

## **Iran, Israel and the Axis of Resistance after October 7<sup>th</sup>**

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In the year since the events of October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023, the conflict between Iran and Israel has escalated from the shadow war of the past decade to an increasingly direct conflict that increases the risk of a wider regional conflagration. It has also brought Iran's interests in the Levant into sharp focus. The broader Levant region is where some important Iranian security concerns have historically been shaped and have continued to be re-shaped by wider shifts in the geopolitics of the Middle East. Since the Syrian civil war starting in 2011, where Iran undertook its most significant military intervention since the Iran-Iraq war, the Islamic Republic has sought to shore up its Syrian ally and enhance its presence in a part of the Middle East seen as vital to its own national security. The strategic value of this presence, which has long been a thorn in Israel's side, has gained further importance in the light of the increasingly 'hot' conflict between Iran and Israel. This brief note will explore the crucial role played by Iran and its allies in the Axis of Resistance in regional geopolitics in recent years, with a particular focus on the role of Israel in Iran's regional calculations.

### **Iran and the Axis of Resistance in the Levant: security and deterrence**

The Levant is an area of the Middle East where the axis was conceived, and where it continues to hone its strategy as a mix of strategic alliance, security community, and ideational network. The intersecting security concerns of key actors Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, born initially of their need for deterrence against Israel but which have since expanded into other areas of cooperation, are closely aligned with Tehran's own conception of how the region should look. Iran's conceptualisation of the Axis of Resistance is one of a networked group with strong ideational ties and common security concerns among its various actors.

Iran's activities in this region are also important in terms of illustrating its broader aims regarding its desire to counter US hegemony in global (and regional) affairs. It is within this theatre that Tehran has advanced its relations with Russia, with both states sharing a common aim in terms of countering Western (primarily US) power in the region and beyond. Indeed, this is manifested in the common cause that helps shape relations with other counter-hegemonic forces desiring a more multipolar global politics, hence the links developed with the 'pink tide' governments in Latin America, or with Russia and China.

Iran's broader military strategy is conceptualised by Tehran in largely defensive terms, particularly vis-a-vis the aims and interests of the United States and its allies in the region. The Islamic Republic has an acute focus on ensuring its survival, maintaining its national territorial integrity, seeking to forge a regional security structure in support of these objectives. To this end, its activities in the Levant involving its allies are a form of 'forward defence' aiming to sustain Iran's strategic depth in the region through countering its foes away from its borders.

### **The Israeli factor**

Israel is seen as the greatest regional threat to Iran and is widely believed to be responsible for a number of attacks against critical infrastructure, nuclear sites, and assassinations of Iranian citizens involved in its nuclear programme. For Israel, the advancement of Iranian

interests in its northern neighbours has long been seen as a significant threat to its own national security, given its long-standing enmity with Iran and the Axis of Resistance and the alliance's enduring support for the Palestinian cause. The eruption of the 2023 conflict in Gaza invited further scrutiny on Iran's ties with Hamas and the wider axis. For the Islamic Republic, the emphasis in the immediate aftermath of al-Aqsa Flood was on giving the green light for other members of the axis to take action, while not undertaking the sort of direct attacks that could lead to a major regional conflagration. This all changed with the increasingly brazen Israeli strikes against Iranian and allied axis targets after October 7<sup>th</sup>, leading us to the current escalatory cycle following Iran's recent response to the assassinations of Haniyeh, Nasrallah and key Iranian commanders in the region.

If the regional picture remains uncertain then one area provides us with much more clarity, and that concerns Israel. With its reputation arguably at its lowest ever point, and held hostage to one of the most extreme governments in its history, Tel Aviv's continued acts of foreign adventurism are far from a display of strength. Though they may offer short term tactical success, such moves only acts as a distraction from the ongoing genocide and its ever-increasing isolation internationally. The West's unequivocal support of its reckless actions has only further fast-tacked its decent to rogue nation status.

### **Where next?**

For Iran, maintaining deterrence against Israel, and broader global forces that threaten its own national security and those of its allies, and the enhancing of its strategic depth in the region remain key concerns. Of note has been Tehran's efforts to assert a perceived moral high ground in emphasising diplomatic channels and efforts to link de-escalation to a viable ceasefire deal in Gaza. Here, we have seen appeals within UN fora, and warming ties with regional leaders as key tools used to assert Iran's position as a key regional, and global actor in this conflict. Iranian diplomatic manoeuvring within the region has been highly prominent since its October 1<sup>st</sup> missiles strikes against Israel. These efforts appear, at present, to have made some inroads in forcing the US to prevent Israeli retaliation against oil and nuclear facilities in Iran, and may have helped de-escalation, though we remain at a critical juncture.

Despite a new, ostensibly more open administration coming to power with the election of Pezeshkian, Iran will continue to double down on its support for its allies in the axis, as they remain vital to its own security. However, the new administration in Tehran does offer an opportunity for Western powers in terms of finding more open interlocutors in the exploration of possible avenues for de-escalation. Of course, the Pezeshkian team's room for manoeuvre in critical national security matters is limited, but the diplomatic openings that are being tentatively alluded to, such as a renewed push for a nuclear deal, should be taken seriously - something especially prescient in light of shifting Iranian debates on nuclear deterrence. Progress in such areas is often touted as a window to consultation on other issues, and although a 'grand bargain' is perhaps fanciful, one should not rule out the possibility of linking progress on issues such as the nuclear programme with broader de-escalation of tensions in the region. Western powers need to fully grasp the opportunities that such a de-escalation can provide. Standing firm against Israeli pressure to torpedo any tentative understanding with the Islamic Republic will show that the foreign policy of key European nations has some semblance of balance and which may, for once, actually do some good in the region.