



# From Ideological Animosity to Strategic Rivalry: The Evolution of Iran's Perception of Israel

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The war in the Gaza Strip has provided Iran with its first significant opportunity to challenge Israel on multiple fronts. Iran's involvement in the multi-front campaign has reignited discussions about the roots of the conflict between Iran and Israel and the best strategy for addressing the Iranian threat. Ideological hostility toward Israel has been a fundamental element in the Iranian regime's worldview since 1979. At the same time, the place of Israel in Iranian security doctrine has evolved over the years. Given the escalating friction between the two countries, Iran now perceives Israel as a threat to its national security. From Iran's perspective, the ongoing Israeli campaign underscores the necessity of enhancing its response to the increasing pressure exerted by Israel. The Israeli-Iranian conflict, originating in Iran's ideological antipathy toward the Jewish state, has transformed into a multi-front struggle between Israel and the pro-Iranian axis effectively wielded by Tehran to advance its strategic goals. While Israel was not the sole or even the primary influence in the development of Iran's strategic doctrines, over the years, it has become a catalyst and motivating factor for their utilization against Israel.

## Introduction

The war in the Gaza Strip has reignited discussions about the ongoing conflict between Iran and Israel within the regional context. At the time of this writing, Iran has refrained from direct involvement in the war, and Hezbollah has not been engaged in a full-scale conflict against Israel. Such involvement could prove costly for the Lebanese organization and, possibly, for Iran itself. However, Iran's explicit engagement in the multi-front campaign since the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, is evident. The war in Gaza has provided Iran with a significant opportunity to implement its “unification of

the arenas” doctrine. This involves activating its network of proxy organizations it has sponsored in various arenas over recent decades (Vazirian, 2023). As Itamar Rabinovich asserts, the war in Gaza should be viewed in a broader context, primarily driven by Iran's efforts to challenge Israel on multiple fronts (Rabinovich, 2023).

Iran, a key player in the Middle East, has experienced an increase in importance and influence in the past decade. Its attainment of nuclear threshold status; possession of sophisticated weapons systems, including long-range missiles and drones; consolidation of its regional status; and ongoing support for

terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah and the Palestinian Islamic organizations, pose a strategic threat to Israel's national security. This threat fuels extensive discussions on the best strategy for Israel against Iran. Various proposals have been suggested in recent years. Major General (res.) Eyal Zamir has recommended adopting "a systematic approach" and "the long-term campaign-like approach" by forming a regional coalition against the Iranian axis that will "show a high degree of cooperation and demonstrate joint, synchronized efforts on a regional scale." His recommended strategy includes weakening the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC); strategic isolation of the Iranian proxy organizations; systematic pressure to weaken the Iranian regime; expansion of the "campaign between wars" into a regional campaign aimed at weakening Iran; and leading a campaign in the ideological-cultural sphere, designed to enhance anti-Iranian sentiment among the Arab public (Zamir, 2022). Colonel T. and Colonel R. propose that Israel should achieve superiority in the strategic competition against Iran. They argue Israel should preserve, and even augment, its military superiority over Iran and the "Iranian axis" as a whole, be prepared for a multi-front regional conflict, and maintain a continuous capability to attack the Iranian nuclear sites. In addition, Israel should prevent Iran from further establishing itself along its borders and destabilizing additional countries in the region and should utilize a wide variety of tools to weaken the Iranian regime in the long term "so that it will change its behavior and accept Israel as a nation like all others" (Colonel T. and Colonel R., 2023).

Itay Haiminis has proposed a different strategy, focusing on arrangements and communication with Iran to reduce the risk of miscalculation and war. Such a strategy may also facilitate the creation of mechanisms for dialogue on other issues, such as Iran's regional policy and its missile program, within the framework of a new security regime between the two countries. However, he has also emphasized

the need to present a credible threat to Iran and its allies, while developing independent Israeli operational military capabilities as a means of prodding Iran to consent to direct dialogue with Israel. He believes that this can be accomplished through the establishment of "frontline siege bases," meaning areas near Iran's borders from which the IDF can threaten and operate against targets inside Iran, thereby relocating the conflict between the parties to Iranian territory (Haiminis, 2023). Meir Litvak has emphasized the need to adopt realistic goals against Iran, even if not optimal, using a combination of restraint, as well as rational and calm diplomacy. He has suggested that military action should be restricted to essential spheres. This attitude recognizes the Iranian threat but does not take an inflexible ideological line that ignores the context and constraints in the international order in the irrational hope of an immediate Iranian collapse (Litvak, 2023).

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The purpose of this article is not to delve further into the discussion of what strategy Israel should adopt against Iran but rather **to examine Israel's position in Iran's strategic doctrine.** While there is no doubt that Iran poses a threat to countries in the Middle East, especially Israel, it is worthwhile to reexamine the fundamental assumption that the centrality of Israel in Iran's policy and security doctrine is predestined by the Islamic Republic's DNA and cannot be changed. Even those who believe, like myself, that religious and ideological enmity toward Israel and the Jews, as well as the rejection of Israel's existence, are a key element in the Iranian regime's worldview cannot ignore the fact that Israel's role in the Iranian security

doctrine has evolved over the years. I argue that Israel is playing a crucial role in driving this change.

Since its 1979 revolution, Iran has consistently pursued an anti-Israel policy. However, in the past two decades, particularly given the regional upheaval in the Middle East, there has been a discernible increase in Iran's efforts to intensify its activities adjacent to Israel's borders, and even within Israel itself. These efforts aim to place Israel under siege and undermine its security. In addition to Iran's ideological hostility toward Israel, the strategic conflict between the two countries has escalated in recent years due to progress in the Iranian nuclear program, the campaign between wars in Syria, Israel's heightened countermeasures against Iran, and frequent statements by Israeli politicians advocating military action against the Islamic Republic. Iran now perceives Israel not only as an illegitimate entity that must be wiped off the map but also as a growing menace to its national security. This shift prompts discussion regarding the extent to which Israel's centrality in the Iranian strategic doctrine is a permanent aspect dictated by a revolutionary worldview or reflects an Iranian response to geostrategic changes in the Middle East, particularly in response to Israeli policy.

If this is indeed a changeable and reversible process, influenced by Israel's activity, then the current vectors affecting Iranian strategy toward Israel are likely to change again in the future, potentially reducing the direct conflict between the countries and perhaps also easing some of the tensions between them. Such a discussion cannot be confined to an examination of Iran's strengths and weaknesses; it must also encompass the development of Israel's role in Iran's fundamental strategic doctrines. This discussion is now more critical than ever before because the war in Gaza provides Israel with an opportunity to reassess long-standing conceptions, including those related to Iran, and to establish up-to-date strategic goals based

on the political and security situation that will emerge at the end of the current conflict.

### **Iran's Ideological Hostility to Israel**

Over the years, the combination of internal constraints and the changing regional and international circumstances has compelled Iran's leaders to adopt a dual policy. They have aimed to remain faithful to their revolutionary ideals while embracing a policy that serves Iran's national interest through cost-benefit considerations and a pragmatic approach to achieving strategic goals. Faced with the dilemma between ideological commitment and utilitarian considerations, Iran has often given preference to the latter, believing that this will not compromise its long-term ideological commitment. For instance, in the territorial dispute between Armenia, its Christian neighbor, and Azerbaijan, a Shiite Muslim nation, over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, Iran sided with Armenia. This decision was driven by Iran's concern that a strong, prosperous, and secular Azerbaijan might fuel separatist tendencies among the sizable Azeri minority in Iran. Similarly, despite Russia's ruthless suppression of the Chechen rebellion in the 1990s, Iran supported Russia's territorial integrity rather than endorsing independence for the Chechen Muslims, due to the strategic and economic importance of Iran's relations with Russia.

In 1991, Iran provided only minimal aid to the Shiite rebellion in Iraq, despite its severe repression and the resulting damage to the holiest sites for Shiites. This decision stemmed from Iran's desire to avoid another military conflict with Iraq (Litvak, 2017). In more remote regions, especially in cases that did not jeopardize Iran's national interest, Iran exhibited more steadfast support for movements ideologically aligned with it. This loyalty to its revolutionary doctrine was evident in its ties with Sudan, radical movements in Algeria, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, and Hamas, although Iranian policy was also non-uniform

and inconsistent in these cases (Menashri, 1999). The ability to navigate between the revolutionary vision and state interests and to emphasize either of them according to changing needs has been considered a source of strength for Iran's leadership. It has enabled Iranian leaders to maintain more room for maneuvering, adjust their policy to varying circumstances, and provide complex solutions for dealing with an equally complex reality.

The primary issue on which Iran's revolutionary policy has remained uncompromising and consistent, despite the changes in Iranian foreign policy and the prioritization of national interests over ideology, is hostility toward Israel. This profound enmity continues to be a crucial element of the Iranian regime's doctrine and a consensus among all factions in the Iranian political system (Litvak, 2004). The revolutionary ideology unequivocally rejects Israel's existence, epitomized by the slogan, "Israel must be wiped off the map." Moreover, due to Iran's claim to be the leader of the Muslim world and a vital force in the Middle East, coupled with its determination to showcase the success of the Islamic revolution to the Iranian public, Muslim societies, and the entire world, it perceives itself as duty-bound to consistently raise the flag of hostility toward Israel. This involves condemning countries willing to negotiate peace with Israel and supporting Islamist countries and movements fighting against it. Iran's antagonism toward Israel encompasses a fundamental hostility to the Jewish state, disdain for the Shah and everything he represented, and hatred for Western imperialism and capitalism, which Israel is believed to embody. Iran categorically denies Israel's right to exist, irrespective of the question of its borders or any policies it may adopt. According to the ideological doctrine of the Iranian revolutionaries, Judaism is considered a religion, not a nationality, and, as such, the Jews do not deserve a country of their own and certainly not at the expense of the legitimate right of the Palestinian people,

especially not in the heart of the holy lands of Islam (Menashri, 1999).

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Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iranian officials have consistently reiterated the need to destroy Israel. Every state leader in Iran and the official media unanimously declares that Israel is a cancerous growth that should be removed. Khamenei has stated that the only way to solve the Middle East crisis is to destroy the "Zionist regime," which he considers the root of the region's crisis (Litvak, 2008). Under the pressure of necessity, Iran has retreated from dogmatic principles no less fundamental than hostility to Israel. However, the regime does not regard its ideological antipathy toward Israel as contradicting the state's pragmatic interests in any way. Iran perceives no adequate reason to deviate from its policy, as it has not had to pay any serious economic or political price for its anti-Israel policy; in fact, it has gained significant political profit from it. It can also be said that, to a great extent, the Iranian regime uses its hostility toward Israel as a fig leaf to justify its compromises and ideological flexibility in other areas. Moreover, its antagonism toward Israel serves as a means of attaining influence and prestige in the Arab world, supporting Iran's claim to leadership of the entire Islamic world (Litvak, 2008).

Hatred for Israel has also been prominent during the war in Gaza. Statements by Iranian leaders and commentary in the Iranian press have unequivocally denied Israel's right to exist. Israel is depicted as an illegitimate entity born out of sin as a result of a Western plot to weaken the Muslim world and consolidate Western imperialist rule in the Middle East. Hamas's

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attack on October 7 has been presented as further evidence of Israel's weakening along the way to its final collapse. Furthermore, Israeli attacks on Gaza have been characterized as "the real Holocaust," and—as part of an ongoing Iranian effort to deny Israel any grounds for legitimacy—have been equated to Nazi war crimes. Iranian officials have repeatedly advocated the Islamic Republic's proposal for a solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—a referendum among the "original inhabitants" of Palestine. This proposal excludes most of the Jewish residents of Israel, who arrived in Palestine after "the beginning of the Zionist invasion" in the late 19th century (Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2023).

Hostility to Israel still constitutes an ideological basis for the Islamic Republic and guides its policy on Israel, even in the third decade of the 21st century. The importance of the Iranian ideology concerning Israel cannot be denied, nor can it be dismissed as inconsequential talk. Hamas's murderous attack on Israel has demonstrated that the sources of hostility to Israel cannot be solely attributed to Israeli policy and occupation; the deep-seated cultural and ideological hostility to Israel, shared by Iran, is also a significant factor. Israel cannot overlook the centrality of this enmity in the Iranian regime's worldview, especially considering Iran's ongoing efforts to support terrorist organizations and advance its nuclear military option.

At the same time, understanding this ideological doctrine is insufficient for comprehending Iran's policy on Israel. If

Iran's policy were solely determined by revolutionary ideals, it would have joined the war in Gaza, or at least engaged Hezbollah in an all-out confrontation with Israel from the very beginning, especially when a historic opportunity to accomplish the revolutionary vision of eliminating Israel seemed imminent. The fact that Iran did not take such actions is evidence of its rational and pragmatic approach, rather than an expression of moderation on its part. Although the revolutionary vision of destroying Israel has never been abandoned, Iranian policy is increasingly focused on strategic goals set by its leadership, based on varying security needs and changing interests in three principal spheres: the regional environment, the nuclear program, and the internal arena.

### **The Regional Environment**

For years, Iran has perceived itself as a nation in a highly troublesome environment, surrounded by failed or weak countries, terrorist groups, and foreign interventions. Its primary aim is to ensure that these elements do not pose a threat to its borders, territorial integrity, unity, sovereignty, and national security (Tabatabai, 2020). Historical experience has significantly shaped Iran's security considerations. Extended periods of independence and regional dominance have instilled in the Iranians a strong sense of their value and regional influence. In parallel, the interference of the great powers in Iran's affairs, the occupation of parts of its territory, and violations of its sovereignty have left its rulers feeling vulnerable, alienated, and suspicious of external entities. From a historical standpoint, Iran's most recent trauma, etched into its national memory, is the war with Iraq, during which Iran found itself strategically isolated. Iraq initiated the war against the new Islamic regime and employed weapons of mass destruction, including chemical warfare, against targets in Iran. Despite this, the majority of the world's countries, including most Arab states, supported Iraq, and some even hindered Iran from acquiring arms for



self-defense, contributing to its failure in the war. These experiences have strongly motivated the Iranians to do everything in their power to prevent the recurrence of this trauma (Kam, 2004).

The dissolution of the Soviet Union eliminated one of Iran's major threats. Iraq, too, has substantially diminished its military capability since the Gulf Wars, particularly following the 2003 American invasion. However, the United States has assumed the role of being a significant threat to Iran, surpassing the former Russian and Soviet threat. Having taken control over Afghanistan and Iraq, which are Iran's eastern and western neighbors, the US maintains allies and partners in the region, deploys substantial military forces near Iran, and demonstrates its readiness to use military force when deemed necessary. The Iranian regime perceives the US as actively seeking to overthrow it while it has the capability to impose severe economic pressure on Iran, a tactic it is currently employing. Additionally, Iran generally lacks substantial state-level allies that can assist in deterring its enemies. Furthermore, Iran is inferior to its main rivals in conventional arms, particularly in air power (Kam, 2021).

Given these challenges, several scholars have linked Iran's effort to expand its regional influence to the growing security anxieties it has experienced in the past two decades. Ali Akbar has identified three main developments underlying Iran's mounting apprehension: the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, the 2011 civil war in Syria, and the rise of the Islamic State in 2014 (Akbar, 2021). Ahmadian and Mohseni have also suggested analyzing Iran's policy based on its perception of the threat. These scholars have attributed the ties between Iran and Syria to a shared perception of a common threat, arising from a sense of regional isolation and a desire to deter external threats, particularly from the US, Israel, and Iraq under the rule of the Baathist regime. The 2003 American invasion of Iraq and the sustained American military presence on the borders of Iran and Syria laid the foundation

for the "axis of resistance," designed to ensure the survival of both countries against shared threats. The necessity to strengthen this axis further intensified following the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2019).

The developments in Syria and Iraq over the past two decades had a definite impact on Iranian national security. The civil war in Syria was perceived as a major threat, seen as an attempt by the West, led by the US and its allies, to bring about a regime change in Syria. Since the outbreak of the rebellion in March 2011, Iran sided with the Assad regime, its most crucial strategic ally, fearing that its fall and replacement by a Sunni regime, or worse, a regime controlled by radical Salafi organizations linked to al-Qaeda, would constitute a strategic defeat for Iran. The primary Iranian concern was that the collapse of the Syrian regime would encourage the US to strive for a similar change in Iran. Additionally, Iran viewed Syria as a means of fulfilling its security needs, particularly the ability to support Hezbollah in Lebanon—a significant asset that gave Iran the ability to deter Israel. Starting in 2014, the rise of the Islamic State and the threats it posed to Iran added another grave worry for the decision-makers in Tehran. Seeking to stabilize Iraq as a satellite country under Shiite control, Iran found itself facing the possibility of an extremist anti-Shiite Sunni-Salafi state on its western border. The Islamic State's successes in conquering large sections of Iraq and eastern Syria in June 2014 posed a significant threat to Iran, compelling it to deliver military equipment to Iraq through the Revolutionary Guards to combat the Islamic State and prevent it from reaching Iraq's western border with Iran.

While developments in the Middle East posed considerable challenges to Iran's national security, the Islamic Republic has demonstrated its ability to leverage them for strategic benefit. Over the past two decades, Iran has actively sought to expand its regional influence across various spheres and enhance its military

capabilities. This cannot be solely attributed to a defensive strategy in response to perceived threats. Iran strategically used the US invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring in the Middle East to advance its long-standing ambitions and interests in the Arab world, predating the Islamic revolution. The aim was to secure a regional bloc under its leadership, comprising Syria, Lebanese Hezbollah, Shiite militias in Iraq, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This development reflects the doctrine that has taken root among Iranian political and military leadership in the past two decades, emphasizing the growing importance of expanding Iran's activity and influence beyond its political and geographic borders to enhance its ability to address external threats. In the past decade, Iran has embraced a strategy of "forward defense" or "offensive defense" to neutralize threats at the earliest possible stage. This strategy can be described as defense through proactive measures, halting threats to Iran's national security by engaging its enemies as far as possible from its borders (Vazarian & Shariati, 2021; Azizi, 2021).

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The growing sense of being under siege has heightened concerns among decision-makers in Iran that the regional conflicts led by the West might serve as a launching point for an attack on Iran itself. From their perspective, Iran is encircled by enemies, and due to its relative military weakness, regional conflicts must not be allowed to spill over into its territory. To address these escalating challenges, Iran

has aimed to establish a defense network beyond its borders to keep threats at a safe distance (Akbarzadeh et al., 2023). Iran's armed forces deputy chief of staff, Massoud Jayazeri, explained the necessity of the "forward defense" doctrine by stating that Iran's enemies, led by the US, had adopted a military strategy focused on subjecting the Islamic Republic to a siege. Therefore, he argued, it was Iran's duty to break out of this siege wherever it existed. He claimed that one method used by the Americans and the "enemies of the revolution" was to intensify their presence in the countries bordering Iran. He emphasized that if the Iranians did not engage in combat outside their borders, they would have to face the enemy within those borders. Iran, he contended, could not afford to wait for the enemy to arrive before taking action but must intercept them along the way (Tabnak, 2016).

In a publication from Imam Hossein University, associated with the Revolutionary Guards, Rouhollah Ghaderi Kangavari presented "offensive defense" as a method to safeguard Iran's national security. He asserted that whenever Iran faced threats to its national security within its official state borders, its independence, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity were violated. Due to its unique geostrategic situation, Iran purportedly requires a robust, independent presence in the region and even beyond to effectively address external threats. Kangavari argued that Iran cannot confine its deterrent capability solely to its geographic borders (Kangavari, 2018).

The "forward defense" doctrine is directly intertwined with the "strategic depth" doctrine, another essential element in Iranian strategy. This concept is considered a means for Iran to compensate for its limited conventional military capabilities. While not a new doctrine, its significance has grown in the past decade amid regional upheavals. The establishment of the "axis of resistance" has enhanced Iran's capacity to expand its strategic depth in the Fertile Crescent. Strategically isolated during its eight-year war with Iraq, Iran determined that

self-defense required expanding its influence, bolstering groups loyal to Iran and aligned with its anti-Zionist and anti-American ideology, establishing military bases with “resistance” groups, and forming alliances with friendly countries.

The achievement of strategic depth was conceived to empower Iran to extend its battlefield against its enemies beyond its borders and establish defense lines far from its territory. This strategy aimed to reduce Iran’s strategic isolation, thwart potential attacks from Israel and the US, and provide a second-strike capability in case of an attack (Bagheri et al., 2021). Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamenei himself emphasized the necessity of expanding Iran’s strategic depth as a crucial element of the Iranian defense doctrine. In January 2017, during a meeting with the families of soldiers killed in the military campaign in Syria and Iraq, Khamenei asserted that if the Islamic State had not been stopped outside Iran’s borders, it would have been necessary to halt it within Tehran, Fars, Khorasan, and Isfahan (Akbar, 2021). A similar sentiment was echoed by Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in a speech upon his return from a visit to Lebanon in mid-October 2023. He stated that if Iran did not defend Gaza today, it would inevitably have to defend its own cities in the future. He added that Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah had told him that if immediate action against Israel was not taken, fighting against IDF forces in Beirut would become a reality tomorrow (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2023).

The evolution of Iran’s strategic doctrines extends beyond its animosity toward Israel, originating from a broader perception of threats to its critical national interests and its ambitions for regional hegemony. This approach involves seizing opportunities to consolidate its influence. Moreover, while the Islamic Republic has been fundamentally hostile toward Israel since the Iranian revolution, the reciprocal threat perception between the two countries only evolved in the second decade of the Islamic

Republic. In the 1980s, Iran focused on the belief that the grand victory of liberating Jerusalem could only occur after the smaller victory of defeating Saddam Hussein. At that time, the Iranian leadership believed that “the road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala,” prioritizing the conflict with Iraq as its greatest concern (Shams, 1998). The escalation of the direct conflict with Israel reinforced Iran’s view of Israel as a significant security threat, necessitating Iran to respond with strategies and capabilities that it has developed over the years, including the creation of proxy militias and the acquisition of advanced weapon systems.

Despite the growing affinity between Iran, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Palestinian terrorist organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, Israel’s strategy, up until 2005, continued to view the Arab world as crucial in dealing with Iran. Israeli decision-makers saw a direct connection between the diplomatic process with the Palestinian Authority and Syria and the ability to contain Iran’s regional ambitions. The IDF focused on the West Bank between 2000 to 2004, the disengagement from the Gaza Strip in 2005, and the war in Lebanon, with potential deployment for a conflict with Syria following the attack on the Deir ez-Zor nuclear reactor in 2006–2007. Periodic rounds of warfare occurred in the Gaza Strip throughout this entire period (Haiminis, 2023).

The regional upheaval in 2011 set Israel and Iran on a slow-motion collision course. Syria’s civil war in 2011 transformed it into a battleground between the two countries, especially after Iran intensified its efforts to establish a long-term military foothold in Syria. The nuclear agreement signed in 2015 allowed Israel to focus on the northern theater in the “campaign between wars.” In the initial two years of this campaign (2013–2014), Israeli strikes were relatively infrequent, primarily targeting the transfer of advanced weaponry to Hezbollah. From 2014 to 2015, the campaign shifted its focus to Hezbollah’s precision missile project, triggered by Iran’s attempts to deliver



complete precision missiles to Hezbollah via Syrian territory. Following the failure of these Iranian efforts, Iran and Hezbollah opted to relocate the missile production to Lebanon. Toward the end of Gadi Eisenkot's term as IDF Chief of Staff, assessments in Israel suggested that the campaign between wars was evolving from a fight against the adversary's capabilities—game-changing weapons in the hands of Hezbollah or Iranian proxy forces in Syria—into a campaign against Iran itself, by directly targeting the Revolutionary Guards and its Quds Force (Shelah & Valensi, 2023).

The attacks attributed to Israel began to be accompanied by statements by Israeli leaders openly admitting Israel's responsibility. For instance, Minister of Regional Cooperation Tzachi Hanegbi stated on July 21, 2019, "For two years now, Israel has been the only country in the world killing Iranians" (Kan 11, 2019). In addition, the campaign between wars extended beyond ground and aerial operations. Starting in 2019, Israel initiated a campaign to thwart Iran's attempt to fund Hezbollah through a fuel-smuggling system from Iran to Syria by sea, transferring weapons through maritime routes, and circumventing American sanctions against its oil industry. According to Western media reports, Israel had targeted at least 10 ships transporting Iranian oil and weapons in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. In response, Iran retaliated by attacking Israeli-owned ships (Elster, 2021).

The frequency of attacks in the campaign between wars has increased over the years, raising expectations for altering the situation through kinetic action, including adjustments to Iran's strategic measures. The concept of the campaign between wars, as a method to achieve broader strategic objectives, has altered Iran's perception of events and its subsequent actions. IDF Military Intelligence Directorate Commander Major General Aharon Haliva acknowledged that, "The State of Israel, due to a range of measures not solely connected to the campaign between wars, has moved

from the back rows to the front row in friction with Iran," and that the attacks on Iranian soil attributed to Israel have shifted Iran's focus, making Israel its primary adversary (Shelah & Valensi, 2023, p. 51).

Iran's perception of the growing Israeli threat has contributed to Tehran's assessment that Israel is trying to encircle it by expanding its presence near Iranian borders, including in the Persian Gulf, Iraqi Kurdistan, and the Caucasus. Iran is particularly attentive to Israel's improved relations with its Central Asian neighbors, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. Recent events in the Caucasus, such as Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh War (September 2023), have heightened Iran's concerns about the increasing influence of Israel and Turkey in the region. Tensions between Tehran and Baku have escalated, fueled by strengthened strategic ties between Israel and Azerbaijan, with Israel emerging as a significant arms supplier to Azerbaijan (Lindenstrauss, 2022). Iran interprets Israel's greater involvement in neighboring countries, especially Azerbaijan and the Kurdish territories in northern Iraq, as a sign of aggressive intentions, seeking to undermine Iran's regional influence and compromise its interests and national security. Iran contends that the impact of Israel's proximity goes beyond military and security aspects, extending to potential threats to Iranian political and economic interests (Kazemi et al., 2017; Navekash & Abaspour, 2015). Consequently, Iran has intensified its determination to establish a presence near Israel's borders, leveraging a network of proxies for this purpose.

After the conclusion of the civil war in Syria, Iran aimed to strengthen both its military and civilian foothold in the country. This involved the deployment of its proxies, including local Syrian groups, Syrian army units influenced by Iran, and Hezbollah, in proximity to the Israeli border. Iran expanded its objectives beyond merely supporting the Assad regime; it now sought to amass substantial military capabilities

in Syria, encompassing missiles, rockets, drones, air defense systems, and advanced weaponry. These assets could potentially be deployed in future escalations against Israel. Concurrently supporting the Syrian regime, Iran worked to establish terrorist infrastructure on the Golan Heights. In recent years, local groups have taken root in the Golan Heights due to the security vacuum resulting from the Syrian regime's loss of control. Key actors involved in organizing terrorism against Israel included Hezbollah members, local Druze, and members of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization. The terrorist infrastructure on the Golan Heights was not necessarily intended for immediate use against Israel; rather, it was positioned to serve as a basis for Iran's proxies in this critical area and to exert future pressure on Israel (Zimmt, 2017).

Iran is clearly intensifying its efforts to expand its influence in the Palestinian theater. In recent years, Iranian leaders, led by Khamenei, have emphasized the imperative of extending the "Palestinian resistance" from the Gaza Strip to the West Bank. The plethora of Iranian comments about events in the West Bank coincides with Israel's discoveries of growing Iranian activity in this theater. This includes attempts to establish Iranian intelligence infrastructure in Israel and the West Bank, create terrorist networks disguised as civil organizations, and deliver explosives via drones. Three primary factors drive Iran's escalating efforts to broaden its influence in the West Bank:

- Increased tension between Iran and Israel, especially notable after the attributed Israeli attacks against Iranian targets in Syria, on the Syrian–Iraqi border, and even in Iran itself.
- Weakness of the Palestinian Authority and Palestinian security agencies, coupled with the rising wave of terrorism in the West Bank, which offers Iran new opportunities to expand its activities.
- Warming ties between Iran and Hamas, which had been strained for several years due to Hamas's objection to the Assad regime and

its support for the Saudi Arabian military campaign in Yemen (Zimmt, 2023b).

Iran adapted its strategy in response to new circumstances in the Middle East following the death of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force, in a US attack in January 2020. It has placed major emphasis on the Palestinian theater as a key front in the struggle of the "axis of resistance." In addition, Iran perceives the Abraham Accords and the normalization process between Israel and Arab countries as a growing threat to its regional standing. These developments are seen as an opportunity to increase coordination between the Palestinian terrorist organizations, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, and other elements in the axis of resistance. This coordination aims to focus on a common struggle against the perceived common enemy, Israel. Iran views Israel's efforts to establish a broad regional front against Iran, including cooperation with "pragmatic" Arab countries, as an attempt to establish an Israeli presence close to its borders, with the Abraham Accords having openly placed Israel in the Persian Gulf. Following the Accords, Iranian leaders issued explicit threats against the United Arab Emirates (UAE). For instance, the editor of the hardline daily *Kayhan*, affiliated with the Supreme Leader, asserted that the UAE's betrayal of the Palestinians was making it a "legitimate and easy target" (Guzansky, 2022, p. 3). In implementing a strategy against Israel, Tehran decided to establish a joint operations room for military, logistic, and intelligence coordination and planning. This effort included cooperation between Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Iranian militias in Syria, the Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen (Tabnak, 2023).

The war in Gaza has provided a significant initial opportunity to assess the degree of cooperation between Iran's elements of the resistance front in the framework of the "convergence of the arenas" doctrine (Azizi, 2023). This is not the first time that the mutual commitment between the members of the front

has been tested. The first occasion took place during the escalation along Israel's borders over the 2023 Passover holiday, centering on the tensions at the Temple Mount and Hamas's activation of the Gazan, Lebanese, and Golan Heights theaters. Iran and its proxies leveraged this crisis to advance their "convergence of the arenas" doctrine—the merging of the Palestinian resistance axis, consisting of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with the Iran–Hezbollah axis—designed to improve the deterrent balance against Israel and the response to Israel (Dekel, 2023; Shine & Zimmt, 2023). This doctrine signifies increased operational coordination between the organizations operating in the framework of the loose resistance front coalition under Iranian leadership with substantial involvement from Hezbollah. The objective of this coordination is to encircle Israel from its southern border (the Gaza Strip), eastern border (the West Bank), and northern borders (Lebanon and Syria), and to improve Iran's deterrent capability and the effectiveness of the anti-Israeli forces in a future war against Israel. Such a war is designed to include Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Hezbollah in Lebanon and southern Syria, the Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen (Tasnim, 2023a; Vazirian, 2023).

At the same time, for the first time, the war in Gaza has posed a significant threat to the very survival of Hamas, one of the key elements in the resistance front; the war, therefore, also constitutes an important initial test of Iran's ability to use Hamas to deter Israel. Regardless of whether Hamas's attack on October 7, 2023, took Iran by surprise, the war in Gaza has proved the pro-Iranian axis's capability for strategic synchronization, including a division of labor between the various elements of the axis and an adjustment to the war's emerging circumstances (Azizi, 2023). Throughout the war, Iran has acted in accordance with gradual steps of escalation, which have included:

- Hezbollah's partial involvement in the war, mainly against IDF border positions;

- Dozens of attacks by pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq against US bases in Syria and Iraq aimed at exacting a price from the United States for its support for Israel and expediting the withdrawal of American forces from Syria;
- Inclusion of the Houthis in Yemen in the war against Israel, mainly through launching missiles and drones at southern Israel, as well as targeting vessels in the Red Sea.

For the first time, the Israeli–Iranian conflict, the underlying cause of which is the Islamic Republic's ideological hostility toward the Jewish state, has now become a multi-front war between Israel and the pro-Iranian axis conducted effectively by Tehran to promote its strategic goals.

## The Nuclear Program

Even the Iranian nuclear program should not be viewed solely in the context of Israel. Like most of the other elements of Iran's strategic and military might, the nuclear program began during the Shah's reign. Following the Islamic revolution, Khomeini ordered the suspension of the project, claiming that the atom was the work of the devil. European countries and the United States stopped providing their services for the program, leading to the cancellation of most contracts for the construction of nuclear power stations and causing most German and French engineers and technicians who had been building them to leave Iran. It was the Iran–Iraq War that prompted the Islamic regime to renew the Iranian nuclear program. In 1982, the Iranian Atomic Energy Organization was reorganized, and its activity was renewed, primarily for the purpose of assembling the technical and scientific infrastructure that would later enable Iran to function independently in the nuclear field (Kam, 2004).

The decision to renew the nuclear program was made as a countermeasure to Iraq's mass destruction capabilities, especially considering the significant setback Iran experienced in its war with Iraq. The primary concern for Iranians was that Iraq had already deployed chemical

and biological weapons, along with missiles capable of reaching Tehran and other cities in Iran, and was progressing toward acquiring weapons. Subsequently, concurrent with Iraq's decline following the first Gulf War in 1991, the Iranian regime's pursuit of nuclear weapons was driven by what it perceived as a growing need to deter the United States from utilizing its strategic capabilities against Iran. Additionally, the Iranian regime sought to deter Israel from potentially attacking Iran's nuclear facilities, while Iran's belief that Israel possessed nuclear weapons did not seem to play a significant role in the decision to develop such weapons (Kam, 2007).

In the late 1980s, several Iranian leaders made statements suggesting that, under certain conditions, Iran was likely to develop nuclear weapons, or at least would not rule out such a possibility. In a speech to Iranian combat soldiers in October 1988, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then chairman of the Iranian parliament and later president of Iran, stated, "With regard to chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons training, it was made very clear during the war that these weapons were very decisive . . . We should fully equip ourselves in the defensive and offensive use of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons" (Kam, 2004). In September 2006, Rafsanjani disclosed in his memoirs a letter sent by Khomeini in July 1987 to senior Iranian military officers. In this letter, the leader of the Iranian revolution explained the background of his decision to consent to the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq, bringing an end to their war. Khomeini quoted a letter sent to him on June 23, 1987, by then-Revolutionary Guards Commander Mohsen Rezaee, in which Rezaee admitted that Iran would be unable to achieve victory in the next five years unless the necessary resources, including, "a considerable number of laser and nuclear weapons," were made available to the Revolutionary Guards (Fathi, 2006).

The statements hinting at Iran's intention to develop nuclear weapons came to an almost complete halt, likely because Iran realized that this effort could lead to increasing pressure on the country. Nevertheless, Khamenei never wavered from his doctrine that achieving a threshold nuclear military capability would provide Iran with effective deterrence against its enemies, serving as an essential insurance policy for the regime's survival. This stance was particularly crucial in Iran's regional environment, which included countries with nuclear capabilities, such as Iran's neighbor, Pakistan, and reportedly, Israel. Khamenei did not retract his position that the nuclear program was merely an excuse for the West to exert pressure on Iran, isolate it, and weaken it, all aimed at laying the groundwork for the accomplishment of its main strategic goal—the overthrow of the Islamic regime. In a speech on February 8, 2014, marking the 35th anniversary of the revolution, Khamenei asserted that the United States continued its efforts to promote the downfall of Iran's revolutionary Islamic regime. "One of the things which American politicians say in their speeches to our officials is that they do not intend to change the regime of Iran. First, they are lying. If they could, they would not hesitate even for a moment to destroy the foundation of the Islamic Republic," he stated (Khamenei.ir, 2014a).

On several occasions, Khamenei reiterated his view that the nuclear issue was merely an excuse to hinder Iran's technological progress (Khamenei.ir, 2015). On another occasion, he emphasized that the West's efforts to exaggerate the Iranian nuclear threat were based on a lie, stating, "what they are and should be afraid of is not a nuclear Iran, but an Islamic Iran" (Voice of America, 2012). In the midst of the negotiations between Iran and the West on the nuclear issue, the official website of the Supreme Leader published an infographic under the headline, "The Nuclear Issue Is an Excuse." The infographic displayed nine matches symbolizing the West's claims against Iran on

various issues, such as Iran's attitude toward Israel, its support for the resistance camp in the region, the Iranian missile program, and human rights in Iran. According to the Iranian regime, the West would use these claims to justify its hostile policy toward the Islamic Republic even if the nuclear issue were settled (Khamenei, 2014b). Khamenei asserted that the 2003 agreement by former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi to dismantle his country's nuclear program, which ultimately did not prevent his downfall aided by Western countries, proved that Iran was justified in refusing to surrender to Western dictates in exchange for Western benefits, likening it to giving candy to a child (Pomeroy, 2011). Iran also sees the disparity between the immunity enjoyed by nuclear-armed North Korea and the fate of Saddam Hussein, who did not possess such weapons, as evidence that nuclear weapons are essential (Litvak, 2023).

Iran's propaganda consistently emphasizes the civilian and defensive nature of its nuclear program. Senior Iranian officials have repeatedly asserted that Iran is not pursuing nuclear weapons and has no intention to do so. They argue that developing such weapons holds no benefit, and that Iran's leader believes that nuclear weapons are forbidden according to Muslim religious law. At the same time, it is evident that Iran takes seriously Israel's threats to attack its nuclear facilities, aiming to prevent Iran from acquiring military nuclear capabilities. While these threats may not necessarily be sufficient to alter Iran's nuclear strategy, as it has not yet decided to break out to nuclear weapons, they contribute to Iran's sense of being under threat. This heightened perception of danger may potentially prompt Iran to adjust its policies, seeking to establish a strategic nuclear balance against Israel.

Furthermore, the clandestine preventive actions attributed to Israel in recent years have hastened the pace of Iran's nuclear program. Until the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Israeli efforts against the Iranian

nuclear program were relatively limited, despite Iran's considerable progress in this area and in its ballistic missile program. Israel primarily focused on persuading European countries and the United States to take action against the Iranian nuclear program. Toward the end of the decade, the IDF engaged in force-building measures designed to facilitate operations within Iran. In 2010, Israel began stepping up its preventive actions against the nuclear program with secret operations, some of which were reported in the media. Notable among these operations were the Stuxnet computer worm and the elimination of scientists involved in the nuclear project, occurring between 2010 and 2012. These efforts helped delay the Iranian program. Although the nuclear agreement signed in 2015 led to the temporary suspension of covert operations against the nuclear program, these operations were renewed and intensified after President Trump withdrew from the agreement in May 2018, and particularly after Iran's decision in the summer of 2019 to violate its obligations under the nuclear agreement (Iran Primer, 2021). Simultaneously, alongside the campaign against the nuclear project, clandestine operations against crucial infrastructure in Iran, secret military facilities, and employees in sensitive security installations were heightened (Bergman, 2022).

The covert Israeli campaign against the nuclear project in recent years may have delayed its progress to some extent. However, in retrospect, it seems to have triggered Tehran's decision to increase its uranium enrichment levels to 20% after the assassination of nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, and later to 60% following the explosion at the Natanz enrichment facility in April 2021 (Ynet, 2021). The war in Gaza could also influence Iran's nuclear strategy. After the war, Iran will need to assess whether its ability to ensure essential security interests through its network of proxies has been preserved. If the answer is no, Iran may reconsider its nuclear strategy. A growing sense of being under threat could lead Iran to shift its



nuclear strategy, driven by the realization that it can no longer rely solely on proxies or being on the nuclear threshold to deter its enemies. Iran has altered its nuclear strategy in the past and may be inclined to do so again.

## The Internal Theater

The desire to ensure the regime's survival against internal and external threats is one of the Islamic Republic's supreme goals, shaping its national security doctrine. Although no existential threat to its survival has emerged since the regime stabilized in the early 1980s, the Islamic Republic has faced a significant legitimacy crisis in the past two decades. Alongside the prevailing social and economic distress in Iran, a widening gap is observed between the regime's institutions and the Iranian public, especially the younger generation. Given the regime's ongoing failure to address public needs and alleviate distress, criticism of the Islamic Republic has escalated over the years. Public trust in state institutions has waned, and a sense of despair has spread (Zimmt, 2022a). These trends have been manifested in protests in Iran in recent decades, reaching a peak during the wave of protests that began in mid-September 2022, following the killing of a young woman, Mahsa Amini, by the "morality police" for allegedly not wearing the veil. In contrast to the preceding waves of protest in Iran in recent years, which focused mainly on demands for economic improvement, the 2022 protests bore a strongly political and anti-establishment character. The demonstrators did not limit their demands to the repeal of the requirement that women wear veils, the disbandment of the morality police, or even greater personal freedom; instead, they sought to replace the existing political order (Zimmt, 2022b).

These processes of social change have not escaped the regime's attention. The Iranian authorities are aware of the public's growing alienation from state institutions, and recognize the need to respond to it, despite differences of opinion among the leadership about the

required solutions. Like other autocratic regimes, however, this one prefers to deflect responsibility for its internal challenges toward its external enemies, whether real or imaginary. As protests in Iran escalated, Iran's leader again accused the West of supporting the protests. In early October 2022, a few days after the most recent wave of protests began, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei stated that the United States and Israel were behind the unrest. He alleged that American and Israeli intelligence services, with "some treasonous Iranians abroad helping them," had planned the disturbances (Khamenei.ir, 2022). In his speech on the occasion of the Iranian New Year (Nowruz) on March 21, 2023, Khamenei asserted that the US president and leaders of several European countries had openly supported the riots. He mentioned that their support went beyond rhetorical expressions and included providing financial and security assistance to the demonstrators in order to weaken the Islamic Republic (Khamenei.ir, 2023a).

Similar allegations have been made in response to earlier waves of protest. In early January 2018, Khamenei accused Iran's enemies, led by the United States and Israel, of using various means—including money, weapons, and intelligence agents—to support the demonstrations that erupted nationwide in late 2017 (Khamenei.ir, 2018). In December 2009, former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad blamed the United States and Israel for the violent demonstrations led by the Iranian reformist Green Movement, which began following allegations that the Iranian presidential elections in the summer of 2017 had been fraudulent. Ahmadinejad labeled the opposition rallies as a foreign-backed "nauseating masquerade" (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2009). The Islamic Republic's tendency to accuse foreigners of being primarily responsible for internal protests within Iran is not unique; even the deposed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi attributed growing internal

opposition to his regime to foreign groups (Zimmt, 2023a).

The Iranian leadership consistently regards the United States as the primary force behind efforts to instigate regime change in Iran. Khamenei has reiterated on numerous occasions that the American government seeks to overthrow the Iranian regime by supporting Iran's internal and external adversaries and by exerting political, economic, and military pressure on Iran. Furthermore, Iranian leaders have contended for years that the United States employs soft power in its endeavors to distance young Iranians from the revolutionary ideology, undermine the regime's popular support base, and erode the Islamic Republic's social cohesion (Eisenstadt, 2015).

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In recent years, Israel has assumed a more central role in Iran's threat perception to the regime's stability. While the Iranian government has previously accused the Israeli intelligence services of attempting to destabilize Iran internally, Israel's escalating covert activities against the Islamic Republic—including actions within Iran that have been attributed to Israel—have underscored the notion that Israel plays a significant role in efforts to change the Islamic regime. Since the beginning of the current decade, Israel's actions have extended beyond Syria, where attacks have increased, to the covert campaign against the Iranian nuclear project. Israel is now conducting kinetic attacks and cyber operations against targets in Iran, some unrelated to the nuclear program or Iran's military buildup. This shift

in strategy aims “to cut off not just the arms of the octopus, but the head itself” (Kahana, 2022). For instance, in May 2022, a senior officer in the Revolutionary Guards Quds Force was assassinated by assailants riding a motorcycle in Tehran. Simultaneously, the Revolutionary Guards announced the uncovering of a ring linked to the Israeli intelligence service. Revolutionary Guards spokesperson Ramazan Sharif acknowledged that activities attributed to Israel took place within its territory, including espionage and assassinations (Iserovich & Lev-Ram, 2022). In recent years, the conflict has expanded into cyberspace, targeting critical civilian infrastructure on both sides. For example, Israel executed a cyberattack on Bandar Abbas Port in southern Iran in May 2020 in response to an Iranian cyberattack against water and sewage infrastructure in Israel (Even & Siman-Tov, 2020).

In recent years, Israel has openly declared its intentions to destabilize the Iranian regime. For instance, in October 2021, a senior diplomatic source confirmed that the Ministry of Defense had developed a doctrine aimed to increase public pressure in Iran. According to this source, the Iranian population would not tolerate disruptions to their daily life and could influence the regime's nuclear policy. This disclosure followed a cyberattack that caused malfunctions and disruptions in Iran's gas distribution. The source asserted that the long lines for gasoline would cause the “spoiled rich kids” of Tehran to exert pressure on the regime (Lis & Reuters, 2021). In April 2023, a few months after a wave of protests in Iran, Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late deposed Shah, visited Israel at the invitation of Minister of Intelligence Gila Gamliel. This visit underscored Israel's intention to support the exiled Iranian opposition in its efforts to overthrow the regime.

Iran's perception of Israel as a growing threat to the regime's stability can be found in an extensive interview with Brigadier General Mohammad Kazemi, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards Intelligence Organization,

featured on the Iranian Supreme Leader's website in June 2023. Kazemi highlighted the involvement of intelligence services from nearly 20 countries, including the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, UAE, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada, and Bahrain in the 2022 protests. He especially underlined the US and Israeli involvement in supporting the demonstrations and asserted that the American government had aided the protests by waging a cognitive war, encouraging strikes, and supplying weapons to opposition groups operating near Iran's borders. Furthermore, Kazemi accused the Israel intelligence services of establishing a fund, supported by the United States and other countries to aid the strikers and demonstrators, adding that they were cooperating with American intelligence in supporting anti-Iranian "terrorist groups." Kazemi revealed details of a meeting held in one of the regional countries, with US Israeli, and UK representatives, where it was allegedly decided that the US Fifth Fleet would arm Kurdish separatist groups in Iran, provide intelligence support to the Iranian opposition organization Mojahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) for identifying key targets within Iran, and encourage anti-revolutionary groups to carry out covert operations on Iranian soil. He also alleged that the Israeli and UAE intelligence services held occasional meetings in an Arab country to coordinate support for the riots in Iran (Khamenei.ir, 2023b).

In addition, Iranian media have shown special interest in Israel's employment of soft power in its efforts to undermine popular support for the regime and challenge its stability. This supposedly includes Israel's financial and logistic backing of media outlets run by Iranian exiles, notably the Iran International television station based in London (Tasnim, 2023b).

## Conclusion

To this day, the Islamic Republic's hostility toward Israel has remained one of the cornerstones of its foreign policy, distinct from its adversarial stance toward the United States.

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While Iranian hostility to the United States is primarily a result of American policy, its enmity toward Israel is rooted in Israel's very existence. As Khamenei once stated, Iran's contention with the United States could potentially be mitigated through US policy change, respect for Iran and the rights of the Iranian people, and refraining from interference in internal Iranian affairs (Al-Monitor, 2013). In contrast, Iran's animosity toward Israel is fundamentally immutable. Iranian leaders have asserted that Iran will never recognize Israel, and that the only way to solve the Middle East crisis is the destruction of "the Zionist regime," which is both the root of the crisis and the reason why the crisis exists in the first place (Litvak, 2004).

Nevertheless, Israel's policies undeniably influence how the Iranian leadership perceives Israel as a threat and shape Iran's strategy toward Israel. Although the root of Iranian hostility toward Israel lies in the ideology of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, Iran's strategic doctrine over the years, vis-à-vis both internal and external threats to its national security, was not originally shaped by its conflict with Israel. However, as direct conflict and friction escalated between the two countries, Iran became increasingly threatened. The Israeli campaign against Iran's nuclear program, the campaign between the wars in Syria, the expansion of Israel's activity against Iran to additional arenas—including the maritime theater and cyberspace—and Israel's implementation of the "head of the snake" doctrine that advocates attacks on Iranian territory have convinced Iran of the

need to enhance its response. Iran's strategy is to continue relying on proxy organizations, developing improved military capabilities, escalating its presence and establishing military infrastructure near Israel's border, along with revenge attacks against Israelis and Jews outside Israel.

Although Israel was not the sole or primary factor shaping Iran's strategic doctrines, including the use of proxies, asymmetric warfare, "forward defense," and "strategic depth," Israel has become a catalyst and a motivating factor for applying these strategies against it. The Iranian leadership views Israel as an aggressor seeking to change the rules of the game and the balance of deterrence, with Iran positioning itself as the party forced to respond to this aggression. Furthermore, while Israel was formerly regarded as a junior partner of the United States in its efforts to weaken the Islamic Republic, in recent years, Israel has emerged as a significant, and sometimes the leading, partner in the war against Iran across the internal, regional, and international arenas. This shift means that Iran's conflict with Israel, once primarily an ideological one, now increasingly revolves around national interests and security concerns.

This does not imply that Israel should ignore the risks posed by the Iranian threat or adopt a passive approach to it. Any discussion of the optimal Israeli strategy toward Iran must acknowledge that Israel's actions have escalated tensions with Iran, prompting Iran to accelerate its offensive efforts both regionally and in the nuclear sphere. Iran remains a major regional power and is unlikely to abandon its efforts to consolidate its regional influence or its pursuit of a military nuclear option, seen as crucial for the regime's survival. Israel should acknowledge this reality and redefine its security interests concerning Iran, focusing on realistic, achievable goals and minimizing actions that exacerbate the friction with Iran and contribute to the vicious circle of continuous escalation.

Dialogue, let alone reconciliation, between Israel and Iran is not on the agenda at this stage. It is highly doubtful that the Islamic Republic will agree to any channels of communication, whether direct or indirect, without a substantive change in the Iranian leadership and its worldview, which outright rejects the very existence of Israel. Even the departure of Supreme Leader Khamenei is unlikely to change the Islamic Republic's fundamental stance toward Israel. The current political elite in Iran is deeply conservative and largely comprised of former members of the Revolutionary Guards, particularly veterans of the Iran–Iraq War. They have been raised in Iran with minimal exposure to Western education or influence. In foreign policy, their stance tends to be hawkish, ultra-nationalistic, and defiant toward the West. They view the West in decline and believe that Iran should adopt an aggressive policy in its pursuit of regional influence and international power (Alfoneh, 2012).

In this context, Israel should reassess whether a violent conflict with Iran is inevitable or if it can stop the collision course between the two countries, in which Israel plays a major role. Reassessing Israel's strategy toward Iran must take into account the ramifications of the war in Gaza, which has reshaped the regional dynamics, affecting Iran as well. Although there is no evidence of direct Iranian involvement in the October 7 attack, the Islamic Republic may need to reconsider its foreign policy, given the possible shifts in the balance of power in the Middle East (Zimmt, 2023). Israel, for its part, will have to consider not only how to force Iran to bear the cost for its hostile anti-Israeli policy but also how to shape a new strategic reality that limits Iran's ability to expand its influence next to Israel's borders.

Iran's success in advancing its political goals in the region largely hinges on the outcomes of the war in Gaza. Should Israel fail to neutralize Hamas's governing and military capabilities, leading to a prolonged state of anarchy in the Gaza Strip, Iran will continue to maintain its

influence, hindering efforts toward regional normalization with Israel. Conversely, the following developments are likely to give rise to a new political reality that could diminish the influence of the pro-Iranian axis and undermine Iran's regional position:

- The removal of Hamas from power and the elimination of its military capabilities;
- The formation of a transitional government until a political arrangement can be achieved;
- Beginning the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip with the support of an Arab and international coalition;
- Renewing the Arab–Israeli normalization process.

Iran's ability to strengthen its involvement and influence in the region is largely due to the prevailing conditions of instability and warfare. Processes of a diplomatic settlement and tension relief, including in the Palestinian arena, are likely to significantly constrain Iran's ability to exploit the crisis situation as an opportunity to deepen its influence. Furthermore, reducing Iran's involvement in the region is contingent on providing the countries in which it operates with alternatives to its influence across various spheres, including the economy. Such alternatives, provided by Western countries or the Gulf states, for example, would not necessarily halt Iran's activity in the Arab world, especially in Syria and Iraq, but would grant Arab leaders more room to maneuver and help balance Iranian influence. A carrot-and-stick approach is inadequate in curbing Iran's ambitions to extend its influence in the region; rather, a strategy to diminish the factors that enable Iran to continue its regional influence is required. In the efforts against Iran after the war in Gaza, Israel cannot stand alone. Cooperation with both the United States and moderate Arab countries will be essential to counter the Iranian threat and all of its components.

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