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# Reinforcing the Resistance: Iran and the Levant in a Multipolar Middle East

Edward Wastnidge

Dr. Wastnidge is senior lecturer in politics and international studies at the Open University and deputy director of the Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation project (SEPAD) at Lancaster University.

## Correspondence

Edward Wastnidge  
[edward.wastnidge@open.ac.uk](mailto:edward.wastnidge@open.ac.uk)

## Abstract

Hamas's al-Aqsa Flood operation, Israel's brutal response, and the regional escalation of the conflict, including Iran's and Israel's unprecedented strikes on each other's territory, mark a critical juncture for the Middle East. These events have brought a renewed focus on the Levant as a key area of Iranian geopolitical interest and rivalry with Israel. Syria and the broader subregion are viewed by Tehran as vital for its national security and that of its alliance network, the Axis of Resistance, and for the survival of the regime. This article explores Iran's policy toward the Levant, focusing on Syria as the crucible of Iran's engagement with the region over the last decade. The study highlights how Iran's approach is defined by its continued desire to maintain its projection of strategic depth, thus ensuring its own security and that of the Axis of Resistance. Israel looms large over this calculus as the Islamic Republic looks to strengthen its allies' positions against its enduring rival.

Israel's April 2024 airstrikes on an Iranian diplomatic site in Damascus, followed by both states' first direct strikes on one another in response, marked a serious escalation in the shadow war between the Islamic Republic and its longstanding regional foe. This ratcheting up of tensions, on top of previous targeting of Iranian military figures in Syria and allies in Lebanon, has brought a renewed focus on the Levant as a subregion of Iranian geopolitical interest. This subregion,

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though separate from Iran's territorial borders, is where a number of Tehran's chief security concerns have historically been shaped and have continued to be reshaped. Since the Syrian civil war starting in 2011, when Iran undertook its most significant military intervention since armed conflict with Iraq in the 1980s, the Islamic Republic has sought to shore up its ally in Damascus and enhance its presence in an area it sees as vital to its national security. The strategic value of these moves has gained importance in the light of an increasingly hot conflict between Iran and Israel. This article explores Iran's policy toward the Levant given the wider shifts in the region's contested geopolitics. It focuses on Syria as the crucible of Iran's engagement with the subregion over the last decade, demonstrating that its approach is driven by a desire to maintain its projection of strategic depth, thus ensuring its security and that of its alliance network, the Axis of Resistance.

The Islamic Republic has complex, overlapping security concerns in relation to Syria that entail important geostrategic issues, such as deterring Israel and advancing its own economic and military interests. Iran's backing of Bashar al-Assad's government and its resulting military presence have led Israel to regularly strike targets within Syria as it seeks to prevent Iran from strengthening its position. Syria has also provided a theater for Iran's Lebanese ally, Hezbollah, to establish itself as a regional power in its own right. And the country has served as an arena in which Tehran and its allies have deepened their ties with Russia, thus reinforcing the perception of the Axis of Resistance as a counter-hegemonic bulwark against the West and its partners.

Israel looms large over this strategic calculus as Iran looks to strengthen the axis's position against its nuclear-armed rival and challenge US dominance. The potential opening up of a northern front remains a concern for Israel and its Western backers. The reciprocal strikes carried out by Iran and Israel against military targets in April 2024, the first direct exchanges between the two states, have arguably shifted the calculus. This is particularly true for Iran, where the policy of strategic patience that it had exercised toward Israel, even when facing targeted killings and strikes against its interests in Syria and the wider region, has now been replaced by a commitment to directly respond to such attacks.

The analysis begins by outlining some of the drivers of Iran's foreign and security policy toward the Levant during the last decade. Because of the subregion's importance to the Islamic Republic's security and the military dimensions of its involvement there, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has arguably been the most prominent actor, with presidential administrations playing a supporting role in diplomacy and public comment. Syria takes center stage as the focal point of Iran's involvement, as this is where Iran has been most involved militarily and where we see Tehran's interests coinciding with those of Moscow, with both desiring a more multipolar regional and global politics. The succeeding sections go on to examine Iran's military, diplomatic, and economic engagement in Syria, with a final section exploring the potential for additional Iran-Israel clashes in Syria and beyond, as tensions continue to rise in light of continuing regional instability. This is seen most acutely in the events that unfolded following the explosive reignition of the Israel-Hamas conflict in October 2023.

## IRAN AND THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE IN THE LEVANT

Iran has gradually increased its military engagement in the Levant since the 1980s, starting initially with its role in the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon, then ramping up over the last decade as Tehran looked to shore up its Syrian, Lebanese, and Palestinian allies, and thus deter Israel. The Axis of Resistance was essentially conceived in this area of the Middle East, where it continues

to hone its strategy as a mix of strategic alliance, security community, and ideational network.<sup>1</sup> This alliance provides additional depth and purpose to Iranian policy in the subregion, aimed at checking the ambitions of its rivals. It also allows Iran and its members, including Hezbollah and Hamas, to cultivate geopolitically expedient relationships with other anti-Western states, as seen in their ever-increasing ties with Russia.<sup>2</sup>

Iran's relations with Lebanon are a vital element of maintaining the axis's position in regional politics, and its ties to Hezbollah are of critical importance not just to its own security but that of the region as a whole. Hezbollah's support for Assad has allowed it to demonstrate that it is not just a (if not *the*) main player in Lebanon but also what Saad labels a "regional subpower."<sup>3</sup> Hezbollah's battlefield experience, enhanced through this involvement in the Syrian conflict, provides the axis with a vanguard force capable of further sustaining its deterrence of Israel. It has also begun to assume a broader role, with Iran and its allies drawing on its expertise in a number of advisory missions across the region. This sense of interoperability and linkage across multiple arenas has transformed a group previously seen as an Iranian protégé into one that some argue is the backbone of a wider armed body.<sup>4</sup>

The intersecting security concerns of Iran, Hezbollah, and Syria, born initially of resistance against Israel but now expanded into other areas of cooperation, are closely aligned with Tehran's conception of how the region should look. This is not to suggest that this is merely a proxy-client relationship. Hezbollah has its own security concerns and interests and is afforded considerable agency within the partnership, often helping to steer axis relationships, such as with the wider Arab world or Latin America.<sup>5</sup> This provides Tehran with a normative justification for its sustained engagement with the subregion's fractious international relations and its continued reinforcing of the Axis of Resistance.

Initially pitched as purely advisory, Iran's actions in Syria grew more overt as the civil war intensified, incorporating and showcasing a range of actors and abilities, including conventional armed forces, the IRGC's elite Quds Force, ballistic-missile assets, and so-called volunteer forces drawn from Shi'i communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and across the Middle East. The Islamic Republic also coordinated closely with Hezbollah, whose forces gained critical battlefield experience. For Iran, Syria was a vital cog in the Axis of Resistance, and Tehran's justification for its involvement, and that of allies including Russia, was couched as a fight against "takfiri" extremists, thus constituting a vital front as part of its very own war on terror.<sup>6</sup> Iran's activities also illustrated its broader aims of countering US hegemony in regional and global affairs, a goal it shares with Russia. This common cause has helped Tehran shape relations with Moscow and other counter-hegemonic

<sup>1</sup> Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon, "The resistance axis and regional order in the Middle East: nomos, space, and normative alternatives," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (early view, 2023), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Julien Barnes-Dacey, "Russia and the 'resistance axis,'" in *Russia's Return to the Middle East: Building Sandcastles?* ed. Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2018), 65–72.

<sup>3</sup> Amal Saad, "Challenging the sponsor-proxy model: the Iran–Hizbullah relationship," *Global Discourse* 9, no. 4 (2019): 627–650.

<sup>4</sup> Hussein Kalout, "The Irreplaceable Piece: Lebanon's Strategic Value in the Saudi-Iranian Foreign Policy Chessboard," in *Saudi Arabia and Iran: the struggle to shape the Middle East*, ed. Edward Wastnidge and Simon Mabon (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), 118–140.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*; William Costanza, "Hizballah and Its Mission in Latin America," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35, no. 3 (2012): 193–210.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Wastnidge, "Iran's Own 'War on Terror,'" in *Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's First Term (2013–2017)*, ed. L. Zaccara (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 107–129.

forces desiring a more multipolar global politics, such as China and “pink tide” governments in Latin America.<sup>7</sup>

Syria and the broader Levant are therefore where the Islamic Republic’s core domestic security concerns intersect with complex geopolitics, influencing how it ensures regime survival. Its long-standing alliance with Syria, for decades its only Arab state ally, is based on a common strategic outlook, with both viewing Israel as an existential threat. This desire to deter Israel, along with deep historical and cultural links, has driven Iran’s involvement in Lebanon and support for the Palestinian cause, though the latter also has an enduring place in the ideational aspects of the regime’s policy to protect Muslim communities around the globe.<sup>8</sup> This subregion is therefore the key space where Iran and the axis’s “unity of arenas” concept is formalized through strategic coordination.<sup>9</sup>

## Iranian National Security and Defense

Despite the fact that this subregion does not border Iran, the Islamic Republic’s interests in the Levant mostly concern deterrence. Indeed, Tehran conceptualizes the alliance with Syria as mostly defensive, particularly against the aims and interests of the United States and its partners, and scholars share this view.<sup>10</sup> The Islamic Republic has an acute focus on ensuring its survival, maintaining its national territorial integrity, and—of particular importance for the Levant—seeking to forge a regional-security structure in support of these objectives.<sup>11</sup> Until its intervention in Syria, Iran’s posture was primarily based on “counter-containment” against US-led efforts. After 2011, however, Iran needed to adapt to the changing geopolitical environment and therefore moved toward preserving its regional position. This was enhanced by its role in the Syrian conflict and in its containing of the emerging threat from Saudi Arabia’s “anti-order” policies in the subregion.<sup>12</sup> The Axis of Resistance was key to this approach. Iran saw the alliance as a network based on strong ideational ties and common security concerns. This in turn has corollaries for the ways in which an increasingly multipolar world order impacts the Middle East, as well as whether the United States will pull back from the region.<sup>13</sup> The often-shared global outlook of key actors in the axis helps its members’ diplomacy with anti-Western governments, including global powers like Russia.

<sup>7</sup> Wastnidge and Mabon, “Resistance axis,” 8.

<sup>8</sup> For an in-depth exploration of Iran-Lebanon ties throughout history, see *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500 Years*, ed. Houchang E. Chehabi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of the “unity of arenas” concept as the most current articulation of Tehran’s forward defense, see Amir Hossein Vazirian, “Iran’s unification of the arenas campaign against Israel: Foundations and prospects,” Middle East Institute, September 26, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-unification-arenas-campaign-against-israel-foundations-and-prospects>.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2016, updated 2020); Jubin M. Goodarzi, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic Alliance and Power Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009); and Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a Penetrated Regional System* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> Amin Saikal and David Vestenskov, “Iran’s National Security and Operational Capability,” *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 3, no. 1 (2020): 21.

<sup>12</sup> Hassan Ahmadian, “Iran and the New Geopolitics of the Middle East: In Search of Equilibrium,” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 23, no. 3 (2021): 467.

<sup>13</sup> Wastnidge and Mabon, “Resistance axis,” 7.

A central element of Iran's strategy is a form of forward defense to keep threats away from its borders. Ahmadian and Mohseni note how presence in Syria gives Tehran a "vital strategic depth in the Arab world, allowing it manoeuvrability throughout the Levant, and provides it with a gateway to Hezbollah, enhancing Iranian deterrence of Israel."<sup>14</sup> Such a posture also allows Iran to compensate for disparities in defense spending with rival regional powers and close Western partners like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>15</sup> Iran's IRGC and especially its elite Quds Force have been arguably the most important actors in Iranian strategy toward the Levant. As with much of Iranian policy on Iraq and Syria during the last two decades, the president and his executive team were not the drivers when it came to this critical area.<sup>16</sup> As we will see, some tensions did come to the surface, typified by Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's frustration at being sidelined in affairs relating to "the field," particularly Syria.

Iran has developed a concept of "mosaic defense," a mode of hybrid warfare, to help shape its role in the subregion.<sup>17</sup> This involves decentralizing command and avoiding symmetrical combat, forcing invaders to fight multiple and continual layers of resistance.<sup>18</sup> Tehran draws on the IRGC, the conventional army, and its large Basij volunteer networks to facilitate a multifaceted counterfoil to the advanced weaponry and conventional military might of the United States and its allies. But given its comparatively disadvantageous economic position, under punitive sanctions for much of its existence, the Islamic Republic backs a number of local groups in the Levant instead of stretching its own conventional forces.<sup>19</sup> Thus, one of the main tools for this asymmetrical approach involves Iran's deploying a range of allies as part of the Axis of Resistance for its forward defense.<sup>20</sup> Tehran has employed this mix of forces elsewhere, such as Iraq, where it cultivated local groups in taking the fight to common security threats such as ISIS.<sup>21</sup> The countering of extremist threats has also been a key feature of Iran-Russia relations, often being cited as a shared mission among policy makers in Moscow and Tehran.<sup>22</sup>

## Reinforcing the Resistance

A further element of Iran's ensuring its strategic depth across the Levant can be seen in its efforts to create a secure land route to the Mediterranean Sea. Such a "land bridge"—stretching from Iran across Iraq and Syria, and including Lebanon—has helped sharpen the geographical focus

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<sup>14</sup> Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, "Iran's Syria strategy: the evolution of deterrence," *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 343.

<sup>15</sup> Vali Nasr, "Iran Among the Ruins: Tehran's Advantage in a Turbulent Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (2018): 110.

<sup>16</sup> Wastnidge, "Iran's Own 'War on Terror,'" 121.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed analysis of the concept of "mosaic defense" and how this plays out in Syria and the region more broadly, see Marcin Adrzej Piotrowski, "'Mosaic Defence': Iran's Hybrid Warfare in Syria 2011–2016," *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs* 3 (2017): 18–67.

<sup>18</sup> Saikal and Vestenkov, *Iran's National Security*, 22.

<sup>19</sup> Banafsheh Keynoush, "Iran's Regional Dynamics: A Piecemeal Approach," *Middle East Policy* 27, no. 2 (2020): 100.

<sup>20</sup> Vazirian, "Iran's unification of the arenas campaign."

<sup>21</sup> Wastnidge, "Iran's Own 'War on Terror,'" 115–120.

<sup>22</sup> Sergey Demidenko and Rasoul Mousavi, "Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Struggling Terrorism and Religious Extremism," in *Russia-Iran Partnership: An Overview and Prospects for the Future*, ed. I. Ivanov (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council and Institute for Iran-Eurasia Studies, 2016), <http://russiancouncil.ru/en/activity/publications/russia-iran-partnership-an-overview-andprospects-for-the-fu>.



of Tehran's involvement in the subregion, especially in the border area between Syria and Iraq. There, the aim is not just to deter Israel and other rivals but to further Iranian economic interests and reinforce its allies' supply lines, with a now-friendly Iraq realized as a major strategic prize. Despite repeated Israeli and US efforts to disrupt this vital corridor, Iran and the axis were able to secure the critical Abu Kamal-al Qaem crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border following their defeat of ISIS forces in the area.<sup>23</sup> Though some scholars point to the logistical complexities of sustaining this land bridge, especially along remote parts of eastern Syria and western Iraq, Iran and its allies have secured the border crossing and made use of several different pathways across Iraq to sustain its operation.<sup>24</sup>

Iran's efforts at confronting threats to the axis have been an important feature of its response to the changing geopolitical environment in the Middle East since 2011.<sup>25</sup> Its harnessing of an anti-extremism narrative gives it domestic justification for continued involvement in Syria and the Levant. This has also bolstered the cultural diplomacy of Tehran and its allies within the axis, as well as broader soft-power efforts such as reconstruction in Syria.<sup>26</sup> Here, one can observe a repurposing of the resistance ideology to encompass not only the historically defined struggle against Israel (and by extension the United States), but also against groups like ISIS, as well as cooperation with allies on economic and infrastructure projects.<sup>27</sup> The very idea of the Axis of Resistance and its role in regional calculations was thus broadened following the Arab uprisings of the 2010s, though with the events of October 2023 and their aftermath, Israel is once again the chief focus.

Despite this seeming position of strength, the coming to power of President Donald Trump in 2017 brought significant challenges for Iran, and may do so again if he were to return in 2025. Trump's "maximum pressure" policy sought to cripple Iran financially and emboldened rival states in their efforts to roll back Tehran's influence in the Levant. Despite a softening of the rhetoric and hopes for a revival of the UN-backed nuclear deal, Trump's successor continued the hard line. The Biden administration ratcheted up sanctions on key figures, though it also maintained backchannel contacts over the nuclear issue and the Gaza conflict, and it turned something of a blind eye to Iranian oil exports. A second Trump presidency may result in a further doubling down on sanctions and additional support for challengers to the Islamic Republic, with the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025 blueprint seeking a new direction in US foreign policy.<sup>28</sup>

As discussed in further detail below, Israel continued airstrikes against Iranian and allied targets in Syria and Lebanon throughout the Trump and Biden presidencies. At the same time, Saudi Arabia, guided by the assertive nationalism of Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince and de facto leader, sought to further shape the narrative of pernicious Iranian influence in the wider

<sup>23</sup> Elijah J. Magnier, "The Axis of Resistance's road from Tehran to Beirut is open and secure," *The Cradle*, August 21, 2021, <https://thecradle.co/Article/Investigations/993>.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Juneau, "Iran's costly intervention in Syria: A pyrrhic victory," *Mediterranean Politics* 25, no. 1 (2020): 33; Keynoush, "Iran's Regional Dynamics"; Magnier, "Axis of Resistance's road."

<sup>25</sup> Ahmadian, "Iran and the New Geopolitics," 467.

<sup>26</sup> Edward Wastnidge, "Iran's Shia Diplomacy: Religious Identity and Foreign Policy in the Islamic Republic," *Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power Policy Brief No. 3* (Washington: Brookings Institution/Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace & World Affairs, 2020).

<sup>27</sup> See Mohamed Sweidan, "Railway of Resistance: A grand project to connect Iran, Iraq, Syria," *The Cradle*, May 19, 2023, <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/377>.

<sup>28</sup> See Project 2025's "Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise," <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24088042-project-2025s-mandate-for-leadership-the-conservative-promise>.

region—though this was toned down after the two states' rapprochement in 2023.<sup>29</sup> Iran's views on the malign intent of the United States under Trump were confirmed when the main architect of its regional strategy, Quds Force leader Qasem Soleimani, was assassinated by an American drone strike at Baghdad International Airport in January 2020. Despite Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's assertion that the killing would not alter Iran's regional strategy, it remains a huge loss given his unparalleled knowledge and experience.<sup>30</sup> The resort to an extrajudicial strike also reaffirmed the continued US misreading of regional dynamics, as panicked leaders in several regional states anticipated Iran's response with trepidation.

## THE SYRIAN CRUCIBLE

Iran-Syria ties have historically centered on a form of "forward deterrence" or defense to help ensure security in a critical region, particularly in relation to Israel and the West, and against substate groups like ISIS and elements of the Syrian opposition.<sup>31</sup> The main developments in the relationship since Iran's intervention have involved Iran's securing its position in Syria through military, diplomatic, and economic means. Though precise figures are difficult to attain, Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, a member of Iran's parliament, has estimated his country's expenditure in Syria to be between \$20 and \$30 billion.<sup>32</sup> Syria has also been a vital space for Israel to challenge Iran's entrenchment in the region, as the Islamic Republic seeks to enhance its deterrence capabilities and maintain its position as a regional power. The Moscow-Tehran relationship has been further strengthened by cooperation in support of Assad, drawing on shared concerns around combating mutual threats and advancing shared strategic objectives in countering Western interests.<sup>33</sup>

### Iranian Military Strategies

The Islamic Republic's military involvement has supported and facilitated groups that have played a key role in keeping Assad in power. This includes continued backing of the Syrian National Defense Forces, a paramilitary organization modeled on Iran's Basij.<sup>34</sup> The Islamic Republic has also been able to draw upon its position as a global Shi'i metropole to establish and coordinate

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<sup>29</sup> See Simon Mabon, "Muting the Trumpets of Sabotage: Saudi Arabia, the US and the Quest to Securitize Iran," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 45, no. 5 (2018): 742–759; and May Darwich, "The View from Riyadh: A Neoclassical Realist Perspective of Saudi Foreign Policy toward Iran in the Post-2011 Middle East," in Wastnidge and Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran*, 14–32.

<sup>30</sup> For the text of Seyyed Ali Khamenei's decree appointing Ismael Qaani as new head of the Quds Force, see "The Quds Force strategy will be the same as during the Martyr General Soleimani," January 3, 2020, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/7271/The-Quds-Force-strategy-will-be-the-same-as-during-the-Martyr>.

<sup>31</sup> Ahmadian and Mohseni, "Iran's Syria strategy," 345.

<sup>32</sup> Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Revolutionary Guards Commander Gives Rare Estimate Of Money Iran Spent On Proxies, Military Aid In Region," September 30, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-commander-rare-estimate-money-spent-proxies-military-aid-region/30866922.html>.

<sup>33</sup> See Sergey Demidenko and Rasoul Mousavi, "Cooperation between Iran and Russia in Struggling Terrorism and Religious Extremism," in Ivanov, *Russia-Iran Partnership*.

<sup>34</sup> Wastnidge, "Iran's Own 'War on Terror,'" 112.



brigades such as the Fatemiyoun, made up largely of Afghans, and the Zeynabiyoun, which consists of fighters from Pakistan. Initially characterized as volunteers helping to defend important Shi'i shrines like Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus, these forces, along with Hezbollah, have been involved in major military battles across Syria.<sup>35</sup> In addition, Iran has deployed conventional military force, as seen with the IRGC's firing of ballistic missiles against ISIS targets in eastern Syria in July 2017. These strikes were a response to terrorist attacks on the Iranian parliament and Khomeini mausoleum in Tehran, which left 18 people dead.

A turning point for Tehran in the Syrian conflict came with ISIS's defeat in the country, which Soleimani announced in a November 2017 letter to Khamenei.<sup>36</sup> The Quds Force commander emphasized the human suffering caused by the terror group and lauded the critical role of Ayatollah Ali Sistani in helping to mobilize the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) of Iraq, and that of Hezbollah's secretary general, Hassan Nasrallah. He also praised the "thousands of Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese, Afghan and Pakistani martyred and disabled defenders of the holy shrine—who gave their lives to defend the lives and honour of Muslims and their sanctities," demonstrating the transnational nature of Iran's Syrian intervention. While ISIS's fate "confirmed the effectiveness of forward defence in Tehran's eyes," Iran was still vulnerable to attacks within its own borders, as seen in a September 2018 attack on an IRGC military parade in the south-western city of Ahvaz.<sup>37</sup> Iran responded by once again launching ballistic missiles against targets in eastern Syria, where remnants of ISIS were still present, and it supplemented the attack with drone strikes.<sup>38</sup>

Much effort has been expended by Iran and its allies in Syria to secure border posts with Iraq in Deir Ezzor province, vital for the land bridge connecting Iran with the Mediterranean. The military effort in clearing out ISIS remnants required careful balancing given the residual presence of US troops in the surrounding region and of the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Iran helped to coordinate a wide range of forces to support the Syrian government's retaking the border town of Abu Kamal in 2017 and into 2018. This involved fighters from the IRGC, the Syrian forces, the Fatemiyoun and Zeynabiyoun brigades, Lebanon's Hezbollah, and allied factions from Iraq's PMF.<sup>39</sup> As a result, the border post between Iraq and Syria was reopened in September 2019, and Iran has sought to maintain its presence in the subregion.<sup>40</sup>

Gaining control of strategic transit points in eastern Syria and western Iraq helps Iran realize its ambitions to secure a corridor through the heart of the Levant. This forms a key component of its strategic-depth projection and enhances its deterrence capabilities against Israel and other hostile

<sup>35</sup> For further detail on the makeup of such groups and casualty figures from their involvement in Syria, see Ali Alfoneh, "Tehran's Shia Foreign Legions," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 30, 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/30/tehran-s-shia-foreign-legions-pub-75387>.

<sup>36</sup> Khamenei.ir, "Gen. Soleimani congratulates Ayatollah Khamenei and Muslims on ISIS termination," November 21, 2017, <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/5283/Gen-Soleimani-congratulates-Ayatollah-Khamenei-and-Muslims-on>.

<sup>37</sup> Nasr, "Iran Among the Ruins," 110. The attack in Ahvaz was claimed by both ISIS and an Arab Ahvazi separatist group.

<sup>38</sup> For an account of the military hardware used in the strikes, see Farzin Nadimi, "For a Second Time, Iran Fires Missiles at IS Targets in Syria," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Analysis/PolicyWatch 3022, October 1, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/second-time-iran-fires-missiles-targets-syria>.

<sup>39</sup> For further details on how the situation developed on the ground in Deir Ezzor between 2017 and 2021, see Navvar Saban, "Iranian presence in Syria's Deir ez-Zor province," Atlantic Council, May 18, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-presence-in-syrias-deir-ez-zor-province>.

<sup>40</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iraq reopens Al Qaim border crossing with Syria," September 20, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/30/iraq-reopens-al-qaim-border-crossing-with-syria>.

powers. To this end, Iranian operatives have also been active in southern Syria, as Tehran seeks to maintain an active presence near Israel, particularly around the occupied Golan Heights, where tensions have ratcheted up since October 7, 2023.<sup>41</sup> This presence has long caused significant anxiety in Tel Aviv, with Syria becoming a site of regular Israeli strikes against Iranian targets.

## Diplomacy

In addition to its active military engagement, Iran has also sought to carve out a significant diplomatic role in Syria, reflecting its position as one of the major powers involved in the conflict. The focus has been on ensuring that the “Astana process” negotiations involving Iran, Russia, and Turkey remain the most important diplomatic apparatus among the external powers involved in Syria. As of mid-2024, the process has brought together leaders and high-ranking officials of the three states on 21 occasions since 2017. It has largely sidelined the UN-affiliated talks, focusing on ceasefires and de-escalation instead of a final political settlement. Astana also acts as a tool for ensuring that the gains and security concerns of Ankara, Moscow, and Tehran are reflected in any lasting post-conflict settlement. According to Aboud, curbing the UN-backed negotiations represents a victory for a new form of “post-liberal” peacemaking, as the Astana process has consolidated the battlefield successes of Russia and Iran.<sup>42</sup> In addition, ties between Moscow and Tehran have been strengthened by their deepening cooperation over Syria. This relationship, forged in the military field, has been shaped by their perceptions of threats such as ISIS and its offshoot ISIS-K, which further increased security coordination.<sup>43</sup>

Some of the more substantive achievements of the Astana process have been the establishment of de-escalation zones and ceasefire agreements where fighting had been the most intense—such as around Idlib, in which the majority of the remaining Syrian opposition forces are now based—and Turkey’s efforts to achieve a buffer/safe zone across its border with Syria. For Iran, the talks have demonstrated its central role in the conflict and its resolution, which is important given Tehran’s exclusion from the Geneva negotiations. And it leaves Western powers out of the equation, thus conforming to Iran’s wider priorities. This forms part of a careful balancing act Iran is attempting in post-ISIS Syria, seeking to balance against stakeholders such as Turkey, Israel, and the United States.<sup>44</sup> However, the American position on Syria continues to cause concern in Tehran. After initially seeking to protect US interests in Syria and counter Iranian and Russian moves in the region, Trump proclaimed a pullout in late 2018, but concerns over a potential vacuum led the Pentagon to maintain to a small core of troops in the country’s east. These forces continued to shore up the SDF and maintain control over oil fields, Trump’s central concern.<sup>45</sup> The continued American presence in eastern Syria has caused headaches for

<sup>41</sup> Armenak Tokmajyan, “A Flashpoint Looms in Southern Syria,” Diwan, March 26, 2024, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/92053>.

<sup>42</sup> Samer Aboud, “Making peace to sustain war: the Astana Process and Syria’s illiberal peace,” *Peacebuilding* 9, no. 3 (2021).

<sup>43</sup> Abdolrasool Divsallar, “The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence,” *The International Spectator* 54, no. 3 (2019): 115.

<sup>44</sup> Ahmadian, “Iran and the New Geopolitics,” 464.

<sup>45</sup> *The Washington Post*, “‘I like oil, we’re keeping the oil’: Trump on American forces in Syria,” November 1, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/i-like-oil-were-keeping-the-oil-trump-on-american-forces-in-syria/2019/11/01/772f0047-91ee-42de-af63-172c3fe6fb05\\_video.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/video/politics/i-like-oil-were-keeping-the-oil-trump-on-american-forces-in-syria/2019/11/01/772f0047-91ee-42de-af63-172c3fe6fb05_video.html).

the Biden administration, with US interests regularly targeted by Iranian allies in response to Washington's unwavering support for Israel during the Gaza war.<sup>46</sup>

It is in the diplomatic field that Iran's political representatives have played a more visible role in relation to Syria, with presidents Hassan Rouhani and Ebrahim Raisi often representing Iran in the Astana process alongside Russia's Vladimir Putin and Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In meetings with Syrian leaders, the Iranians have been steadfast in offering support to maintain Syria's territorial integrity.<sup>47</sup> Rouhani made the case for Astana in an address to the UN General Assembly, while Raisi used the process to amplify Iran's call for a US withdrawal from Syria.<sup>48</sup>

Visits to Iran by Syrian officials have continued apace, but it was Assad's trip in February 2019, his first since the onset of hostilities in his country, that laid bare tensions within Iran's foreign-policy establishment, particularly between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the IRGC. During the visit, Assad was pictured meeting with Khamenei and Soleimani. In a well-publicized spat, Zarif tendered his resignation on account of not being informed of the meeting and a perceived lack of coordination with his ministry.<sup>49</sup> The resignation was subsequently refused by Rouhani, who paraphrased the supreme leader in describing Zarif as "honest, brave, courageous and pious."<sup>50</sup> However, Zarif's continued irritation with the IRGC's domination of the Syria file became apparent again in the 2021 leak of an audio interview in which he appeared to criticize Soleimani and the IRGC for running their own regional foreign policy without sufficient coordination with and agreement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>51</sup>

## Economic Ties

Although not a regional economic power in any sense, Syria allows Iran to realize geostrategic aims that also have economic utility. Tehran wants to capitalize on its longstanding position as Damascus's main regional ally to help an economy battered by waves of punitive sanctions, led in large part by the United States. The Islamic Republic's efforts to deepen its economic relationship with Syria have mainly centered around securing its position in the country's east to protect its

<sup>46</sup> For a regularly updated list of strikes against US interests in Syria and Iraq in 2023–2024, see Michael Knights, Amir al-Kaabi, and Hamdi Malik, "Tracking Anti-U.S. Strikes in Iraq and Syria During the Gaza Crisis," Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis>.

<sup>47</sup> *Tehran Times*, "Rouhani: Astana peace talks can protect Syrian territorial integrity," December 8, 2020, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/455553/Rouhani-Astana-peace-talks-can-protect-Syrian-territorial-integrity>; *Tehran Times*, "Astana process in Tehran ends on positive note," July 20, 2022, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/474864/Astana-process-in-Tehran-ends-on-positive-note>.

<sup>48</sup> Address by Hassan Rouhani to the 73rd United Nations General Assembly, September 2018, [https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/73/ir\\_en.pdf](https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/73/ir_en.pdf); Islamic Republic News Agency, "Americans should withdraw from east of Euphrates: President Raisi," July 20, 2022, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84827369/Americans-should-withdraw-from-east-of-Euphrates-President-Raisi>.

<sup>49</sup> Al Jazeera, "Zarif resigned over Assad's trip to Tehran: Spokesperson," March 5, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/3/5/zarif-resigned-over-assads-trip-to-tehran-spokesperson>.

<sup>50</sup> IRNA, "Iran president rejects FM Zarif's resignation," February 27, 2019, <https://en.irna.ir/news/83224529/Iran-president-rejects-FM-Zarif-s-resignation>.

<sup>51</sup> Al Monitor, "Leaked recording of Iran's foreign minister stirs debate," April 26, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/leaked-recording-irans-foreign-minister-stirs-debate#ixzz74fibL9Vj>.

hard-won land bridge to the Mediterranean, financing reconstruction, and supplying the Syrian government with oil.

Iran needs reliable partners and has worked hard to sustain the alliance with the help of Russia, a state that has also been subject to Western sanctions. Despite the general alignment of Moscow and Tehran over Syria, some analysts have highlighted that they have different objectives and ways of engaging with local actors.<sup>52</sup> Russia tends to institutionalize its influence through reinforcing Syrian state capacity, while Iran focuses instead on working with local partners sympathetic to its own objectives.<sup>53</sup>

Eastern Syria remains of vital economic importance to Iran. The Abu Kamal-al Qaem crossing has become a critical hub for Iranian commercial as well as military supplies crossing into Syria. Iran has concentrated much of its effort in reconstruction and infrastructure work in the east to win hearts and minds. Residents of Deir Ezzor, initially suspicious of the motives of Iran and its allies in the region, are reportedly receptive to the Iranian investment in the area, due to the aid and services provided.<sup>54</sup> Agreements have been signed in recent years for Iran's participation and investment in power generation and phone networks, along with an increase in exports of Iranian commercial goods to Syria.<sup>55</sup> Away from the east, but connected in terms of its utility for maintaining the route to the Mediterranean, Tehran also leases the Port of Latakia on Syria's coast.<sup>56</sup> Further advancing this strategic reach, plans were announced in 2019 to connect Latakia with Iran's Imam Khomeini Port on the Persian Gulf. This involved a trilateral agreement among Iran, Iraq, and Syria to connect the ports by rail, a move that has wider significance given that this "railway of resistance" would also serve as an important route in China's Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the high-level diplomatic meetings and agreements, Iran has been highly active on the ground through reconstruction and aid work, using a range of parastatal organizations to advance its soft power, and drawing on longstanding links with tribal leaders in eastern Syria. In an in-depth analysis, Akbar shows how Iran has sought to improve its position by capturing Syrian hearts and minds through the reconstruction programs of its Jihad Sazandegi (construction jihad) organization and others like the Hezbollah-affiliated Jihad al-Bina.<sup>58</sup> This includes the building of hospitals and homes, and the renovation of schools, leveraging soft power channeled through state-affiliated agencies. This aid extends to the Syrian health sector through training and construction, as well as offering medical supplies and support during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>59</sup> In Deir Ezzor, the Islamic Republic has also provided support for Syrians

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<sup>52</sup> Sinan Hatahet, *Russia and Iran: Economic Influence in Syria* (London: Chatham House, Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2019).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–3.

<sup>54</sup> Ghaith al-Ahmad, "Post-conflict, how will Iran preserve its presence in Syria?" Atlantic Council Syria Source, February 1, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/post-conflict-how-will-iran-preserve-its-presence-in-syria>.

<sup>55</sup> Ali Akbar, "Iran's soft power in Syria after the Syrian civil war," *Mediterranean Politics* 28, no. 2 (2023): 15–17.

<sup>56</sup> *Asia Times*, "Syria leases Mediterranean port to Iran," April 2019, <https://asiatimes.com/2019/04/syria-leases-mediterranean-port-to-iran-raising-alarms>.

<sup>57</sup> *Tehran Times*, "Southwestern Iranian port to be connected to Syria through Iraq," November 18, 2019, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/442117/Southwestern-Iranian-port-to-be-connected-to-Syria-through-Iraq>; Sweidan, "Railway of Resistance."

<sup>58</sup> Akbar, "Iran's Soft Power," 14–15.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

to enroll in Iranian-funded schools, take classes in the Persian language, and apply for grants to study in Iranian universities.<sup>60</sup>

An additional factor cementing bilateral economic ties has been the delivery of Iranian oil to Syria. Trump's maximum pressure strategy sought to reduce such exports to zero, and in 2019 the United States withdrew waivers that it had given to countries with significant markets for Iranian oil, China and India chief among them. However, Iranian oil deliveries to Syria's Baniyas terminal continued despite American attempts to prohibit Iranian exports on the global market. While the process of getting crude to Syria is shrouded in obscurity, Iran uses a number of strategies, including ship-to-ship transfers in the Mediterranean and the masking of movements to evade tracking.<sup>61</sup> Iranian deliveries of oil thus not only continued but increased by some 21 percent in 2023.<sup>62</sup> This is despite continued efforts of Western powers to block deliveries, such as the bungled 2019 British attempt to capture the Iranian *Grace 1* vessel off the coast of Gibraltar, citing EU sanctions against Syria. In a stinging rebuke, Zarif wrote on Twitter, "Iran is neither a member of the EU nor subject to any European oil embargo. Last I checked, EU was against extraterritoriality," adding that the seizure was "piracy, pure and simple."<sup>63</sup>

Syria's return to the regional fold—beginning with the re-establishing of diplomatic ties with the UAE in 2018 and continuing with its readmission to the Arab League in 2023, after a 12-year absence—can be seen as a major diplomatic success not just for Assad but for Russia, Iran, and the trilateral relationship.<sup>64</sup> This rehabilitation ran parallel to a de-escalation between Iran and Saudi Arabia, finalized through a China-brokered détente announced in March 2023. Iran's ties with Russia have also been advanced through its accession to the BRICS group of nations and continued cooperation on arms sales in the light of the Ukraine conflict. The reconstruction of Syria, circumvention of Western economic sanctions, and broader rapprochement between formerly hostile powers signal continuing close relations among Syria, Iran, and Russia—all sanctioned nations, all opposed to the United States.

## The Israeli Factor

The state of Israel has long been a critical focus for Iran's national-security policies, given the historical tensions between both sides. As discussed above, the need for Tehran to maintain a form of forward defense against Tel Aviv has been a key part of its strategy in Syria and the Levant.<sup>65</sup> Israel is perceived as the greatest regional threat to the Islamic Republic and is believed responsible for a number of attacks against critical infrastructure, nuclear sites, and Iranian citizens involved in its atomic program. Iran's advancing its interests within the borders of its northern neighbors is seen in Tel Aviv as a significant threat given the longstanding enmity with Iran and the Axis of

<sup>60</sup> Al-Ahmad, "Post-conflict, how will Iran preserve its presence."

<sup>61</sup> Noam Raydan, "Iran's Oil Flow Holds Ground in Syria As Market Share Lost To Battling OPEC Members," *The Fuse*, March 16, 2020 <https://energyfuse.org/irans-oil-flow-holds-ground-in-syria-as-market-share-lost-to-battling-opec-members>.

<sup>62</sup> Syria Report, "Iran's Oil Exports to Syria Increased 21 percent in 2023," January 16, 2024, <https://syria-report.com/irans-oil-exports-to-syria-increased-21-percent-in-2023>.

<sup>63</sup> Mohammad Javad Zarif, Twitter, July 8, 2019, <https://twitter.com/JZarif/status/1148184403736244226>.

<sup>64</sup> Kali Robinson, "Syria Is Normalizing Relations With Arab Countries. Who Will Benefit?" Council on Foreign Relations: In Brief, May 11, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/syria-normalizing-relations-arab-countries-who-will-benefit>.

<sup>65</sup> Ahmadian and Mohseni, "Iran's Syria Strategy," 362.

Resistance, and their enduring support for the Palestinian cause. Tensions have further escalated due to the Gaza conflict, resulting in the first direct exchange of hostilities between the two sides. Before examining the changed strategic picture as of mid-2024, it is worth analyzing how tensions reached this new and dangerous point.

Under the pretense of strategic ambiguity, the Israeli military carried out a number of strikes on targets in Syria from the early days of the civil conflict, as it sought to roll back Axis of Resistance forces. A seeming abandonment of this policy coincided with a marked increase in attacks on Iranian and Iranian-linked targets in Syria from 2017, which continued through the April 2024 strikes on Iranian diplomatic premises in Damascus, generating publicity in conventional and social media.<sup>66</sup> Israeli aggression escalated significantly following Trump's announcement of a partial withdrawal of US forces from Syria, with open acknowledgement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of the targeting of "Iranian infrastructure" in the country.<sup>67</sup> The shifting geopolitical environment led to this change in strategic calculus on trying to remove the Iranian presence from Syria rather than contain it.<sup>68</sup> Drone incursions into Israeli-occupied territory in the Golan Heights in 2018 led to a number of retaliatory strikes against IRGC drone bases and missile stores in Syria. Israel's subsequent Operation House of Cards against Iranian and axis targets in Syria—allegedly its biggest overseas engagement since 1973—included attacks against military bases, intelligence-gathering posts, logistics centers, and weapon-storage facilities.<sup>69</sup> To further push back against Iran's advances, Israel expanded its operations beyond Syria, targeting Iranian allies in Iraq and launching an unsuccessful drone strike into southern Lebanon in 2019.<sup>70</sup>

Israel has also instigated a number of strikes within Iran's borders in recent years, including sabotage attacks against critical and atomic infrastructure that bear the hallmarks of its covert operations. The targeting of nuclear sites included attacks on Iran's uranium enrichment facility at Natanz in 2020 and 2021, and a strike against the Iranian Atomic Energy Association in Karaj in May 2021.<sup>71</sup> Israel was also believed to be the chief culprit behind the assassination of high-ranking Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrazadeh in a remote-controlled machine-gun attack in November 2020. A series of seemingly tit-for-tat strikes against commercial and alleged military shipping targets also took place in 2020 and 2021, as the apparent shadow war between the two powers expanded. Israel was also widely seen as being behind the 2022 assassination of Quds Force commander Hassan Sayyad Khodaei in Tehran.<sup>72</sup>

Increasing the tensions, Iran has responded negatively to the Abraham Accords, Israel's normalization deals with the UAE and Bahrain; Khamenei singled out the UAE's signing of the agreement as a "betrayal of the Islamic world."<sup>73</sup> Tehran was also active in its support for Palestine during the May 2021 Israel-Hamas conflict, with key figures citing the existence of

<sup>66</sup> Grace Wermenbol, "Lifting the veil: Israel's new military strategy in Syria," Middle East Institute, January 31, 2019, <https://mei.edu/publications/lifting-veil-israels-new-military-strategy-syria>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Gil Murciano, "Preventing a Spillover of the Iran-Israel Conflict in Syria," SWP Comment 27, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>70</sup> Marwan Bishara, "Netanyahu's Calculus: Bombs Speak Louder Than Words," *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 38, no. 6 (2019): 33–34.

<sup>71</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iran says Israel attacked Karaj site to thwart nuclear talks," July 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/6/iran-says-israel-attacked-its-karaj-site-to-thwart-nuclear>.

<sup>72</sup> Al Jazeera, "Iran: Revolutionary Guard officer assassinated in Tehran," May 22, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/22/iran-irgc-quds-force-member-assassinated-in-tehran-state-media>.

<sup>73</sup> Khamenei.ir, Twitter, September 5, 2020, [https://x.com/khamenei\\_ir/status/1302315879368187906?s=20](https://x.com/khamenei_ir/status/1302315879368187906?s=20).



a coordination center in Beirut for Hezbollah and the IRGC to assist allies in Gaza.<sup>74</sup> This demonstrated Hamas's full return to the Axis of Resistance after several years' rupture over the Syria conflict. Indeed, Hamas's political leader, Ismael Haniyeh, was given a front-row seat at Raisi's August 2021 inauguration, alongside Axis of Resistance leaders like Ziad al-Nakhlah of Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah's deputy leader, Naim Qassem—a clear sign of the incoming president's foreign-policy priorities.

## THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE AND ISRAEL AFTER AL-AQSA FLOOD

The eruption of the 2023 conflict in Gaza invited further scrutiny of Iran's ties with Hamas and gave rise to much press speculation about the extent of Iran's role in the October 7 attack on Israel. Khamenei responded to the accusations by claiming that the planning and coordination were entirely Hamas's responsibility, while at the same time offering continued moral and political support as Israel assaulted Gaza.<sup>75</sup> Tehran thus initially chose to tread a cautious path, seeking not to become directly involved while keeping "all options open." As then-Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian noted during a meeting with Nasrallah in November 2023, "We do not look forward to its expansion, but any possibility is on the table if the aggression continues."<sup>76</sup>

While not undertaking the sort of direct attacks that could lead to a major regional conflagration, the Islamic Republic did give the green light for other axis members to take action against Israel. The responses included Houthi ballistic-missile and drone launches toward Israel from Yemen, PMF attacks against US forces stationed in Iraq and Syria, and most notably a ratcheting up of tensions between Hezbollah and Israel on Lebanon's southern border, where the opening of a northern front remains a possibility.

Israeli strikes against Iranian assets and Hezbollah figures grew increasingly brazen, sparking very real fears of the Gaza crisis spilling out into a wider war. Israel focused on Iranian military sites and the direct targeting of Iranian commanders in Syria, and on Hezbollah sites in Lebanon in response to rocket attacks. Due to Israel's policy of only occasional acknowledgement of its offensive operations in Syria, the reporting is predominantly left to regional and international news organizations. Notable strikes include the October and November 2023 bombings of civilian airports in Aleppo and Damascus, both alleged to be important nodes for Iranian military asset transfers to its allies.<sup>77</sup> IRGC and Hezbollah members operating in Syria also became targets, with Israel's "abandoning the rules of the game" in striking key figures directly.<sup>78</sup> IRGC members

<sup>74</sup> *Al Manar*, "Hezbollah, IRGC, Hamas Established Chamber of Military Operations in Beirut during Israeli War on Gaza: Report," May 28, 2021, <https://english.almanar.com.lb/1352914>.

<sup>75</sup> Amwaj Media, "Inside story: Iran's supreme leader strongly rejects role in Hamas attack," November 11, 2023, <https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/inside-story-iran-s-supreme-leader-strongly-rejects-role-in-hamas-attack>.

<sup>76</sup> *Al-Mayadeen*, "Sayyed Nasrallah and Amir-Abdollahian discuss options, paths forward," November 23, 2023, <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/sayyed-nasrallah-and-amir-abdollahian-discuss-options-paths>.

<sup>77</sup> Al Jazeera, "Syria says Israel hit Damascus, Aleppo airports again amid Gaza bombing," October 22, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/22/syria-says-israel-hit-damascus-aleppo-airports-again-amid-gaza-bombing>.

<sup>78</sup> For insight into perceptions among the Axis of Resistance about the changing nature of Israeli strikes in Syria after October 7, see Laila Bassam, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, and Maya Gebeily, "Israel shifts to deadlier strikes on Iran-linked targets in Syria," Reuters, January 8, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-shifts-deadlier-strikes-iran-linked-targets-syria-2024-01-08>.

assassinated during this period included its “most influential military figure in Syria,”<sup>79</sup> Seyed Radhi Mousavi, in December 2023, and the Quds Force’s head in Syria, Sadeq Omidzadeh, along with four others in January 2024.<sup>80</sup> Senior Hezbollah commanders Ismail al-Zin and Wissam Tawil were killed in Lebanon, and Israel also struck deep into that country to attack Hezbollah targets in the Beqaa Valley several times in 2024.<sup>81</sup>

Until the Israeli strikes on its diplomatic compound in Damascus in April 2024, which killed 16, including eight IRGC members, Tehran had been following a policy of “strategic patience” in the face of increasingly overt provocation. Initially, it sought to take advantage of increasing global opposition to Israeli actions and calibrate its response to efforts at securing a lasting ceasefire in Gaza.<sup>82</sup> This would have potentially given the Islamic Republic a diplomatic win at a time when its stock was rising among the region’s publics.<sup>83</sup> With a UN Security Council resolution in support of this initiative again failing, Iran began to telegraph its response to the consulate attack, culminating in the launching of more than 300 drones and missiles toward Israeli territory in Operation True Promise on April 13. While most were intercepted by Israel and its allies, the air assault marked a new approach, declared Mohammad Jamshidi, an Iranian presidential aide:

Iran’s victorious True Promise operation means that the era of strategic patience is over & the Israeli strategy of war between wars was defeated. Now the equation has changed. Targeting Iranian personnel and assets by the regime will be met with a direct and punishing response.<sup>84</sup>

Israel provided its own reply the following week, targeting Iranian air-defense sites in Isfahan. The cautious tit-for-tat resulted in an uneasy settlement around new rules of engagement. Ultimately, both states can ill afford a regional war, and this face-saving appeased domestic and allied constituencies but avoided further escalation.

The Gaza conflict and the often-frenzied debate over Iran’s role highlight the continued salience of the Levant for Tehran’s foreign policy and demonstrate its significance as the space where the unity of arenas concept is further crystallized through the Axis of Resistance’s efforts at responding to Israel. The risks of targeting Iranian interests are now arguably higher for Israel than they were before April 2024. However, it remains to be seen whether Israel is willing to test the new limits that Iran has tried to set. The wider subregion remains at a critical juncture.

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<sup>79</sup> Ali Hashem, “Inside story: Airstrike kills Iran’s ‘most influential’ commander in Syria,” Amwaj Media, December 25, 2023, <https://amwaj.media/article/inside-story-airstrike-kills-iran-s-most-influential-commander-in-syria>.

<sup>80</sup> France 24, “Iran blames Israel, vows revenge after Guards die in Syria strike,” January 20, 2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240120-iran-blames-israel-vows-revenge-after-guards-die-in-syria-strike>.

<sup>81</sup> Al Jazeera, “Israeli military says it killed Hezbollah commander Ismail al-Zin,” March 31, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/31/israeli-military-says-it-killed-hezbollah-commander-ismail-al-zin>.

<sup>82</sup> Trita Parsi, “Report: Iran says it won’t strike Israel if US gets Gaza ceasefire,” Responsible Statecraft, April 8, 2024, <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/iran-israel-gaza>.

<sup>83</sup> See Arab Barometer, “Image of Global and Regional Powers in MENA dramatically affected in Tunisia following Israel’s War on Gaza,” December 15, 2023, <https://www.arabbarometer.org/2023/12/image-of-global-and-regional-powers-in-mena-dramatically-affected-in-tunisia-following-israels-war-on-gaza>.

<sup>84</sup> See statement of Mohammad Jamshidi, X, April 14, 2024, <https://twitter.com/MhmmdJamshidi/status/1779490624795705734>.

## CONCLUSION

Iran's foreign policy toward the Levant is predicated on its longstanding involvement in the region across multiple fronts as it seeks to reinforce the Axis of Resistance. Syria, the country in which Iran has been most involved militarily over the past decade due to the intersection of core security concerns with regional geopolitics, remains the crucible of Iranian actions. These have included maintaining deterrence against Israel, fighting against groups that threaten the security of the Islamic Republic and its allies, and enhancing Iran's strategic depth through infrastructure development and reconstruction activities. Despite the blow of losing the primary architect of its Levant policy, Qassem Soleimani, Iran's overall strategy remained largely unchanged. However, the escalation with Israel following provocative strikes on Iranian interests in Syria after October 7, 2023, has engendered a more aggressive form of deterrence on Iran's part.

To maintain its influence in Syria, Iran has also continued to pursue closer relations with Russia. This suits the desires of both states for a more multipolar Middle East with reduced US influence. Moves made by Iran to join the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and to gain full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS group point to further strategic confluence. This has been enhanced by participation in the Astana process, where diplomacy has capitalized on battlefield experience and gains made by Russia and Iran in Syria. In addition to the military and diplomatic maneuvers, Iran has expanded its economic activity to help secure its position in Syria. Securing and developing the land bridge linking Tehran to the Mediterranean through territories controlled by friendly governments and allies is seen as a vital part of maintaining Iran's strategic depth. Concomitant with this has been Tehran's deepening of economic investments in infrastructure and major ports along critical nodes of this route.

The Israeli factor has continued to loom large, but despite the repeated strikes against Iranian and allied targets across the region, the sabotage operations within the Islamic Republic, and the new rules of engagement forged through the mutual strikes of April 2024, the Axis of Resistance remains a critical bulwark against Israel and a channel for support to its allied Palestinian groups. Here one can see the moves toward a unity of arenas by the key Iranian allies, with a renewed focus on the Israeli threat. As such, the axis has come full circle, brought into ever-sharpening focus by the Gaza war, but now with greater coordination and increased battle-hardiness forged in the Syrian crucible.

Geopolitical currents in the Middle East continue to shift, with developments like the Abraham Accords, the Gaza conflict, and the tentative rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia presenting both threats and opportunities for the Islamic Republic and the Levant. Iran's continuing alliance with Syria and Russia, and its desire to maintain the Axis of Resistance, remain vital components of its subregional strategy and will continue to shape and reshape its security concerns in the short term and beyond.

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