



Reassessing Fundamental Concepts in Iranian Policy Against the Background of the War in Gaza

Raz Zimmt

The Institute for National Security Studies – Tel Aviv University

The ongoing campaign in Gaza and its spread to other fronts, including the direct confrontation in April 2024 between Iran and Israel, could bring about significant changes in the security conception of the Islamic Republic. These changes could affect the features of its policy and its strategic perceptions, including how it manages its regional network of proxies and its nuclear doctrine. Although Iran's conduct since the start of the war does not currently indicate any strategic U-turns by the Iranian leadership, it is clear that due to internal, regional and international developments—along with the lessons from the ongoing regional war—Tehran increasingly estimates that the strategic balance is tipping in its favor. This perception could lead to significant changes in its policy, specifically a greater willingness to take risks and adopt a more aggressive approach, including towards Israel. This trend obliges Israel to prepare for the new Iranian strategy and for more intense conflict with Iran and the Shiite axis it leads.

Keywords: Iran, strategy, nuclear, proxies, Gaza, Iran-Israel conflict

Introduction

The war in Gaza has found Iran embroiled in significant internal, regional, and international developments. Internally, the regime is facing a severe crisis of legitimacy as it approaches the end of the era of the current leader, Ali Khamenei, and the [power struggle](#) that can be expected in the coming years. Regionally, Iran continues to ease the tensions with its Arab neighbors and to entrench its influence through a network of proxies it has built up over the years. Globally, it has intensified its strategic cooperation with Russia and increased its oil exports to China to an extent that allows it to cope with economic sanctions.

Since the start of the war, Iran has led a regional and international effort to recruit support for Hamas and exert pressure on Israel and the United States, coordinating and synchronizing its partners and proxies in the region. In this context, the alleged Israeli attack of April 1, 2024, on a building next to the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, which killed Hassan Mahdavi, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards in Syria and Lebanon, dramatically raised tensions between Iran and Israel. The Iranian missile and drone attack on Israel on the night of April 14 heralded a new stage in the strategic conflict between the two countries,

enabling Iran to exploit the war to draw closer to the military nuclear threshold.

These developments demand a reassessment of several basic assumptions regarding Iranian policy and its strategic perceptions. The complex interaction between ideological-revolutionary aspirations and political logic in Tehran's decision-making processes, the patterns of behavior and decision-making of the Supreme Leader, the preference for maintaining the nuclear threshold over a breakthrough to nuclear weapons, and the continued entrenchment of the regional network of proxies—all these should be examined critically in light of the lessons learned from the campaign to date.

The prolonged war and the growing danger of its spread into other arenas, including Iran and Hezbollah, could lead to significant changes in Iran's balance of considerations and its strategies. This paper proposes an initial examination of the validity of four fundamental assumptions that have underpinned Iranian policy in recent decades: the role of ideological vision in shaping Iranian policy; the Iranian leader's preference for a cautious approach to limit risks and preserve the regime; the objectives of Iran's nuclear strategy; and the proxies' strategy.

The Role of Revolutionary Ideology in Iranian Policy

The murderous Hamas attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, proved that the source of enmity towards Israel does not derive solely from reasons relating to Israel's policies, but also from fierce cultural and ideological hostility shared by Iran. As [Michael Milstein](#) remarked:

Types like Sinwar, who believe in the path of Jihad and declare this openly, are ideologists. His most authentic long-term objective is the destruction of Israel [...] not the creation of Hong Kong in Gaza, nor any improvement to the life of the average Gazan [...] When Hamas reaches a junction at which it

has to choose between ideology and the welfare of the residents, ideology always wins.

[Harel Horev](#) also pointed out the gap between recognizing Hamas' ideology and failure to internalize that the organization indeed wishes to implement this ideology.

Any comparison between Hamas and Iran is partial and problematic. Hamas is a Sunni Jihadist movement, while Iran is a Shiite Islamic Republic. The struggle against Israel is the *raison d'être* for Hamas and a central pillar of its identity, whereas in Iran's ideological concept, [hostility to Israel](#) is just one, albeit important, element. Moreover, there is no comparison between the limited territorial space within which Hamas operates and the political status of the Hamas regime in Gaza, and the expansive territorial space and broader considerations that guide the Iranian regime. Over the years the combination of internal constraints and changing regional and international circumstances has led the leaders of Iran to adopt a [dual policy](#): attempting to remain faithful to its revolutionary teachings while pursuing a policy that serves Iran's national interests on cost-benefit considerations, employing a pragmatic approach that strives for the best way to achieve its strategic objectives.

Under certain conditions, the Iranian leadership has prioritized Iranian interests over revolutionary and Islamic ideological concepts. In other cases, they have preferred to act according to their ideological vision by striving for revolutionary changes and the establishment of a new regional and international order. For example, in the territorial dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh enclave, Iran sided with its Christian neighbor Armenia rather than with Shiite Muslim Azerbaijan, because it feared that a strong and thriving secular Azerbaijan would reinforce separatist tendencies among the large Azeri minority in Iran. In more distant regions, particularly in cases that posed no risk to Iranian interests, Iran has been [more determined](#) in its

support for ideologically closer movements, showing more loyalty to its revolutionary orientation. This was evident in its relations

Declarations by senior Iranian officials and commentaries in the Iranian press have unequivocally rejected Israel's right to exist, portraying it as an illegitimate entity created in sin through nefarious Western plots aimed at weakening the Muslim world and establishing Western imperialist dominance in the Middle East.

with Sudan, radical movements in Algeria, Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad and Hamas, although even in these cases, its policy has not always been consistent.

Notwithstanding the differences between Iran and Islamic movements in the region, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, a common thread among them is the rejection of Israel's existence. Iran's hostility to Israel stems from its mere existence and has been a [central component](#) of its policy since the Islamic Revolution. This animosity towards Israel has been prominently [displayed](#) during the war in Gaza. Declarations by senior Iranian officials and commentaries in the Iranian press have unequivocally rejected Israel's right to exist, portraying it as an illegitimate entity created in sin through nefarious Western plots aimed at weakening the Muslim world and establishing Western imperialist dominance in the Middle East.

However, focusing on the ideological perspective alone is insufficient to grasp Iran's policy towards Israel since the outbreak of the war in Gaza. If Iranian policy were solely determined by its revolutionary ideology, Iran would have likely joined the campaign or at least engaged Hezbollah in full-scale warfare against Israel from the early stages, seizing what appeared to be a historic opportunity to realize its revolutionary vision of Israel's destruction. In reality, throughout the war, Iran has acted based on astute assessments reflecting a rational and pragmatic approach. This approach has

included a strategy of [gradual escalation](#), involving partial engagement of Hezbollah in the fighting, numerous attacks by pro-Iranian Shiite militias on American bases in Syria and Iraq, and involvement of the Houthis in Yemen in the fight against Israel.

Consequently, Iran sought to avoid opening a full-scale confrontation against Israel, which could have exacted a heavy toll on Hezbollah and possibly on Iran itself. This caution was especially evident in light of repeated [warnings](#) from US President Joe Biden that Iran and Hezbollah should not exploit this opportunity to act against Israel. [Meir Litvak](#) aptly captured this sentiment in his discussion of Supreme Leader Khamenei's decision not to directly interfere at the onset of the war:

Khamenei had an opportunity on October 7, but he also takes a historical view, and so he is not in a rush to destroy Israel tomorrow morning. His ideological stance is that Israel's blood must be shed, it must be brought to a state of collapse, so that it will yield to Iran's demands and will no longer exist as a Jewish state. Then, according to his vision, we can all return "home"—whether to Morocco or Ukraine.

Thus, [David Menashri's observation](#) that "Iran is still a country that operates according to political logic more than fiery ideology" appears to hold true to a significant extent even today.

Ali Khamenei as a Cautious Leader

Following the Iranian missile and drone attack on Israel, a [senior American official](#) told ABC News that his country had relied too heavily on the mistaken idea that the Iranian leader, Ali Khamenei, was cautious and would never order a direct attack on Israel. He stated that the direct Iranian attack required a renewed examination and assessment of this conception. There is no doubt that the Iranian attack on Israel has opened a new stage in the strategic hostility

between the countries. Iran's decision to attack targets in Israel from within its territory reflected a significant change in its approach toward Israel's rules of engagement. Even though the Iranian leadership may have estimated that launching missiles and drones to attack military targets in Israel would not necessarily lead to a total regional war, it is clear that launching over 300 missiles and drones demonstrates a willingness to take considerable risks that it had previously avoided.

The Iranian leader is a revolutionary ideologue who has never abandoned his revolutionary worldview. Nevertheless, since his appointment as Iranian leader in mid-1989, Khamenei has generally adopted a cautious policy, particularly in foreign relations, to ensure the survival of his regime. For example, in 2003 he agreed to [freeze](#) work in the development of a military nuclear device, concerned that Iran could be the next in line after the American invasion of Iraq. Securing the survival of the Islamic Republic despite internal and external threats is the primary objective of the leadership. Khamenei perceives direct military conflict with the United States as an existential threat to the regime's survival, necessitating a [display of caution](#), notwithstanding his extreme rhetoric. Thus, while his declarations often reflect an uncompromising revolutionary approach, his policies typically express caution.

Khamenei's decision to attack Israel is not necessarily evidence of a significant change in his decision-making processes or his willingness to drag Iran into all-out war with Israel, and certainly not with the United States. Shortly after the nighttime attack, [senior Iranian officials](#) were quick to announce the successful completion of an act of revenge against Israel, attempting to close the incident. Moreover, this is not the first time that Iran has retreated from a policy of restraint and shown willingness to take risks in the face of growing external challenges. Twice in recent years, Iran adopted a policy of "strategic patience," and both times, the policy was ultimately abandoned when it

concluded that the risks involved outweighed the potential benefits.

For a year after President Donald Trump withdrew from the nuclear deal in May 2018 and renewed economic sanctions, Iran adhered to its obligations under the nuclear deal of summer 2015 and adopted a policy of [strategic patience](#), hoping to gain adequate financial compensation from the other deal partners. However, Europe's failure to establish an alternative mechanism for financial transactions with Iran, coupled with increasing American economic pressure, led to a shift in Iranian policy. Iran gradually began to deviate from its obligations under the deal while simultaneously engaging in [defiant military actions](#) against the United States and its allies.

Iran returned to its strategic patience policy following the assassinations of senior Iranian personnel in Syria, attributed to Israel, during the Gaza war. According to a [report](#) in the New York Times in early 2024, the Iranian leader instructed his military commanders to adopt a policy of strategic patience and to avoid, in every possible way, serious escalation that could drag Iran into direct military conflict with Israel or the United States. However, the killing of a senior Iranian in the attack in Damascus prompted Tehran to [abandon this policy](#). It is possible that this decision was based on an assessment by the Iranian leadership that the risk of further Israeli attacks against senior Iranians outweighed the risk of escalation with Israel.

On other occasions, the Iranian leadership has also demonstrated a willingness to take calculated risks to safeguard its essential national interests. For example, in January 2024, in an unprecedented move, the Revolutionary Guards launched [salvos of rockets](#) towards a site reportedly used by the Israeli Mossad in Northern Iraq and towards a training base of the Baluchi terrorist organization Jaish al-Adl in Pakistan. The intensive barrage was retaliation against Israel for the assassination of senior Revolutionary Guards commander Sayyed Razi Mousavi and against Jaish al-Adl for a series of

attacks on Iranian officers and soldiers along the Iran-Pakistan border. In response to the attack in Pakistan, on January 18, 2024, the [Pakistani Air Force](#) struck terrorist targets in Iran, resulting in casualties.

Conversely, in other cases, Iran has continued to demonstrate a high degree of restraint and caution, particularly towards the United States. An example of Iran's effort to avoid direct military conflict with the United States can be seen in their response following the deaths of three American soldiers in a drone attack on a base in northern Jordan in late January 2024. Less than 48 hours after the incident, attributed to pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq, Esmail Qaani, the [commander of the Quds Force](#) of the Revolutionary Guards, traveled to Baghdad. There, he met with representatives of some Shiite militias and warned them that such actions could provoke a severe American response. According to [one report](#), Qaani instructed the militia commanders to maintain a low profile to avoid US attacks on the militias or even direct action against Iran itself.

The war in Ukraine and the supply of Iranian drones to Russia have elevated relations between Tehran and Moscow to a strategic partnership, which Iran has leveraged to enhance its standing within the new world order.

It is possible that the fear of military conflict with the United States has decreased in recent years, amidst growing assessment in Tehran that the United States is weakened and the American administration is reluctant to engage in direct conflict with Iran. This shift is attributed to changes in U.S. priorities influenced by international developments, particularly involving Russia and China. In addition, changes in Iran's regional and international status, coupled with its growing military strength, may encourage its leaders to adopt more daring policies. In the regional arena, Iran has capitalized on events to advance its aims and

interests in the Middle East and to strengthen the regional axis under its leadership.

Moreover, the war in Ukraine and the supply of Iranian drones to Russia have elevated relations between Tehran and Moscow to a strategic partnership, which Iran has leveraged to enhance its standing within the new world order. The Islamic Republic views international developments as an opportunity to establish a [multi-polar world order](#), not dominated by America, where it can play a more significant role alongside its regional allies and international partners, principally Russia and China. In a speech in November 2022, Iranian leader Khamenei [declared](#) that the United States is no longer the world's dominant power and that a new world order is emerging, characterized by the shift of political, economic, and cultural power from the West to Asia, and the expansion of the "axis of resistance."

The Supreme Leader's willingness to take greater risks could also stem from recent changes in the main centers of power within Iran, particularly the growing influence of [hardliners](#) in decision-making and the absolute control by conservatives over all state institutions, starting with the Supreme National Security Council. Although the Supreme Leader holds most of the authority in the country, he is supported by a limited team of advisors and the Supreme National Security Council, headed by the president. The election of Ebrahim Raisi as president in 2021 reinforced the council's hawkish composition. This trend reached its peak in May 2023 with the appointment of [Ali Akbar Ahmadian](#) as secretary of the Council, replacing Ali Shamkhani. This appointment also reflected the [ongoing rise](#) of the Revolutionary Guards' influence in decision-making, turning the organization into a central focus of power in the Iranian political system.

Ultimately, Khamenei's conduct in recent months does not necessarily indicate that he has abandoned the generally cautious line of his 35-year rule. However, the approaching end of his leadership could lead him in two

opposing directions. On one hand, given his advanced age, he might avoid any far-reaching policy changes or risks that could undermine the national security of country at the end of his tenure. On the other hand, he might conclude that now is the time to bolster the immunity of the Islamic Republic against growing security challenges, mainly from Israel, and internal challenges to the regime's stability, even if that means taking calculated risks that he previously avoided.

The Concept of Proxies

After the Iranian attack on Israel, [intelligence sources](#) estimated that Iran was displeased with Hezbollah's actions on the night of the attack. Despite launching several salvos of dozens of rockets toward army bases on the Golan Heights, Hezbollah's response adhered to the established rules of engagement between the organization and Israel along the northern border since the onset of the war in Gaza. This incident was not the first time apparent tensions surfaced between Iran and its proxies during the war. The killing of [three American troops](#) in Jordan in an attack by an Iraqi Shiite militia in late January 2024, and the increasing involvement of the Iranian-backed [Houthis in Yemen](#), targeting shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, risked dragging Iran into an unwanted military confrontation with the United States.

The Islamic Republic views its [network of proxies](#) as integral to its military strength and deterrent capability. This network enables Iran to exert influence in the region and deter its enemies while maintaining plausible deniability, thereby mitigating the political and military costs associated with the actions of its proxies. However, despite these advantages, conflicts of interest can arise between Iran and some of the organizations it supports. Moreover, in recent years, particularly following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, Iran has adopted a more [decentralized approach](#) to managing this network. While it continues to

wield considerable influence within the network, this influence is not necessarily exerted through complete and continuous control over each of its components.

Alongside the trend of decentralization in the Iranian proxy network, recent years have witnessed a growing Iranian preference for direct attacks by its own forces, alongside continued use of these organizations. Since May 2019, when Iran abandoned its policy of strategic patience adopted after the United States withdrew from the nuclear treaty in May 2018, it has undertaken a series of aggressive actions. These included [sabotaging oil tankers](#) in the Persian Gulf and the [Gulf of Oman](#) (summer 2019), shooting down an [American drone](#) (June 2019), and launching cruise missile and drone [attacks on Saudi oil installations](#) (September 2019). These actions were orchestrated and executed by Iranian military units under direct leadership and without the involvement of proxies.

In the Syrian arena, [recent changes](#) in Iranian activity against Israel are evident in Iran's increased willingness to conduct [direct attacks on Israel](#) using drones and rockets. Proxies, generally less effective than Iran's high-quality capabilities, require extensive coordination and control and involve managing complex operations across different arenas. These tasks are largely handled by the Iranian armed forces. Consequently, in recent years, Iran has preferred to deploy its own forces in some cases. Additionally, Iran's growing sense of security has emboldened it to undertake more daring direct actions, calculatedly accepting risks to achieve strategic objectives.

The war in Gaza provided Iran with its first significant opportunity to implement its "[united fronts](#)" concept on a broader scale than before, coordinating simultaneous action across multiple arenas against Israel and the United States without facing direct consequences. However, it also revealed the limitations of Iran's ability to fully leverage the capabilities of the axis of resistance, especially due to concerns

about being dragged into direct military conflict with Israel and possibly the United States. Furthermore, Iran has not achieved two crucial objectives through its proxy network: securing a ceasefire in Gaza to minimize damage to Hamas and exerting enough pressure on the United States to end its unequivocal support for Israel, thereby forcing it to cease the war without achieving its objectives.

In the first mention of the attack, Revolutionary Guards Commander Hossein Salami warned that Iran had established a new equation against the “Zionist entity,” asserting that henceforth it would respond directly from its own territory to any Israeli aggression.

The direct Iranian attack on Israel on April 14 could herald a further step in Tehran’s increasing preference to utilize its own strategic military capabilities rather than relying on its regional network of proxies. In the first mention of the attack, Revolutionary Guards Commander Hossein Salami **warned** that Iran had established a new equation against the “Zionist entity,” asserting that henceforth it would respond directly from its own territory to any Israeli aggression. Iran continues to derive benefits from its proxy strategy and it is unlikely to abandon it in the foreseeable future. However, the operational difficulties and risks associated with maintaining such a network, coupled with Tehran’s growing inclination to act directly in certain instances, might prompt Iran to reassess the proxy concept. Ultimately, Iran will need to determine whether the advantages of its current approach still outweigh the inherent risks and challenges.

The Nuclear Strategy

Against the backdrop of the April 2024 escalation between Israel and Iran, Ahmad Haghtalab the Revolutionary Guards commander responsible for protecting nuclear sites, warned that if Israel attempted to damage nuclear facilities

in response to an Iranian attack, Tehran could deviate from its previous considerations and reconsider its nuclear doctrine. A few days later, Javad Karimi Qodduzi, a member of the Majlis Committee on National Security & Foreign Policy, claimed that Iran needed only one week to conduct a nuclear test after receiving approval from the Supreme Leader.

These declarations align with the growing voices in Iran calling for a reassessment of its nuclear strategy, rather than settling for its status as a nuclear threshold state. Senior Iranian officials emphasize that the primary obstacle to Iran developing nuclear weapons is political rather than technological. For instance, in December 2022, Kamal Kharazi, Chairman of the Strategic Council for Foreign Policy, stated that Iran could produce a nuclear bomb but had no intention of doing so. Mahmoud Reza Aghamiri, President of Shahid Beheshti University and a nuclear scientist, underscored in an April 7, 2024, interview on Iranian television, that Ayatollah Khamenei could change his religious ruling (fatwa) prohibiting the production of nuclear weapons at any time, and Iran has the capability to comply in such a scenario. Saeed Leylaz, an Iranian economist and advisor to the former reformist President Mohammad Khatami, claimed that in the event of an attack on Iran, it would conduct its first nuclear test.

Amidst growing voices in Iran urging a review of its nuclear doctrine, Iranian officials continue to emphasize the civilian purposes of their nuclear program. Following the statement by Majlis Member Qodduzi, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani also reiterated at a press conference in Tehran that a nuclear bomb had no place in Iran’s defense doctrine. President Raisi further affirmed that Iran remained committed to its leader’s fatwa, and that nuclear weapons had no place in its doctrine. On April 25, 2024, Iranian news sites published an infographic prepared by the Documentation Center of the Islamic Revolution, summarizing the Iranian leader’s declarations ruling out the development of a nuclear bomb.

Currently, there is no evidence of a decision by the Iranian leadership led by Khamenei to change its nuclear strategy and pursue nuclear weapons. However, the public statements emerging from Iran supporting a review of its nuclear strategy suggest ongoing discussions on this matter within the corridors of power in Tehran. Factors such as Iran's position on the nuclear threshold, heightened risks of direct military confrontation with Israel and possibly the United States, increased support from Russia and China, and challenges in managing proxy dynamics following lessons from the Gaza war—all these may bolster voices within the Iranian leadership advocating for deeper entrenchment in the nuclear threshold and enhancing Iran's capability to develop nuclear weapons within a short time frame. This scenario hinges on a political decision by the leader, driven by an assessment that mounting threats to Iran's national security necessitate moving beyond reliance on nuclear threshold status to deter adversaries.

Summary and Significance

Iran finds itself at a significant crossroads. The impending end of the current leader's reign, coupled with a new and perilous escalation with Israel, necessitates a reassessment of its military capabilities. Simultaneously, its stance on the nuclear threshold presents an opportunity to review its nuclear strategy, while the lessons from the war in Gaza demand a re-examination of the benefits and drawbacks of utilizing its network of proxies. The ongoing campaign in Gaza, with its regional implications, is akin to a potential earthquake whose effects will inevitably reach Iran. The Islamic Republic must now consider whether the war thwarts or accelerates what it views as positive trends. The outcomes of this reassessment will significantly influence Iran's regional and international policies.

However, this does not imply imminent changes in every arena addressed in this article. The blend of revolutionary vision and

national interests will likely persist as the bedrock of the Iranian leadership's power. This combination enables Iran to adapt its policies to evolving circumstances and maintain flexibility in a complex reality. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether there will be substantial changes in the decision-making process of the Iranian leadership, given the advanced age of the current leader and preparations for the anticipated succession struggle upon his death.

However, Iran's perspective on international developments as an opportunity to establish a new multipolar world order without American leadership, its pursuit of the military nuclear threshold, development of missile systems and drones to compensate for its limited conventional military capabilities, establishment of a pro-Iranian regional axis, and creation of a "ring of fire" around Israel, all reinforce Tehran's assessment that the strategic balance is tilting in its favor. This could embolden Iran to take greater risks and adopt a more confrontational policy, particularly towards Israel. Such a stance may be exacerbated by increasing extremism within the Iranian political system and the influence of the Revolutionary Guards that espouse a hawkish, nationalist, and defiant stance towards the West. They may potentially encourage the Iranian leadership to adopt a less cautious approach concerning key issues, including the nuclear program, relations with the United States and Israel, and regional aspirations.

These developments underscore the urgency for Israel and its allies, particularly the United States, to prepare for shifts in Iranian strategy and to devise a comprehensive strategy concerning the Islamic Republic. Such a strategy must offer a robust response to the array of challenges Iran poses to Israel's national security and tilt the strategic balance in Israel's favor. To affectively address Iran, Israel must collaborate closely with the United States, other Western countries, and moderate Arab states based on a vision aimed at shaping a new regional order characterized by strengthened ties with

the United States, promotion of normalization with the Arab world, and deterrence against Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons.

Dr. Raz Zimmt is a senior researcher and expert on Iran at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) and the Alliance Center for Iranian Studies at Tel Aviv University. He is also the co-editor of the INSS Journal "Strategic Update." He holds an MA degree and a PhD in Middle East History from Tel Aviv University. His main fields of research are the politics, society and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. His book **Iran from Within: State and Society in the Islamic Republic** [Hebrew] was published by Resling in 2022. razz@inss.org.il