

HAMAS, HEZBOLLAH AND THE HOUTHIS: IRAN'S “AXIS OF RESISTANCE”



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INTRODUCTION: IRAN'S AXIS OF RESISTANCE



Iran's regional affiliates/ [Council on Foreign Relations](#), Iran's regional armed network, updated 15 April 2024, CC BY-NC-ND-4.0

Iran's "Axis of Resistance" is a network of armed, Islamist extremist actors supported by Iran. This axis threatens the interests and security of the UK and its allies, seeking to expel western influence from the Middle East, block a two-state solution and Arab-Israeli normalisation, and ultimately destroy Israel. For Tehran, this is not only an ideological and theological imperative, but one it exploits in the competition for regional legitimacy. This competition is exacerbated by ethnic and sectarian differences between Iran, which is non-Arab and has a Shia majority, and its Sunni-Arab rivals, especially Saudi Arabia. But while Iran's most loyal proxies are those belonging to the same branch of Shia Islam, such as Hezbollah, Iran is ready to extend support to non-Shia actors, such as Hamas, if they share strategic interests. The war launched by Hamas on 7 October has brought about an unprecedented level of coordination between the Axis members forcing Israel to fight a multi-front conflict for close to a year.

The Iranian regime considers itself in a struggle for regional hegemony against the US and its allies. Its strategy is to empower proxies that share its revisionist agenda – regardless of sectarian differences – within weak or failed states. By utilising these proxies, especially those on the borders of its enemies, and fighting

through them, Iran largely avoids direct retaliation against its own territory, allowing others to bear the costs for its actions.

Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, are members of this axis, which also includes Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), as well as the Assad regime in Syria and Shia militias in Iraq. Iran has long sponsored Hamas and PIJ in the Gaza Strip and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Over the last decade or so, it has also helped turn the Houthis in Yemen into a powerful military actor. Iran and Hezbollah helped save the Assad regime in Syria, where the Iranian Republic Guard Corps (IRGC) retains a major presence.

Iran also exploited the destabilisation of Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein to exert its influence on the Shia population including arming and training militias with the purpose of dominating Iraq against foreign powers (including UK forces after the 2003 invasion) and domestic rivals, and supporting Iran's regional agenda including in Syria. The domination by Iran of Shia groups in Iraq enables Iran to control a corridor extending from Iran through Iraq and Syria to Israel's borders on the Golan Heights and South Lebanon. Iraqi Shia militias have also claimed direct rocket and drone attacks on Israel.

The increasingly radical IRGC is the agency that leads this effort. The IRGC is the ideological vanguard of the Iranian regime, founded on a mission to secure and export Iran's "Islamic revolution", and seeing itself in a struggle with a "Arab-Zionist-western axis". The IRGC's Quds Force is an extraterritorial unit that operates sophisticated networks to smuggle advanced weapons including ballistic missiles and provide training and resources to these groups. Because the IRGC does not recognise sovereign borders, it is ideologically "hardwired" to create, strengthen and spread non-state proxies.

The IRGC also threatens opponents and seeks to radicalise sympathisers in the UK. According to a recent House of Commons Library briefing the IRGC has been linked to 15 kidnap and assassination plots in Britain since 2020, included threats to journalists and attempts to collect intelligence on UK-based individuals linked to Iran or Israel. IRGC members have also given antisemitic speeches to British students. In opposition, Labour said it supported proscribing the IRGC. The party's general election manifesto said: "Labour will take the approach used for dealing with non-state terrorism and adapt it to deal with state-based domestic security threats," and in early September David Lammy announced new sanctions against individuals with the IRGC and an IRGC unit.

This Axis directly threatens not only Israel but western-aligned Arab states that are partners for the UK, including Gulf Cooperation Council countries, as well as Jordan and Egypt. It also threatens energy infrastructure and trade routes of global significance, including the Houthi threat to shipping in the Red Sea.

Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons capability would further embolden Iran in its regional strategy and create the risk of proliferation to its proxies.

The will and capability of this Axis to sustain an attritional multi-front war against Israel with apparent indifference to the costs on their own side, represents a grave challenge for Israel. The ability to make life in Israel inherently insecure, and force the evacuation of tens of thousands of Israeli civilians from border areas, is perceived by Israelis as an existential threat. It makes future territorial concessions to the Palestinians difficult for most Israelis to envisage.

To understand the current conflict and the struggle for the future of the region it is vital to understand the motivations and capabilities of these regional actors. Each has a history, identity and agenda specific to their social and political context, and distinct capabilities, threats and prospects.

Working with allies to confront this Axis and its agenda is central to protecting UK interests and advancing an inclusive vision for the region based on a two-state solution and Arab-Israeli normalisation.

HAMAS: ENEMY OF THE OSLO PEACE PROCESS



Members of Hamas' Al Qassam Brigades, Gaza City/ Mohammed Asad Apaimages/APA Images

The devastating attack launched by Hamas on 7 October is a turning point for the terror group. With its Gaza regime now in ruins and many of its leaders killed, its future will depend on the outcome of the war.

Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya or Islamic Resistance Movement) is a Palestinian Sunni-Islamist movement founded with the goal of destroying Israel through armed Jihad and replacing it with an Islamic state. It was founded out of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1988 in the early stages of the first intifada. Its goals and ideology blend Palestinian nationalism with violent Islamist Jihadism. Citing the Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, its founding charter declares that "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it." In line with wider Muslim Brotherhood thought, the charter depicts the movement as being engaged in an apocalyptic struggle with Jews, who are depicted as a demonic threat to the world. Hamas' "military wing" was designated as a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK in 2001, and in 2021 this was extended to cover the entire movement.

Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s Hamas – assisted by Iran and Hezbollah – played a major role in scuppering the Oslo process through terrorist attacks, especially suicide bombings on buses and cafes. It was a central actor in the second intifada, with dozens of attacks including the 2001 Dolphinarium discotheque bombing in Tel Aviv (in which 21 people, most of whom were teenage girls, were killed) and the 2002 Park Hotel Passover massacre in Netanya (in which 30, mainly elderly people, were killed, including a number of Holocaust survivors). The Park Hotel attack coincided with the 2002 Arab League summit in Beirut which adopted the Arab Peace Initiative, a Saudi-backed proposal opposed by Hamas. It offered the prospect of a two-state solution and the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab world.



Former Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh meets Iranian paymaster Ali Khamenei in Tehran, 2012/
Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-NC-ND-4.0](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ismail_Haniyeh_meets_Ali_Khamenei.jpg)

In the early 2000s, Hamas began developing rocket technology with help from Iran and Hezbollah, and used the Gaza Strip as a base to fire rockets indiscriminately at Israeli towns. These attacks greatly increased after Israel unilaterally withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005. In 2006, Hamas defeated its secular nationalist rival Fatah in Palestinian legislative elections and formed a government. Shortly afterwards, Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit was captured in a cross-border raid from Gaza, triggering the first major Israeli incursions after the 2005 withdrawal.

In 2007 a mini-civil war broke out in the Gaza Strip, with Hamas ejecting Fatah forces loyal to the Palestinian Authority (PA) president, Mahmoud Abbas. Hamas established an authoritarian regime, promoting Islamisation in the Gaza Strip and suppressing dissent, while maintaining its war with Israel. Together with Egypt, Israel tightly restricted movement and access into the territory, and western governments avoided contact with Hamas. From 2007 Hamas sought to keep control of Gaza while destabilising its rivals in the Fatah-dominated PA in the West Bank, and building its ability to strike at Israel.

With assistance from Iran and Hezbollah, Hamas increased the range, quantity and lethality of its arsenal over several rounds of conflict with Israel (2009, 2012, 2014, 2021). Using domestically produced rockets and missiles smuggled from Iran, Hamas developed the ability to strike most Israeli population centres. While relations between Iran and Hamas became strained following the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011 – the former backed the Assad regime, while the latter supported its opponents – they were restored over time.

In 2017, Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip Yahya al-Sinwar described Iran as Hamas’ “largest backer financially and militarily”, with Iranian commanders proudly taking credit for Hamas’ military capabilities. Some reports indicate the scale of support to Hamas’s military being up to \$350m a year. Hamas also receives diplomatic support from Muslim Brotherhood-aligned governments in Turkey and Qatar. Qatar provides economic assistance and hosts Hamas’ political bureau in Doha, while Turkey also hosts Hamas leaders and serves as a financial clearing house for Islamist terror groups, including Hamas.

At times, Hamas has shown internal variations over strategy. In 2017, it issued a seemingly more moderate version of its political programme. This referred to a Palestinian state on the territories captured in 1967 as “a formula of national consensus” while still stressing its commitment to the goal of eliminating Israel. Hamas’ leadership is physically divided between the Gaza Strip and Qatar, but also has internal divisions over how handle ceasefire talks. Sinwar is generally considered to be more hardline in the talks that some of his Qatari-based colleagues, who have greater concern for the movement’s regional diplomatic position. After the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Iran in August, Sinwar was elected to head the political bureau, in effect becoming the dominant leader of the entire organisation.

“With assistance from Iran and Hezbollah, Hamas increased the range, quantity and lethality of its arsenal over several rounds of conflict with Israel”

After an escalation in 2021 Hamas agreed a ceasefire with Israel, leading to eased restrictions on movement and access, including 20,000 Gazans entering Israel to work. The resilience of this ceasefire led to an erroneous belief in Israel that Hamas was interested in stabilising the situation inside the Gaza Strip, and not in military escalation. In reality, Hamas was preparing for 7 October.

The October 7 attack revealed Hamas capabilities had attained a far greater level than had been previously realised, including drones and motorised gliders deployed under the cover of massive rocket fire, and a huge underground military infrastructure inside the Gaza Strip. Hamas embedded its military entirely within and beneath civilian infrastructure, including schools, homes, mosques and hospitals, and UN facilities. Hamas invested immense resources to construct the huge “Gaza Metro” tunnel network (estimated to be 350-450 miles). Hamas’ strategy, confirmed in intercepted messages sent by Sinwar, is to ensure Israel cannot attack without causing civilian casualties, which creates escalating diplomatic pressure on Israel to stop.

Hamas’ military infrastructure, commanders, and brigades have been devastated by the IDF but if it still controls the Gaza Strip after the war it will have the chance to rebuild, and the Iranian-led axis will claim a major victory. It will also be impossible to restore PA governance under these conditions. This explains why Sinwar has repeatedly rejected ceasefire proposals, despite the immense destruction, death and suffering in the Gaza Strip.

HEZBOLLAH: THE WORLD'S MOST HEAVILY ARMED NON-STATE ACTOR



Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah/Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-NC-ND-4.0

The Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah – the most powerful and loyal of Iran’s regional proxies – began firing at Israel on 8 October, and has engaged in an unrelenting war of attrition threatening to erupt into a devastating full-scale war.

Iran played an instrumental role in the formation of Hezbollah within the Shia population of Lebanon in the early 1980s, following the Israeli invasion during the first Lebanon war. The organisation, led by Hassan Nasrallah since 1992, is religiously and ideologically aligned with the regime of the Ayatollahs and politically loyal to Tehran. Hezbollah seeks to minimise the influence of western powers in the region, eliminate Israel and dominate Lebanon. The [US Treasury reckoned](#) in 2018 that Hezbollah received \$700m

a year from Tehran, amounting to 70 percent of its revenue, although this figure dropped when the US reimposed sanctions on Iran in 2018.

Hezbollah fought a guerrilla campaign against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon and fired rockets into northern Israeli towns until Israel's withdrawal in 2000. Hezbollah has since used Israel's ongoing presence in disputed border areas, including the Sheba Farms, to justify continuing violence and a refusal to disarm in defiance of UN resolutions. It launched cross-border raids to capture and kill Israeli soldiers in 2000, and again in 2006, triggering the seven-week second Lebanon war.

Hezbollah is responsible for many notorious terrorist attacks against international targets. It orchestrated the 1983 bombing of a US Marine and French paratrooper barracks in Beirut, killing 299 servicemen. It has also perpetrated terror attacks around the world. These include the 1992 attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires killing 29; the 1994 attack on the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires that killed 85; and the 2012 Burgas bus bombing that killed five Israeli tourists and their driver. In 2015, UK security forces uncovered a stockpile of explosives in a Hezbollah bomb factory in London. In 2019, the UK proscription of Hezbollah's military wing was expanded to include the organisation in its entirety.



The explosion at the US Marine Corps building, Beirut, October 1983/
USMC, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-NC-ND-4.0

Hezbollah also operates a global criminal-financial network trafficking drugs in Europe as well as Africa and Latin America. A 2022 Europol [report](#) stated: “The network of collaborators built by Hezbollah in the EU is suspected of managing the transportation and distribution of illegal drugs into the EU, dealing with firearms trafficking and running professional money laundering operations.”

With Iranian arms and money, Hezbollah has become the most potent non-state military actor in the Middle East. In 2018, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies labelled it “[the world's most heavily armed non-state actor](#)”, while Israeli military experts note that it has “a larger arsenal of artillery than most nations enjoy”. Hezbollah has an [estimated](#) 50,000 fighters and an estimated arsenal of more than 150,000 rockets, missiles and drones, some of them precision guided, and able to carry up to 450kg warheads up to 1000km. Its forces played a significant role saving the Assad regime in Syria, and include the elite Radwan special forces. It trains and supports Iran's other proxies, including Hamas and the Houthis, as well as Shia militias in Iraq. Hezbollah's massive rocket arsenal has been widely seen as part of Iran's deterrence against a potential Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities.

Hezbollah is the most powerful sectarian actor in the weak and fractured multi-confessional Lebanese state. Since the 1990s, Hezbollah has participated in Lebanese electoral politics, holding seats in parliament and in each Lebanese government over the past two decades. Since its forces are more powerful than those of the official western-backed Lebanese Armed Forces it [acts with impunity](#), especially in its strongholds in southern Lebanon and Dahiya neighbourhood of Beirut. Hezbollah [operatives](#) carried out the 2005

assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri in Beirut that also killed 21 others. Since 2022, Hezbollah has been blocking the appointment of a new Lebanese president. Despite UN security council resolution 1701 requiring Hezbollah be disarmed, and a 10,000-strong UN force mandated to assist in its implementation, the Lebanese Armed Forces are unable to act.

The situation on the Israel-Lebanon border has transformed since 7 October, with daily clashes and an Israeli determination that Hezbollah's threat can no longer be tolerated. A ceasefire had kept the border largely quiet from the end of the 2006 war. Immediately after 7 October, fearing an attack like that launched by Hamas from Hezbollah's Radwan fighters, Israel evacuated around 80,000 civilians from the border areas. Beginning on 8 October, Hezbollah has launched close to 3,000 cross-border missile attacks using a range of rockets, guided anti-tank weapons and drones, killing (as of 25 August 2024) 22 soldiers and 25 civilians. Nasrallah's actions have attempted to strike a balance between maintaining military pressure on Israel and avoiding a full-scale military conflict. While focusing its main military efforts against Hamas, Israel has kept its responses against Hezbollah highly targeted. It has killed more than 450 Hezbollah fighters in airstrikes, including many commanders, with close to 130 Lebanese civilians reported killed. More than 100,000 Lebanese civilians are reported to have evacuated from southern Lebanon.

On 30 July, Israel carried out a precision strike that killed Hezbollah's veteran senior military commander, Fuad Shukur, in Beirut, leading Hezbollah to threaten a major retaliation, and raising fears of a devastating full-scale war. Early on the morning of 25 August, Israel carried out a pre-emptive wave of airstrikes on Hezbollah rocket positions preparing to launch, apparently greatly limiting a sizeable planned Hezbollah attack. Hezbollah nonetheless claimed that it had successfully carried out the "first phase" of its promised retaliation, and since then exchanges of fire have continued at previous levels.

"In 2015, UK security forces uncovered a stockpile of explosives in a Hezbollah bomb factory in London"

Were Hezbollah to attempt to unleash its full force for a sustained period, its massive arsenal of rockets and drones Hezbollah could target population centres across Israel and potentially overwhelm Israeli missile defences. With precision-guided missiles and drones, Hezbollah could target Israeli power plants, airbases, chemical plants, ports and airports, offshore gas facilities and other infrastructure. Faced with this threat, Israel could launch a massive offensive targeting Hezbollah military infrastructure and strongholds but also wider Lebanese infrastructure used by Hezbollah. Like Hamas, Hezbollah embeds its military infrastructure within civilian areas, including the villages of south Lebanon and areas of Beirut. A wider war would strike Lebanon at a moment of particularly acute domestic political and economic crisis.

In a speech in June, Nasrallah also threatened Cyprus if it became involved in the conflict. Cyprus has developed a significant defence relationship with Israel, but some analysts interpret this as a threat towards UK sovereign bases on Cyprus, used in airstrikes against the Houthis and possibly in ferrying US military assistance to Israel.

The UK has sought to support a US and French-led diplomatic efforts to secure Hezbollah's withdrawal from the border area and prevent a wider Israeli military operation. In February, the then-Middle East minister, Lord Ahmed, told the House of Lords that the UK had, "made a specific offer to the Lebanese army to ensure that we see a scaling down of the current rise in attacks from Hezbollah and of the conflict with Israel. We want to ensure that the Lebanese army moves in, and that the Hezbollah grouping moves north of the Litani river." Since 2009, the UK has spent £100m on training and equipping Lebanese army forces.

THE HOUTHIS: “DEATH TO ISRAEL, DAMNATION TO THE JEWS”



The Houthi flag on a home in Yafaa-Dhamar, 2019. The slogan translates to “God is Great; Death to America; Death to Israel; Damnation to the Jews; Victory to Islam”/Abdullah Sarhan, via Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-NC-ND-4.0

Following the 7 October attacks, the Houthis have evolved from a local Iranian-backed group fighting for dominance in Yemen to a significant strategic asset for the “Axis of Resistance” at the regional level, threatening a vital maritime choke point.

The Houthis are an armed religious and political rebel movement that emerged in the 1990s among followers of the Zaydi branch of Shia Islam, which is dominant in the north and west of Yemen in an area bordering Saudi Arabia. The Houthis were founded by a Zaydi cleric, Hussein al Houthi, with a mixture of motives including resisting corruption and discrimination against Zaydis, opposing the growing influence of Salafi and Wahhabi streams of Sunni Islam, and rejecting the influence of the west.

In the 2000s, the Houthis became increasingly radicalised and adopted the slogan: “God is Great; Death to America; Death to Israel; Damnation to the Jews; Victory to Islam”. Beginning in 2004, they fought a series of wars against the internationally recognised government in the capital Sanaa, with increasing assistance from Hezbollah and Iran. They participated in the wider uprising that deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh in 2012.

By 2014, support from Hezbollah and Iran had increased substantially, when the Houthis captured Sanaa and the main port of Hodeidah. This breakthrough triggered direct military intervention by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, backed by other Saudi allies, using airpower supplied by the US and UK. Thousands of civilians were killed in airstrikes and the Saudis blockaded Hodeidah, exacerbating a humanitarian catastrophe.

“In terms of domestic governance, the Houthis have imposed a repressive police state aimed at squashing any threat to their control and routing all resources to their war machine”

The direct involvement of Arab states further deepened the cooperation between the Houthis, Hezbollah and Iran, with the Houthis firing Iranian-supplied rockets at Saudi and Emirati targets. Since 2022, there has been a de-escalation and ceasefire process between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, with the Houthis retaining control of much of the populated areas, including Hodeidah and Sanaa.

In terms of domestic governance, the Houthis have imposed a repressive police state aimed at

squashing any threat to their control and routing all resources to their war machine; instigated more extreme interpretations of Islamic practices; and targeted Yemen’s tiny Jewish community and professional and politically active women.

The Houthi attacks on international shipping and Israeli territory since 7 October has made apparent the full extent of their Iranian-supplied military capability and strategic significance. The Houthis have attacked dozens of ships around the narrow Bab al-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea approach to the Suez Canal, which typically accounts for 10-15 percent of global trade. Ships have been attacked with a range of advanced missiles and drones, and in November 2023, the Houthis hijacked the Galaxy Leader cargo ship and its crew using helicopters. Many energy and shipping companies have diverted shipping to a longer and more expensive journey via the Cape of Good Hope, and delivery of humanitarian relief for Sudan and Yemen has been delayed.

Iran supplies the advanced missiles and know-how that enables the Houthis to carry out these attacks. According to US intelligence: “As of 30 April 2024, the Houthis have used Iran-supplied ballistic and cruise missiles to conduct at least 100 attacks against land-based targets in Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen and at least 56 attacks targeting ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.” Since 2015, the US, UK and allies have intercepted “at least 20 Iranian smuggling vessels, seizing ballistic, cruise, and surface-to-air missile (SAM) components, antitank guided missiles (ATGMs), unmanned aerial vehicles

(UAVs), and thousands of assault rifles, rocket components, and other illicit weapons destined for the Houthis.” The IRGC also illicitly channels millions of dollars in foreign currency to the Houthis. Experts suggest that IRGC and Hezbollah commanders in Yemen are helping to “direct and oversee” the Houthis’ attacks on shipping.

Between January and May 2024, the UK and US conducted five joint naval and air strikes against the Houthis in response to their attacks on shipping, targeting airstrips and other military infrastructure. The US has also conducted a series of separate actions. While individual Houthi leaders are subject to UK financial sanctions and UN mandated sanctions, the Houthis are not proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the UK, as they are in the US.

The Houthis repeatedly fired drones and ballistic missiles at the southern Israeli port town of Eilat without an Israeli response until a Houthi drone attack killed a civilian in Tel Aviv on 19 July. Israel then retaliated with an air strike on Hodeidah that destroyed oil tanks, port cranes and other infrastructure. Most of the Houthi attacks on Eilat had been intercepted by the US Navy or Israeli missile defences.

CONCLUSION

Any strategy to advance a progressive and prosperous vision of the Middle East based on religious pluralism, a two-state solution, and Arab-Israeli normalisation, requires a robust, coordinated and sustained strategy to contain the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance”.

The “Axis of Resistance” should not be seen as acting in solidarity with the Palestinians, but rather using the Palestinian issue as a tool in a much wider struggle to shape the future of the region in line with their own values and interests.

“The ‘Axis of Resistance’ should not be seen as acting in solidarity with the Palestinians, but rather using the Palestinian issue as a tool”

By arming and funding Palestinian extremists, it has undermined the two-state solution with devastating consequences for Palestinians and

Israelis. By drawing Israel into conflict, Iran and its allies also hope to undermine Israeli security but also radicalise anti-western and anti-Israel sentiment and discredit normalisation between Israel and western-aligned Arab states. This, in turn, undermines the massive potential for regional integration including game-changing geopolitical projects such as the India-Middle East-Europe corridor.

Iran’s strategy is designed to sow instability while avoiding accountability, causing devastation in the countries where its proxies are operating.

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