

“The Axis of Resistance” and the War in Gaza. Quo Vadis?

El Eje de la Resistencia y la Guerra de Gaza. Quo Vadis?

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Abstract

The article explores Iran's "Axis of Resistance," a regional coalition which includes Syria, and the militant radical groups Hamas, Hezbollah, Iraqi pro-Iranian militias and Yemen's Houthis, aimed at the annihilation of Israel and countering U.S./Western influence in the Middle East. Formed post-1979 Iranian Revolution, it supported Palestinian Islamist causes and regional defiance of American presence. The October 7, 2023, Hamas terrorist massacre attack on Israel, followed by Hezbollah, Houthi and, for first time, direct Iranian missile attacks on Israel, and Israel's subsequent Gaza offensive and retaliation against Iran and its proxies, exposed the Axis's vulnerabilities. The 2024 collapse of Syria's Bashar al-Assad regime, Hezbollah's weakening in Lebanon, Hamas' military demise, U.S and Western challenge of Houthi's terrorist attacks against the international maritime lanes in the Red Sea, disrupted Iran's strategy. On the backdrop of their diminished position, Iran and its proxies face now the pressure of President Trump's strategy to change the regional dynamics, limit the impact of the Axis's influence and achieve, by negotiation or military pressure, the dismantling of Iran's nuclear project.

Keywords: Iran, Israel, Syria, Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, U.S.

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Resumen

El artículo explora el "Eje de la Resistencia" de Irán, una coalición regional que incluye a Siria y a los grupos radicales militantes Hamás, Hezbolá, las milicias proiraníes iraquíes y los hutíes yemeníes, cuyo objetivo es la aniquilación de Israel y contrarrestar la influencia estadounidense y occidental en Oriente Medio. Formada tras la Revolución iraní de 1979, la coalición apoyó las causas islamistas palestinas y el desafío regional a la presencia estadounidense. El ataque terrorista masivo del 7 de octubre de 2023 perpetrado por Hamás contra Israel, seguido de ataques con misiles de Hezbolá, los hutíes y, por primera vez, ataques directos de Irán contra Israel, así como la posterior ofensiva israelí en Gaza y las represalias contra Irán y sus aliados, expusieron las vulnerabilidades del Eje. El colapso del régimen sirio de Bashar al-Assad en 2024, el debilitamiento de Hezbolá en el Líbano, la caída militar de Hamás y la respuesta de Estados Unidos y Occidente a los ataques terroristas hutíes contra las rutas marítimas internacionales en el Mar Rojo trastocaron la estrategia de Irán. Ante el deterioro de su posición, Irán y sus aliados se enfrentan ahora a la presión de la estrategia del presidente Trump para cambiar la dinámica regional, para limitar el impacto de la influencia del Eje y lograr, mediante negociación o presión militar, el desmantelamiento del proyecto nuclear iraní.

Palabras-clave: Irán, Israel, Siria, Hamas, Hezbolá, Hutís, Estados Unidos

Background

At the basis of what is called today The Axis of Resistance, lies the Triple Alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. Hezbollah proclaimed in 1991 that “the only vital and effective axis in the region is that between Tehran and Damascus. They are the two capitals which enjoy a degree of strength and a measure of independence that allows them to remain unaffected by direct political pressure.”² The Iran - Syria “axis,” an alliance “between the Lion and the Turban” according to Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, were the remaining centers of power challenging the U.S. New World Order in the Middle East in the aftermath of Iraq’s defeat in the first Gulf War, pursuing agendas “not necessarily to the liking of the dominant Western world powers.”³

In 1982, following the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Syria permitted Iran to send about a thousand military and religious instructors of the Iranian

² “Hezbollah Voice of the Oppressed (radio station),” 27 April 1991.

³ Hinnebusch Raymond and Ehteshami Anoushiravan Ehteshami (eds.), *The Foreign Policies of Middle East States*, Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p.1.

Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) to the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon. The Iranian force recruited militants of Islamic Amal, a breakaway faction of the Lebanese Shia Amal movement, and several young, militant Lebanese clerics affiliated with the Lebanese branch of al-Da'wa, a radical Iraqi Shiite fundamentalist group, to become the nucleus of a new movement, the Hezbollah, the Party of God. Hezbollah's leadership embraced Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's concept of the just jurisconsult (al-wali al-faqih), the ideological basis for clerical rule, enshrined in Iran's 1979 constitution. Hezbollah formulated its doctrine in a document of February 1985, an "Open Letter" addressed to "the Downtrodden in Lebanon and in the World," which emphasizes the 1979 revolution in Iran as an inspiration to action "capable, with God's help, of breaking the iron and oppression of tyrannical regimes." The leadership of Hezbollah pledged loyalty to Khomeini and to the goal of establishing an Islamic state in Lebanon.⁴

Hezbollah became thus the third rib of The Triple Alliance.⁵

The demise of the Syrian Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024 and the weakening of the Hezbollah grip on the Lebanese state after the Israeli military intervention in Lebanon, have shattered the Axis of Resistance basis itself and the Iranian theocratic rule.

Hamas didn't exist at that time as an organization, but the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yasser Arafat, and the Palestinian cause, were a cherished element of Khomeini's doctrine and strategy. The introduction to Khomeini's book *Velayat-e Faqih Hokumat-e Eslami* presented the Jews as the enemies of Islam. Later he would situate Israel in the center of the 'axis of resistance' to the Islamic Republic.

Khomeini viewed the relationship with the PLO as a bridge between revolutionary Iran and the Arab world. This hope would be dashed, however, after the Palestinian leadership refused to adopt the 'guardianship of the jurist' principle and Arafat took a non-aligned stance during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). However, the Palestinian issue continued to be a central motif in his proclamations, as the Islamic Republic exploited the Palestinian struggle as a platform to achieve geostrategic successes that served its own interests. In August 1979 Khomeini declared the last Friday of Ramadan, International Quds (Jerusalem) Day, in solidarity with the Palestinians.⁶

Khomeini viewed the 'liberation of Palestine' as the first necessary step to the unification of the Muslim umma and set this struggle within the broader pan-

⁴ Mokhtari, Fariborz, "Countering Terrorism: Could Hezbollah and Hamas Show the Way?" *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 27, No. 3, December 2006, pp. 376–396.

⁵ Karmon Ely, *Iran-Syria-Hizballah-Hamas: A Coalition Against Nature: why Does it Work?* The Proteus Monograph Series, Vol. 1, Issue 5, May 2008, National Intelligence University, at <https://www.ict.org.il/UserFiles/karmon-iran-syria-hizballah.pdf>.

⁶ Itzhakov, Doron, "Ayatollah Khomeini's Approach to the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict and its Longstanding Ramifications," *ICT website*, November 11, 2023.

Islamic context. He sought to make the Islamic Republic the political center of Islam, under the assumption that the commitment to Palestine would grant him the right to lead the Muslim world in its struggle to uproot Western imperialism and its local allies. Khomeini and his successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, made efforts to generate support for the Palestinians to promote Iran's revolutionary regime to a level of regional hegemony.⁷

Paradoxically, it was the Fatah organization which trained Hezbollah and IRGC militants in Lebanon, and later in Iran itself. During the 1970s, Fatah embraced the Iranian leftist and clerical revolutionaries and provided expertise, training, and connections with liberation fighters from around the globe.⁸

Distancing itself from the PLO, Iran gradually started to reach out to other, nascent, Palestinian groups such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas. The 1993 Oslo Accords, and Iran's decision not to endorse them, provided a decisive break with the PLO. Hamas became a key ally, since the group advocated for political Islam and was opposed to a two-state solution that could potentially end the conflict. Indeed, the failures of Oslo served Iranian interests in so far as they undermined any real prospects for peace and shifted the framework for resistance, especially with the rise of Hezbollah both as a vanguard of anti-Israeli resistance and a staunch Iranian ally.⁹

The Axis completed by 2014/15

In a Mayadeen TV (Lebanon) interview, on September 24, 2014, Iranian analyst Mohammad Sadeq Al-Hosseini, said: "We in the axis of resistance are the new sultans of the Mediterranean and the Gulf. We in Tehran, Damascus, [Hizbullah's] southern suburb of Beirut, Baghdad, and Sanaa will shape the map of the region. We are the new sultans of the Red Sea as well."¹⁰

In a February 11, 2015, speech, IRGC Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani said: "Today we are seeing the signs of the export of the Islamic Revolution across the region, from Bahrain and Iraq to Syria, Yemen, and North Africa."¹¹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ataie Mohammad, "How the Axis of Resistance is shaping the Middle East," *Middle East Eye*, October 24, 2024.

⁹ Alemzadeh Maryam, "Iran, Palestine and the Axis of Resistance," *Middle East Report*, 313 (Winter 2024), Middle East Research and Information Project.

¹⁰ "Iranian Analyst Mohammad Sadeq Al-Hosseini: Saudi Arabia Is on the Verge of Extinction; We Are the New Sultans of the Mediterranean, the Gulf, and the Red Sea," *Iran, The Gulf, The Gulf | Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1155*, MEMRI.

¹¹ Mansharof Yossi and Kharrazi E., "Iran's Support For The Houthi Rebellion In Yemen: 'Without Iran There Would Be No War In Syria And Ansar Allah Would Have Never Emerged'", *Iran, The Gulf, The Gulf | Inquiry & Analysis Series No. 1155*, MEMRI.

On 3 January 2020, an American drone killed in Baghdad Qassem Soleimani, the Axis's legendary leader. The Iranian regional project suffered a blow then, but a survivable one. In a rousing speech at her father's funeral in Tehran, Soleimani's daughter Zeynab promised that three of her honorary "uncles" would exact revenge for her father's death: the Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, the Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, and Syria's president Bashar al-Assad. Within four months in 2024, all three of these avengers "have been dispatched from the scene," Haniyah and Nasrallah killed by Israel, and Assad deposed by opposition forces and now a refugee in Moscow.¹²

Gaza/Hamastan

In the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, with the commencement of the Madrid peace process in the Middle East in October 1991, Iran convened a parallel conference in Tehran to unite radical organizations hostile to the PLO's negotiations with Israel.¹³ The Tehran conference participants, including Hamas and the PIJ, all of which professed the destruction of Israel, decided to make every possible effort to sabotage the new-born peace process. The Tehran regime decided to support the "Palestinian resistance" and establish a high-level committee to unite radical organizations hostile to negotiations with Israel in an Islamic front under Iranian leadership.¹⁴ Iran-Hamas relations were put on a formal basis in October 1992, when a Hamas delegation, led by the then Secretary General Mousa Abu-Marzuq and spokesman Ibrahim Ghawshah, visited Tehran. Iran permitted Hamas to open an office in Tehran and pledged \$30 million a year to the organization, and they agreed to have the Revolutionary Guards train thousands of Hamas activists in Iran and in Hezbollah camps in Lebanon.¹⁵

Sabotaging the peace process. Hamas rejected the Declaration of Principles (DoP, known as Oslo I) signed by Israel and the PLO on September 13, 1993, and "the plot to recognize the occupying Zionist entity." Terrorism or—in Hamas terminology—jihad has been the immediate response to the Oslo process. Violent suicide attacks perpetrated by Islamist terrorists proved crucial in impacting the pace and direction of the Israeli Palestinian political process. Iran provided \$3 million a year to both Hamas and the PIJ, and one thousand

¹² Azizi Arash, "RIP, the Axis of Resistance," *The Atlantic*, December 17, 2024.

¹³ Rekheiss, Elie, "The Terrorist Connection—Iran, the Islamic Jihad and Hamas," *Justice* (Tel Aviv), May 1995, p. 4.

¹⁴ Karmon, Ely, "Counterterrorism Policy: Why Tehran Starts and Stops Terrorism?" *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. V, No. 4, December 1998.

¹⁵ Kurz, Anat & Tal, Nahman, "Hamas: Radical Islam in a National Struggle," *Jaffee Center for Strategic Center Memorandum*, No. 48, July 1997.

families of Palestinian suicide bombers or detainees from both organizations received regular monthly payments from Iran.¹⁶

The Second Intifada (2000-2005) flared up against the backdrop of the humiliation of Israeli army leaving Lebanon in 2000, with a resurgence of armed resistance, especially in Gaza. Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza was a pivotal moment in the trajectory of the Palestinian resistance, not only for Gaza but also for advancing the broader goal of "Palestinian liberation from the river to the sea." Through collaboration with the Axis of Resistance, the military wing of Hamas, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, and the armed wing of the Islamic Jihad, the al-Quds Brigades, have steadily developed their military capabilities and expertise, posing a substantial challenge to the Israeli army.¹⁷

Contrary to the first intifada of 1987 – 1992, a spontaneous popular uprising bandwagoned and controlled by the PLO and the newly emerging Hamas, the so-called "al-Aqsa intifada", beginning in September 2000, was a premeditated violent campaign against Israel tainted by strong religious connotations intended to rally around it not only the Palestinians but also the Muslim world at large. The violence was initiated by Chairman Yasser Arafat when he realized that the Camp David summit could not deliver the kind of agreement he dreamt of – the establishment of a Palestinian state in all of Gaza and the West Bank with Jerusalem's Old City as its capital without renouncing the "right to return" of the Palestinian refugees. Iran hold a central position in granting political, propaganda and morale and material aid to Hamas.¹⁸

During the Second Intifada, Hamas and PIJ staged dozens of deadly suicide bombings, culminating with twelve suicide bombings of civilian targets in March 2002. The Hamas attack on 27 March, during a Holy Passover Seder in Netanya's Park Hotel, was the deadliest, killing twenty-nine civilians, and injuring one hundred. Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, its leader, declared that the attack intended to sabotage the Saudi peace plan discussed at the Arab League summit in Beirut, "as a clear message to [the] Arab rulers that our struggling people have chosen their road and know how to regain lands and rights in full, depending only on God."¹⁹

Hamas's unexpected electoral victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections of January 2006 culminated in its bloody takeover of Gaza in June 2007. Egypt's Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit accused Iran of encouraging Hamas to seize the Gaza Strip, a charge reinforced by the head of the Palestinian

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ataie Mohammad, How the Axis of Resistance is shaping the Middle East.

¹⁸ Karmon Ely, "Gaza/Hamastan, Platform for Iranian Destabilization of the Arab World," *ICT Special Report*, January 5, 2009.

¹⁹ Stork Joe, "Erased In A Moment. Suicide Bombing Attacks Against Israeli Civilians," *Human Rights Watch Report*, October 15, 2002.

intelligence, Tawfiq al-Tirawi, who said that Iran had provided Hamas with training and weapons and that Hamas had carried out its plan in 'coordination with Iran'.²⁰

The October 7, 2023, Hamas led massacre and its aftermath

On the morning of October 7, 2023, a barrage of around 5,000 rockets from the Gaza Strip hit targets in southern Israel. Armed motorized paragliders and gunmen in trucks, on motorbikes, streamed through holes blown through Israel's once-vaunted border fence and began firing on a mixture of civilian and military targets. Seaborn divers and small boats attacked other targets on Israel's coast. Around 1,200 Israelis were killed and around 3,500 wounded; over 240 were taken hostage. Most of the fighters who crossed into Israel were members of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), joined by gunmen from numerous smaller Palestinian factions. The scope, brutality, and audacity of the attacks, along with the weapons systems used, revealed a level of planning, destructiveness, and capability that surprised many analysts both in and out of government.²¹

The terrorists penetrated several southern settlements and began a murderous killing spree. The evidence found on the ground, the documentation caught on camera by the terrorists themselves, as well as survivors' testimonies, document a horrendous story of attackers devoid of any shred of humanity. Families were slaughtered in their beds, civilians were burnt alive, babies were butchered, and hundreds of men and women were viciously gunned down while simply dancing at a music festival.²² It is considered the worst anti-Jewish pogrom since the WWII and the deadliest event in Israel's history since independence.

In response to these grave developments, the State of Israel officially declared war, the first time the state has done so since the October 1973 War. The Army launched Operation *Swords of Iron* aimed at countering the threat posed by the terrorist organization Hamas. It represents a decisive effort by Israel to safeguard the security and well-being of its citizens and to address the challenges posed by extremist elements in the region.

In killing more than 1,200 Israelis and taking more than 240 hostages, Hamas clearly anticipated a large-scale military response against Gaza, an expectation confirmed in the Israeli army's unprecedentedly violent air and

²⁰ Samuel S. & Rajiv C., "The Hamas Takeover and its Aftermath," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 31, Issue 5, 2007.

²¹ Smyth Phillip, "The Path to October 7: How Iran Built Up and Managed a Palestinian 'Axis of Resistance'", *CTC Sentinel*, December 2023 Issue, Vol. 16, Issue 11.

²² "Swords of Iron: War in the South - Hamas' Attack on Israel," *Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website*, 27.05.2024.

ground offensive. The Israeli campaign, which has killed tens of thousands of Palestinians, and caused enormous devastation across the Strip, has dominated the attention of the world and international media for weeks. In essence, after years of being consigned to the background, Gaza has become again the heart of the Israeli Palestinian confrontation.

According to a Reuters report, by the end of March 2025, Palestinian health authorities claimed Israel's ground and air campaign in Gaza has killed more than 50,000 people, with nearly a third of the dead under 18. Israel's military has also accepted in briefings that the overall Gaza casualty numbers are broadly reliable. However, Israel estimates the number of Hamas fighters killed at 20,000. It says about one civilian was killed for every fighter, a ratio it blames on Hamas for using civilian facilities and the civilians as human shields.²³ Civilians in Gaza have no access to the 500km of tunnels used by Hamas terrorists to hide. Mousa Abu Marzouk, a member of the Hamas Political Bureau said in October 2023 that the tunnels in Gaza were built to protect Hamas fighters from airstrikes, not civilians. He added that Hamas fights Israel from within the tunnels and that since 75% of the residents in the Gaza Strip are refugees, it is the responsibility of the United Nations to protect them!²⁴

The Israeli government set three objectives for the war in the Strip: the collapse of Hamas's rule, the destruction of its military capabilities, and the return of hostages that were taken during the attack. On January 19, 2025, a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas came into effect. This was part of the initiation of a second deal between the two sides for the return of the Israeli hostages in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners, a gradual withdrawal of The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) presence from the Strip, and for the return of Palestinians to their homes in the northern Gaza Strip. About a month later, on March 18, Israel ended the ceasefire and resumed attacks in the Strip.²⁵

The return of President Trump to the White House has upended the cards regarding the Gaza Strip. Trump has reintroduced and intensified the option of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which is supposed to include a political engagement with the Palestinian issue. At the same time, the US president presented an idea for the "voluntary emigration," or evacuation of the entire Palestinian population from the area as part of a new vision for the Strip.

Meanwhile, the strategic intentions of the current Israeli government regarding the Gaza Strip, in both the short and long term, remain unclear. Prime

²³ Al-Mughrabi Nidal and Farge Emma, "Gaza death toll: how many Palestinians has Israel's offensive killed?", *Reuters*, March 24, 2025. See also *INSS post*, "The Truth behind the Number of Gazan Casualties Reported in the International Media," at https://www.inss.org.il/social_media/numbers/

²⁴ Interview on October 27, 2023, aired on Russia Today TV. See on the *MEMRI website*.

²⁵ Guterman Ofer, "Strategic Alternatives for the Gaza Strip," *INSS Policy Analysis*, April 10, 2025.

Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has adopted President Trump's population evacuation plan as Israel's new official policy for the "day after," but continues to claim that normalization with Saudi Arabia will materialize soon.

The Arab states have formed a unified front rejecting the idea of evacuating the Strip and are attempting to promote an alternative vision of stabilizing Gaza through a Palestinian technocratic administration and a civilian reconstruction project that would not require population displacement. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia is sharpening its demand for "paving a path toward the establishment of a Palestinian state" as part of the conditions for normalization with Israel.

One common thread linking the attackers were their extensive financial, military, and political connections to the Islamic Republic of Iran, the product of extensive cultivation and management of a Palestinian "Axis of Resistance" by Tehran over many years. Yet no 'smoking gun' has emerged of direct Iranian involvement in or greenlighting of the October 7 attacks. This may reflect the opacity of many proxy-related activities by Iran and Tehran's deliberate pursuit of plausible deniability. Alternatively, it may reflect the fact that "while Iran cocked the gun, it was its Palestinian proxies that pulled the trigger."²⁶

According to Lisa Issac, Russian researcher specialized in the Middle East, the Axis of Resistance hailed the operation as "shattering the myth of the invincible army," "exposing the fallacy of Israeli technological and military superiority," "an intelligence failure," and "a permanent overturning of the rules of engagement." Amid this euphoric rhetoric of "victory," few observers of the regional landscape foresaw an impending catastrophe in Gaza. Israel became, according to Isaac, "a wounded beast," poised to unleash devastation - not merely seeking revenge, but aiming to dismantle the entire Axis, basically anyone aligned with Tehran across the Middle East to confront Israel.²⁷

Supporters of Iran's axis noticed that its stance was not what they had expected. Iran kept insisting that it had no warning of the October 7 invasion of Israel by Hamas. Ayatollah Khamenei told Ismail Haniyeh that "Iran would continue to lend the group its political and moral support but wouldn't intervene directly" and complained that Hamas didn't warn Iran of the attack, so they will not enter the war on their behalf. As Israel's bombardment of Gaza grew increasingly intense, Tehran escalated its rhetoric against Israel, declaring that it would 'not stand idly by in the face of what it called 'Israeli crimes.' Yet on the ground, nothing changed - except that the situation worsened, plunging Gaza, the West Bank, Yemen and the Lebanese front into deeper catastrophe.²⁸

²⁶ Smyth Phillip, *The Path to October 7: How Iran Built Up and Managed a Palestinian 'Axis of Resistance'*.

²⁷ Issac Lisa, "The Crucible: The 'Axis of Resistance' Collapse in War, or Survival Through Peace?" *Russia in Global Affairs*, April 8, 2025.

²⁸ Ibid.

Hezbollah

Ali-Khan and Cambanis thoroughly summarize Hezbollah's demise, Iran's most capable military partner, unable to check Israel's military strikes. The day after Hamas's October 7 attack, Hezbollah entered the fray as part of the "unity of fronts" strategy, launching rockets at the North of Israel. Convinced that Israel wanted to avoid spreading the Gaza war to Lebanon, Hezbollah miscalculated and severely underestimated Israel's resolve. The Lebanese group initially demanded a truce in Gaza in exchange for a cessation of its attacks. Backed into a corner, Hezbollah dropped that demand and agreed to the Hezbollah-Israel truce in November 2024. The fall of 2024 delivered blow after blow to the group. Israel infiltrated Hezbollah's supply chain, booby-trapping thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies, injuring thousands and debilitating its communication network and relentless airstrikes decimated its military infrastructure and destroyed much of its missile arsenal. The Hezbollah position dramatically deteriorated following the assassination of longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah in an Israeli airstrike on September 27, 2024, and two days later his successor, Hashem Safieddine. On October 1, Israeli forces crossed into southern Lebanon. Hezbollah has been reduced to its weakest condition since the late 1980s. Israel now says it will indefinitely occupy five hilltops in Lebanese territory.²⁹

The public funeral of Nasrallah, delayed for security reasons for more than five months, was held in Beirut on 23 February 2025. Along with hundreds of thousands of mourners who attended the event, representatives from "nearly 79 countries were present," including Iran, which pledged broad public and official participation. Despite being weakened politically and militarily, observers say Hezbollah emphasized the international nature of funeral's event to demonstrate that the group is still "a key player in the Middle East."³⁰

According to expert Albert Kostanian, the funeral is hugely symbolic in Hezbollah's eyes and for its supporters, because Nasrallah was an unparalleled charismatic figurehead, a symbol of religious strength, almost "a saint" in Shiite tradition. He had influence beyond Lebanese borders and was one of the main faces of the Iranian axis. The reality in the south of Lebanon is humiliating for Hezbollah even though it claims to have won the war against Israel. In Lebanon's domestic politics, the election of the new President Joseph Aoun, and the nomination of the Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, out of Hezbollah's control, represent a sensational defeat for Hezbollah.³¹

²⁹ Ali-Khan Veena and Cambanis Thanassis, "Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance," *Report Century International*, Century Foundation, March 19, 2025.

³⁰ Daou Marc, "At Nasrallah's funeral, Hezbollah and Iran set to put on a 'show of strength'", *France24*, February 22, 2025.

³¹ Ibid.

According to some optimist analysts, the once unthinkable disarmament of Hezbollah could finally be within reach, as the United States pushes Lebanon to act and applies pressure on Iran over its nuclear program. Hezbollah, bolstered by an arsenal more powerful than that of the Lebanese army, long presented itself as the country's best line of defense against "Israeli aggression." Under a November 27, 2024, truce, Hezbollah was to withdraw its fighters to the north of Lebanon's Litani River and dismantle any remaining military infrastructure in the south, while the Lebanese army was to deploy in the area. A source close to Hezbollah told AFP that the group had ceded to the Lebanese army around 190 of its 265 military positions identified south of the Litani. Lebanese President Aoun, who has pledged a state monopoly on bearing arms, has said the issue requires national dialogue. Several Hezbollah officials have said the group is ready for dialogue on Lebanon's defense strategy, including the issue of the group's weapons, but is not prepared to surrender them now.³²

There is no doubt a change in Lebanon, first on the political level, with the election of President Aoun, supported by the West, the United States, Saudi Arabia. Hezbollah's political weight in parliament and in Lebanon in general has dropped significantly after the blow they received from the IDF. On the other hand, Aoun's statement that he "isn't interested in coming to military confrontation with Hezbollah," and that it needs to be a "slow process," as well as his call for Hezbollah to enter Lebanese army units, should not be taken at face value, because traditionally, in the Lebanese Army, most of the soldiers are Shi'ites, for a simple demographic reason. Therefore, the integration of thousands of Hezbollah fighters or personnel into the army, certainly at this stage, is a danger that the organization will take control of the army from within, after it has already cooperated with the army for years. Hezbollah and its Iranian sponsors will be cautious but that they will continue to try, as usual, to bring in weapons, to prepare some infrastructure in case, for example, there is a crisis in the negotiations with the US on the Iranian nuclear issue.³³

Indeed, the new Hezbollah Secretary-General Naim Qassem declared that Hezbollah "will not let anyone disarm it or disarm the resistance" against Israel, and "We must cut this idea of disarmament from the dictionary."³⁴

³² Al-Nahhas Lynne, "Disarming Lebanon's Hezbollah no longer inconceivable: analysts," *Al-Monitor*, April 14, 2025.

³³ Karmon Ely, cited in Yaakov Lappin, "Lebanon claims it is replacing Hezbollah in the south," *Israel Today*, April 18, 2025, <https://www.israeltoday.co.il/read/lebanon-claims-it-is-replacing-hezbollah-in-the-south/>

³⁴ "Secretary-General Naim Qassem says Hezbollah 'will not let anyone disarm' it", *AFP*, April 18, 2025.

The Houthis

In a May 2017 article, this author estimated that Yemen's Houthi already became new members of Iran's anti-Israeli/anti-American Axis of Resistance, although some Arab and American experts contested Iranian leaders' declarations that the movement is within Iran's sphere of influence.³⁵ Houthi's propaganda strategy contained already hallmarks of the Lebanese Hezbollah movement's propaganda in its discourse and format. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, their uncontested leader since the assassination of his brother, and ideolog of the movement, Houssein al-Houthi, delivered speeches inspired by the "performances of Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah whom he mimics in tone, mannerisms, and discourse."³⁶

The Houthi – Hezbollah relationship span over more than a decade, as their militants trained together for the past 10 years in Iran, then in Lebanon and in Yemen. Hundreds of Lebanese and Iranian trainers and military advisers were in Yemen already, the Iranians dealing with missile batteries and other weaponry while Hezbollah fighters serving as "guerrilla experts".³⁷ In April 2017, Abdul-Malik declared that the United States and the Israeli regime are two sides of the same coin and together they seek to destroy Yemen through a brutal military campaign launched by Saudi Arabia.

It appears that the process of radicalization of the Houthi movement was more profound and began much earlier than assessed by the American experts. Therefore, a physical Iranian presence based on a strategic cooperation with the Houthi in Yemeni ports of the Red Sea, the control of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the threat to free navigation from Israel's Eilat Southern harbor, represent a direct threat to Israel's security and interests. Moreover, this project will permit Iran to completely encircle Israel on the Lebanese, Syrian, Gazan and now Yemeni frontiers, and increase the ground and naval challenges for the Jewish state. It seems that not only US experts, but also Israeli intelligence and defense establishment didn't take seriously the Houthi threat.³⁸

The American administration had an ambivalent position towards the organization. President Trump did support the war that Saudi Arabia waged against the Houthis since 2015 to restore Sunni President Mansour Hadi to power in Yemen, but when the Houthis, and Iran, fired missiles that severely damaged the Saudi oil facilities in September 2019, the Trump administration did not react at all. Trump decided to put the Houthis on the list of terrorist

³⁵ Karmon Ely, "Yemen's Houthis: New members of Iran's anti-Israeli/anti-American axis," *Jerusalem Post*, May 28, 2017.

³⁶ Taqi Abdulalah, "Houthi propaganda: following in Hizballah's footsteps," *The New Arab*, April 12, 2015, at

³⁷ Solomon Erika, "Lebanon's Hizbollah and Yemen's Houthis open up on links," *The Financial Times*, May 8, 2015.

³⁸ Karmon Ely, Yemen's Houthis: New members of Iran's anti-Israeli/anti-American axis.

organizations only on January 19, 2020, a day before President Biden replaced him. President Biden was quick to remove the Houthis from the list. Thus, the American administrations underestimated the transformation of the Houthi movement into an active companion in Iran's "axis of resistance."³⁹

The Houthis enthusiastically joined Iran and Hezbollah in aiding Hamas after October 7. Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi announced on October 10 that the Houthis would join the conflict if the United States did, part of the axis effort to shield Hezbollah and Iran from direct U.S. pressure. On October 31, the Houthis launched their first ballistic missile strike on Israel and the Houthi military spokesman, Yahya Sarea, confirmed that attacks on Israel would be sustained if Israeli operations in Gaza continued, a commitment that no other non-Palestinian member of the axis did [besides Hezbollah], with little apparent fear of an Israeli response.⁴⁰

Israel preferred that an international coalition, led by the Americans, deals with the Houthi naval threat. Rather Israel should have not remained passive and give up its role as protector of the country's freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Straits after a similar situation forced it to start two wars in the past, the Sinai War in 1956 and the Six Days War in 1967.⁴¹ The military capabilities of the Houthis have not been technically impressive. Despite all their efforts, by the end of April 2024, they failed to land a single effective blow on Israeli soil (with only one ballistic or cruise missile penetrating Israel's defenses) and only sank one ship.

However, on July 19, 2024, an Iranian-made drone sent by Houthi rebels struck Tel Aviv, leaving one person dead and at least 10 wounded in the group's first lethal strike into Israel. In the afternoon of July 20, Israel attacked alone targets in the important port city al-Hudaydah, through which Iran supplies the Houthis with weapons, and which is an important economic asset. Dozens of Israeli planes targeted oil installations, a power plant, operational facilities in the commercial port, and military bases.⁴²

The Houthis have launched an estimated 200 long-range ballistic missiles and 170 drones at Israel since October 7, 2023. The Houthis attacked Israel with ballistic missiles on December 1, 16, 19, 21, 24, and 25, 2024. The pattern of increased attacks in the second half of that month came as Hezbollah has ceased attacks on Israel in the wake of an Israel-Lebanon ceasefire on November 27. IDF carried out a new round of airstrikes targeting the Houthis on December 26. Israel's operations did not appear to deter the

³⁹ Karmon Ely, "The Houthi Threat to Israel and its Regional and Global Consequences," *ICT website*, December 19, 2023.

⁴⁰ Knights Michael, "Assessing the Houthi War Effort Since October 2023," *CTC Sentinel*, April 2024, Vol.17, Issue 4.

⁴¹ Karmon Ely, "The Houthi Threat to Israel and its Regional and Global Consequences."

⁴² Zimmt Raz, "Escalation of the Confrontation Between Israel and the Houthis Background and Significance," *The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, July 21, 2024.

Houthis, as the group launched ballistic missiles at Israel in the early morning of December 27, claiming they had targeted Israel's Ben-Gurion International Airport. The Houthis have vowed to continue their attacks as long as the war in Gaza continues.⁴³

The US helped Israel defend itself against the threat of long-range missiles and drones launched by the Houthis towards southern Israel by shooting them down from its warships sailing in the Red Sea or from bases in Saudi Arabia. But this, like the Israeli threats against the Houthis, did not deter their leadership. Although the Houthis initially announced their desire to act against "Israeli ships" only, in practice, they attacked "every ship that made its way to Israel," even if not related to Israel. As more and more merchant ships were hit by missile fire, the situation became a direct threat to international maritime traffic and global economic activity.⁴⁴

Since the elimination by Israel of Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in September 2-23, Houthi leader Abdul-Malik al-Houthi views himself as the dominant figure in the axis of resistance. Through independent operations, he has positioned the Houthis as a critical player not only in Yemen but also on the global stage. With tactics like disrupting Red Sea trade routes, holding vessels hostage, and collaborating with Somali terror groups, the Houthis are creating a ripple effect that harms not only regional players but also global powers like Russia and China.⁴⁵

Experts, who seem sympathetic to Houthis, claim that rather than operating as a cohesive, coordinated force, the axis seemed bound more by rhetoric. Abdul-Malik al-Houthi's threats to escalate to "much higher levels" and Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah's fiery denunciations of Israeli airstrikes as "treacherous" made headlines but delivered little tangible results, have caused problems for Israel and its partners, and have disrupted global shipping but have not reversed the region's strategic balance of power. Houthis attacks were sporadic and lacked strategic impact and "felt more like political theatre than military might."⁴⁶

The United States adopted a reactive and defensive posture and only responded with strikes into Yemen on January 12, 2024, after 26 Houthi attacks targeting international shipping and nine attacks involving US and allied warships. The US-led strike campaign, which has prevented individual Houthi attacks and destroyed some of their targeting infrastructure and a limited number of missiles on the ground, has failed to alter the Houthi rate

⁴³ Frantzman Seth, "Israel strikes Houthi targets after ballistic missile attacks on Israel," *FDD's Long War Journal*, December 27, 2024.

⁴⁴ Karmon Ely, *The Houthi Threat to Israel and its Regional and Global Consequences*.

⁴⁵ Karmon Ely, in *Ynet's daily podcast "The Headline" (in Hebrew)*, "Can the Houthi Threat Be Neutralized?", ICT website, January 1, 2025.

⁴⁶ Ali-Khan Veena and Cambanis Thanassis, *Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance*.

of attacks. During President Biden's administration the Houthi attacks have become more effective in 2024.⁴⁷

The Trump administration has been at pains to favorably contrast its wide-ranging strikes on Houthi targets with the more cautious approach of the Biden administration. It has also made clear that Yemen itself barely figures into the administration's calculus. By designating the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, launching airstrikes, and pledging to hold Iran to account for Houthi actions, the administration aims to create leverage with Iran that Trump hopes could lead to a grand bargain with Tehran. As Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth notes in the leaked *Signal chat*, "This [is] not about the Houthis. I see it as two things: 1) Restoring Freedom of Navigation, a core national interest; and 2) Reestablish deterrence, which Biden cratered".⁴⁸

The Houthis respected their pledge to stop attacks against Israel if the two-month-long ceasefire in Gaza between Israel and Hamas was in force. When Israel accused Hamas of "repeatedly" refusing to release hostages and rejecting mediation offers and shattered Gaza's fragile ceasefire, the Houthis returned to attack it with missiles and drones by mid-March 2025. While Israeli officials were holding discussions on whether to respond to the recent missiles launched from Yemen, the US has asked Israel not to strike Houthi targets but "Leave it to us", as the US believes it has greater capacity to conduct sustained attacks using aircraft stationed on its aircraft carriers.⁴⁹

Indeed, U.S. forces have struck more than 1,000 Houthi targets in Yemen since March 15, 2025, as the Trump administration's campaign against the militants reached the 45-day mark. Dubbed *Operation Rough Rider*, the campaign has drawn on U.S. Navy and Air Force warplanes and drones and shows no sign of slowing down. The Pentagon has devoted considerable resources to the effort under U.S. Central Command, including six B-2 Spirit Stealth bombers, two aircraft carriers and their accompanying strike groups, and other aerial assets. The campaign against the Houthis has also been broadened to include Britain, which on April 29 participated in airstrikes for the first time since Trump took office. "This action was taken in response to a persistent threat from the Houthis to freedom of navigation," British Defense Secretary John Healey said in a statement.⁵⁰

The Trump administration's air strike campaign is degrading the Houthis missile and drone capability but has failed to force the group to capitulate.

⁴⁷ Carter Brian, "The Cost of Inaction in Yemen," *ISW Press*, The Institute for the Study of War, November 22, 2024.

⁴⁸ Salisbury Peter, "Texting Military Plans Is Bad. American Policy in Yemen Is Worse," *Century International Commentary*, The Century Foundation, April 1, 2025.

⁴⁹ Stein Amichai, Jerusalem Post Staff, "US to Israel: Don't strike Houthis in Yemen, 'leave it to us'", *Jerusalem Post*, March 20, 2025.

⁵⁰ Gordon Chris, "US Has Struck Over 1,000 Houthi Targets in Renewed Campaign," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, April 30, 2025.

Trump officials see little room for diplomacy with the group and are “open” to supporting a ground operation by “local forces” in Yemen, units of the ousted but still internationally-recognized Republic of Yemen Government. Yemeni forces want to try to advance on the ground against the Houthis, taking advantage of the U.S. strikes, but appear ill-prepared for a major ground offensive.⁵¹

As the Trump administration ties the Houthi issue with Iran’s intervention in the region, it is possible some solution will be found in the framework of the negotiations on the fate of Iran’s nuclear project.

The impact of Assad regime’s fall in Syria

Assad owed his throne to its armies, which helped him kill hundreds of thousands of civilians in the civil war that began in 2011. Unlike other members of the Axis, Assad wasn’t an Islamist. He also had real differences with Hamas (the only Sunni member of the Axis). But Syria was the only United Nations member-state to be considered part of the Axis, and its territory was crucial for Iran to pass supplies through Syria to Hezbollah, in neighboring Lebanon, and use it as a platform on Israel’s border to gather its multinational, mostly Shiite regiments from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and elsewhere.⁵²

The loss of Syria as a strategic ally is a severe blow to the Axis of Resistance. Without Syria as a land link, the Axis faces significant logistical and strategic challenges, threatening its cohesion and effectiveness. The fall of the Assad regime also threatens Hezbollah’s position in Lebanon. With Syria under the influence of a Sunni militant group, there is the possibility of a Sunni insurgency against Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁵³

Currently, Turkey seems best positioned to play a decisive role in shaping Syria’s future. It is no coincidence that Ibrahim Kalin, the head of Turkish intelligence, was the first high-ranking foreign official to visit Syria’s interim government, followed by Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan. Turkey’s pursuit of power and dominance in Syria is provoking unease in many quarters, including Israel. Since the Gaza war, relations between Erdogan’s Turkey and Benjamin Netanyahu’s Israel have been openly hostile. The presence of Turkish troops in Syrian territories bordering Israel raises the risk of direct military confrontation between the two nations, according to a report by the Nagel Commission, named after its chairman.⁵⁴

⁵¹ “Endgame For Costly U.S. Campaign Against Yemen’s Houthis Is Unclear, *Intelbrief*, The Soufan Center, April 28, 2025.

⁵² Azizi Arash, RIP, the Axis of Resistance.

⁵³ Mahmoudian Arman, “Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance’ Weakened But Still Dangerous,” *Stimson Commentary, Pivotal Places*, January 10, 2025/

⁵⁴ Meinardus Ronald, “Syria’s impact on regional rivalries,” *Kathimerini English Edition*, January 24, 2025.

Recently, Israeli security experts warned that Turkey's growing influence in Syria could pose a greater threat to Israel than Iran. Most commentators and the Israeli government are concerned that the new Syrian government will fall into the hands of jihadists due to Ahmed Sharaa's (aka. Muhammed al-Julani') past, which was linked to al-Qaeda and later underwent a significant change. But as the new Syria's President functions as a serious and pragmatic leader, the real concern from the north, even at the immediate level, comes from Turkey. The Turks have proposed a long-term strategic agreement in which Turkey will rebuild the Syrian army and gain control of five significant territorial bases. Erdogan's neo-Ottoman aspirations and Muslim Brotherhood ideology, his threats of war against Israel, the funds he has poured into Islamist organizations in Jerusalem to strengthen Turkey's position on the Temple Mount, confronting Jordanian and Palestinian interests, requires maximum Israeli caution, as it allows the Turkish army, which is much stronger than Iran's, to be stationed on its northern border.⁵⁵

With the fall of the Asad regime, the prospects of Axis' members will change. It signifies the end of a strong ally that allowed Iran to practice forward defense in its clash with Israel, on the country's northern border. The resulting reputational damage to Iran's image within the Axis of Resistance will be immense as it proved incapable of protecting its allies and assets. The Axis might also prove less useful as a valued rhetorical device and framing mechanism championed by the Islamic Republic considering Iran's acute internal security threats after October 7, 2023, and the depleted strategic and military options to counter Israel.⁵⁶

Iraq

Iraq is, in many ways, in a conundrum: it is an ally of Iran yet hosts a U.S.-led military coalition. Over the years, Iran-backed armed groups calling themselves the "Islamic Resistance" have repeatedly targeted the American embassy in Baghdad and military and diplomatic facilities elsewhere in Iraq. The United States has carried out airstrikes in retaliation that have killed dozens, including senior officials such as Iraq's Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy chairman of the Popular Mobilization Commission (PMC), a formal governmental agency that includes all Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) groups. Al-Muhandis was killed by an American drone strike in January 2020, together with Iran's Gen. Qassem Soleimani. Tehran sees Iraq

⁵⁵ Shimon Cohen interviews Ely Karmon, "Terrorism Research Expert: The Real Fear Is From Turkey," *Channel 7 radio (in Hebrew)*, December 20, 2-24.

⁵⁶ Schwartz Kevin, "The End of the Axis of Resistance?" *Middle East Report*, 313 (Winter 2024).

as its most important neighbor, an economic lifeline and a base from which to project military power.⁵⁷

Iraqi Shia Islamist affiliates, like Kata'ib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba', emerged during the American-led occupation after the 2003 invasion, but gained more power, popularity, and relevance by joining Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units in the fight against the Islamic State from 2014.

Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iraqi Axis group with a mostly local agenda, has entered the fray of the Gaza war on January 28, 2024, with a drone attack on an American outpost in Jordan called Tower 22, killing three U.S. soldiers. Yet Kata'ib Hezbollah opted for restraint after Iran pleaded with it, avoiding further moves that might have spiraled into a costly confrontation.⁵⁸

At home and in Washington, the Hashd militias constitute Sudani's biggest challenge. Since Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack on Israel, these militias have conducted over 100 strikes on U.S. forces in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan. In October and November 2024 alone, these groups attacked Israel with drones and cruise missiles on nearly 150 occasions. Lately, however, these groups have gone largely silent. Indeed, U.S. troops and diplomats in Iraq have not been targeted by the militias in nearly six months.⁵⁹

Ibrahim Al-Sumaidaie, advisor to Iraq's prime minister, said in mid-December 2024, that the US demanded Iraq dismantles armed groups in the country, reserving the use of force if the Iraqi government does not act.⁶⁰

Discussions between Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani and several militia leaders were "very advanced", and the groups were inclined to comply with U.S. calls for disarmament. The six militia commanders interviewed in Baghdad and a southern province, who requested anonymity, are from the Kata'ib Hezbollah, al-Nujaba', Kataib Sayyed al-Shuhada and Ansarullah al-Awfiyaa groups. "Trump is ready to take the war with us to worse levels, we know that, and we want to avoid such a bad scenario," said a commander of Kata'ib Hezbollah. Kata'ib Hezbollah issued a statement denying that any of its members had spoken to Reuters.⁶¹

Farhad Alaaeldin, Sudani's foreign affairs adviser, told Reuters that the prime minister was committed to ensuring all weapons in Iraq were under state control through "constructive dialogue with various national actors". Iraq is

⁵⁷ Sajad Jiyad, "Iraq Walks a Tightrope into the New Trump Era," *Commentary Century International*, Century Foundation, March 3, 2025.

⁵⁸ Ali-Khan Veena and Cambanis, Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance.

⁵⁹ Schenker David, "Iraqis Fear That Trump's America Will Depart Once and For All," *The National Interest*, March 4, 2025.

⁶⁰ Oseran Ariel, "US demands Iraq dismantles Iran-backed militias, or else," *i24NEWS English Channel*, December 18, 2024.

⁶¹ Rasheed Ahmed, "Exclusive: Iran-backed militias in Iraq ready to disarm to avert Trump wrath," *Reuters*, April 8, 2025.

seeking to balance its alliances with both America and Iran in its dealing with the militias on its soil.⁶²

Senior sources in Iraq, including commanders in militias that have been responsible for hundreds of attacks against Israel and the US - have announced at the beginning of April 2025, that they will disarm to avoid attacks by the US and Israel. The militias have evacuated headquarters, and senior commanders are replacing phones, vehicles and houses. The Revolutionary Guards have given their blessing to the move.⁶³

The Axis of Resistance keeps getting smaller, as Iran may be losing its grip on Iraq, too, argues Arash Azizi.⁶⁴

However, according to other reports, Iran has transferred new long-range missiles to proxy groups in Iraq, defying hopes that the anti-American militias would disarm. The deliveries from the IRGC air force include surface-to-surface missiles that could reach as far as Europe, as well as shorter-range Quds 351 cruise and Jamal 69 ballistic missiles, The Times of London reported. The new long-range models had never been given to Iraq's pro-Iranian militias.⁶⁵

The planned withdrawal of American forces from central Iraq offers Iran and its Iraqi affiliates a strategic opportunity to consolidate their influence and compensate for the loss of Syria. Iran enters 2025 with its large network of state and non-state allies –built up painstakingly over nearly half a century– severely damaged. Iran has sponsored and funded this network running from Lebanon to Yemen, Gaza to Iraq, not only to project power but also as a deterrent against its primary adversaries, the United States and Israel. However, events beginning with Hamas's devastating attacks on Israel on October 7, 2023, have boomeranged in spectacular fashion, decimating key figures and structures within the alliance.⁶⁶

Iran

Iran began treating its members in the Axis of Resistance as part of a project against U.S. and Israeli goals in the Middle East, best summarized in the "unity of fronts" doctrine that Tehran promoted with all its partners. The result of this doctrine was that all Axis members should attack or hold fire together, increasing their leverage against Israel and the United States. As the Axis of Resistance grew stronger and added more members in the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Rosenzweig Assaf, "Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq prepare to disarm to avoid confrontation with Trump, *N12 website*, April 7, 2025.

⁶⁴ Azizi Arash, RIP, the Axis of Resistance.

⁶⁵ TOI Staff, "Iran sends new missiles to Iraqi proxies that were said to be disarming – report," *Times of Israel*, April 9, 2025.

⁶⁶ Mahmoudian Arman, Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' Weakened But Still Dangerous.

last two decades, it gained an aura of near invincibility. Key leaders of these groups and its media outlets conveyed the impression that they possessed the capability to launch “a sweeping, multipronged assault on Israel—where they could catch Israel off guard, undermine its military superiority, and drain its American-supplied resources” and could balance Western powers despite its apparent disadvantage in conventional military strength. The network’s geographic spread - often referred to as the “Shia Crescent” - encircled Israel.⁶⁷

Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran has hesitated to engage with Israel directly. Iran’s support for its non-state allies in the region, Hezbollah, Hamas and the Houthis, serves to expand its own political and military influence in the region and must align with its geostrategic interests.⁶⁸

According to Ali-Khan and Cambanis, analysts thought that the Axis could not be fully dismantled, thanks to its horizontal structure as the network would replace killed leaders, ensuring continuity. But after the United States assassinated Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, the Axis transitioned “from a top-down, Iranian-driven hierarchy to a more horizontally integrated alliance.” This shift gained momentum under the leadership of his successor, Esmail Qaani. Soleimani was the commander of the IRGC Quds Force and had spent decades cultivating personal relationships with every major Resistance leader. Perhaps the Axis never recovered the operational capacity that resided in those relationships. While Iran retained its role as the strategic architect, the new structure granted members greater autonomy and allowed them to forge independent ties with Tehran and one another.⁶⁹

Indeed, the elimination of Qasem Soleimani was probably the first trigger for the subsequent failures of the Axis of Resistance.

On April 1, 2024, Israel struck Iran’s consulate in the heart of Damascus, targeting Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a senior IRGC Quds Force commander overseeing operations in Syria and Lebanon, and several other high officers. On April 13, 2024, Iran launched its first-ever direct attack on Israel from its territory, firing over 300 missiles and drones, yet it failed to alter the course of the conflict. Israel intercepted most of these strikes and responded decisively on April 19 with a retaliatory drone attack targeting the Isfahan air base, a clear demonstration of its direct challenge to Iran’s deterrence capabilities. On July 24, 2014, Israel escalated tensions by assassinating Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas’s political bureau, in a targeted strike on his residence in Tehran. The

⁶⁷ Ali-Khan Veena and Cambanis Thanassis, *Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance*.

⁶⁸ Alemzadeh Maryam, *Iran, Palestine and the Axis of Resistance*.

⁶⁹ Ali-Khan Veena and Cambanis Thanassis, *Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance*.

attack challenged Iran's regional role and exposed its inability to protect a key ally.⁷⁰

On September 17, 2024, the synchronized pager and walkie-talkie bombings struck in Lebanon, killing at least 39, and wounding some 4,000. The operation left Hezbollah "functionally dead, paralyzed, and blind." The attack was described by Israeli Mossad chief David Barnea as "turning point" in the fight in Lebanon, "by which we turned the tables on our enemies." Together with Nasrallah in his bunker was killed Gen. Abbas Nilforoushan, IRGC commander in Lebanon. A direct line can be drawn from the pager operation to the elimination of Nasrallah and the ceasefire agreement with Lebanon.⁷¹

On October 1, 2024, Iran launched around 200 missiles at Israel, its second direct attack in less than six months, targeting Israel's Mossad headquarters, three air bases, radar systems, and armored units. Most of the missiles were intercepted by Israel's aerial defense system, while some hit military bases but did not cause major damage or casualties. The IRGC boasted a 90% success rate, but the operation fell far short of expectations for the Resistance's supporters, particularly in Lebanon, who saw it as a half-hearted response to Israel's escalating assassinations.⁷²

Iran's two direct attacks on Israel during 2024 represented an escalation compared to previous indirect encounters between the two countries. But the attacks were calculated so as not to risk a full-blown confrontation with Israel.⁷³

On November 27, 2024, a ceasefire was accepted by the decapitated leadership of Hezbollah in Lebanon. But the war merely shifted to a new front, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, which "defied all expectations." Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham opposition factions, which controlled the northern Idlib province in Syria since 2015, took advantage of the new situation and launched a quick offensive that saw the strategic provinces of Aleppo, Hama and Homs collapse in rapid succession like dominoes. The bewildered IRGC, which had previously intervened to save the Assad regime during the civil war, had to abandon immediately the Syrian territory to Lebanon or Iraq, together with the allied troops of Hezbollah and various pro-Iranian militias. In just ten days, by December 8, 2024, Assad's regime crumbled completely and a new Sunni regime, with a totally different identity and different foreign policy strategy is now ruling Syria.⁷⁴

The fall of Assad changed Syria's and the region's fate and revealed the weaknesses in Iran's Axis with significant implications for Iran's regional strategy and its deterrent capabilities. In parallel, Iran's proxies showed signs

⁷⁰ Issac Lisa, *The Crucible: The 'Axis of Resistance' Collapse in War, or Survival Through Peace*.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Alemzadeh Maryam, *Iran, Palestine and the Axis of Resistance*.

⁷⁴ Issac Lisa, *The Crucible: The 'Axis of Resistance' Collapse in War, or Survival Through Peace*.

of reduced effectiveness. The international landscape turned decisively against Iran with President Trump's return to power in January 2025.⁷⁵

The global implications

International media frequently dwell on two "axes," but separately: a Eurasian axis of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and a Middle East "axis of resistance" led by Iran that includes Hezbollah in Lebanon; the Assad regime in Syria (until recently); Shia militias in Syria and Iraq; Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza and the West Bank; and the Houthis in Yemen. The fall of the Assad regime, following Israel's military feats against Hamas and Hezbollah and its strikes on Iran, has brought the second axis to a historic low and pushed Russia to withdraw at least some of its assets from Syria. It is prudent, however, to assume that Russia and Iran's presence in Syria and the axis of resistance itself are down but not out.⁷⁶

Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion (Res.), The Washington Institute's Fellow, a senior research fellow at the INSS, and former head of the IDF Strategic Planning Division, compares the two anti-Western coalitions, the Eurasian axis of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and the Middle East "axis of resistance" led by Iran, challenging the global and regional order. On the battlefields, Ukraine is defending itself from Russia, while Israel is fighting the resistance axis on seven fronts. Logistically, it is the West against both axes.⁷⁷

Oron details the military support Russia has received from Iran (drones, ballistic missiles, artillery shells, small-arms ammunition), North Korea (thousands of troops, ballistic missiles, rockets), China (attack drones), and even recruited hundreds of Syrian and Yemeni mercenaries.

Iran is member of the two coalitions, with ambitions that go beyond the Middle East and include nuclear weapons. Russia has supplied Iran with S-300 long-range air defense systems (which were destroyed by Israel in April and October), has begun supplying it with Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets, launches Iranian satellites, and will probably share advanced military technologies with Tehran, including nuclear technology. Reportedly, Russia, with Iranian mediation, also provided the Houthis with targeting data for shipping attacks in the Red Sea, while GRU military advisors in Yemen help the Houthis pin down U.S. naval assets and deplete the U.S. stock of interceptor missiles. The war zones in Ukraine and around Israel are testing grounds for advanced weapons systems and military practices.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Orion Assaf, "Two 'Axes' Converging in Iran," *PolicyWatch* 3973, The Washington Institute, December 23, 2024.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Iran as a vital node at the intersection between the two axes is facilitating access to the Middle East by the West's rivals and threatening international shipping as well as U.S. forces, partners, and allies in the region and endangering Western partners and interests in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Tehran is also daring enough to plot to assassinate Donald Trump.

The 2021 China-Iran "comprehensive strategic partnership" agreement included cooperation on military, security, intelligence, and cyber issues, while the two countries' navies, alongside Russia's, periodically drill off the coast of Iran. North Korea exported ballistic missiles and tunneling technologies to the Middle East as well as nuclear technology, such as the plutonium production reactor that Israel destroyed in Syria in 2007.

At the grand strategy level, argues Oron, the axes' regional and global posture calls for a parallel Western architecture, a regional-global partnership with vital U.S. leadership and support, promoting inter-regional integration and interoperability globally. The outcome in one region, such as Ukraine, or the Middle East, will surely affect the others, such as Asia. They should be seen as a strategic whole rather than separate.

This architecture already exists, as proposed by President Joe Biden on September 9, 2023, on the sidelines of the G20 Summit convened by India. The new initiative aims building "enhanced connectivity and economic integration between Asia, the Arabian Gulf, and Europe", The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The MoU was signed by India, three European partners (France, Italy, and Germany), the European Union, and two Gulf states (Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)). Though Israel did not formally commit to the MoU, it is widely believed that the country will be involved in the future of the project. Indeed, this project was conceived during a meeting of the I2U2 forum of the US, Israel, the UAE, and India (September 2022, referred to I in India as the "Western Quad."⁷⁸

The corridor could constitute one of the more ambitious counters to China's own Belt and Road Initiative, which sought to connect more of the world to that country's economy. The announcement came at a time when Washington was encouraging Saudi Arabia to normalize ties with Israel – a linkage critical for permitting the corridor to reach the Mediterranean on its way to Europe.

The Hamas 7.10 gruesome terrorist assault on Israel, was a critical step in sabotaging the normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and indirectly also the MEC project, and it served not only the strategic interests of Iran, and Hamas, but also the global goals of China.

⁷⁸ Inbar Efraim, "The New US-led India-Middle East-Europe corridor will only be credible and meaningful if extended to China's backyard," *JISS Policy Paper*, The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), October 2, 2023.

Conclusion

Those with some affinity or even sympathy to the Axis of Resistance have a more optimistic view about its future.

‘Global Palestine’. According to a sympathetic view of Hamas, “to Zionists, the alliance between Arabs, Iranians, Sunnis, and the Shia is ‘unnatural’, and according to their sectarian views of Middle Eastern societies and politics, it should have crumbled long ago.” However, the longevity of the Hamas - Axis coalition couldn’t survive “without the global pro-Palestine movement and the cause of liberating al-Quds,” a rallying point for the ummah (the Muslim community). Beyond being a cause for Muslims, Palestine remains a “quintessential Third World issue,” connected with broader struggles for social, economic, and environmental justice, one of the most unifying issues within the diverse “global justice movement.” “Radiating both Third Worldist solidarity and Islamic ecumenicalism, the heroes and martyrs of Palestine have unified the elements of the Axis beyond sectarian identities and political disagreements.” The US, under both Trump and Biden, vigorously pursued the Abraham Accords to create a new Middle East centered on normalization with Israel. It replaced the so-called Israeli peace with Palestinians with an Israeli normalization “with the autocrats in the region,” chief among them the ruling families in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and UAE. However, Hamas’s actions on 7 October not only derailed the Abraham Accords but also revived the Axis of Resistance.⁷⁹

Ali-Khan and Cambanis, from the US progressive Century Foundation, consider that the Axis is “Down but Not Out”. They claim that Israel, the United States, and local competitors across the Middle East risk dangerously underestimating “the Iran-backed web of militias and hybrid actors.” The Axis was unable to deter Israel and cannot deter Israel now. At the same time, “resistance militias” retain substantial local firepower, which they can leverage for national or subnational power even with a diminished regional profile. Some, like the Assad regime, appear gone forever, while others, like the Houthis, Hezbollah and Hamas in “Palestine,” remain indisputably powerful in their domestic contexts. significantly weakened in its short-term potency. Yet the Axis retains economic and political might, commands tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of fighters across the Middle East and still have significant weapons and means of financing. They retain local constituencies and continue to operate as states within states. They maintain their links to Iran, which, within limits, still coordinates their activity and aid. “Less tangibly, an ideological vibrancy of opposition to Israel and the United States continues to animate the Axis—even as the depth of commitment

⁷⁹ Mohammad Ataie, How the Axis of Resistance is shaping the Middle East.

to that ideology varies among Axis groups." With the traditional military options of shambled, it will look for ways to inflict economic pain (think Red Sea shipping), target less-fortified U.S. allies in the Gulf, and ramp up other types of asymmetric attacks.⁸⁰

Three Chatham House researchers, Mansour, Al-Shakeri and Haid, have reached the conclusion that contrary to evaluations by some observers and policymakers in Western countries that Iran and its allies are severely weakened, their research uncovers a series of adaptable networks that have historically enabled Iran to navigate and overcome various shocks, ensuring its survival through strategic alliances. Iran sought to extend its relationships beyond the axis, enhancing its established ties with China and Russia, while also engaging more with former geopolitical adversaries in the Middle East, including the Gulf Arab countries. This adaptability is enhanced in the evolving global order, where the decline of US hegemony has given rise to a multi-aligned world, marked "by a more fluid and unstable set of relationships," which enables Iran to forge connections not only within the axis and like-minded states and groups, but also with traditional allies of the West. Therefore, one of their major recommendation is engaging with Iran and its axis partners rather than sidelining them.⁸¹

Interestingly, an even more optimistic position is presented by a researcher close to Russian interests. Maybe Iran is still capable of leveraging diplomacy and skillfully exploiting the conflicting interests in the region. What if Iran abandons its traditional role in the region? What if it proposes a 'Maximum Peace' initiative in exchange for Trump's 'Maximum pressure'? What if Khamenei revolts against his own legacy before internal forces can do so and proposes not just negotiations, but peace with Israel itself? Wouldn't this shift the balance, internally, regionally, and globally?⁸²

Is this President Trump's approach to the problem, after Russian President Putin has agreed to assist in communicating with Iran on various issues, including on Tehran's nuclear program and its support for regional anti-US proxies that seek Israel's destruction?⁸³ Trump recently declared that he is even open to meeting Iran's supreme leader Khomeini or president Masoud Pezeshkian as the two countries began talks on Iran's nuclear program, which a US official describes as yielding "very good progress." Trump tells Time magazine, in an April 22 interview "I think we're going to make a deal with Iran."⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Ali-Khan Veena and Cambanis Thanassis, Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance.

⁸¹ Mansour Renad, Al-Shakeri Hayder and Haid Haid, "The shape-shifting 'axis of resistance,'" *Research Paper*, Chatham House, March 6, 2025.

⁸² Issac Lisa, The Crucible: The 'Axis of Resistance' Collapse in War, or Survival Through Peace.

⁸³ "As Trump cozies up to Putin, Russia offers to mediate US-Iran nuclear talks," *Times of Israel*, March 4, 2025.

⁸⁴ "Trump says he's willing to meet with Iran's supreme leader, president amid nuclear talks," *Reuters*, April 25, 2025.

A more realist evaluation is given by Ezekiel Dzulhisham, from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) of Singapore. With its influence now more constrained, he argues, Iran faces difficulties rebuilding the Axis of Resistance in Syria and Lebanon, due to two interrelated reasons. The first is the rise of new leadership in Syria and Lebanon that resists Iranian influence. The second is economic pragmatism, which draws both states towards the wealthy Gulf countries and Turkey, making them bound to anti-Iran interests. Thus, the Axis of Resistance is expected to be more geographically confined to Iraq and Yemen, which host surviving Iraqi PMF militias and the Yemeni Houthis.⁸⁵

Iran's Axis of Resistance no longer functions effectively as a tool for advancing Iran's regional ambitions. Israel's aerial strikes against Iran have significantly degraded Iran's air defense capabilities and challenge severely Iran's strategic posture. In this context, there is growing concern that a weakened and increasingly vulnerable Iran may see no alternative but to weaponize its decades-long nuclear program.⁸⁶

Israel's options and dilemmas

The Israeli establishment and academia are profoundly divided, according to political lines, concerning the causes of the present conflict with Hamas in Gaza, as well as the changes needed in the national security strategy, after more than a year and half of war on seven fronts, and the challenges ahead at this crucial moment. For lack of space, we will present here only the opinions concerning the end of the too long war against Hamas in Gaza, with two papers for each side of the political divide.

Despite the huge intelligence failure to prevent the attack, and the massive human price paid by the people for the military lack of preparation for the massive Hamas terrorist attack in the first 48 hours of the campaign, the year 2024 ended with remarkable military accomplishments by the IDF on all war fronts.

For the researchers at the Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS) at Reichman University, the most important and urgent goal, a moral and national necessity: the return of all 59 hostages, alive or dead, still in the hands of Hamas, even at the price of ending the war through a comprehensive agreement, because the risk to their lives grows with every day that they remain in the Hamas terror tunnels. Moreover, a visionary and all-encompassing political solution must respond to the multidimensional threat posed by Iran.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Dzulhisham Huzeir Ezekiel, "The Future of Iran's Axis of Resistance in Syria and Lebanon," *RSIS Commentary*, The S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), March 3, 2025.

⁸⁶ Mahmoudian Arman, Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' Weakened But Still Dangerous.

⁸⁷ Har Zvi Shay (ed.) *A Strategic Outlook for Israel 2025*, Institute for Policy and Strategy (IPS),

Israel is facing a historical opportunity, due to the IDF achievements combined with President Trump's return to the White House, to improve the state security and political reality, while substantially weakening the Iranian threat. Normalization may be established with Saudi Arabia, and the strategic axis with the Arab states, led by the United States, strengthened, on condition that ending the war offers a reformed Palestinian Authority political prospects in Gaza.

As the Trump administration has already begun negotiations with Iran on the nuclear program, Israel must insist on being part of the and must demand, as a red line, that Iran cease all uranium enriching activities beyond 5% for an unlimited period and enable tight oversight by the IAEA, including unlimited impromptu checks.⁸⁸

The INSS's researcher Udi Dekel considers that Israel did not achieve its primary war objectives against Hamas, the complete dismantling of its military and governmental capabilities. Despite suffering significant losses that outweigh its achievements, Hamas has managed to survive. Therefore, at this stage, Israel should focus on two key efforts: finalizing the framework for the return of the hostages, an imperative rooted in Jewish tradition and its moral significance in Israeli society; and leveraging the notion of expelling Gaza's residents, as proposed by US President Donald Trump, to encourage the involvement of Arab states in stabilizing and reconstructing the Gaza Strip while ensuring that Hamas does not regain control.⁸⁹ Indeed, the best option to advance the war's objectives at a relatively low cost, according to Hayman, is an agreement to discuss the Arab proposal for the reconstruction and stabilization of the Strip and the establishment of an alternative governing authority. The occupation of the Gaza Strip and the imposition of a military administration; or a siege on the Strip, in which Hamas is weakened and deterred, are not productive⁹⁰

By contrast, Hillel Frisch, from The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), argues that moving on to the final stage of the hostage agreement will validate the path of jihad among Palestinians and the wider Muslim world, replenish Hamas's leadership structure, and impose significant long-term military and economic costs on Israel. To mitigate this heavy price, Israel must leverage the assets at its disposal: control over the supply of aid to Gaza; the capability to use significant military force against Hamas; the

Reichman University, January 2025.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Dekel Udi, "The Long-Awaited Victory Over Hamas Was Not Achieved—What Now?" *INSS Insight* No. 1950, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) – Tel Aviv University, February 20, 2025.

⁹⁰ Hayman Tamir, "Three Strategic Paths to Achieve the Objectives of the War—One Is Preferable," *INSS Insight* No. 1972, Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) – Tel Aviv University, April 6, 2025.

ability to prevent the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Gaza; and the backing provided by U.S. President Donald Trump for Israeli measures designed to exert pressure on Hamas regarding the release of hostages.⁹¹

Yaakov Lappin, from The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, argues that Hamas's primary goal at this time is to secure a ceasefire to survive the war, rebuild its terror army and cement its political control of the Gaza Strip. To accomplish this, it has signaled its willingness to create a governance model in Gaza like Hezbollah's pre-war control of Lebanon: an internationally recognized government providing a façade of authority, while Hamas retains full military-terrorist control on the ground and de facto political power. This would allow the jihadist organization to regroup, rearm, and ultimately restart its war against Israel at a time of its choosing. All proposals that have been floated in the region, by Egypt or in Israel, of a Gaza ruled by a regional coalition would result in this dangerous Lebanon-like situation. Therefore, Israel must not allow this to happen, even if Egypt pushes for it.⁹²

Israel is faced at this moment with major strategic dilemmas, first and foremost how to liberate its hostages in Hamas's hands and achieve a clear victory against the organization. Is this possible without accepting a permanent cease-fire, which means the end of the war? Will it accept a Palestinian partner in the future solution of the Gaza conundrum, without Hamas, as proposed by the Gulf states and Egypt? Here the dilemma is mainly political, as the government under PM Benjamin Netanyahu is guided by its attempt to survive a coalition with radical right-wing parties, which didn't even accept its responsibility for the catastrophe of 7.10. 2024.

On the larger strategic level, Israel will be challenged by Hezbollah's attempt to return to its previous stronghold position in Lebanon, despite the positive internal political changes because of the war. In Syria there is a new regime, whose jihadist roots did not yet disappear, and where Turkey's neo-Ottoman President Erdogan tries to replace Iran and challenge Israel. Finally, but most importantly, it must try to coordinate with the unpredictable President Trump the necessary dismantling of Iran's nuclear project.

⁹¹ Frisch, Hillel, The Heavy Price of a Hostage Deal 'At All Costs', *JISS Policy Paper*, The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), March 24, 2025.

⁹² Lappin Yaakov, "Hamas's Plan to Turn Gaza Into Another Lebanon," *BESA Perspectives Paper* No. 2,336, The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies March 13, 2025.

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