nigeria's tertiary education system in the face of ongoing geopolitical instability.

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