

Assad and the Axis of Resistance: A Tense Partnership Put to the Test

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Over the past decade, Iran and Hezbollah have consolidated their military presence in Syria as part of their joint vision of creating Shiite territorial continuity in the region and utilizing the country as a theater of conflict against Israel. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the Swords of Iron war, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has refrained from directly intervening in the multi-front war against Israel, fearing that such intervention would be detrimental to his survival and position. Assad has also recently restricted the activity in his territory of the groups belonging to the “Axis of Resistance.” This measure, which has deepened the tension between Assad and those groups, highlights his commitment to his personal ambitions and to Syria’s national interests over the ideological vision and strategy of the Axis. In light of Israel’s growing offensive operations in Syria, Arab states should take advantage of the current momentum to decrease Syria’s dependence on Iran by integrating Israeli military actions within the framework of a regional political plan.

Since 2016, Iran and Hezbollah have consolidated their military presence in Syria as part of their joint vision of creating Shiite territorial continuity in the region and making Syria an additional theater for operations and influence. In a scenario of direct conflict between Israel and the groups belonging to the “Axis of Resistance,” and certainly in a scenario of a multi-front war, Syria was slated to be one of the fronts, with the advantage of having geographic proximity to Israel and sizeable pro-Iranian forces operating in and from Syrian territory. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the Swords of Iron war, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has refrained from direct intervention in the war being conducted by the “Axis of Resistance.” Assad, who managed to survive a bloody civil war that continues until now, decided against jeopardizing his standing and sacrificing his country for the sake of Hamas, with which he had severed relations at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, although the two parties reconciled in 2022. Assad’s prioritization of internal considerations over commitment to the Axis of Resistance is likely to lead

him to further undermine the freedom of action of Axis groups in Syria and deepen the tension with them.

It is likely that some members of the Axis have been dissatisfied with Assad's decision to stay out of the war against Israel since it began. Even if he did not take direct action himself against Israel, they expected Assad to at least allow Hezbollah and the pro-Iranian militias to conduct operations from Syrian territory throughout the war. During the year, a few isolated offensive actions were attributed to Palestinian and Shiite groups, including the Imam Hossein Division, [an Iranian militia with thousands of combatants operating against Israel in Syria in recent years](#). The Syrian army, however, did not engage in any hostile action. Despite the solid and long-lasting alliance between the parties, it seems that for Assad, the Axis—once regarded as a “defender of Syria,”—has, to a large extent, become a “danger to Syria,” especially in light of the sharp increase in Israeli attacks in Syrian territory during the war between Israel and Hamas and between Israel and Hezbollah.

Ostensibly, the elimination of Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah constituted a major setback not only for Hezbollah but also for its ally, Syria. Assad owes his survival to Iran and Hezbollah, who have fought the Syrian rebels since 2012 and persuaded Russia to provide air support when the military challenges facing Assad's regime intensified. At the same time, events during the past year have proved that Assad's true commitment is to staying in power and not necessarily to the Axis. The removal of Nasrallah from the scene is likely to strengthen this trend. It may be no coincidence that [Assad spoke in subdued tones](#) after Nasrallah was killed: “We are certain that the *Lebanese* (emphasis added) national resistance will continue on the path of struggle and justice in the face of the occupation and will continue to support the Palestinian people in their struggle for their just cause. Martyr Nasrallah will be remembered by the Syrian people for his loyalty and for leading the Lebanese national resistance alongside Syria in its war against the tools of Zionism, despite the heavy burdens he bore.” Furthermore, in the absence of Nasrallah, who had a close relationship for many years with President Assad, Iran itself will have trouble finding someone else with similar influence on Assad. This is another factor likely to alienate Syria from the Axis. In addition, while relations between Iran and Russia have strengthened following the war in Ukraine, it is clear that Russia supports Syria's actions to curb Iran's freedom of action in order to safeguard the Syrian regime.

The recent restrictions imposed by the Assad regime on the freedom of action of the Axis of Resistance reflect growing tensions between the regime and Iran and its proxies in Syria:

- A. In October, numerous reports indicated that Assad had warned the Axis of Resistance that actions originating from Syrian territory could drag Syria into the war, jeopardizing both him and the country. Measures are already being implemented on the ground: The Syrian regime has issued military orders and directives to restrict the freedom of action of the pro-Iranian militias and Hezbollah, starting in southern Syria near the Golan Heights and then extending to rural areas around Damascus and Homs. Assad has also increased the Syrian army's oversight and presence in areas that, not long ago, were favorable to the militias' activity. Russia, which has worked for years to stabilize the Syrian regime, seems to support this policy and, in recent months, has reinforced its military activity in southern Syria, establishing new observation posts and initiating air surveillance patrols.
- B. It was also reported that Maher al-Assad, the commander of the Syrian 4th Armored Division and the president's brother, [had banned the presence of militia members](#) in the division's bases for fear of Israeli attacks. In October, it was also reported that Assad was taking active measures to prevent clashes with Israel in the Golan Heights and was preventing the pro-Iranian militias from launching drones against Israel from Syrian territory.
- C. Following Israel's targeted killings in Syria, it was reported in early 2024 that Iranian sources had accused Syrian army personnel of cooperating with Israel and disclosing information about the Iranians' presence.
- D. A number of appointments have been made in the Syrian regime and army in the past two months (apparently under Russian pressure). The new appointees are people whose affiliation with and loyalty to Iran are doubtful. This measure is likely to constrict Iran's influence in Syrian politics. For example, Suhayl al-Hassan was promoted to commander of the Syrian army's Special Forces last April, replacing Mudhar Khaydar, who is associated with Iran. Al-Hassan, who is known to have Russian support, previously commanded the Syrian army's "Tiger Forces" (25th Special Mission Forces Division) during the Syrian civil war.

Catalyst for the Change—Israel's Escalating Campaign Against the Axis

Following the conclusion of the high-intensity fighting in the Gaza Strip and the inclusion of the return of the evacuees from northern Israel to their homes as a

war objective (September 2024), Israel expanded its offensive operations in Lebanon and Syria. The aim was to diminish Hezbollah's military capabilities and disrupt its efforts to rearm and reconstitute its military power in Lebanon. In the course of this effort, Syria, a territorial hub for arms shipments and a convenient base for the Axis, became a major theater of activity. Israel's high-intensity campaign preserves its deterrence against Assad, thereby encouraging the continuation of his policy of restraint and the restrictions that he has begun to impose on the activity of the Axis in his territory. Israel is engaged in three main efforts in Syria:

Targeted Killings: Taking advantage of opportunities, the number of targeted killings of individuals responsible for the ties between Syria, Hezbollah, and the Axis has increased. For example, Muhammad Ja'far Qasir ("Hajj Fadi"), closely associated with the Assad regime, and who, as commander of Unit 4400, was responsible for sending arms from Syria to Lebanon, was eliminated in October. Dhu al-Faqar Hinawi, commander of the Imam Hossein Division, was killed in early October. This division had moved most of its forces to Lebanon at the beginning of the war and operated in close coordination with Hezbollah units in the south. It took an active part in the attacks against Israel from Lebanese, Syrian, and Iraqi territory, employing anti-tank weapons, drones, and rockets targeting communities in northern Israel. It was also responsible for one of the actions from Syrian territory early in the war when it launched an explosive drone that landed close to a school in Eilat. Another targeted killing was that of Mahmoud Shaheen, who was in charge of Hezbollah's intelligence headquarters in Syria and was responsible for intelligence ties with the Syrian regime.

Disrupting Arms Delivery Routes: On October 25, [the Israeli Air Force bombed a Hezbollah target](#) near the Beirut-Damascus highway, specifically on the Lebanese side of the official border crossing between Syria and Lebanon (Jdeidat Yabous-al-Masnaa). The resulting crater left the main road unusable. Israel accused Hezbollah of using this official border crossing for the transport of weapons and personnel. In November, Israel conducted a number of attacks on unofficial border crossings between Syria and Lebanon as part of an operation aimed at damaging various road sections to halt Hezbollah's weapon smuggling activities. These attacks on the border crossings also inflicted economic damage on Hezbollah because it used these roads for profitable drug and arms smuggling.

Israeli Activity on the Border: Reports indicated that [Israel had begun constructing fortifications along its border with Syria within the demilitarized zone](#), in violation of the separation of forces agreement signed after the Yom Kippur

War. This work, which began in late September, includes paving roads along the boundary on the Alpha Line delineating the border between the Golan Heights and Syria. It is likely that the fence that Israel is building contains sensors designed to prevent land invasions.

Harming the presence of the Axis in Syria: Israel's efforts to combat the Iranian entrenchment in Syria, part of its decade-long "campaign between wars," have intensified in 2024. As of October, Israel had conducted 60 attacks in 2024, [compared to 40 in 2023](#). One prominent operation was the [ground raid by the IDF's Shaldag Unit in September](#) on a missile production site in the town of Masyaf. The attack focused on the Syrian military research and industry facility, officially known as the Scientific Studies and Research Center (CERS), which contains an underground factory built by Iran to produce precision missiles for Hezbollah. This was a complex operation that deviated from the usual pattern of IDF air attacks in Syria. It had reportedly been delayed due to the high level of risk involved, and therefore, it can be concluded that proceeding with the raid reflected a shift in the array of considerations and a greater willingness to take risks.

In addition, particularly following the exchange of attacks between Israel and Iran, the IDF began attacking radar battalions and electronic warfare sites in southern Syria. These attacks aimed to provide the Israeli Air Force with room to maneuver against Axis targets and to prepare for another potential Iranian attack. In November, for example, the air force conducted an attack in the Aleppo-Idlib region of northwestern Syria. Reports indicated that by utilizing the airspace above the Hauran and the Daraa-Suwayda districts in southern Syria, Israel no longer needed to rely on Jordanian airspace. It was also reported that no Syrian air defense systems remained in the region [after Israel had destroyed five radar facilities shortly before its October 26 attack on Iran](#). The strike on the al-Safira military-industrial complex, located south of Aleppo, is believed to have targeted the headquarters of Hezbollah's Radwan Forces and facilities of the Iranian logistics unit responsible for transferring arms from Syria to Lebanon.

Significance

Assad's primary focus on survival, which has kept him from joining the multi-front war against Israel, is likely to continue to shape his future policy toward both Israel and Iran. The elimination of Hezbollah's leadership and the intensification of IDF operations in Syria signal to Assad that Israel is willing to take significant risks to change the strategic balance on its northern border. These developments have led Assad to realize that Syria cannot afford to continue serving as a playground for the Axis powers, as it has for the past decade. To protect his position,

supporters, and assets, Assad must restrict Iran and Hezbollah's freedom of action within Syrian territory, even if only temporarily.

Underlying the tension between Syria and the Axis is a process of normalization that has occurred between Syria and other Arab states in recent years. After a decade of severed ties, most of the Sunni Arab countries have renewed diplomatic relations with Assad, culminating in Syria's return to the Arab League in 2023. While this normalization has been largely symbolic—primarily the opening of embassies—it has not resulted in any practical influence on the ground nor any substantive concessions from Assad on key issues such as Iran's presence in Syria, the refugee crisis, or the trafficking of the illegal Captagon drug.

One exception is the [United Arab Emirates \(UAE\), which has increased](#) its civilian and economic activity in Syria in recent years, partly to reduce Syrian dependence on Iran. Assad's current restraint could indicate a calculated policy to distance Syria from the Axis of Resistance and align more closely with the Sunni Arab countries while even signaling a shift to Israel. However, this restraint should be viewed with skepticism, as Assad is an opportunist whose main concern is remaining in power, and this change may be purely tactical and temporary. If the war between Israel and Iran's proxies ends and the immediate threat to Assad's position is removed, he may once again allow large-scale activity by the Axis of Resistance in and from Syria.

Another limitation to a potential shift in Syria's attitude is the depth of the Iranian presence in Syria. In recent years, Iran has expanded its influence in Syria not only militarily but also in civilian and cultural spheres. It has established educational and welfare institutions, rebuilt infrastructure, and created Shiite religious centers, to the extent that it will be difficult for Syria to sever ties with Iran. Recognizing Syria's strategic importance, Iran will undoubtedly exert great efforts to prevent Assad from developing closer ties with the Sunni Arab states. The frequent visits to Syria by senior Iranian leaders in November—including the foreign minister, the speaker of parliament, the advisor to the supreme leader, and the defense minister—suggest an effort to reduce tension between the two countries.

Still, a window of opportunity may be opening. Assad's restrictions on the activity of the Axis could align well with Israel's military efforts in the past decade, particularly since Israel's attacks on Hezbollah in Lebanon in September 2024, to eradicate the Axis presence in Syria. On the political front, the Sunni Arab countries that have normalized their relations with the Assad regime could leverage the current momentum to intensify pressure on Assad to increase his measures against the Axis. The UAE, in particular, could be a key player in the

effort to free Syria from the Iranian bear hug. If Assad does not change directions and continues supporting the Axis, Israel should renew its threats and escalate the military pressure on his regime. Such actions could integrate Israel's military efforts with a broader political initiative led by the Sunni Arab states—possibly also with Russian support—aimed at achieving a long-term strategic goal of weakening Iran and its proxies in the region.

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