

## Israel–Iran Conflict: A Change in Iran’s Strategic Assessment?

By Amin Tarzi

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With its second direct missile and drone attack on Israel on 1 October 2024, the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) may have changed, or has been forced to alter, its longstanding geopolitical strategy of preventing its adversaries, real or perceived, from directly engaging its homeland. Here, after an overview of the IRI’s geopolitical development, this article will briefly discuss some of the reasons for the alteration in Tehran’s strategic assessments and the potential consequences of this strategic readjustment.

### Contextualizing Geopolitical Strategies of the IRI

Geopolitics in the IRI is shaped by an intertwined, overlapping, and seemingly self-contradictory combination of historical, geographical, denominational, ethnolinguistical, political, and military factors based on Thucydidean realism, albeit laced with Shi’ite Islam esoterica.<sup>1</sup> Its roots extend back before the Islamic Revolution in 1979. These include:

- The country’s geographical position, which links four volatile yet economically vital regions of the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Eurasia.
- The country is the natural and most economical access route to the open seas for the hydrocarbon-rich but landlocked Caucasus and Central Asia. It controls most of the northern coast of the Persian Gulf as well as the northern end of the Strait of Hormuz—one of the strategically vital maritime chokepoints in the world—and has direct access to the open seas through ports in the Arabian Sea.
- From a hydrocarbon geopolitics perspective, with its location and vast amounts of oil and natural gas, the IRI has the potential of being one of the most, if not the greatest, influential suppliers and a significant transportation hub of oil and gas not only in the region but also for the global market.
- Significant territorial losses in the nineteenth century to European imperial powers.
  - The IRI’s territorial identity expands beyond its current political boundaries and incorporates reenvisioned historical memories of past losses. From among the various invaders and overlords of Iran, the most impactful were the Russian and British imperial expansions and geopolitical gamesmanship in the nineteenth century.
- Historical imperial attitudes of the IRI as a natural—and in Tehran’s view, a necessary—regional power or even a global player.
  - At the outset, the IRI’s geopolitical strategy was based on its independence from the United States and the Soviet Union, but with the demise of the latter, the IRI’s relations with the Russian Federation have vacillated between competition and cooperation. Beginning in 2015, Tehran’s strategic relations with Moscow changed toward active cooperation. Both sides found themselves on the same side in the Syrian Civil War, supporting Syrian president Bashar al-Assad’s government and opposing the presence and policies of the United States and its allies. The IRI has been fully supporting Russia in its second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, including with the delivery of drones and short-range missiles and reportedly building drone production facilities.

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ties in Russia.<sup>2</sup> In return, there are reports that Russia has been supplying the IRI with advanced air defense systems and Sukhoi Su-35 advanced multirole fighters.<sup>3</sup>

- Currently, the IRI relies on its relationship with Russia in a mutually beneficial partnership based on its isolation, forming an anti-Western stance designed to change the current U.S.-led world order, as well as expansionist tendencies. However, Iran should not be expected to trust the Russians in a longer-term alliance due to historical overlapping spheres of interest, mainly in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Caspian Sea. This longstanding rift has resurfaced recently in relation to the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict, where Moscow has been trying to get closer to Baku while Tehran has been steadfast in its support of Yerevan.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2021, the IRI signed a 25-year strategic partnership agreement with the People's Republic of China (PRC), and both countries, along with Russia, are partners in trying to end U.S. leadership in the international arena, ushering a new world order whereby Iran would be the regional hegemon.<sup>5</sup>
  - Unlike with Russia, the IRI's long history with the PRC is void of any confrontations or overlapping territorial claims or aspirations, leading to the conclusion that these two states should be expected to have a long-term strategic partnership and even a mutually supporting alliance.
  - However, unlike in the case of Russo-Iranian partnerships, the Chinese have avoided becoming entangled in Tehran's geopolitical and ideological adventurisms but are steadily building the future of partnership in which the IRI would serve as the PRC's main hub for hydrocarbon and other economic and political interests in the Middle East and beyond. The Sino-Iranian deal includes Chinese access to strategic Iranian ports. In the short term, the only inconsistency between Beijing and Tehran's worldviews regarding the role of the United States in the Middle East is with the former's wanting to keep Washington entangled in that region. The IRI would prefer to continue the current trend of gradual U.S. disentanglement from the region.
- A unique clerical governing *nezam* (system/regime), based on Shi'ite esoterica, with stated strategies of exporting its ideologies, and increasingly arms, for both expansionist and defensive purposes and a doctrinal rejection of Israel's right to exist on both geopolitical and ideological rationales.
  - The IRI's doctrinal strategies were based on providing a voice, as well as economic and military support, to minority Shi'ite and more radical Sunni disenfranchised political movements. This strategy manifested itself in the formation of groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and other allies and proxies.
- In the early days of the Islamic Revolution, the IRI opposed the Arab monarchal states in the Gulf region, espousing a specific confrontational stance directed at Saudi Arabia to compete for hearts and minds of the Muslim *ummah* (community) globally.
- Lessons and effects of the Iran-Iraq War (1980–89).
  - In the IRI's threat perception, the war with Iraq exposed both the state and the *nezam*'s vulnerabilities, limitations, and sense of strategic isolation. The war provided lessons learned about how to safeguard the territory and the prevailing Islamist system and deal with attempts by the United States and some of its Arab neighbors to isolate the IRI.
  - With the intensification and internationalization of the war and not being capable of directly confronting Western forces militarily, most specifically the United States, Tehran began using its "hidden hand," or proxy assets, to exert pressure on its enemies. This allowed the IRI to avoid a direct confrontation that would have assured its defeat.
- A longstanding confrontational stance with the United States.
  - As stated above, the foundational geopolitical stance of the IRI has been to keep the United States out of the Middle East and to destroy Israel as a Jewish state.
  - True to Tehran's complex and seemingly contradictory geopolitical strategies based on realpolitik and ideological underpinnings, the IRI in many instances has worked or extended the offer to support Washington's actions in the region, such as neutrality in the 1990–91 Gulf War, initial support of U.S.-led war efforts in Afghanistan in 2001–2, signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, a.k.a. the Iran nuclear deal) in 2015, and others.<sup>6</sup> The rationale for these strategies was multifold, to include fear of direct confrontation with the United States, elimination of regional adversaries (e.g., Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the Taliban's rule in Afghanistan), alleviation from of crippling U.S. sanctions and the attempt to politically isolate the IRI, and finally, in the case of the JCPOA, more time to improve its technological expertise to achieve the status of becoming a threshold nuclear weapons state.
    - Alternatively, as the United States became further entrenched in Afghanistan and Iraq, the IRI, using its regional proxies, imposed indirect costs on the United States.
    - With the United States gradually "pivoting" toward Asia in the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the IRI has tried to solidify its longstanding geopolitical strategy of becoming the regional hegemon. More recently, Tehran's geopo-

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litical worldview has become part of PRC-led efforts to alter the post-World War II international world order. However, what Tehran does not want is the normalization of the relations between Israel and Arab countries.

### **The “Axis of Resistance”**

As noted above, the key kinetic component to the IRI’s strategy of keeping its homeland from becoming involved in direct confrontation with the United States, Israel, or other potential adversaries has been the formation of, support of, or episodic cooperation with what Tehran refers to as the “axis of resistance,” bringing together Iran’s clients in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen in opposition to the state of Israel and the U.S. presence in the core Middle East region. The axis of resistance furthermore serves as the sword of Damocles that Tehran has hung over its adversarial regional competitors and foes.

Prior to launching its offensive phase of the Iran–Iraq War, the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) “called for the establishment of a multinational Muslim force to liberate” Jerusalem—“Qods” in Arabic.<sup>7</sup> The Qods Force has since become the vanguard of IRI-backed military and political organizations known as “long-hand” or “hidden hand” assets across the Middle East and beyond, cultivating and using proxies, clients, and surrogate forces directly or circuitously. Most of these proxies have acted within sovereign states as politico-military organizations, terrorist outfits, or criminal networks. These were established from scattered groups of disenfranchised peoples and nurtured by Tehran. Prior to Iraq’s invasion of the IRI in 1980, these groups expanded the IRI’s geopolitical reach on an ideological level with the majority of the clients representing Shi’ites in other Muslim majority countries. As the Iran–Iraq War intensified, and to indirectly confront Western forces, Tehran employed its hidden hand assets to exert pressure on its enemies. This allowed the IRI to avoid direct confrontation that would have assured its defeat.

One of the earliest manifestations of the longhand geopolitical strategy was in Lebanon, a country with a large restive and disfranchised Shi’ite population. Banking on the opportunity provided after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the IRGC established a foothold for its strategic and stated ideological goal of “liberating Jerusalem.”<sup>8</sup> Later, the IRI’s direct and indirect attacks grew beyond the original axis of resistance targets of Israel and the United States, to include targets in or belonging to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Japan, Norway, the United Kingdom, and others.<sup>9</sup> In the cases of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, direct attacks have been carried out by and mostly attributed to or claimed by the IRI-backed Houthis in Yemen, while commercial vessels belonging to several states have been damaged in various cases of sabotage mostly attributed to the IRI.<sup>10</sup>

### **Hamas’ Attack on Israel**

The 7 October 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel was support-

ed by the IRI. The IRI hailed the attack as not only a legitimate action but also the beginning of the end of Israel as a sovereign Jewish state. Despite the lack of incriminating evidence—as in most cases of the hidden hand attacks—of Tehran’s culpability in ordering the attack, there is no doubt that Hamas was receiving the bulk of its funds and weapons from Iranian sources, and Yahya Sinwar, then the leader of the group in Gaza, had become very close to Qods Force elements within the IRGC. Lack of evidence for Tehran’s direct involvement notwithstanding, the main beneficiary of the attacks on Israel, beyond the pro-Iran segments within Hamas, was the IRI. The attack was a brazen breach in Israel’s security system, and for Tehran and its proxies, especially Hamas and Hezbollah, it was the first step in overcoming Israel’s military and intelligence deterrence abilities and toward their ultimate goal of destruction of that country.<sup>11</sup>

In the ensuing year, Israel has systematically reduced the power of Hamas in Gaza, responded to Hezbollah’s increasing attacks by carrying out an extensive air campaign and limited incursions into Lebanon’s southern border zones, and targeted the Houthis in Yemen in response to their aerial attacks. Israel has also eliminated many Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, including their respective top leaders, Sinwar and Hassan Nasrallah.

### **The IRI’s Direct Confrontation with Israel**

In addition to a multidomain response to the axis of resistance attacks, Israel heightened the intensity and scope of its ongoing “interwar campaigns” or “the campaign between wars” against Iranian targets.<sup>12</sup>

In April 2024, the Israeli attack on an Iranian diplomatic building in Damascus resulted in the death of several high-level IRGC officers. The IRI responded with a direct and large-scale aerial attack against Israel, showcasing Tehran’s most formidable military hardware, namely swarming drones and ballistic and cruise missiles. However, due to Israel’s multilayered missile defense systems and with support of Israel’s allies, few of the more than 300 drones and missiles launched reached their targets.<sup>13</sup> Israel’s retaliation strike on an airbase near the Iranian city of Isfahan was limited but intended to send a strong message, demonstrating Israel’s ability to hit targets deep into Iran. Tehran has dismissed the strikes as a “nuisance” and issued warnings about and intimations of potential alterations to the IRI’s nuclear doctrine, ostensibly the shift from a threshold to a nuclear weapons state.

After greatly intensifying the targeting of Hezbollah and Hamas commanders in July 2024, on the last day of the month, Hamas’ political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran, allegedly by Israel. The IRI vowed a strong retaliation, as Israel continued to target Hezbollah commanders using an array of methods, including air strikes. Many also believe, though Israel has not claimed, that Israel was behind a series of exploding pagers and walkie-talkies that targeted Hezbollah commanders and fighters in September 2024. Israel’s efforts culminated in the killing of the group’s secretary general, Nasrallah, along with another

senior Hezbollah commander and an IRGC brigadier general. In response, the IRI launched nearly 200 ballistic missiles at Israel, with several hitting military bases, causing minor damage according to the IDF.<sup>14</sup>

### Involuntary Strategic Reassessment?

Since the end of the Iran–Iraq War, the basic geopolitical strategy of the IRI had been safeguarding the Islamic *nezam* by keeping the homeland out of direct military conflicts while expanding its offensive/defensive capabilities through a combination of proxies and an extensive missile and later drone programs. This strategy has had much success in raising the cost for major powers, beginning with the twin bombings of French and U.S. military barracks in Beirut in 1983 and continuing with hidden hand attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan in the twenty-first century. In dealing with its regional adversaries in the Persian Gulf, the IRI managed to demonstrate its capabilities to strike them. In the case of Israel, the IRI systematically encircled the country with its axis of resistance and, through its operational bases in Syria and symbiotic relationship with Hezbollah in Lebanon, became Israel’s neighbor.

Since 7 October 2023, the decisionmakers in the IRI seem to be continuing the trend of increasing pressure and not confronting Israel directly. If so, that calculus seems to have failed after Israel directed its attacks on the Iranian diplomatic mission and with the killing of many in the leadership ranks of the axis of resistance—including, as alleged in the case of Haniyeh, inside an official guest-house in Tehran—and IRGC. Perhaps the authorities in Tehran as well as Nasrallah and Sinwar misconstrued Israel’s internal political squabbles and its failure to predict or swiftly respond to the largest single-day loss of life in modern Israel’s history as a functional inability to respond to multifrontal assaults. To safeguard its deterrence power and hard-gained leadership of its regional proxies, the Iranian *nezam* was forced to change its approach, targeting Israel directly and potentially bringing the homeland to the frontline. As IDF retired brigadier general Shlomo Brom wrote in these pages shortly after the terrorist attack on Israel, “One can assume that Iran is trying to steer the conflict quite carefully in a way that will not hurt its core interests, but such a situation is prone to mistakes. The conclusion is that escalation to a multi-theater war is indeed possible.”<sup>15</sup>

### ENDNOTES

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