

FRACTURING THE AXIS: Degrading and Disrupting Iran's Proxy Network



This analysis is based on a workshop held at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Israel in late April 2025 and follow-up conversations in July 2025.

Contributors included:

Israel Policy Forum:

Rachel Brandenburg
Shira Efron
Michael Koplow
Garrett Nada

The Institute for National Security Studies:

Avishay Ben-Sasson Gordis
Danny Citrinowicz
Udi Dekel
Orna Mizrahi
Yaron Schneider
Eldad Shavit
Sima Shine
Carmit Valensi
Raz Zimmt

Independent Researcher:

Ari Heistein

Table of Contents

Contributors	1
Overview	3
Syria	5
Lebanon	9
Jordan and the West Bank	13
Iraq	16
Yemen	19
Conclusions	23

Overview

The Middle East is undergoing an unprecedented transition sparked by Hamas' October 7, 2023, attack and the subsequent regional war. The war in the Gaza Strip provided Iran with its first real opportunity to implement its "unity of the fronts" concept through the simultaneous, coordinated activation of several fronts against Israel and the United States. Iran hoped to avoid direct involvement and the consequences thereof. Ultimately, however, it failed to employ its network of proxies to force Israel to stop the fighting in Gaza.

On the contrary, Israel went on the offensive. In 2024, Israel achieved a string of key operational successes against the "Axis of Resistance," Iran's network of partners and proxies across the Middle East. Iran's "forward defense" doctrine included support for proxies intended to keep threats away from the homeland and reduce the risk of direct military confrontation. The militias have lost senior leaders, thousands of fighters, and many weapons that could have been pointed at Israel or U.S. forces. Iran also lost a critical base of operations with Bashar al-Assad's downfall in Syria, along with a key conduit for resupplying Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Iran's responses included two massive aerial attacks on Israel in April and October 2024, but most of the missiles and drones were intercepted or fell short of their targets. Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and counterstrikes on Iranian territory only further exposed the Islamic Republic's vulnerabilities and lack of a credible deterrent. The downfall of the Assad regime, Iran's only regional state ally, upended the regional balance of power in December. For the first time, the military capabilities of Iran and all its partners had been degraded at once.

In June 2025, Israel took the historic opportunity to attack Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs through intensive airstrikes and covert operations across the country. During the so-called "12-Day War," Iran called on its proxies for [support](#). Yet they were virtually absent. Faced with domestic pressure to stay on the sidelines, diminished military capabilities, and fear of severe Israeli or U.S. counterstrikes, members of the Axis of Resistance offered little more than [condemnation](#) of the Israeli and U.S. strikes. Although Iranian leaders refrained from public criticism of Iran's allies, commentary in newspapers reflected disappointment.

But Iran and the Axis of Resistance are diminished, not defeated. They still have enough military assets to destabilize parts of the region. And Tehran will work hard to rebuild the axis. The question for the remainder of 2025 is how to translate Israel's tactical successes into long-term strategic achievements.

The military setbacks have coincided with the emergence of new political environments in Lebanon and Syria that are unfavorable to Iran. Meanwhile, Iraq is slated to hold parliamentary elections in November 2025. The Shiite Coordination Framework, a loose umbrella of pro-Iran factions, is plagued by internal tensions that could negatively impact Iran's level of influence in Iraqi politics.

The United States has an unprecedented opportunity to capitalize on shifts in the Middle

East. In order to do so, the Trump administration should lean into the region rather than withdraw. U.S. engagement need not involve boots on the ground or Sisyphean nation-building projects. The United States—in partnership with Gulf states, European powers, and, in some cases, Israel—can act as a force multiplier to direct foreign assistance and attract investment.

For example, the United States could help convene a regional coalition of states focused on building a new architecture to boost cooperation and promote economic prosperity, especially for Syria, Lebanon, and eventually a post-war Gaza. The framework would not be explicitly anti-Iranian but would offer an alternative to Tehran's vision for the region. Strengthening central governments and expanding opportunities for people to benefit from the licit economy can shrink the space that Iran and its allies exploit to fund their malign activities. But the dissolution of USAID and cuts to the State Department may limit the soft-power tools needed to keep the Axis of Resistance on its heels.

Setting up regional governments for success is especially imperative given the potential trajectory of the U.S.-Iran nuclear talks. If the two sides reach an agreement that lifts U.S. sanctions in exchange for stringent limits on or the dissolution of Tehran's nuclear program, Iran's economy will almost certainly grow, freeing up more resources that could be used to reconstitute the Axis of Resistance. Iran has decades of experience filling vacuums in countries with poor governance.

Although the following report focuses on Iranian proxies and how to mitigate their reconstitution in the areas in which they reside, there is also an opportunity for the United States and like-minded actors to take steps to mitigate Iranian capacity to rebuild its proxy network. For example, in the context of any future diplomatic agreement between the United States and Iran, Iran should be prohibited from providing economic or military support to its proxies in the region. The U.S. should also work with regional partners to create a coordinated approach to monitoring and curbing Iranian efforts to provide arms, equipment, training, and funding to its proxies.

Given the fluid nature of the situation in the Gaza Strip, this policy memo will not directly address the status of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad there.

Syria



Israel-Syria border fence facing a U.N. observing station on the Syrian side

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 was a major blow to Iran's ability to project power in the Levant. For decades, Iran had used Syria as a conduit for transferring men, weapons, and funds to its allies, especially Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Assad government also allowed militant Palestinian movements, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, to maintain offices in Damascus and recruit in Palestinian refugee camps. Although Hamas broke with the regime and sided with Syrian rebels in 2011, the movement [reconciled](#) with Assad in 2022. Palestinian Islamic Jihad has maintained its headquarters in Damascus until the present day.

After the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011, Israel initially refrained from intervention and carefully monitored for potential threats from jihadist groups as well as entrenchment by Iran and Hezbollah. In 2013, Israel embarked on its "campaign between the wars," which included thousands of airstrikes on fighters, weapons, equipment, and infrastructure linked to Iran and Hezbollah during the following decade. In 2015, Russia entered the war on the side of the Assad regime and deployed advanced air defense systems that could have threatened Israel's freedom of operation over Syria. But Israel and Russia entered into a deconfliction agreement that allowed both to continue operating with minimal risk to aircraft and personnel. Despite Israeli pressure, Iran used the presence of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) fighters and pro-Iranian militias deployed to Syria to entrench itself militarily while using soft power to increase its economic, religious, and cultural influence.

The defeat of the Assad regime in December 2024 by Islamist rebels and foreign fighters, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), has presented opportunities as well as risks for both Israeli and U.S. interests. HTS leader Ahmad al-Sharaa is a personification of Israel's general concerns over the composition of the new Syrian government. For years, the former member of al-Qaeda was better known by his nom de guerre, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. The United States placed a \$10 million [bounty](#) for his capture in 2017 and only lifted it after the Assad regime collapsed.

As of August 2025, the trajectory of Syria's political transition was uncertain, but the new government's position on Iran and Hezbollah was clear. HTS fought against Iran-aligned forces during the Syrian civil war and considered Tehran complicit in the regime's crimes. The Syrian opposition "set the Iranian project in the region back by 40 years," al-Sharaa, the head of the new government, [boasted](#) in December 2024. "By removing Iranian militias and closing Syria to Iranian influence, we've served the region's interests—achieving what diplomacy and external pressure could not, with minimal losses." The new government has reportedly [banned](#) Iranian nationals from entering the country and repeatedly [intercepted](#) weapons [smuggled](#) from Iran and bound for Hezbollah.

The United States and Israel are both concerned that Iran and its allies could take advantage of the tenuous security situation in Syria. For example, Iran may have been involved in inciting [unrest](#) between the Alawite minority and government forces in western Syria in [March 2025](#). A new Iran-backed militia, Uli al-Baas, [emerged](#) in January 2025 and claimed responsibility for a rocket launch on Israel in June. Iran is also reportedly [training](#) Assad regime loyalists in camps in Iraq who may seek to reestablish a pro-Iranian presence in Syria. In July 2025, Israel [captured](#) members of an Iran-linked terror cell in two separate operations in southern Syria.

Meanwhile, Israel's attacks on Syrian government targets—stemming in part from its support for the Druze community—and military presence in southwestern Syria are quickly turning into a liability that antagonizes the new government and the Syrian public. Israel's actions could destabilize Syria and open the door to an Iranian resurgence while boosting Iran's narrative that Israel is an expansionist power. Israel's interests would be better served by prioritizing dialogue with Syria's government, a process that cautiously began in April, with reports of direct talks between the two sides in the United Arab Emirates. However, this should be clearly conditioned on the regime's responsible conduct, including safeguarding border security and refraining from further violence against Syria's minority communities.

The United States, Israel, and regional powers have the opportunity to reshape the regional balance of power against Iran by supporting Syria's new government. In the long term, a stable Syria aligned with Gulf powers, the United States, and Turkey—a member of NATO—is preferable to a fragmented Syria, where jihadists or Iran-backed groups could thrive. Either way, Iran will work to maintain its presence and undermine al-Sharaa's government.

The United States should:

- **Maintain and enhance diplomatic engagement to empower the new Syrian government and ensure developments in Syria are aligned with U.S. interests.**
 - » Expand the U.S. diplomatic presence in Syria to verify conditions on the ground.
 - » Maintain a small military presence in Syria as a bulwark against an ISIS resurgence in coordination with the emerging regional mechanism to combat ISIS, led by Turkey.
 - » Support mediation efforts aimed at securing an agreement between the Syrian regime and Druze leadership.

- » Encourage negotiations between Damascus and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on integration to further unify Syria and ensure retention of SDF counterterrorism capabilities.
- » Pilot a security force training program with elite new Syrian government forces to build the discipline and professionalism of the military and reinforce the bilateral U.S.-Syria relationship. This could be built on the Office of the Security Coordinator in Jerusalem's approach to training the Palestinian Authority Security Forces and the U.S. training program for the Iraqi Counterterrorism Forces.
- **Follow through on U.S. sanctions relief and develop accountability mechanisms for the new government.**
 - » Work with Congress to repeal Caesar Act sanctions, subject to benchmarks, and provide authorizations to allow aid and investment to flow in Syria as soon as possible.
 - » Convey clear expectations to Syria's new government—such as dismantling Palestinian militant groups, blocking Hezbollah's weapons transfers, removing foreign fighters from government and military positions, forming an inclusive government, and protecting the rights of minorities—for increased U.S. engagement and termination of sanctions.
 - » Facilitate American investment and encourage businesses to work in Syria as conditions permit.
- **Encourage Israel to:**
 - » Establish a stable set of understandings with the Syrian government to clarify mutual interests, reduce tensions, and, over time, lay the groundwork for broader cooperation.
 - » Use its deconfliction hotline with Turkey as a platform for rapprochement.
 - » Avoid actions that could fragment Syria, particularly with regard to the Druze minority.

Israel should:

- Refrain from interfering in Syria's domestic politics, including among Druze factions and other minorities.
- Cease public statements favoring the “dismantlement” or fragmentation of Syria.
- Refrain from military action that could escalate tensions and instead prioritize quiet dialogue with the regime to prevent harm to these communities.
- Use the 24/7 deconfliction hotline with Turkey to prevent any accidents between their militaries in Syria.
- Continue direct and/or mediated talks with the Syrian government and gradually withdraw ground forces from southwestern Syria as mutual

understandings are reached.

- Limit airstrikes on and ground incursions into Syrian territory so as not to undermine the sovereignty of the central government and antagonize the Syrian public.
- Offer humanitarian assistance and other aid to the Syrian population in areas where the IDF is holding territory, in coordination with the Syrian government.
- Offer to collaborate with other countries on infrastructure projects that could help pave the way for a future normalization process.

Lebanon



A Hezbollah rally

Hezbollah was the most heavily [armed](#) non-state actor in the world and the crown jewel in Iran's Axis of Resistance. Positioned to the north of Israel with a formidable arsenal of rockets, missiles, and UAVs, it was a major deterrent against a direct Israeli attack on Iran. But the group incurred heavy losses in the conflict with Israel that erupted after October 7, 2023, and particularly after Israel escalated its military operations against Hezbollah in September 2024. By the time Israel and Hezbollah agreed to a ceasefire in November 2024, some 5,000 Hezbollah fighters were [dead](#) and thousands more were injured. The dead included senior military and political leaders, including longtime leader Hassan Nasrallah, who spearheaded the organization and whose absence is keenly felt. The IDF [estimated](#) that 80 percent of Hezbollah's rockets with a range of up to 40 kilometers (25 miles) were destroyed.

Currently, Hezbollah is still weakened and in disarray, but trying to recover. It faces a series of challenges: ongoing daily military pressure from Israel, asserting its freedom of operation as stipulated in the ceasefire agreement; difficulties created by the new leadership in Lebanon; loss of strategic depth resulting from the Assad regime's collapse; and diminishing financial resources. It does not appear to have the resources to recover or rebuild southern Lebanon, a key area for its constituents. The World Bank [estimated](#) that the country's reconstruction and recovery needs totaled \$11 billion. Nasrallah's successor, Naim Qassem, lacks the necessary charisma and gravitas to inspire confidence in the future of the group.

Nevertheless, Iran is determined to maintain its support for the organization despite the fall of its Syrian ally and the harm it sustained in the war with Israel. Tehran persists in its efforts to smuggle [weapons](#) and [funds](#) to Hezbollah to rebuild the group's ability to threaten Israel and recreate a deterrent against Israeli attacks on Iran. The fall of Iran's

Syrian ally is a major hurdle in the way of rebuilding Hezbollah. The fact that Hezbollah was either unwilling or unable to attack Israel in solidarity with Iran during the 12-day war in June 2025 demonstrates its weakness.

Hezbollah's vulnerability has facilitated the rise of new Lebanese leadership opposed to Iranian influence. This change presents opportunities for the United States, Israel, and other regional powers. Joseph Aoun defeated Hezbollah's preferred candidate for president and appointed Nawaf Salam as prime minister in January-February 2025, ending more than two years of political deadlock. Both want the state to have a [monopoly](#) over weapons and be the sole power that decides when to go to [war](#). "We hope that Hezbollah's weapons will be withdrawn or that their possession will be restricted to the state in 2025, and this is what I am striving for," Aoun, a former army general, [said](#) in April.

Indeed, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have been working to implement the terms of the ceasefire with Israel. The government claimed that the army has [dismantled](#) 80 percent of Hezbollah infrastructure south of the Litani River. The vulnerability of the new leadership lies in the LAF's weakness. It has been careful to avoid clashes with Hezbollah for fear of sparking another civil war. The Lebanese government is struggling to comply with U.S. and Israeli demands to implement its commitments to disarm Hezbollah and to [disarm](#) Palestinian militant groups. In order to stand up to the difficult task of disarming Hezbollah and the other militias in Lebanon, the LAF needs additional training, modernized equipment and weapons, and resources to exert control over all Lebanese territory.

The most pressing issue for Lebanon's government, however, is the [economy](#). In 2019, a combination of political instability, overreliance on borrowing, corruption, currency devaluation, and the collapse of the banking sector led to one of the world's worst economic crises. The Lebanese lira has lost some 98 percent of its value and prices have skyrocketed. Basic commodities like fuel, water, and medicine are in short supply. The conflict between Hezbollah and Israel has only exacerbated the situation. The difficult economic circumstances create an opening for Iran to reassert itself. The United States has [provided](#) an average of \$285 million a year in bilateral assistance. The fiscal year 2025 request, for example, included \$150 million for Foreign Military Financing for the LAF and \$117.5 million for Economic Support Funds. The United States has also provided critical support to the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNFIL), the peacekeeping mission mandated to support security and stability in southern Lebanon, including \$170 million in fiscal year 2024. However, this is a drop in the bucket compared to Lebanon's requirement for billions of dollars to revive its economy and rebuild after the devastation of the war.

The United States, Israel, and regional/international actors have an opportunity now to strengthen the Lebanese state to help mitigate Iranian influence and prevent Hezbollah from rebuilding its ranks and arsenal.

The United States should:

- **On security:**
 - » Urgently support the LAF with the necessary training and weapons

needed to secure Lebanon's borders as well as dismantle all non-state military infrastructure south of the Litani River and disarm remaining militants.

- » Develop accountability mechanisms to ensure that weapons, equipment, and funds intended for the LAF do not fall into Hezbollah's hands.
 - » Develop metrics for monitoring the impact of training and assistance for the LAF.
 - » Urge other donors, including the European powers and Gulf states, to support the Lebanese government and the LAF.
 - » Encourage Lebanon to disarm Palestinian militias.
 - » Urge Israeli restraint in conducting military strikes in Lebanon to avoid undermining the Lebanese government's effort to consolidate power.
- **On reconstruction and the economy:**
 - » Work with the international community to fund a reconstruction mechanism for southern Lebanon, with oversight to sideline Hezbollah and ensure areas are not rebuilt according to Hezbollah's design.
 - » Support Lebanon's effort to secure an International Monetary Fund loan and offer assistance on implementing requisite economic reforms.
 - » Continue to sanction financiers and smugglers providing support to Hezbollah from outside of Lebanon.

Israel should:

- Convey that Israel's occupation of the five strategic points in southern Lebanon is temporary, but condition withdrawal on confirmation of Hezbollah's departure and destruction of military infrastructure in southern Lebanon.
- Continue to utilize the U.S.-led Quintet Committee notification and coordination mechanism with the Lebanese government and LAF, in accordance with the terms of the ceasefire agreement, to hold them accountable to countering threats from Hezbollah, or enable Israel to do so without undermining Lebanese government authority.
- Design a phased process for the potential dissolution of UNIFIL while simultaneously strengthening the LAF.
- Establish a line of communication, even if indirect, with Lebanon's government, and develop a working relationship based on mutual understanding and respect.
- Coordinate with the United States to communicate Israel's concerns and needs regarding Lebanon.
- Refrain from pressuring Lebanon's government to normalize ties with Israel

while Lebanon deals with internal challenges.

- Encourage Lebanon to disarm Palestinian militias.
- Destroy or interdict arms shipments intended for Hezbollah wherever they are detected.
- Monitor and disrupt efforts by Hezbollah to use Shiite communities and infrastructures outside of Lebanon to help Hezbollah rebuild.

Jordan and the West Bank



Hamas fighters

For more than two decades, Iran and Hezbollah have been attempting to [destabilize](#) Jordan while using it as a base to carry out attacks against Israel, often through local Palestinians or the Muslim Brotherhood. The Palestine Branch of Iran's Quds Force, the external operations arms of the IRGC, and Hezbollah's Unit 3900 have been the two principal players in Jordan. Iran has [targeted](#) the Hashemite kingdom because it is a key U.S. partner on regional security issues, closely cooperates with Israel, and has a strategic location bordering Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the West Bank. Since October 7, Iran and its allies have intensified [operations](#) in Jordan, including the smuggling of [arms](#) to Muslim Brotherhood cells seeking to destabilize Jordan. For example, in June 2024, authorities [discovered](#) explosive caches in Amman that were [reportedly](#) tied to Iranian efforts to smuggle weapons into Jordan. In April 2025, Jordanian security forces [arrested](#) 16 members of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated [cells](#) for plotting attacks involving rockets and drones. Some had received training in Lebanon. The government [banned](#) the Brotherhood a week later.

Since at least 2022, Iran has been orchestrating the [smuggling](#) of weapons into the West Bank via the border with Jordan. Although Israel and Jordan closely monitor both sides of the border, some arms—mostly rifles and handguns—have managed to slip past their forces. The IDF and the Shin Bet have also [seized](#) advanced weapons, such as anti-tank missiles and rocket-propelled grenades. In November 2024, Israel intercepted rockets, 40 powerful Claymore explosives of various types, some geared to activate remotely, bombs, mortar launchers, sniper rifles, and additional weapons bound for Jenin, a hotbed of terrorist activity in the West Bank. In December 2024, the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF) [launched](#) an operation against terrorist cells in the Jenin area, which ended inconclusively and was immediately followed by an extensive IDF takeover of the Jenin

refugee camp. While the PASF operation was its largest sustained effort to date against terrorist groups operating in the West Bank, the PASF remain at a disadvantage in the face of Iranian weapons and funding flooding the territory, needing more training and equipment to dismantle all of the terrorist hubs.

Ongoing attacks by Jewish settlers against Palestinian civilians may also indirectly facilitate further Iranian involvement in the West Bank. Israel's inability or unwillingness to rein in settler violence has fueled Iran's [narrative](#) that Israel is engaging in "state-sponsored terrorism." The [displacement](#) of some 40,000 Palestinians from Jenin, Tulkarem, and Nur Shams in the first half of 2025, contrary to expectations, brought calm to the area and neutralized the freedom of action of terrorist elements under the auspices of the local Palestinian population. With stability on the ground, Israel began to return responsibility for the refugee camps to PA security apparatuses. Hamas, however, has continued to operate in the West Bank. In June 2025, the Shin Bet [announced](#) that it had arrested 60 Hamas operatives during the previous few months following the "largest and most complex investigation" in the West Bank in the past decade.

The United States and Israel have the opportunity to limit Iranian intervention by enhancing the capabilities of Jordanian and PA security forces to counter threats from Iran-backed militants. Israel can also minimize threats to its security from the West Bank by reducing the motivation for terrorism and Iranian leverage by improving the quality of life in the West Bank and curbing violence by extremist settlers.

The United States should:

- Maintain the Office of the Security Coordinator (OSC) and expand assistance to train and equip the PASF.
- Unfreeze the remaining foreign assistance to Jordan to help ensure the stability of the kingdom.
- Push Turkey to crack down on Hamas financing, especially the transfer of funds to the West Bank for terrorist activities, and expel all remaining Hamas operatives from Turkey.
- Through Turkey, influence the new regime in Syria to combat Iranian arms smuggling routes and in cooperation with Jordan and Israel.
- Communicate to Israel that it will not support any form of West Bank annexation, which will only provide Iran with more fertile recruiting ground and encourage Palestinian extremism.

Israel should:

- Create a trilateral Israel-Jordan-PA task force to combat weapons smuggling.
- Maintain cooperation with the PASF, especially intelligence sharing.
- Strengthen the sealing of the Jordan-Israeli border and the Syria-Jordan Israeli border triangle to prevent the smuggling of weapons. For this

purpose, the IDF recently established a division-level headquarters responsible for securing the eastern border.

- Begin work on the new border barrier with Jordan.
- Scale Palestinian work permits back up to pre-October 7 levels to lessen incentives to accept Iranian cash payments for terrorist operations.
- Strengthen PA governing institutions by stopping unnecessarily withholding PA tax revenue.
- Act firmly against extremist settler violence and prevent the expulsion of Palestinian farmers from their lands.
- Forswear any form of West Bank annexation, including not implementing the July non-binding Knesset resolution supporting the extension of Israeli sovereignty to the territory.

Iraq



A Shiite militia in Iraq

For decades, Iran has armed, trained, and funded Shiite militias in neighboring Iraq, including groups responsible for killing hundreds of U.S. troops since 2003. These militias went on to commit atrocities against Iraqis, including political adversaries, rival minorities (mainly Sunnis), and also Shiite protesters who oppose the militias and Iranian interference in Iraq. The militias have helped Iran to deepen its influence over Iraq's political, economic, and security affairs. Yet the militias are far from a monolith and have diverse interests. Some have political wings or provide social services for their constituents, while others are entirely focused on military operations.

Most of the militias are part of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Formed in 2014 to fight ISIS, the PMF militias were nominally brought under government supervision in [2016](#) in a law that granted the PMF legal status. In 2022, the pro-Iranian Coordination Framework government took the unprecedented move to establish a company (al-Muhandis), aimed at financially supporting the PMF. In 2024, Parliament [allocated](#) some \$3.5 billion to the PMF, most of which was intended to cover salaries. Although the Iran-backed militias have varying degrees of loyalty to Tehran, they all oppose Israel and want to expel U.S. forces from the Middle East.

After October 7, 2023, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq—an umbrella moniker for about 10 [militias](#) backed by Iran—attacked Israel as well as U.S. and coalition bases in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan. Less than a third of the 300 claimed drone and missile attacks [reached](#) Israeli territory, and only four hit targets in Israel. But one drone hit a military base in the Golan Heights in October 2024 and [killed](#) two soldiers and wounded 24 others. Israel has refrained from attacking targets on Iraqi territory but, according to [foreign reports](#), did launch [airstrikes](#) against elements of Iraqi militias operating across the Iraq-Syria border, in Palmyra and Damascus. The attacks on Israel largely [subsided](#) in late 2024.

Between late 2023 and 2024, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq reportedly [attacked](#) U.S. and coalition bases in Iraq and Syria more than 200 times. The United States sporadically responded with military strikes. Tensions peaked after a drone attack [killed](#) three U.S. troops and injured at least 24 others at the Tower 22 base in northeastern Jordan in January 2024. The United States [retaliated](#) with airstrikes on more than 85 Iran-linked targets in Iraq and Syria. The Iraqi militias largely [paused](#) attacks until July 2024. The attacks stopped again in December 2024 amid increased U.S. pressure on Baghdad to restrain the militias and the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. As of mid-2025, the United States was still [pressuring](#) the Iraqi government to rein in the militias. Meanwhile, they have reportedly gained new capabilities that could threaten both U.S. forces and Israel. In April 2025, Iran reportedly [transferred](#) three types of missiles to Iraqi militias: long-range models capable of reaching Europe, Quds 351 cruise missiles, and Jamal 69 ballistic missiles.

The Iraqi militias, however, largely stayed out of the 12-day conflict between Israel and Iran. Iraqi forces [blocked](#) 29 attempts to launch missiles or drones at Israel or U.S. forces by Iran-backed militias, according to Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani. The groups were largely deterred. Not only did they [face](#) potential retaliation from Israel and the United States, but Iraq's government also [urged](#) them to not drag the country into the war. Intervening more forcefully could have also jeopardized the political and economic interests of the groups.

The United States has the opportunity to mitigate Iranian influence in Iraq by supporting state institutions and counseling Baghdad against further integration of Iran-backed militias into the government.

The United States should:

- Sustain a close bilateral relationship with the government of Iraq that includes support for security sector and economic reform programs, and enables the resumption of industry and educational exchange programs between the United States and Iraq.
- Convey to Iraq's government that passing the [PMF Authority Law](#), which would permanently enshrine the PMF as a parallel security force similar to Iran's IRGC, would be detrimental to the U.S.-Iraq relationship and could lead to sanctions on entities such as the PMF's conglomerate, the Muhandis General Company, and eventually the entire PMF.
- Increase resources to the Treasury Department to track and sanction the economic activities of Iraqi militias and the IRGC in the Iraqi economy to improve the business climate for investment by Gulf nations and others.
- Maintain freedom of action to respond militarily to future attacks on U.S. forces by Iraqi militias.

Israel should:

- Refrain from strikes on Iraqi territory unless responding to specific attacks.
- Continue to raise the security threats posed by the Iran-backed militias at

the United Nations and other international forums.

- Encourage a strategic dialogue with the Trump administration on challenges to regional stability caused by the activities of Iraqi militias (including the recent attacks against military bases and civilian targets in the Kurdistan Regional Government in July 2025), and how to address these challenges by diplomatic and military means. Such a dialogue would also create an opportunity for an in-depth assessment of Iranian intervention in Iraq, as well as formulating a policy of response to possible scenarios of escalation from within Iraq towards Israel, Syria, and Jordan (e.g. missiles or drone attacks at U.S. or Israeli targets).
- Prevent the exploitation of the delicate internal situation in Syria by pro-Iranian militias in Iraq, for the purpose of entrenchment in Syria and transferring weapons from Iraq through Syria to Lebanon. Therefore, if cross-border attempts to transfer weapons from Iraq to Syria are detected, preparations must be made in coordination with the U.S. to renew airstrikes along the Iraq-Syria border.

Yemen



Houthi fighters in Yemen

The Houthis, also known as Ansar Allah, are a Zaidi Shiite political and religious movement that started in the 1990s. Since 2004, they have opposed the Yemeni central government. Iran's support for the group dates to at least [2009](#). The Houthis have controlled the capital, Sanaa, and much of northern and western Yemen since 2014. The group weathered heavy bombing by a Saudi-led coalition from 2015 to 2022. But it remained a relatively peripheral member of the Axis of Resistance until October 7, 2023. The Houthis seized the opportunity of the ensuing conflict between Israel and Hamas to raise their international profile by firing missiles and drones at Israel starting in [October](#) and attacking commercial ships in the Red Sea supposedly linked to Israel starting in November. The attacks disrupted shipping through the Red Sea and Suez Canal, which accounted for 15 percent of [global trade](#) before the war. The Biden administration mobilized two coalitions to protect shipping and neutralize immediate threats posed by the Houthis. Israel has sporadically launched airstrikes against Houthi targets and infrastructure, such as Hodeidah port in July 2024, but the group is undeterred. Houthi leaders take pride in going to war with Israel and the United States because it fits their ideological agenda and serves as a convenient excuse for why conditions are so dismal for Yemenis living under their rule.

In March 2025, the Trump administration launched a much more aggressive campaign codenamed "Operation Rough Rider." Despite more than 1,100 U.S. strikes, the Houthis managed to shoot down several U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drones and continue to fire at warships in the Red Sea. President Trump grew increasingly skeptical about the viability of the campaign after the U.S. military [expended](#) \$1 billion worth of weapons and munitions in the first month. The United States moved to secure a ceasefire, announced on May 6, after receiving [intelligence](#) suggesting that the Houthis wanted to end the fight. Notably, the ceasefire did not require the Houthis to stop attacks on Israel or strikes on Israel-linked shipping, which called into question whether

freedom of navigation in the Red Sea would be fully restored. The Houthis have [continued](#) to fire missiles at Israel, including three in a 24-hour period between May 13 and 14. Since the start of the Gaza war, the Houthis have launched [hundreds](#) of missiles and drones at Israel, most of which have fallen short, been intercepted, or landed in open areas. During the 12-day conflict with Iran in June 2025, the Houthis launched two or three ballistic missiles at Israel.

In July 2025, the Houthis resumed attacks on commercial vessels allegedly linked to Israel, triggering another [round](#) of tit for tat attacks. Israel can certainly continue to respond with strikes targeting essential Houthi infrastructure and target some Houthi leaders, but deterring the group is a significant challenge.

Neutralizing the Houthi threat would be a challenge for Israel—or any other country. First, the Houthis have complete control of their territory and function as an authoritarian state in northern Yemen. They have a strong hold on the population due to near absolute control over the economy, including the distribution of aid. The Houthis also crush any signs of dissent coming from rival tribes or political movements, such as the General People’s Congress, the former ruling party. As a result, they have more freedom of action than Hezbollah or the Iraqi militias. Second, the Houthis are a deeply [ideological](#) movement. They are willing to incur economic damage and sacrifice their forces. Waging war against Israel and the United States has always been part of their agenda and dovetails with their wider ambitions for power and influence within the Axis of Resistance and beyond Yemen.

Third, expressing solidarity with Gazans through strikes on Israel boosts [recruitment](#) and helps dampen domestic criticism of the group’s inability to provide services and its abysmal human rights record. The Houthis label dissidents as CIA or Mossad spies. Fourth, the Houthis do not consider themselves subordinate to Iran. “We do not take orders from Iran; I must emphasize that the Yemeni people have dignity,” spokesperson Mohammad Abdulsalam [said](#) in December 2023. Fifth, the Houthis have worked to diversify their supply chains for weapons and weapon components beyond what Iran has provided. For example, they have expanded operations into the [Horn of Africa](#), where it has developed alternative streams of revenue that leave it less dependent on Iran. In the meantime, Iran has faced minimal obstacles to resupplying the Houthis. In late June 2025, the National Resistance Force, which is allied with the Yemeni government in exile, [seized](#) an Iranian shipment of 750 tons of missiles, drone components, and other weapons.

Finally, the internationally recognized government of Yemen has not emerged as a viable alternative to Houthi rule. The government, including the Presidential Leadership Council, faces allegations of corruption, incompetence, and internal rivalries between Saudi-backed and UAE-backed factions. Houthi attacks on civilian infrastructure, sabotage in government-controlled areas, and obstruction of humanitarian aid have undermined the government’s authority and legitimacy. Neighboring Gulf countries, which have no appetite for restarting a conflict with the Houthis, have also restrained the PLC from aspirations of moving against the Houthis.

In the long run, there are two broad poles for dealing with the Houthi threat. One is the military option, which would likely require a sustained U.S. air campaign in close coordination with a ground assault by Yemeni forces opposed to the Houthis, including the internationally recognized government, the Southern Transitional Council, and the National Resistance Forces.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE would probably need to contribute air support and help their Yemeni sponsorees. But there is no political appetite for reigniting the Yemeni civil war.

The other option is to revive diplomacy among the various Yemeni parties. The ceasefire between the United States and the Houthis provides “a welcome opportunity on which we must collectively build to refocus on resolving Yemen’s conflict and advancing a Yemeni-owned peace process,” U.N. Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg [said](#) on May 14. Given the latent threat that the Houthis still pose to international shipping, to Gulf countries, and to Israel, the international community may be motivated to push the parties to the negotiating table. Oman could play a helpful mediating role along with the United Nations.

The United States has the opportunity to help isolate the Houthis and enhance maritime security in the short term. In the long term, it can support international efforts to reach a lasting peace agreement for Yemen. Both scenarios could weaken the Houthis’ ability to threaten Israel and other U.S. partners in the region.

The United States should:

- Undercut Houthi attempts to expand partnerships with other countries and terrorist groups through sanctions and interdictions.
- Loosen the Houthi grip on the economy by encouraging the delivery of aid via the government-controlled south, which could be shipped north, provided it can be delivered in an impartial manner which undercuts the Houthi monopoly on dispersing resources.
- Offer security guarantees to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to ensure their continued support for the internationally recognized Yemeni government and anti-Houthi forces.
- Bolster efforts by the United Nations and other interlocutors to help restart talks on a political settlement for Yemen.
- Work with Oman to prevent weapons smuggling from Iran through Oman to Yemen.
- Spearhead an initiative to resuscitate the Djibouti-based U.N. Verification and Inspection Mechanism (UNVIM) to increase ship inspections and minimize the smuggling of Iranian fuel and weapons.
- Continue to block Iranian attempts to smuggle arms via the Arabian Sea.

Israel should:

- Press the international community to strengthen enforcement of existing sanctions on the Houthis and Iran.
- Build relations with African countries bordering the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.
- Work with Gulf partners to develop a shared network for early detection of

missile and drone launches along the Red Sea coast.

- Strengthen its military presence in the Bab al-Mandab Strait.
- Improve intel capabilities in the Yemeni arena.
- Engage with armed groups in southern Yemen opposed to the Houthis.
- Expose Houthi dependence on advanced Iranian weapons and highlight long-standing connections between the Houthi clan and Iran to undermine the group's legitimacy.
- Reserve the right to respond militarily to Houthi strikes but refrain from attacks on critical infrastructure that would exacerbate the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

Conclusions

For decades, Iran has gradually expanded its influence in the region through its network of proxies. The cascade of events following October 7 initially appeared to be a nightmare scenario for Israel, a multi-front war. But Israel has turned the tide in an unprecedented way. Nearly all of the pillars supporting Iran, such as Hezbollah, have been degraded—with the potential for further weakening—or have collapsed, as in the case of the Assad regime. At home, the Iranian regime is struggling to manage a plethora of problems, including an economic crisis and societal rifts, under the shadow of a looming leadership succession. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei turned 86 in 2025. Israel's June 2025 strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities, ballistic missile sites, and military leadership put the regime in an even more precarious position.

Iran will likely prioritize shoring up its own defenses and, absent a nuclear deal that lifts sanctions, will have fewer resources to disburse to the Axis of Resistance. There is a historic opportunity to shift the regional balance of power in favor of U.S. and Israeli interests for the long term. But U.S. leadership and engagement, in coordination with regional partners, will be required to capitalize on openings in Syria and Lebanon and to find a viable solution for Gaza.

At the same time, the discourse in Tehran does not suggest that Iran is going to abandon its allies in favor of a new strategy. Iran will almost certainly try to adapt to the changing geostrategic environment and exploit fragile states to strengthen its position. U.S. and Israeli policymakers should not underestimate the resilience of Iran and its allies. While Iran's ability to reconstitute the Axis of Resistance is limited, the United States and its partners should bolster the governments of Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq to limit the operating space for Iran-backed groups and the networks of criminals that help them. The United States can help to expand and coordinate efforts to block the flow of personnel, weapons, and money from Iran across the region.

Historically, U.S. policy has often focused on individual countries rather than addressing the connections between the groups and diverse economic relationships that span the globe. An interagency task force drawing on experts from the intelligence community, the Treasury Department, and the State Department could develop a more comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained approach to countering the Iranian-backed "Axis of Resistance."

The United States should also employ soft power tactics to challenge Iran's revolutionary narrative and promote a vision for the region centered on stability, security, and prosperity instead of endless war against Israel and U.S. interests in the region. In the best of all worlds, the most effective way to pour cold water on Iran's resistance ideology would be to limit its appeal beyond Iran's borders by carving a clear path to Palestinian statehood and expanding the Abraham Accords to more Muslim-majority countries, particularly Saudi Arabia.

Israel has long viewed Iran as the driver of resistance to Israel, including in the sphere of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The actions and rhetoric of Iran-backed groups have fed on the ongoing failure to meaningfully address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Palestinian national desires. While concrete actions must be taken to disrupt Iranian-backed networks and deny Iranian proxies space to operate in their domestic arenas, the wider ideological grievance

stemming from Palestinian statelessness and seemingly permanent Israeli military occupation must be addressed as well for the overall strategy to achieve maximum success.