



Cite this article as: Samiei, M. (2026). In the Middle of a Paradigm Shift. *Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies*, 10(3), 697-701.
<https://doi.org/10.22059/wsps.2026.108747>

In the Middle of a Paradigm Shift

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(Received: Jun. 15, 2026 Available Online: Jul. 01, 2026)

We appear to be living through another historic and revolutionary shift in the global order—one brought by kamikaze drones and precision ballistic missiles. The war against the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2026, and prior to that, the U.S. war against Yemen in 2025, have demonstrated that a weaker power, armed with drones and ballistic missiles, can effectively block a waterway—and that no amount of conventional military might can reliably reopen it. In the past, powerful nations could always keep strategic waterways open through sheer force. This is, in fact, the first such instance in recorded political history; a clear paradigm shift seems to be underway.

The physicist Thomas Kuhn, in his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), argued that change in the history of science typically occurs as a revolutionary transition between two paradigms. Though his model was originally intended for empirical sciences, it found a warm reception only in the

Journal of World Sociopolitical Studies| Vol. 10| No. 3| July 2026| pp. 697-701

Web Page: <https://wsps.ut.ac.ir/> Email: wsps@ut.ac.ir

eISSN: 2588-3127

PrintISSN: 2588-3119

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humanities and social sciences. Today, Kuhnian key terms such as paradigm, revolutionary shift, gestalt change, anomaly, and incommensurability appear well suited to explaining developments in such fields as society, politics, literature, and the like.

Some political historians suggest that the transition from feudalism to the nation-state paradigm was accelerated largely by the widespread use of artillery in European conflicts. The castles that had defined feudal defense were no match for such firepower; feudal landowners, feeling vulnerable, sought refuge in larger cities with centralized governments and modern armies for protection (Osborne, 2006, pp. 238, 245). This revolutionary change was driven by an anomaly introduced by a new military technology. Another such shift occurred during World War II with the advent of the tank. In World War I, opposing armies faced off in static trench lines with little room for advancement; but in the World War II the tank, as a new armored fighting vehicle, broke through enemy lines and reshaped the balance of power on the battlefield (Fox, 1992, p. 334). The nuclear bomb, too, after its detonation over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, fundamentally altered global power relations (Fox, 1992, pp. 373, 385, 410). Each of these technologies was an anomaly to the prevailing paradigms of the time and brought about a new paradigm.

The Shahed 136—an Iranian-designed one-way attack drone, also known as a kamikaze or suicide drone—has a range of 2,500 kilometers and is relatively inexpensive, with an estimated cost of between \$10,000 and \$50,000 per unit. First reportedly used in the 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais, this weapon is highly accurate and difficult to counter or intercept. Its effectiveness was further demonstrated during the 2022 Russian-Ukraine war, where Russian forces employed the Shahed 136,

producing it domestically under license from Iran. Crucially, this drone enabled the Yemeni Houthis to resist the world's most powerful military in 2025. Fired easily from concealed positions against commercial shipping, these drones allowed Yemen to effectively block the Red Sea—with no amount of U.S. firepower able to prevent it.

A similar scenario is now unfolding in the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran has blocked following the U.S. and Israeli attacks on the country on February 28, 2026. The strait is among the most critical oil chokepoints in the world and was completely open to all prior to the conflict. The United States, widely seen as responsible for the crisis, has been trying at all costs to reopen it. Yet even with its full military capabilities, it has been unable to do so. Even if U.S. ground forces were to invade the coastline, the range of the Shahed 136 would still allow Iranian forces to disrupt free navigation in the strait from the heartland of the country.

Iran's medium-range missile technology represents another game-changer. These missiles are far cheaper than the interceptors used against them—roughly one-tenth the cost—and some models travel at supersonic speeds making the interception much harder. They have proven highly accurate in strikes on U.S. military sites in the Middle East. Like the Shahed drones, they are devastating if they hit their targets, and even when intercepted, they impose enormous economic costs on the enemy if fired in large salvos.

Today, military analysts acknowledge that the United States, despite possessing the world's strongest military with a budget roughly 100 times that of Iran's, is virtually paralyzed in the Strait of Hormuz. Once again, a new weapon system has introduced an anomaly that appears poised to reshape the world order. Regional military bases, now well within range of Iranian missiles and

drones, may prove to be more liability than asset. The U.S. appears to be rethinking its military strategy to adapt to these new realities. Furthermore, nearly all other waterways have become potential points of vulnerability for American military hegemony. A new paradigm seems to be imposing its own rules.

As with previous transitions, this new paradigm will likely require time and probably sustained efforts to fully replace the old one. Proponents of the older order will resist such inevitable changes. But sooner or later, the old paradigm will fade, giving way to the new—and the world order will shift accordingly. Much research is required to investigate the rules and regulations imposed by this new paradigm. But it is not ruling forever. We must wait and see when perhaps another unknown technology emerges as the next anomaly, set to overturn everything once again—and again.

Conflict of Interests and Funding

The authors certify that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureaus; membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs affecting authors' objectivity) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

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