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The Need to Reexamine the Concept of the "Shiite Axis"

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The major developments that have unfolded in the region since the outbreak of the war in the Gaza Strip—and especially in recent months—require a renewed examination of the relevance of the concept of the "Shiite Axis" led by Iran. Over the past two decades, Tehran has worked to shape a network of regional actors—mainly sub-state entities—based on a shared ideology of resistance to Israel and the West, aiming to expand its influence and create strategic depth. While in the past, this "axis" was considered a centralized and well-coordinated system, it is now increasingly apparent that it functions more as a decentralized, ad hoc, and flexible network of actors with independent interests and identities, who exercise a much greater degree of autonomy. In addition, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria, the erosion of Hezbollah's strategic capabilities, and the mounting pressures on the militias in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen—alongside the weakening of Iran's own deterrence capacity—have significantly diminished the axis and undermined its cohesion. At the same time, the network that Iran has woven over the years continues to operate at a certain level of coordination and commitment, with Tehran still providing it with funding, weapons, and support. Therefore, it is appropriate to consider, over time, the need to shift the analysis of this regional aggregation from a hierarchical axis model to one of a loose and dynamic network. Moreover, it is essential to formulate tailored policies for each of its components, identifying internal rifts, vulnerabilities, and opportunities to weaken Iran's grip on the region and disrupt the ties between its partners.

The "Shiite Crescent": Between Vision and Reality

In December 2004, King Abdullah II of Jordan warned of the emergence of a transnational "Shiite Crescent"—stretching from Iran in the east, through Iraq and Syria, to Lebanon in the west—which could destabilize the Middle East and alter the regional balance of power. At that time, with the rise of a Shiite-led government in Baghdad following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Abdullah cautioned that Iran might exploit the new political dynamics to establish deeper influence across the region by strengthening actors aligned with it religiously and ideologically. The king's warning reflected growing Sunni Arab concerns over Iran's rising stature in the heart of the Arab world and its efforts to expand its regional influence, including the provision of support for armed Shiite militias, terrorist organizations, and sub-state actors.

Since the US conquest of Iraq and in the shadow of the upheaval that swept the Arab world beginning in 2011, Iran has worked to consolidate its "Axis of Resistance"—an anti-American,

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anti-Israeli coalition—and to establish regional hegemony against the rival "Axis of Cooperation" led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Iran's so-called "Axis of Resistance" has included states and organizations aligned with the ideology of the Islamic Republic, among them Bashar al-Assad's Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and even Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The establishment of this "Resistance Front" enhanced Iran's ability to extend its strategic depth across the Fertile Crescent. Iran's growing influence in the Middle East has become one of the defining features of the region's geopolitical landscape over the past two decades. The use of terms such as the "Radical Axis," the "Shiite Crescent," or the "Resistance Front" has been intended to describe this aggregation by emphasizing either its political-strategic or ideological-conceptual dimensions.

Defining the Iran-led network as an axis has become commonplace, even though this network never truly operated as a hierarchical framework under direct Iranian command and control. Instead, it has functioned as a loose association of components connected by shared interests and a common ideological vision rooted in resistance to Israel, the United States, and their regional allies. While Iran has sought to maintain as much influence—and exert control—as possible over these components, it has never formalized its activities through official alliances or binding agreements. Furthermore, in recent years, especially since the killing of Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, Iran has managed the network in an even more decentralized manner than in the past. Although it has continued to wield substantial influence over the network, this has not necessarily meant full or constant control over each part. The growing divergence of interests between Iran and its proxies is evident, for example, in the attempt by Iraqi Shiite militias to assassinate former Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in November 2021—apparently without Iranian support—and in several attacks carried out by the Houthis against Abu Dhabi, which did not necessarily align with Iran's interest in improving its ties with the United Arab Emirates.

Nevertheless, alongside the decentralization of the network, the connections and mutual assistance between Iran's partners have strengthened. This growing cooperation is evident, for example, in meetings between senior leaders of the Palestinian Islamist organizations and the Hezbollah leadership; in the coordinated development of Hezbollah's and Hamas's operational plans to infiltrate Israeli territory; and in Hezbollah's assistance to the Houthis and the Iraqi Shiite militias through training and instruction. In this context, Hezbollah and its Secretary-General, Hassan Nasrallah, played a central role, both due to Nasrallah's long-standing experience and familiarity with Israel and because of his prominent status and influence in Tehran, which increased since the killing of Qassem Soleimani. In addition, there is a clear and growing effort by network components to arm themselves with increasing quantities of precision weapons, while simultaneously developing independent capabilities to manufacture weaponry—including missiles and UAVs—in response to efforts (mainly by Israel) to block the transfer of arms from Iran to its partners. These developments have created a higher degree of mutual commitment among the axis's components and have allowed them to diversify the resources at their disposal.

At the same time, Iran faces fundamental limitations in establishing itself as a major power in the Arab sphere. First, as a country with a Persian majority, it is perceived even by its allies in

the Arab world as a foreign actor—one that often behaves arrogantly and sometimes even racially toward its Arab neighbors. For example, research by Hanin Ghaddar from the Washington Institute, based on interviews with Hezbollah fighters in Syria, revealed the crisis of trust between the organization and the commanders of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria, who, according to the fighters, treated their Lebanese counterparts and the other Shiites under their sponsorship in Syria with disdain and condescension.

Second, Shiite Iran struggles to achieve regional hegemony in a predominantly Sunni space. Moreover, Iran's efforts to expand its regional influence have faced difficulties even among Shiite populations in the region, as clearly seen in the case of the Shiites in Iraq. Among Iraqi Shiites, there exists a degree of hostility toward Iran and suspicion of its intentions, as the trauma of the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s still continues to shape their attitudes. There is also religious competition between the Shiism of Iran and that of Iraq, and most Iraqi Shiites—including the country's senior cleric, Ayatollah Ali Sistani—reject the concept of rule by the jurisprudent (*velayat-e faqih*), which has been Iran's governing principle since the Islamic Revolution.

Additionally, proxies that are considered the most loyal to Iran and even committed to the revolutionary ideology and the concept of *velayat-e faqih*—mainly Hezbollah and some of the Shiite militias in Iraq—have, at times, prioritized their own unique interests and considerations over those of Iran. Even Hezbollah has over the years evolved into an organization whose Lebanese identity has strengthened relative to its Islamic-Iranian identity, although Iran remains its primary source of authority and allegiance. As INSS experts Orna Mizrahi and Yoram Schweitzer have noted, Hezbollah is a central component of the Shiite Islamic Resistance Axis, but at the same time, it is also an autonomous, multifaceted organization within Lebanon. In Hezbollah's decision-making process, there is indeed a dynamic between these multiple identities, which often coexist harmoniously but sometimes with noticeable contradictions.

In Iraq as well, the Shiite militias have varied in their degree of commitment and loyalty to the Islamic Republic. While some, notably Kata'ib Hezbollah, 'Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq, and Harakat al-Nujaba, have demonstrated greater allegiance to Tehran and to the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine, other Shiite militias have followed the leadership of Sistani. Even militias previously considered loyal to Iran, chiefly the Mahdi Army led by Muqtada al-Sadr, have over the years adopted a more critical approach toward Iranian influence in Iraq. The loyalty and commitment of the Houthis to Iran have remained even more limited. While there is Shiite solidarity between Iran and the Houthis, the Houthis belong to the Zaidi Shiite branch rather than the Twelver Shiite branch (dominant in Iran). Unlike some of Iran's other proxies, the Houthis have remained a local Yemeni group with autonomous leadership, operating based on a Yemeni agenda. In the past, the Houthis even acted against Iranian guidance, such as in their decision to seize Sana'a in September 2014, contrary to Iranian advice not to attack Yemen's capital. The Houthis' rise and Saudi Arabia's military involvement in the Yemen war were perceived by Iran as an opportunity to increase its support for the group, strengthen its influence in Yemen, outflank Saudi Arabia from the south, and threaten the Bab al-Mandeb

Strait. However, the Houthis have continued to maintain a significant degree of autonomy in managing their territory, setting priorities, and defining their strategic goals.

From "Convergence of Arenas" to a Joint Operations Room

Despite Iran's limitations in managing the components of the "Resistance Front" and the challenges it faces in operating the axis, Iran seized the new circumstances created in the Middle East after the killing of Soleimani and the Abraham Accords as an opportunity to enhance coordination between the Palestinian terrorist organizations Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the other components of the axis around the struggle against their common enemy—Israel. As part of implementing this strategy, Iran decided to establish a joint operations room responsible for comprehensive military, logistical, and intelligence coordination among Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the pro-Iranian militias in Syria, the Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen.

The growing coordination among axis components was already evident in May 2021, during the IDF's "Guardian of the Walls" operation in Gaza, when Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad established a joint operations room in Beirut. Ibrahim al-Amin, editor of the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Akhbar*, which is affiliated with Hezbollah, stated in an interview with Hezbollah's Al-Manar channel that the operations room active during the campaign included officers from the IRGC and was responsible for coordinating not only information exchange or tactical actions but also intelligence cooperation. According to al-Amin, Hezbollah managed to bring Hamas field officers to Beirut through special channels and successfully transferred equipment into the Gaza Strip during the days of fighting.

Hamas documents captured in Gaza during the "Swords of Iron" war revealed the extent of the coordination between Iran's leadership and the components of the "Resistance Axis"—Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. According to these documents, senior IRGC Qods Force official Saeed Izadi led Iran's efforts to smuggle weapons and provide funding, conduct training for Palestinian organizations in the West Bank and Gaza, strengthen cooperation and coordination between the Palestinian organizations and Hezbollah, and regulate relations between Hamas and the Assad regime in Syria. Although these documents also point to disagreements and divergent interests among the axis components, they nonetheless testify to the ideological partnership and the broad strategic and operational cooperation between Iran and its regional allies within the axis framework.

The war in Gaza provided Iran with its first significant opportunity to implement the "convergence of arenas" concept—meaning axis-wide action in strategic synchronization with a division of labor among its various components and adaptation to the evolving circumstances of the war. Implementing this convergence concept included the partial integration of Hezbollah in Iran's campaign; attacks by pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq against US bases in Syria and Iraq to impose a cost on the United States for its support of Israel and hasten the withdrawal of US forces from Syria; and the integration of the Houthis from Yemen into the campaign against Israel, mainly through the launching of missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) toward southern Israel, as well as attacks on ships in the Red Sea

intended to impose a maritime blockade on Israel and trigger international intervention to halt Israel's attacks on the Gaza Strip.

However, the war also exposed Iran's limitations in leveraging the full range of capabilities available to the pro-Iranian axis in the region, particularly due to its concerns about being drawn into direct military conflict with Israel—and possibly even with the United States. Moreover, Iran failed to achieve two main goals through its proxy network: ending the fighting in Gaza to reduce the cost of Hamas's losses and exerting pressure on the United States to halt its unconditional support for Israel and push Israel to end the war before achieving its objectives.

Additionally, during the war, tensions emerged between Iran and some of its proxies due to certain gaps between its interests and those of the groups it supports. For example, following the Iranian attack on Israel in April 2024, intelligence sources assessed that Iran was disappointed by Hezbollah's activity on the night of the attack. Although Hezbollah fired several barrages of dozens of rockets at military bases in the Golan Heights during the Iranian attack, this response did not deviate from the established rules of engagement between the organization and Israel on the northern border since the outbreak of the Gaza war. Similarly, the deaths of three US soldiers in Jordan during an attack by an Iraqi Shiite militia at the end of January 2024, along with the Houthis' escalating attacks on ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, threatened to drag Iran into an undesirable military confrontation with the United States. Ultimately, the activation of proxies and Iran's support for them—which was intended to minimize the risk of being drawn into direct military conflict—ended up bringing Iran into direct confrontation with Israel.

Most concerning of all, the major events that have unfolded in the region since the outbreak of the Gaza war have, for the first time, posed a significant threat to the very survival of Hamas—an important, although not central, component of the pro-Iranian axis—and have inflicted severe damage on Hezbollah, Iran's key strategic asset in the region. The decapitation of most of Hezbollah's leadership, including Nasrallah, and the heavy blow to its military power represent a major threat to the most important regional project Iran has cultivated for decades, largely stripping it of the ability to deter Israel or retaliate in the event of attacks on its nuclear facilities. Hezbollah now faces increasing pressure as the IDF's ongoing military efforts erode its capabilities, making its recovery more difficult, alongside growing demands for the organization's disarmament. Moreover, with the fall of the Assad regime, Iran has lost a central pillar of its strategic depth and its forward defense line against Israel. In Iraq, the Shiite militias have been forced to halt attacks against Israel and are under mounting pressure to disarm and integrate into Iraq's armed forces. In Yemen, the Houthis have continued their operations against Israel, especially since the resumption of fighting in Gaza in March 2025, but they too are under increasing pressure in the wake of American strikes (which ceased in May 2025) and Israeli attacks.

The "Shiite Axis": Between Weakening and Resilience

Despite these challenges, the statements of senior Iranian officials, along with Iran's policies in recent months, indicate that Tehran has no intention of retreating from its efforts to

preserve its regional standing and rebuild the "Axis of Resistance." Over the past decades, Iran has invested considerable efforts in establishing its regional influence and strengthening its regional proxies, and it is unlikely to abandon this policy—a central pillar of its security doctrine—despite the weakening of the axis. Having experienced strategic isolation during the eight-year war with Iraq, Iran concluded that it could defend its security only by expanding its influence, strengthening loyal groups committed to its anti-Zionist and anti-American ideology and strategy, creating military bases for resistance groups, and forging alliances with like-minded states. Achieving strategic depth was meant to allow Iran to extend the frontlines of its struggle against its enemies beyond its own territory and to establish defensive lines far from its borders, thereby reducing its strategic isolation. Moreover, the seeds of Iranian involvement in the Arab sphere and its connections with Shiite communities in the region could be seen long before the revolution, reflecting Iran's aspiration for a leadership position in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

It is therefore unsurprising that, even amid significant regional upheavals, the Islamic Republic has continued to downplay the severity of the situation and emphasize its commitment to ongoing support for the pro-Iranian axis. Senior regime figures in Tehran, led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have stressed that Iran and its regional proxies are capable of overcoming challenges and continue to operate under the new circumstances, partly due to their ability to produce weapons independently. Moreover, there is currently no sign of recognition that Tehran's conservative establishment recognizes the need for a strategic reassessment regarding the continued operation of the Iran-led regional axis.

Iran's commitment to the "Axis of Resistance" is evident not only in official declarations but also in its actual policy. In recent months, under the leadership of the IRGC, Iran has continued advancing efforts to preserve, strengthen, and rebuild the capabilities of the axis that were damaged in the campaign with Israel. In Lebanon, Iran is visibly seeking alternative ways to offset the loss of the strategic corridor in Syria, compensate for the blow to Hezbollah's military power, and at least partially restore its war-damaged capabilities, particularly in the domain of precision missiles. In Iraq, the Iranian leadership has shown determination to preserve its influence over the Shiite militias and has publicly opposed their disarmament and integration into Iraq's armed forces. In a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, Iran's supreme leader emphasized that the Shiite militias are one of the key components of governance in Iraq and should be preserved and even further strengthened. In Yemen, Iran has continued to support Houthi activity against Israel as well as against shipping in the Red Sea.

Given the Islamic Republic's determination to maintain its regional influence through its network of proxies and partners, it is understandable why some assessments suggest that ultimately Iran will succeed in overcoming the current challenges facing it and the "Shiite Axis," and it may even exploit these events as opportunities to strengthen its regional grip and standing. This is similar to what Iran has done in the past when it was forced to contend with regional crises that threatened its national security, including the US conquest of Iraq in 2003, the Syrian civil war, and the rise of ISIS and its gains in seizing substantial parts of Iraq and Syria in the previous decade.

Against the backdrop of recent regional developments, researchers at the British think tank Chatham House assessed in March 2025 that the "Axis of Resistance" retains the ability to adapt to the changing reality, even in the face of severe external pressures. According to their analysis, the events of the past year—including the collapse of the Assad regime, the damage to Hezbollah, and the intensification of economic sanctions on Iran—do not necessarily signal the collapse of the axis. Rather, the axis operates as a dynamic, decentralized, and flexible network that has previously succeeded in adapting to a range of military, economic, political, and social shocks, regaining effective operational capacity each time. Due to its structural and organizational flexibility, the axis can offset damage to one of its components, such as Hezbollah or the Syrian regime, by leveraging another, such as the Shiite militias in Iraq or the Houthis in Yemen, thereby maintaining itself. The shift from a centralized to a more decentralized, horizontal model following the assassination of Soleimani has also helped the axis avoid dependency on a single component and has given its various parts greater autonomy. Additionally, the use of diverse economic mechanisms—including formal institutions like central banks alongside networks of money changers and smuggling operations closely tied to the axis—has provided it with a greater degree of resilience. Moreover, organizations such as Hezbollah, the Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis cannot be considered purely non-state actors, as they are integrated into state institutions and therefore enjoy greater influence and adaptability.

Doubts have also been raised about the extent of the weakening of the axis's components. For example, researcher Jack Neria has argued that Hezbollah is far from disarming; it continues to establish "resistance brigades" that maintain control in southern Lebanon and is strengthening its grip on villages. He emphasized that although the blow Hezbollah suffered in the recent war has forced it to change tactics, it has not relinquished its power, and this does not represent genuine weakening but rather an adaptation to temporary circumstances. Regarding Iraq, Michael Knights has claimed that despite recent setbacks to Iran's regional network, Iran and the Shiite militias in Iraq continue to exploit their influence and control over the Iraqi government to operate terrorist financing networks through the Iraqi oil sector, thereby further strengthening Iran's regional standing. He stressed that Iraq has become an even more central strategic asset for Tehran, with Shiite militias seizing control not only of the state's resources but also of its institutions.

Conclusion and Implications: From a "Shiite Axis" to a "Shiite Network"

Over the past two decades, the concept of a "Shiite Axis" has taken shape—a geopolitical, military, and ideological system (the "Resistance" framework) led by Iran, "the head of the snake," uniting Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, Shiite militias in Iraq, and the Houthis in Yemen. This concept assumed the existence of a centralized, hierarchical, and coordinated structure that could be termed an "axis" in the classical sense: a cohesive political aggregation managed by a clear center of gravity—Tehran—which sets the strategic direction for its proxies.

However, the dramatic developments of the past year—mainly Iran's weakening after Israel's strike in October 2024; the Islamic Republic's economic crisis; the emergence of a credible

military threat from the United States and Israel; the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria; Hezbollah's inward retreat under military and political pressure; and the halting of attacks by Iraqi Shiite militias under growing disarmament demands—raise serious doubts about the continued relevance of the "axis" concept. At the same time, an alternative interpretive framework is gaining ground: that this is no longer a true axis, but rather a loose network—a flexible, decentralized, and asymmetrical system of actors bound by ideological affinity and some degree of ad hoc coordination and cooperation, yet driven by differing interests, identities, and functions, each operating according to local considerations and sometimes even at odds with Iran's own interests.

The question of whether the axis still exists is not merely theoretical; it shapes the understanding of the nature of the threat, the formulation of its goals, and the selection of tools to confront it. A superficial analysis, or clinging to an outdated hierarchical model, risks overlooking the fundamental transformations in the Iran-led aggregation and underestimating the changing extent of Iran's influence. In contrast, recognizing the network's complexity enables the development of context-based policies that identify vulnerabilities, encourage differentiation, and offer opportunities to weaken—and perhaps even dismantle—the network through a variety of means. The central question concerns understanding the nature of the ties and internal dynamics within the Shiite aggregation and how Israel should prepare to face it.

A perspective that still views the system as an axis emphasizes Tehran as the center of gravity, assuming that each component functions as its direct proxy or, alternatively, that targeting one or more key proxies is effectively equivalent to striking at Iran itself. By contrast, if it is understood as a loose network, each actor must be mapped individually—analyzing its unique interests, independent motivations, and local relationships, and assessing the degree of its ideological or structural commitment to Iran and to other components. Adopting this approach may require Israel to adjust its response to this regional network. For example, in the realm of deterrence, differential and tailored deterrence mechanisms would be needed for each arena, actor, and set of circumstances. Militarily, it may become possible to take action against any one of the actors without necessarily triggering the mobilization of others—and such actions could even be exploited by other actors to strengthen their own independence. Politically, it would require a policy that goes beyond applying concentrated pressure on Tehran but also invests efforts in encouraging pragmatic actors in the region, fostering internal divisions and rifts within the network to weaken the commitment among its components, and creating local alternatives to the sub-state actors linked to and supported by Iran.

This does not deny the existence of ideological, military, economic, or political ties between Iran and its regional partners. However, these ties do not necessarily indicate direct subordination or suggest that the entire system could be severed by targeting its head. On the contrary, it is possible that a network structure actually increases the system's survivability, as seen in the Houthis' persistent activities, Hezbollah's recovery efforts, and the ways these actors maintain their status within the states where they operate, even as formal ties with Iran weaken. Moreover, a situation in which each actor maintains a degree of autonomy may

present even greater challenges for Israel, given the absence of a unified organizing logic behind the network's activities.

Nonetheless, it is premature to declare the axis concept dead. Iran's ongoing efforts to restore Hezbollah's capabilities, the continued coordination between Iran and the Shiite militias—and between them and the Houthis—and reports that the ceasefire between the United States and the Houthis was achieved partly due to Iranian pressure on the Houthis to cease their activity in the Red Sea to avoid derailing the nuclear talks all suggest that the aggregation led by the Islamic Republic still retains a significant degree of mutual commitment, ideological and operational cohesion, strategic coordination, and clear shared objectives. Even if the axis has cracked and weakened, the ideological bonds, shared interests, and connections among its components have not yet dissipated. In any case, Iran continues to play a central role, primarily as a supplier of weaponry, expertise, funding, and ideological support. If and when Iran ceases to play this role, the challenge facing Israel is expected to change and diminish.

At present, however, it is evident that the axis has lost its strategic value for Iran in terms of deterring Israel and responding to attacks on vital Iranian interests. Furthermore, Iran's ability—and that of the axis—to recover and restore Iran's previous scope control and influence is minimal to nonexistent, a reality that may compel Tehran to adopt new proxy strategies, such as political subversion or embedding "influence agents" within state institutions. In any case, a critical and ongoing examination of the concept of the "Shiite Axis" is essential, alongside a deep understanding of the regional system that Iran has woven over recent decades—a flexible, evolving, and adaptive network under conditions of geopolitical uncertainty. Such an examination is crucial for shaping effective policy. Only by undertaking it will it be possible to make the necessary adjustments to confront the Shiite network and to develop an up-to-date strategy toward Iran and its partners, given the shifting regional reality and the new opportunities that have emerged and may continue to do so in the future.

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