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AXIS OF RESISTANCE AND THE REGIONAL WAR IN MIDDLE EAST: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND POWER TUSLLE

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ABSTRACT:

The Axis of Resistance, a regional alliance led by Iran encompasses Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, and various Iraqi and Syrian militia groups, is undergoing its most profound crisis. Rooted in Iran's post 1979 doctrine of exporting the Islamic Revolution, the Axis leveraged proxy groups to challenge Western powers and regional adversaries across Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This research paper explores the fragility of the Axis amid significant geopolitical shifts, including the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, Israel's intensified military campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon, and the renewed U.S. 'maximum pressure' policy under Trump's second term. Consecutively the paper delves into the internal fault lines, Operational setbacks and diverging political priorities emerging within the Axis factions, which have further fragmented the alliance and weakened Iran's capacity to project power. With Hezbollah and Hamas significantly weakened, Iraqi and Syrian militias distancing themselves, and the Houthis remaining the only operational proxy, Iran is forced to navigate between reinforcing its proxy network or reassessing its defence doctrine. The paper also answers how religion is a critical epicentre of the axis and includes different religious ideologies but often shared political objectives and common enemies outweigh religious differences. It also investigates the evolving roles of the United States and Russia wherein U.S. remains committed to a strategy of economic sanctions, military deterrence, and diplomatic isolation whereas Russia adopts a more pragmatic approach. The Axis's future hinges on Iran's proxy network recovery, U.S.-Israeli pressure, and Russia's role. Despite weakening, it remains a destabilising force, with Tehran needing to manage divisions and recalibrate its strategy amid shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Keywords: Axis Of Resistance, Iran, Hezbollah, Middle East, Role of Religion

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:

1.1 Origins and Formation:

Middle East has remained a centre of geopolitical conflicts, shaped by power struggles,

religious ideologies, and foreign interventions. The concept of the Axis of Resistance emerged in the 80s, largely due to Iran's efforts to create a regional network of allies. The emergence of the Axis of Resistance is linked to a combination of historical, ideological, and political factors. Various theories attempt to explain different factors, and perspectives attributing a central role to the Islamic Republic of Iran.

According to one of the theories, it is suggested that the roots of the Axis lie in Iranian nationalism, which identifies the West as a historical adversary. This view is shaped by key events such as the Qajardynasty's decline in the 19th century, the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran during World War II, and the 1953 CIA-backed coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. These experiences fostered a deep mistrust toward Western powers, particularly the United States.

However, the most widely accepted theory links the formation of the Axis of Resistance directly to the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Since then, Iran and its allies have been locked in a continuous cycle of conflict and instability wherein the 1980 Iraq invasion of Iran marked the start of a series of security, economic, and societal crises that have consistently strained Tehran and its partners. In response, Iran adopted a strategy of "forward defense," utilising asymmetric deterrence capabilities to counter perceived threats, particularly from Israel.^[1] This approach led Iran to support the establishment of armed groups across the Middle East, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Badr Corps in Iraq, and Palestinian factions such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad further. The Quds Force of the IRGC played a key role in fostering ties with these groups, embedding them within their host states through military, ideological, and economic cooperation — ultimately integrating them into a broader regional network to advance shared objectives.

The 1979 revolution transformed Iran into an Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; with his revolution's guiding slogan as, "Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic",^[2] emphasized breaking free from Western dominance and promoting Islamic governance. Khomeini declared his support for the resilient Palestine and Lebanon, calling on Muslims and the oppressed worldwide to rise, unite, and defend Islam.

Khomeini also openly labelled the United States as the "Great Satan" and Israel as a "cancerous tumour" within the Islamic world^[3] particularly defending the vulnerable populations against Israel which became a fundamental pillar of Iran's foreign policy and conclusively laying the groundwork for what later evolved into the Axis of Resistance.

[1] Mansour, R., Al-Shakeri, H., Haid, H., & Chatham House. (2025). The shape-shifting 'axis of resistance': How Iran and its networks adapt to external pressures. In Chatham House

[2] Randjbar-Daemi, S. & Department of History, Royal Holloway, University of London. (2011). Intra-State Relations in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Presidency and the Struggle for Political Authority, 1989-2009.

1.2 From Inception to Influence: The Rise of the Axis of Resistance (1980s–2010s)

The Axis of Resistance began taking shape in the early 1980s as Iran sought to establish a regional alliance; A pivotal moment in this effort was the creation of Hezbollah in 1982, following Israel's invasion of Lebanon. With direct support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah developed into a powerful Shi'a Islamist movement combining militant, political, and social dimensions. Around the same period, Iran forged a strategic partnership with Syria's Assad regime, despite having ideological differences. Their mutual opposition to Israel and Western intervention laid the foundation for an enduring alliance.

By the early 1990s, Iran further extended its influence by supporting Palestinian factions such as Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) wherein Both the groups aligned with Iran's anti-Israel stance, reinforcing the growing network of resistance movements across the region. The early 2000s saw a significant expansion of the Axis of Resistance, particularly after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. The power vacuum left by Saddam Hussein's fall allowed Iran to establish deeper ties with Iraqi Shi'a militias, many of which received training and support from Iran's Quds Force. These developments solidified the Axis as a transnational coalition, positioning it as an ideological and military counterweight to Western and Israeli influence in the Middle East.

Iran increasingly promoted the Axis not just as a military alliance but as a model for Islamic governance, emphasizing resistance against foreign intervention. Ranging from top to bottom towards all Middle East members this period of consolidation set the stage for the Axis of Resistance to play a decisive role in regional conflicts, and further shaping the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and also establishing a foundation for what later became known as the Axis of resistance.

2. KEY ACTORS OF THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE: STRUCTURE, INFLUENCE, AND STRATEGIC ROLES:

2.1 Iran: The Embattled Leader Struggling To Maintain Control:

Iran stands as the undisputed architect of the Axis of Resistance, a coalition bound by shared objectives. The formation and consolidation of this alliance have been pivotal to Iran's broader strategy of establishing itself as a dominant regional power, utilising both ideological influence and geopolitical calculations. Iran's ruling elites seek to push for a U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East through a strategy of continuous resistance, a term frequently highlighted in their rhetoric. This approach not only aims to counter external influence but also holds an inherently offensive nature, with the ultimate objective of dismantling Israel.

The overarching goal is to reshape the region's political landscape in Iran's favour, positioning itself as the preeminent power in the Middle East.

[3] IranWire. (2024, December 6). Iran's shadow network: the axis of resistance explained.

Iran provides the logistical, financial, and ideological backbone that sustains the entire alliance. The foundation of the Axis of Resistance is deeply rooted in the ideological transformation that followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The revolution replaced the U.S.-aligned monarchy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with a theocratic regime under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose doctrine fused political governance with Shi'a Islamic principles. This shift reshaped Iran's foreign policy, emphasising anti-imperialism, opposition to Western powers—particularly the United States and resistance against Israel.

Khomeini's vision extended beyond Iran's borders, advocating for the export of the revolution to unite oppressed Muslims worldwide. This doctrine became the ideological cornerstone of the Axis of Resistance, positioning Iran not merely as a sovereign state but as the leader of a transnational struggle against perceived Western and Zionist oppression.

2.1.1. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC):

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is one of Iran's most influential institutions, playing a central role in the country's military, political, and economic spheres. Established after the 1979 Iranian Revolution,^[4] the IRGC was created as a parallel force to the regular military, reporting directly to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. It was designed to safeguard the Islamic regime and counter internal or external threats. The IRGC operates Iran's ballistic missile arsenal and oversees the Quds Force, its elite unit is responsible for carrying out operations abroad and supporting regional allies like Hezbollah and Hamas. The group's influence extends into Iran's politics, with many former IRGC members occupying key government positions. Additionally, the IRGC has built a vast economic network, benefiting from state contracts and illicit trade to bypass international sanctions. Its growing power has made it a dominant force in both Iran's internal affairs and its foreign policy strategies.

2.1.2. The Quds Corps:

The Quds Force, a special unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), plays a critical role in Iran's regional influence within the Axis of Resistance. Formed in the 1990s and operating independently since 2009, its primary mission is to organize, train, and support Iran-aligned militias across the Middle East.

Under Qassem Soleimani's leadership from 1998 until his assassination in 2020, the QUDS forces expanded its operations and supported Hezbollah during the 2006 Lebanon War, aided Iraqi militias against U.S. forces after the 2003 invasion, and backed Syria's Assad regime in the Syrian Civil War from 2011. The unit also played a key role in the fight against ISIS in Iraq between 2014 and 2017. Despite having not much members in troops, the Quds Force exerts influence through an

[4] CFR.org Editors. (2024, November 13). Iran's Revolutionary Guards. *Council on Foreign Relations*.

extensive network of proxy militias, estimated to comprise between 140,000 and 180,000 fighters^[5]. Combining military, intelligence, and political operations, the Quds Force serves as a cornerstone of Iran's foreign policy strategy to extend its influence across the Middle East.

2.2 Hezbollah: The Shattered Backbone of the Axis:

Hezbollah, meaning Party of God, established in 1980s during the Israeli invasion, is one of the most prominent and powerful groups within the Axis of Resistance operating in Lebanon. Hezbollah was created with the support of Iran's Revolutionary Guards to resist Israeli occupation and improve the socio-political conditions of Lebanon's marginalized Shi'a community.

Over the years, the group has grown into a heavily armed organization with significant political influence. Initially, founded as an armed militia, Hezbollah successfully fought Israeli forces, eventually contributing to the withdrawal of their troops from southern Lebanon in 2000. While the US, Canada, European Union and several other countries have designated the Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation; Hezbollah portrays itself domestically as a legitimate political party. It operates across multiple domains, including its civilian role in social welfare and religious education and its military role carrying out attacks against U.S. and Israeli targets in Lebanon. Hezbollah's relationship with Iran has deepened over time, by receiving financial and military support from Tehran. Iran provides substantial financial support to Hezbollah, with estimates indicating an annual contribution of approximately \$700 million.^[6]

Iran provides these hundreds of millions of dollars annually to Hezbollah for training, weaponry, and operational expenses. This close relationship has made Hezbollah a cornerstone of Iran's regional strategy, aligning it with Iran's Shi'a Islamist ideology and enabling it to support allied movements throughout the Middle East. The dual role of the organisation of combining militant, political, and social elements—has allowed Hezbollah to project significant influence both domestically and regionally, solidifying its role as a key player in the Axis of Resistance and a major adversary of Western and Israeli interests in the Middle East.

2.3 Hamas: A Weakened Force in the Crosshairs:

Hamas an Islamist party and a militia in Gaza, established in 1987. It originated from the Muslim Brotherhood during the First Intifada, functions both as a political entity and a militant group. Hamas's original charter, introduced in 1988, called for the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic state across historic Palestine. However, in May 2017, Hamas issued a revised political document that indicated a conditional acceptance of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 borders, without formally recognizing Israel. The organization operates through two main

[5] Steinberg, G. & Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik. (2021). The "Axis of Resistance": Iran's Expansion in the Middle East Is Hitting a Wall. In SWP Research Paper (Vol. 6) [Report]. Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik

[6]. Karam, J. (2021, July 6). Iran pays Hezbollah \$700 million a year, US official says. *The National*.

branches. The political wing governs the Gaza Strip, providing social services, education, and humanitarian aid to Palestinians. The military wing, known as the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades that carries out armed operations against Israel, including rocket attacks, suicide bombings, and cross-border incursions.

The United States designated Hamas as a Foreign Terrorist Organization since 1997. Despite sectarian differences, Hamas aligns with Iran within the Axis of Resistance. With Iran's financial, military training, and weaponry support which began in early 1990s, pledging around \$30 million annually along with military training,^[7] The partnership has deepened until the Syrian civil war in 2011, when Hamas supported the Sunni opposition against Iran-backed President Bashar al-Assad, leading Iran to cut funding.

By 2017 again relations were restored, with Iran resuming financial and military support, In 2018, Israeli media reported that Iran was transferring some \$70 million a year, or \$5.83 million a month, to Hamas.^[7] Iran's assistance included weapons technology, enabling Hamas to manufacture its own weaponry. The relationship grew stronger following the assassination of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in 2020, with Hamas publicly mourning his death and Iran's attack on Israel in 2021, reinforcing the group's integral role in Iran's broader regional strategy. Overall the Hamas's trajectory from a grassroots movement to a central player in the Axis of Resistance highlights its adaptability and the complex dynamics of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

2.4 Houthis: Iran's Lone Spearhead In A Shrinking Network:

The Houthis, officially known as Ansar Allah, are a Yemeni political and military movement that emerged in the 1990s under the leadership of Hussein Badruddin al-Houthi. Rooted in the Shia community, the group initially operated as a political and religious movement advocating for the protection of Zaydi cultural and religious identity which Over time, adopted a more militant methods, inspired by Hezbollah, and began opposing the Yemeni government, Saudi Arabia, and Western influence in the region.

Their role within the Axis of Resistance became more prominent in the late 2000s as their alliance with Iran deepened. Iran's support, which includes weapons, funding, and training through the IRGC and Hezbollah, allowed the Houthis to expand their military capabilities. This partnership benefits Iran by giving it strategic leverage over Saudi Arabia and controlling critical maritime routes like the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Despite differences in religious doctrine between the Houthis' Zaydi Shia roots and Iran's Twelver Shia ideology, their mutual opposition to Western influence, Israel, and Sunni Arab states has solidified their alliance. The Houthis have played an increasingly active role in the Axis of Resistance, launching missile attacks against Israel and targeting international shipping routes and to pressure regional adversaries.

[7] Levin, D. (2023, October 11). History of Iran, Hamas & Islamic Jihad ties. The Iran Primer.

Through Iranian backing, the Houthis have evolved from a local insurgency into a significant player in the Middle East, extending Iran's influence and contributing to broader regional instability and positioning themselves as Iran's New Hezbollah. Although The Houthis have not been globally designated as a terrorist organization, but they are recognized as such by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

2.5 Syria: The Collapse of the Axis's Strategic Heartland:

Syria, under the leadership of President Bashar al-Assad, is a pivotal member, serving as a crucial logistical and strategic hub for the alliance. Its partnership with Iran dates back to the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) when both nations opposed Saddam Hussein's Iraq, which was supported by Western powers and Gulf Arab states. Over the decades, this relationship has strengthened, with Syria playing a key role in facilitating Iranian support to Hezbollah in Lebanon and various Palestinian factions.

While Syria itself has not played a direct role in recent regional conflicts, its territory has become a battleground for escalating tensions. For instance Iran-backed militias have launched attacks on U.S. forces stationed in eastern Syria, while Israel has conducted numerous airstrikes targeting Iranian personnel, military installations, and Hezbollah operatives within the country. The partnership between Iran and Syria is built on mutual strategic and economic benefits for example Since 2014, Iran has supported the Assad regime through two primary channels. The first involves extending two lines of credit for importing Iranian goods, including arms, amounting to approximately USD 2 billion. The second channel involves the daily transfer of around 70,000 barrels of oil to Syria, which accounts for two-thirds of Syria's total consumption, with an accumulated value exceeding USD 6 billion. Overall, in the past three years, Iran has delivered approximately USD 8 billion in direct economic aid to Syria,^[8] excluding the hundreds of millions of dollars annually allocated for direct military assistance.

In return for its support, Iran has demanded Syrian economic concessions. The most strategically significant concession is the right to construct a sea port in Syria, which is officially designated for commercial use but can also serve military purposes. Syria's strategic location and its long-standing alliance with Iran make it an essential link in the Axis of Resistance, enabling the flow of arms, resources, and coordination among its members. Despite internal challenges stemming from the ongoing civil war, Syria also remains a critical player in the broader effort to counter U.S. and Israeli influence in the region.

2.6 Palestinian Islamic Jihad:

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is a Sunni Islamist militant organization founded in 1979 by Fathi Shikaki and Abd al Aziz Awda in Egypt as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.

[8] Iran's economic gains in Syria. (2018, January 9). The Israel Defense Forces.

The group emerged as a more radical alternative, believing that the Brotherhood's approach was too moderate regarding the Palestinian cause. After being expelled from Egypt in 1981, PIJ relocated to Gaza and later Lebanon, where it established close ties with Iran and Hezbollah. PIJ's primary objective is the liberation of Palestine through armed struggle and the establishment of an Islamic state. Unlike Hamas, PIJ focuses exclusively on military resistance rather than providing social services. The group's military wing, Al-Quds Brigades, has been responsible for numerous attacks, including suicide bombings, rocket strikes, and cross-border raids against Israeli targets.

Iran has played a crucial role in funding, arming, and training PIJ fighters since the late 1980s. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Hezbollah have provided military training, while Tehran has supplied weapons such as Fajr-5 rockets and financial aid. According to Lieutenant-General Gadi Eizenkot, the chief of staff of Israel's armed forces, Iran's financial investment in the Palestinian arena has increased significantly in recent months, with annual funding in Gaza for Hamas and Islamic Jihad reaching \$100 million as of January 2018. Later, Israeli media reported that Iran was transferring around \$30 million per year; approximately \$2.5 million each month — to Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ).^[9]

Conclusively Iran remains PIJ's most significant backer, positioning the group as a key member of the Axis of Resistance alongside Hamas and Hezbollah.

3. FAITH, POWER, AND STRATEGY: THE IDEOLOGICAL GLUE OF THE AXIS:

One of the most debated aspects of the Axis of Resistance is the role of religion. While many of its members are Shiite Muslim groups, the inclusion of Sunni organisations like Hamas challenges the idea that sectarian identity is the primary factor in its formation. Instead, shared political objectives and common enemies often outweigh religious differences. This raises important questions: Is the Axis primarily a religious movement, or is it a strategic alliance that uses religion as a tool for political legitimacy?

Religion, particularly Shi'a Islam, serves as a foundational element in the cohesion and operational strategies of the Axis of Resistance. The alliance is predominantly composed of Shi'a-majority entities, and their shared religious beliefs significantly influence their political ideologies and actions.

Central to Iran's political and religious ideology is the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which grants the Supreme Leader ultimate authority over both religious and political matters. This doctrine has been instrumental in shaping Iran's domestic and foreign policies, positioning the country as the leader of the Shi'a Islamic world. Iran's commitment to this ideology extends beyond its borders, as it seeks to unite and support Shi'a communities and

[9] Levin, D. (2023, October 11). History of Iran, Hamas & Islamic Jihad ties. The Iran Primer.

movements across the Middle East under its leadership.

Hezbollah, as an extension of Iran's influence in Lebanon, embodies the principles of Wilayat al-Faqih wherein the group's leadership pledges allegiance to Iran's Supreme Leader, and its political and military strategies are closely aligned with Iranian directives. This religious and ideological alignment has facilitated a seamless partnership between Iran and Hezbollah, enabling coordinated efforts in pursuing their shared objectives. While the Axis is primarily Shi'a, it has demonstrated a pragmatic approach by collaborating with Sunni groups that share common political goals. A notable example is the alliance with Hamas, a Sunni Islamist organisation in Palestine. Despite theological differences, Iran has extended support to Hamas, recognising their mutual interest in opposing Israeli policies. This collaboration underscores the Axis's flexibility in prioritising political objectives over sectarian divisions when advantageous. The ideological frameworks within the Axis are not monolithic. For instance, Syria, under the Assad regime, adheres to a secular Ba'athist ideology, which contrasts with the theocratic governance of Iran. However, their shared strategic interests, particularly in countering Western influence and maintaining regional stability, have facilitated a strong alliance. This partnership highlights the Axis's capacity to bridge ideological disparities in pursuit of common goals.

Religion also plays a crucial role in mobilising support and legitimising the actions of Axis members. The invocation of religious duty and protection of holy sites resonates deeply within their constituencies, fostering a sense of unity and purpose. For example, Iran's call to defend the Shi'a holy sites in Syria and Iraq have galvanised support from various militias and volunteers across the region, reinforcing the Axis's collective resolve. In summary, while the Axis of Resistance is rooted in a shared commitment to countering Western and Israeli influence, the specific role of religion and the various ideologies of its members significantly shape their understanding, operations, and cohesion.

4. UNITED BY RESISTANCE:

The groups within the Axis of Resistance share deep political and ideological connections, yet they operate as nationalist organizations with distinct domestic interests and ambitions. These interests often centre around improving the livelihoods of Shi'a communities and gaining political power within their respective countries. This shared struggle is framed as resistance, or muqawama, encompassing various forms: resistance against occupation, oppressive regimes, and imperialist or hegemonic powers.

This narrative of resistance is rooted in Shi'a ideology, particularly the concept of oppressors vs. the oppressed, which originates from the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE. Hussein's martyrdom has become a symbol of Shi'a resistance, inspiring movements like Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and

Shi'ite militias in Iraq to unite under the banner of the Axis of Resistance. Each group carries out its own form of resistance: Hezbollah against Israeli occupation in southern Lebanon, the Houthis against the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and armed Shi'ite groups in Iraq targeting ISIS and U.S. forces.

Recently, these groups have further united in their resistance against Israel, particularly during the war in Gaza, aligning with Iran's broader strategy of countering U.S. and Israeli influence in the Middle East. While the extent of Iran's direct control over these groups is debated, Iran consistently denies ordering specific attacks, claiming that each faction acts independently to oppose aggression and occupation. However, the rise in coordinated military operations suggests these groups are becoming increasingly central to Iran's strategy of expanding its influence and challenging U.S. dominance in the region.

5. U.S. STRATEGIC OFFENSIVE: DISMANTLING IRAN'S REGIONAL NETWORK:

The United States has adopted a comprehensive and multifaceted strategy to counter Iran and its Axis of Resistance, which includes Iranian-backed groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis, and various militias in Iraq and Syria. This strategy revolves around four core pillars — military deterrence, economic pressure, diplomatic isolation, and regional cooperation — aimed at safeguarding U.S. interests and maintaining stability in the Middle East.

Military deterrence forms the cornerstone of this policy, with approximately 40,000 U.S. troops stationed across key Gulf states, Iraq, and Syria.^[10] These forces bolster regional defence systems through advanced air defence infrastructure, naval fleets, and missile defence capabilities. The U.S. collaborates closely with allies such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel to protect critical maritime routes like the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait, while simultaneously supporting local partners in combating ISIS and disrupting Iran's arms smuggling networks. The military footprint is spread across at least 19 bases, including permanent facilities in Bahrain, Qatar, Iraq, Kuwait, and the UAE. Bahrain serves as a strategic hub by hosting the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, while Qatar accommodates U.S. Central Command's regional headquarters.^[10] Additionally, the Pentagon responded to rising hostilities between Israel and Iran in 2024 by deploying more aircraft squadrons and intercepting Iranian missile attacks against Israel.

Alongside its military posture, the U.S. employs targeted economic sanctions to cripple Iran's financial networks and limit its ability to fund proxy groups. These sanctions focus on arms transfers, drone exports, and dual-use technologies, with special attention on Iranian drone sales to Russia, Africa, and Latin America which is a key revenue source for the regime.

The U.S. also simultaneously conducts proportional retaliatory strikes against Iranian-backed

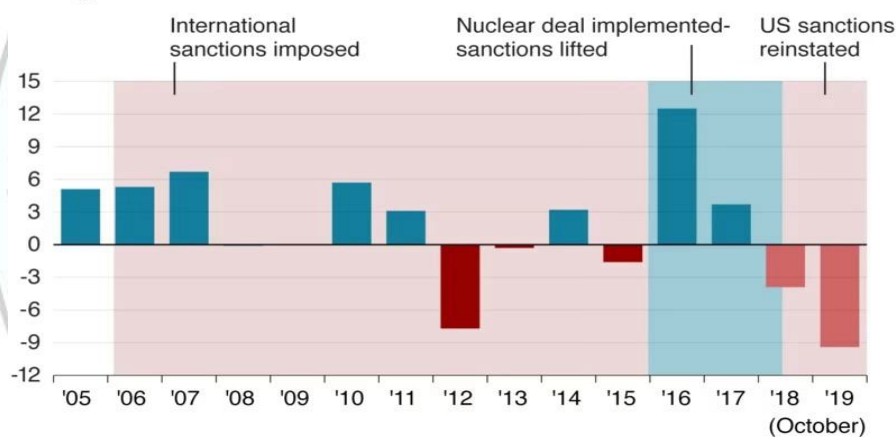
[10] Masters, J. (2024, October 1). U.S. Troops in the Middle East: Mapping the Military Presence. *Council on Foreign Relations*.

militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, while carefully avoiding direct military escalation against Iran itself. Washington also pursues a nuclear non-proliferation strategy by applying economic pressure and urging European allies to invoke snapback sanctions under UN Resolution 2231 if Iran breaches its nuclear obligations.

Diplomatic efforts further isolate Iran by building coalitions with countries like South Korea, Australia, and Japan, and pressuring China which is Iran's largest oil buyer to reduce economic ties. Despite these pressure tactics, the U.S. incorporates a bipartisan long-term strategy that combines sanctions with diplomatic incentives, offering limited sanctions relief if Iran scales back both its nuclear program and proxy warfare. This approach balances pressure with humanitarian considerations, allowing the export of non-military goods such as food, medicine, carpets, and pistachios to minimize the impact on ordinary Iranians. Additionally, Washington also advocates for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as part of its broader vision for regional integration, recognizing that unresolved conflicts provide fertile ground for Iran to expand its proxy network.

Economic growth in Iran

GDP growth rate %



Source: Central Bank of Iran, IMF

BBC

GDP wise Economic Growth in Iran ^[11]

6. IRAN'S WANING INFLUENCE: THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE AT A CROSSROADS:

Iran's Axis of Resistance faces its gravest crisis in decades, with the chain of events fracturing the alliance and significantly degrading its key members. The overthrow of Bashar Assad's brutal regime in Syria has seen the collapse of one of the cornerstones in Iran's regional politics and the emergence of new power dynamics in the volatile region.

Ali Akbar Velayati, a key adviser to Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, once called Assad and Syria "the golden ring of the resistance chain in the region."

[11]BBC News. (2019, December 9). *Six charts that show how hard US sanctions have hit Iran.*

Without the Syrian government, this chain will break and the resistance against Israel and its supporters will be weakened” he said. ^[12]

The faultiness caused by Israel’s aggression in Gaza since Oct. 7, 2023, and more recently in Lebanon have shaken Iranian regional influence and destabilized its proxy networks. Iran has suffered an unprecedented blow to its desire for regional dominance. Currently viewing the situation Iran is likened to an octopus with its arms cut off, but Tehran will definitely re-evaluate its defence doctrine, which is essentially based on its Axis of Resistance.

From The Houthis in Yemen, to the Hamas and militia groups in Iraq had opportunistically created Axis of Resistance, which gave Tehran strategic depth in the region. However, the scope for manoeuvring by Iran will be limited, with an unpredictable and fiercely anti-Tehran new President of the United States, Donald Trump, set to begin his second term at the White House.

Since the start of the Gaza war in October 2023, the U.S.’s all-weather ally Israel has dealt several crippling blows to Iran. Lebanese Hezbollah, the strongest pillar of Iran’s proxy network in terms of doctrinal and operational aspects, was weakened after Israel targeted the group with an unprecedented pager attack and separately killed its longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah and almost the entire executive cadre within a short time. After such losses, Hezbollah was forced to shrink up and withdraw its field support to Assad, which is said to be one of the reasons for the quick fall of the regime. Israel’s assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and the elimination of his successor Yahya Sinwar further undermined the network.

With the collapse of the Assad regime, Tehran’s access to its proxy network in Lebanon and Palestine has been significantly restricted, a factor that will push Tehran back in regional politics. At the same time Some Iran-backed Iraqi militia groups within the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), the state-sponsored Iraqi paramilitary units, have been operating in Syria on behalf of Iran since 2012 but even, their rhetoric instantly changed with the collapse of the regime on . In fact, head Falih Al-Fayyadh said that Iraq is committed to supporting Syria’s stability and refraining from interfering in its internal affairs. Tehran is concerned that uncontrollable instability in Iraq would increase the risk to its borders and regime. However, even if Iran-backed Iraqi militias do not want a Sunni-dominated Syrian state, they may accept the new reality and not want to be part of an unpredictable adventure for now.

The U.S. in 2018 unilaterally withdrew from the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).^[13] Also Trump dealt the biggest blow to Tehran when he ordered the killing of Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani – the mastermind of

[12] “Break in the Chain”: Fall of Assad deals blow to Iran’s global “Axis of Resistance.” (2024, December 8). The Times of Israel.

[13] *President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal – The White House.* (2018, May 8). The White House.

controlling Iran's proxy networks consecutively afterwards. The recent election of Donald Trump, the president has ushered in a more confrontational U.S. stance toward Iran and its allies.

The administration's "maximum pressure" campaign, reinstated through a National Security Presidential Memorandum, that aims to deny Iran any path to nuclear weapons and counter its regional influence. This strategy includes imposing stringent economic sanctions targeting Iran's financial networks, particularly those funding proxy groups, and enforcing measures to drive Iran's oil exports to zero.^[14] Additionally, the U.S. seeks to neutralize Iran's terrorist networks and counter its development of missile capabilities.

Concurrently, Russia has offered to mediate between the U.S. and Iran, reflecting Moscow's strategic interest in balancing relations with both nations. This mediation proposal aligns with Russia's broader strategy to expand its influence in the Middle East and maintain stability in its partnerships. The dynamics are further complicated by the Iranian-Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, signed on January 17, 2025. This 20-year agreement aims to expand economic cooperation, mitigate the impact of U.S. sanctions, and strengthen military and political partnerships between Moscow and Tehran.^[15] The treaty covers various areas, including defence, counter-terrorism, energy, finance, and culture, indicating a deepening alliance that could counterbalance U.S. efforts to isolate Iran.

7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE OUTLOOK:

The Axis of Resistance, once a formidable alliance reshaping the Middle East's geopolitical landscape, now faces its gravest existential crisis since its inception. The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has fractured one of the most vital pillars of the alliance, severing Iran's crucial land bridge to its proxy networks in Lebanon and Palestine. The successive blows inflicted by Israel's military campaigns in Lebanon, the Gaza war, and the assassination of high-profile leaders such as Hassan Nasrallah and Ismail Haniyeh have further weakened the Axis's operational capacity. Additionally, "the U.S. maximum pressure campaign under Donald Trump's renewed presidency"^[16] and the strategic isolation of Iran through military deterrence and sanctions have significantly constrained Tehran's ability to sustain its proxy network. Donald Trump's latest strategic move to share "the AI-generated Trump Gaza video" aligns with his broader strategy of reframing Middle East conflicts through an economic and transactional lens.^[17] By portraying Gaza as a potential luxury destination, Trump seeks to push the narrative that economic prosperity, rather than political

[14] Alaca, M. (2025, January 20). Can Iran find a solution to the downfall of its Axis of Resistance? | Daily Sabah. *Daily Sabah*. <https://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/op-ed/can-iran-find-a-solution-to-the-downfall-of-its-axis-of-resistance/amp>

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concessions, is the key to resolving regional tensions.

This move indirectly undermines Iran and its Axis of Resistance by shifting focus away from armed resistance and towards greater economic reconstruction. For Iran-backed groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, this portrayal of Gaza as a future business hub threatens to delegitimize their cause and weaken their public support. Additionally, the video fuels tensions by reinforcing the perception that U.S. policy is dismissive of Palestinian suffering, further alienating Arab nations that are already cautious of Trump's pro-Israel stance.

However, while the Axis of Resistance faces internal fragmentation and declining influence, its ideology of *muqawama* (resistance) remains deeply embedded within Shi'a and broader Islamist movements across the region. Iran's longstanding doctrine of asymmetric warfare — using proxies as instruments of power projection — is likely to persist as the regime recalibrates its strategy. The Houthis in Yemen, one of the few remaining operational allies of Iran, are expected to play a more central role in Tehran's regional strategy, especially in exerting pressure on Gulf states and disrupting maritime trade routes. Moreover, Iran may seek to exploit emerging alliances with non-regional powers like Russia under the recently signed Iranian–Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025), as a means to circumvent U.S. sanctions and bolster its economic and military capabilities.

The future trajectory of the Axis will largely depend on three key factors:

1. Iran's ability to rebuild its proxy network post-Syria collapse
2. The intensity of U.S. and Israeli pressure campaigns under the Trump administration
3. Russia's evolving role as a strategic partner and mediator in Middle Eastern conflicts

Despite its current fragility, the Axis remains a persistent threat to regional stability due to its ideological resilience and decentralized operational structure. Iran's strategic pivot could involve reviving its nuclear and missile programs to strengthen deterrence capabilities or instrumentalizing the Houthis and Iraqi militias to escalate conflicts in the Gulf region. Conversely, Tehran may temporarily adopt a more cautious posture, seeking a diplomatic accommodation with the United States to ease sanctions and mitigate further isolation.

In this volatile geopolitical environment, the Axis of Resistance stands at a crossroads — either to endure as a diminished yet adaptable force or to fragment under the combined pressures of external military campaigns, internal divisions, and shifting power dynamics. The coming years will determine whether Iran can salvage its proxy network or whether the Axis of Resistance will crumble — leaving behind a fractured region vulnerable to new power struggles and emerging alliances.

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