



## Iran's Strategic Crossroads: Options Beyond the Axis?

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# Iran's Strategic Crossroads: Options Beyond the Axis?

After Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel, the ensuing Gaza war, and regional escalatory exchanges, Iran's regional policy, strategic calculus, and deterrence posture have been challenged in unprecedented ways. Israel's military retaliation over the first year of the war not only targeted Hamas's strongholds, but also extended beyond Gaza to Lebanon, Syria, and Iran. Israel targeted key leaders and infrastructure linked to Iran as well as a network of regional non-state actors—its long-cultivated “Axis of Resistance”—probing limitations in the alliance's commitments, coordination and strategy.<sup>1</sup>

Tehran, for its part, has refrained from direct involvement in the war between its Axis and Israel, choosing instead to signal resolve through retaliations in response to attacks directly on Iran. The Iranian-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah engaged in calibrated skirmishes but avoided full-scale confrontation. Iranian-linked militias in Iraq launched intermittent attacks on US positions but quickly de-escalated following Washington's retaliatory strikes. The attacks and retaliation among Israel, Iran, the Axis of Resistance, and the United States became a profound test of the Islamic Republic's deterrence architecture and the operational value of the Axis alliance during a major crisis.

These operations exposed the fragmentation, overstretch, and diminished cohesion of Iran's network, triggering a recalibration in Tehran's strategic thinking. During this first year of conflict, Iran's unexpected restraint and prioritization

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of the homeland, Hezbollah's cautious responses and prioritization of Lebanon, and the Houthis' resolve and their operational autonomy, even when Tehran disagreed, ended up debilitating the Axis and leading to its erosion.

## Events have triggered a recalibration in Tehran's strategic thinking

Most significantly, the Assad regime in Syria—a cornerstone of Iran's regional strategy and its only formal state ally within the Axis—collapsed in late 2024 following a renewed insurgency.<sup>2</sup> The collapse severed Iran's logistical corridor to Hezbollah and undermined a decade of strategic investment. In practical terms, Iran lost its only sovereign bridge to the Levant and a key platform for deterrent signaling to Israel.

This regional unraveling has forced a strategic reassessment in Tehran. For decades, Iran's deterrence doctrine rested on three pillars: a robust ballistic missile and drone program, a nuclear hedging strategy, and a distributed network of armed partners across the region.<sup>3</sup> While each component has developed independently, they have been designed to function in tandem as a layered deterrence, offering Tehran redundancy, flexibility, and an outer layer of deterrence for keeping conflict outside Iran's homeland.

Moreover, the regional shift toward diplomatic engagement of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states toward Tehran, even at the height of the Gaza war, had a restraining effect, however minimal. Iran was cognizant in choosing response options not to undermine the improved diplomatic relations.<sup>4</sup> The erosion of the Axis and improved relations with regional states opened the door for the first time in decades to candidly discussing a recalibration of Tehran's regional strategy and diplomacy. Inside Iran, debates have emerged between the IRGC Quds Force (QF) and the Foreign Ministry over whether to double down on support for armed groups or to pivot toward regional diplomacy and economic normalization.<sup>5</sup>

This article examines that strategic inflection point. It analyzes the origins of Iran's network of partners and proxies, this network's evolution into a key pillar of Iran's deterrence, and the growing internal contradictions that threaten its sustainability. The article will then proceed with an assessment of how Iran's missile and nuclear capabilities are becoming increasingly central to Iran's deterrence strategy, and examines internal debates, particularly between military and diplomatic elites, over the path forward.

### Pillars of Deterrence: The Axis and Iran's Asymmetric Strategy

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Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's national security strategy has relied on a triad of asymmetric capabilities: a ballistic missile and drone arsenal, a nuclear hedging

posture, and a network of regional armed partners known as the Axis of Resistance. These three pillars—developed out of necessity and strategic choices partly due to revolutionary ideology—provide Tehran with strategic depth and deterrent power that offset its conventional military limitations.

The Axis of Resistance has played a particularly conspicuous role in this asymmetric strategy. The Islamic Republic's embrace of militant partners across the Middle East was born not out of revolutionary idealism alone, but out of strategic necessity. In the aftermath of the revolution and throughout the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran found itself regionally isolated and under siege. Most Arab regimes viewed its revolutionary project as a threat. With no regional alliances—Syria being the sole exception—Iran turned to non-state actors to build influence and deter its adversaries.<sup>6</sup>

The approach was not unique to Iran. In the 1960s, revolutionary Cuba exported insurgencies across Latin America to break out of its geopolitical isolation. Revolutions need allies for survival, and when surrounded by hostile states that fear the spread of revolution, they need to create their own alliances within those states. Tehran learned from the failures of militia groups cultivated by Che Guevara, whose efforts in Bolivia and the Congo faltered because they lacked local roots.<sup>7</sup> Iran pursued a more pragmatic strategy: identifying militant groups with social bases, political aspirations, and charismatic leadership, then nurturing them into autonomous yet ideologically aligned partners.

Iran's aim was to build durable alliances that served its strategic survival needs and could be maintained by ideological affinity when resources were scarce. The ideal scenario was that the groups would take over their respective states and become allies. But even if they remained opposition groups, at the very least they could challenge or deter the government in their home country to weaken Iran's adversary government. Lacking a formal alliance network or great-power patron due to revolutionary ideologies, Iran resorted to these unconventional approaches, including partnerships with non-state actors. In other words, building a network of ideologically aligned, politically ambitious militant movements became a strategic survival mechanism for revolutionary Iran.

The prototype for this was Hezbollah in Lebanon. Formed in the early 1980s with Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) support and Syrian facilitation, Hezbollah evolved into a hybrid actor—part militia, part political party, and part social welfare network. It maintained local legitimacy while becoming Iran's most reliable partner. This model of “guided autonomy” became the blueprint for Iran's broader axis strategy.<sup>8</sup> Over time, Tehran replicated it in Iraq, Gaza, and Yemen.

This “arm's length” approach was by design. From the outset, Iran designed its network such that each group retained operational autonomy to bolster the partner's local legitimacy. This model—empowering proxies rather than

**Khamenei referred to the Axis of Resistance as Iran’s “strategic depth” beyond Iran’s borders**

micromanaging them—helped Iran build deterrence beyond its borders without provoking direct confrontation. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei encapsulated this by referring to the Axis of Resistance as Iran’s “strategic depth,” implying these groups effectively extend Iran’s defensive perimeter far beyond its own borders. By the late 1980s, Hezbollah’s attacks had driven US and

French forces out of Lebanon, and exacted a continuing toll on Israel’s occupation, all while Iran itself avoided open war with those far stronger powers.

Iran’s embrace of this partner/proxy strategy was accelerated and refined through the Iran-Iraq War. Facing Iraq’s US- and Arab-backed war capability, Iran began reaching out to Iraqi Shi’a and Kurdish dissidents who opposed Saddam, planting the seeds of a reliable ally next door. Even after the 1988

ceasefire, Tehran feared Saddam’s regime might attack again, so it continued to support Iraqi insurgent groups as a lever of pressure and deterrence. The strategy paid off years later: when the United States toppled Saddam in 2003, many of Iran’s longtime Iraqi protégés (including the Badr organization) became power brokers in the new Iraq, guaranteeing Tehran postwar influence there.<sup>9</sup>

The 2003 US invasion was itself a watershed for Iran’s partner/proxy strategy. Suddenly, US forces were on Iran’s doorstep in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and the George W. Bush administration’s rhetoric labeled Iran part of an “Axis of Evil,” implying it could be America’s next regime-change target. Feeling encircled, Tehran doubled down on building partner/proxy militia networks to raise the costs of any US military adventure against Iran. IRGC Quds Force commander General Qasem Soleimani famously mobilized Iraqi Shi’ite militias to challenge US and British troops during their occupation of Iraq, contributing to the steady drumbeat of casualties. This informed Tehran’s thinking: by proving to adversaries the capability and will to inflict costs which would create domestic political pressure on them in politically charged protracted conflicts in the region, Iran could deter adversaries from attacking the Iranian homeland.

Iran steadily extended this model across the region opportunistically. In the Palestinian territories, it cultivated ties with factions like Palestinian Islamic Jihad and later Hamas (especially after Hamas’s relations with Sunni Arab patrons soured).<sup>10</sup> In the 2000s, Tehran’s alliance with President Bashar al-Assad’s Syria deepened, with Syria acting as the conduit for Iranian arms to Hezbollah and Palestinian militants.<sup>11</sup>

In Yemen, Iran eventually found opportunity amid the mid-2000s Houthi rebellion; by the 2010s, the Houthi movement, Ansar Allah, had evolved with modest Iranian support from a local Zaydi Shi'a insurgency into a rebel government controlling Sanaa. Iran's material aid to the Houthis—including missiles and drones used against Saudi Arabia—was always limited relative to the massive Saudi Emirati intervention against the Houthis. Nevertheless, backing the Houthis yielded Iran a low-cost pressure point against its rival Saudi Arabia, forcing Riyadh to hemorrhage resources in the quagmire of the Yemen war at very little cost to Iran. An IRGC official bragged that Saudi Arabia was spending billions per month in Yemen—and suffering international criticism for the war's toll—while Iran spent a tiny fraction of that to keep the Saudis tied down.<sup>12</sup>

In Syria, when the Arab Spring uprising of 2011 threatened Assad's rule, Iran sprang into action to preserve its cornerstone state ally.<sup>13</sup> Tehran dispatched small IRGC units to coordinate a multinational coalition of Shi'a militias—from Lebanese Hezbollah fighters to Iraqi, Afghan, and Pakistani volunteers—effectively outsourcing much of the grinding ground combat to these partner/proxy forces. This expeditionary strategy, overseen by Soleimani, allowed Iran to shore up Assad while minimizing regular Iranian troop deployments. By tying down superior adversaries in protracted, costly conflicts—whether it was Israel in South Lebanon, the United States in Iraq, or Saudi Arabia in Yemen—Iran developed a reputation for strategic savvy in asymmetric warfare. As one study observed, the IRGC honed a “minimalist form of unconventional warfare” using small numbers of Iranian personnel to coordinate local proxies, yielding effects disproportionate to Iran's limited military means.<sup>14</sup>

The Islamic Republic genuinely espouses a pan-Islamist, anti-Zionist ideology of *moqawama* (resistance) that binds it with groups like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Islamic Jihad. By the 2010s, Iran's network, derided by its adversaries as mere Tehran puppets, had become a diverse array of actors with varying degrees of dependency on Iran. Some, like Hezbollah, are so closely aligned with Tehran's worldview and so deeply embedded in Iran's supply networks that they operate almost as extensions of Iranian power (yet even Hezbollah retains freedom to make many tactical decisions). Others like the Houthis, Hamas, or certain Iraqi militias, have their own local agendas and more frequently diverge from Iran's preferences—a dynamic that can cause friction within the Axis. Tehran, however, generally tolerates a degree of autonomy, seeing it as vital to the axis's long-term sustainability.

Iranian officials often reject the term “proxy,” emphasizing instead “partner,” to signal that groups like Hezbollah and the Houthis pursue their own domestic goals in parallel with serving the broader “Resistance” cause. This semantic distinction matters: a proxy is expected to obey orders, but a partnership is a more

**Iranian officials reject the term “proxy,” emphasizing instead “partner”—a distinction that matters**

complex relationship. Iran’s influence comes from years of ideological mentorship, shared struggle, and provision of resources. But Iran does not have direct command-and-control and there is a level of operational freedom that varies from one group to the other. Tehran *can* often direct or trigger actions by its allies (for instance, providing intelligence or materiel for an operation), but it prefers to not act as a puppeteer. While Tehran could sometimes discourage or delay partner actions by withholding support or exerting political pressure, it could not reliably veto operations outright.

Before 2023, Iran was generally able to maintain a degree of operational discipline across its network—not through direct orders, but by aligning interests and managing escalation thresholds. This structure enhanced flexibility but limited control. The ambiguity complicated attribution for adversaries but also limited Iran’s ability to prevent escalation when its partners acted independently.<sup>15</sup> A 2025 US government annual threat assessment stated that Iran’s relationships with militias give it “leverage” over them, but not absolute control.<sup>16</sup> If Iran pushes a partner too hard (for example, pressuring it to cease fire or escalate against its own interests), Tehran risks that the partner might resist or demand greater compensation. Hamas’s October 7, 2023, attack on Israel provides an example of the limitations of Iran’s control. In that case, both US and Israeli officials assessed that Iran had not been informed in advance of the operation<sup>17</sup>. The timing was especially problematic for Tehran, which was actively pursuing indirect negotiations with Washington on sanctions relief and de-escalation in the region. Instead of advancing those goals, Iran was forced into a crisis management posture. The episode underscored the risks Tehran faces when empowered partners act independently and disrupt its broader strategic calculus.

The structure of the axis offered three main strategic benefits. First, it deterred by threat dispersion: if Iran’s interest is attacked, retaliation may come from Lebanon, Iraq, or Yemen, not directly from Tehran. This allows Iran to maintain a level of gray zone operations that keep the escalation outside Iran’s border for as long as possible. Second, Iran could impose costs on its adversaries concurrently in several theaters across the region, making the adversaries’ cost-benefit calculations on military confrontation with Iran more complex, ambiguous, and costly. Third, it gave Iran influence in key states, making it a regional power with a role in the politics of several key geopolitical areas.

By the early 2020s, the Axis of Resistance included Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, several Iraqi militias under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and the Houthis in Yemen. This constellation gave Tehran the ability to project power across multiple theaters, while keeping adversaries uncertain about where retaliation might come from. Iran had achieved strategic depth without deploying large forces or incurring the cost of confrontation within Iran's borders.<sup>18</sup>

## Fracture and Drift: Erosion of the Axis after October 7

And yet, by 2024, the model began to show strain. Conflicts became costlier and Tehran struggled to sustain the axis's cohesion. Most significantly, some groups—like the Houthis—began demonstrating increasing autonomy and at times, defiant messaging. Iran's model of managed ambiguity, once its greatest strength, had become a source of vulnerability.

The 2023 Israel-Hamas war catalyzed a multi-theater test of the Axis of Resistance, revealing deep fractures in its coherence and effectiveness during a large-scale crisis. What had once been a robust web of asymmetrically aligned actors began to show signs of drift, degradation, and even strategic exhaustion. Iran's traditional method of diffusing conflict through a decentralized partner/proxy network faltered under the weight of a regional confrontation.

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria in late 2024 was the most consequential development. Iran had spent over a decade investing blood and treasure to preserve Bashar al-Assad's rule, viewing Syria as the keystone of its regional deterrence system and the land corridor to Hezbollah. Yet in a stunning reversal, an insurgent offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, coupled with defections and protests, toppled Assad's regime. Iran opted not to intervene militarily.<sup>19</sup> The loss of Syria severed Iran's primary logistical corridor to Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza, and also undermined its forward operating platform for deterrence against Israel.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah, Tehran's most capable partner, was simultaneously dealt one of its greatest strategic blows. Following a series of cross-border exchanges with Israel, the conflict escalated. Hezbollah's capabilities were severely degraded: its leadership was killed and degraded, major rocket stockpiles were destroyed, command centers targeted, and southern Lebanon was devastated.<sup>20</sup> For Iran, this was a staggering setback—not only had it lost its overland supply route, but its most trusted and operationally sophisticated ally had been weakened at precisely the moment deterrence needed to be reinforced.

In Iraq, Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani has sought to rein in militia activity, and public resentment over militia impunity has grown. In



January 2024, Kata'ib Hizballah (KH), an Iraqi Shia paramilitary group part of the “Popular Mobilization Forces” in Iraq and the “Axis of Resistance,” launched a drone strike on US forces at Tower 22 in Jordan, killing three soldiers. Iranian officials reportedly intervened urgently to stop further attacks, concerned that escalation might prompt direct US retaliation against Iranian assets.<sup>21</sup>

In Yemen, Iran maintains ideological alignment and logistical ties with the Houthis, but the group has asserted growing autonomy—most visibly through direct negotiations with Saudi Arabia to secure political legitimacy. That autonomy was further underscored when the Houthis reached an informal de-escalation understanding with the United States in the spring of 2024. The agreement aimed to reduce attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea—but notably excluded Israel, allowing the Houthis to continue their anti-Israel operations on their own terms.

## The Axis of Resistance is no longer a strategically significant force

Throughout this period, while continuing logistical support, Tehran signaled reluctance to be drawn into further escalation. Iran also refrained from direct retaliation when US and UK forces struck Houthi targets. This approach allowed Tehran to benefit from the spectacle of extended regional disruption without becoming a direct party to a broader military confrontation.<sup>22</sup>

The Axis of Resistance, while still ideologically potent and operationally relevant, is no longer a strategically significant force. Its members are diverging in agenda, suffering battlefield degradation, and in some cases, slipping out of Tehran's orbit. For the first time in decades, Iran appears to be reassessing the sustainability of a strategy that once allowed it to punch above its conventional weight across the region.

## Rebalancing the Pillars: Iran's Strategic Recalibration

The setbacks suffered by the Axis of Resistance in 2023 and 2024 have prompted Iran to recalibrate the balance among its three deterrence pillars. While Tehran has not abandoned its network of partners, the growing operational constraints and unpredictability of the axis have shifted strategic emphasis back toward state-owned capabilities—particularly missiles, drones, and nuclear latency.

The most visible manifestation of this shift was Iran's April 2024 direct missile strike on Israel, carried out in retaliation for an Israeli airstrike on Iran's consular

building in Damascus. Although the facility was located in Syria, it was officially Iranian diplomatic property—so Tehran viewed the strike as an attack on Iranian territory. From Iran's perspective, Israel had crossed a red line by targeting a sovereign extension of the Iranian state.<sup>23</sup>

The salvo of medium-range ballistic missiles targeted military facilities near Tel Aviv and Haifa, signaling that Iran was willing to cross red lines that it had previously avoided in response to overt strikes on its territories. Though Israel and its partner defenses intercepted most of the projectiles, the attack was a milestone: it marked Iran's first overt use of sovereign territory to strike Israel directly.<sup>24</sup> The attack marked the end of Tehran's policy of avoiding direct state-to-state confrontation.<sup>25</sup> It was a clear signal that when Iran's territory is targeted even outside Iran, it will respond forcefully by resorting to the crown jewel of its deterrence capability, its missiles.

The strike served both punitive and symbolic functions, reaffirming red lines while maintaining a level of proportionality calibrated to avoid full-scale war.<sup>26</sup> It also underscored the new centrality of Iran's missile arsenal to its strategic signaling. As IRGC Aerospace Force Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh emphasized shortly after the attack, "The era of indirect responses is over. The Islamic Republic responds from its own territory when its dignity is violated."<sup>27</sup>

Beyond operational messaging, Tehran has accelerated investment in missile modernization. Following the April strike, state media showcased new solid-fuel missile systems and UAV platforms designed for rapid deployment and saturation attacks. These upgrades aim to increase precision, survivability, and launch readiness—capabilities more reliably controlled by the Iranian state than dispersed among partner/proxy networks.<sup>28</sup>

The erosion of Iran's regional network and the shift toward direct state deterrence have reinvigorated a long-standing fault line within the Islamic Republic: the tension between diplomacy and resistance, between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the IRGC Quds Force, between the "arena of the diplomats" and the "theater of the commanders."

## The Battle Between Diplomacy and Resistance

The internal contest over strategic priorities and how Iran projects influence has resurfaced at a moment of extraordinary volatility. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's long-serving foreign minister and a consistent advocate for pragmatic diplomacy, stated that "They (proxies) always worked for their own cause, even at our expense. They never carried our orders. We didn't know about October 7th. We were supposed to have a meeting with the Americans on JCPOA renewal

on October 9th, which was undermined and destroyed by this operation.”<sup>29</sup> He contended that Iran’s greatest strategic gains had come not from confrontation, but from careful diplomatic maneuvering, including the 2015 nuclear deal and the 2023 Saudi détente.

However, Iran’s hardline establishment sees the axis as a strategic necessity. In a March 2025 Nowruz address, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared that “the resistance front is our strategic depth; if Lebanon, Gaza, Iraq, and Yemen resist, Iran remains secure.”<sup>30</sup> He emphasized that without this outer defensive perimeter, Iran would face direct confrontation on its own borders. For Khamenei, the axis remains both an expression of revolutionary identity and an asymmetric deterrent shield. Esmail Qaani, commander of the IRGC Quds Force, argued that while diplomacy has its role, it must be used to complement—not replace—military and ideological pressure. “Even when one arm of the resistance is severed,” he said, “another grows in its place. This is our strength.”<sup>31</sup> IRGC-linked media outlets have amplified this message. The Tasnim News Agency, for example, highlighted how the Houthis and Kata’ib Hezbollah have continued operations independently, proving the resilience of the Axis even when under pressure.<sup>32</sup>

The Islamic Republic of Iran stands at a strategic crossroads in the wake of the tumultuous events of 2023-2024. The internal debate is not about abandoning

## Iran stands at a strategic crossroads in the wake of 2023-24

the Axis, it is about not making it the main priority strategically. Even among the IRGC’s upper ranks, there is recognition that the costs of open-ended partner/proxy warfare may outweigh the benefits unless calibrated more carefully. Moreover, the question of resource allocation is at the heart of considering the amount and speed of investment in reviving the Axis. Importantly, Iran’s domestic

stability is affecting strategy. The protest movement that erupted in Iran in September 2022 after the death of Mahsa Amini in police custody was one of the most significant internal challenges the regime has faced in years. The unrest, driven by demands for social freedoms and economic frustration, exposed fissures in Iranian society and even some elite circles.<sup>33</sup>

Some in Iran’s leadership worry that fiscal overextension abroad (namely funding expensive proxies or wars) could exacerbate public discontent at home, especially when the economy is under strain. Slogans heard in protests like “No Gaza, No Lebanon, my life for Iran!” bluntly criticize the regime’s foreign adventurism, suggesting ordinary Iranians resent resources spent on the likes of Hezbollah while they suffer at home. These sentiments put pressure, albeit indirect, on Tehran to justify or recalibrate its regional commitments.

There are arguments within the regime about focusing inward for a period of time. This is perhaps why former president Ebrahim Raisi's government prioritized regional diplomatic fixes—to reduce costly conflicts.

In this context, Iran's leadership is reassessing how to safeguard the revolutionary state and its interests for the long term. One path at the crossroads is to double down on the traditional playbook: rebuild the broken pieces of the Axis of Resistance, perhaps in a leaner form, and continue advancing the missile and nuclear programs as insurance. This would be a recommitment to the deterrence model that has thus far averted direct war with a superpower or with Israel.

The opposing path is more transformative: pivoting away from heavy reliance on proxy conflict and seeking a *modus vivendi* through diplomacy that reduces the imperative for constant low-level warfare. In reality, Iran is likely to seek a middle path—maintaining its hard power deterrents while opportunistically embracing de-escalation with neighbors where possible.

The coming years will reveal the new equilibrium. If Iran succeeds in bolstering its missile forces and perhaps edging closer to nuclear deterrence, it may feel less dependent on proxies to keep enemies at bay.

### **Strategic Contraction or Calculated Patience?**

The events of 2023-2024 have brought Iran's regional strategy and deterrence model to a moment of reckoning. For over four decades, Tehran's approach has relied on a triad of ballistic missile capabilities, nuclear latency, and a decentralized network of regional armed partners. While this strategy has allowed Iran to project power, deter adversaries, and influence conflicts beyond its borders, the evolving dynamics of regional geopolitics have tested its sustainability. The fractures within the Axis of Resistance, the loss of critical logistical corridors like Syria, and the growing autonomy of key partners have revealed the limits of Tehran's strategic depth.

Tehran can no longer rely on the Axis to deliver unified deterrence or disciplined escalation control. In response, Iran is likely to pursue a hybrid strategy that signals both resilience and adaptation—one that prioritizes control, precision, and deterrence over ideological overreach, while preserving the symbolic and operational value of the Axis.

Tehran seeks to balance its revolutionary ideals with the realities of its constrained resources and shifting regional dynamics. The ramifications of the path Iran chooses at this crossroads will reverberate across the Middle East. Whether Tehran doubles down on its traditional partner/proxy network, pivots

toward greater reliance on state-based capabilities, or strikes a balance between the two, its decisions will influence regional stability.

For Iran's adversaries, this presents both risk and opportunity. A misreading of Iran's strategic shift as weakness could invite overreach. A narrow focus on regime change or maximalist containment could provoke the very escalation the West hopes to avoid. Conversely, a strategy that recognizes the Axis's frag-

## A misreading of Iran's strategic shift as weakness could invite overreach

mentation, reinforces local resilience, and isolates Iran's remaining leverage points may succeed where past approaches have failed.

The future of the Axis of Resistance will depend not only on Iranian decisions but also on how the region responds. The window for recalibration is narrow—but it is open. Whether Tehran retreats, retrenches, or simply refines its playbook, one thing is

clear: the post-Gaza landscape is no longer defined by the old rules of warfare. Iran's next moves—and those of its adversaries—will define a new phase in Middle East geopolitics.

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