

## CHAPTER 4

# IRAN IN THE REGIONAL ARENA AFTER THE WAR

### **The War and the Collapse of the Proxy Doctrine**

Although the limits of Iran's power in activating the regional network it had woven over years were already evident in the months preceding the 12-Day War—above all since Hezbollah's defeat by Israel and the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria—the war further underscored the breakdown of the proxy doctrine. The concept of “forward defense,” designed to neutralize threats to Iran's national security as far from its borders as possible through the use of proxies, ultimately did not prevent Israel and the United States from striking Iran directly.

The proxy network is a basic pillar of Iran's security doctrine and one of its principal instruments for deterring adversaries, expanding its strategic depth, and projecting influence and power beyond its borders. From the perspective of Iran's rulers, this network enabled the Islamic Republic to advance its strategic interests in the region at relatively low cost, while trying to avoid, as far as possible, a direct confrontation with its main rivals. By relying on sub-state organizations, Iran succeeded in establishing important footholds of influence in the Arab arena—even though regional actors that cooperate with it often have their own interests and calculations that do not necessarily align with those of Tehran.

Over the past two decades, Iran has invested growing efforts in expanding its regional influence. This trend reflects an entrenched perception at the top of Iran's political and security establishment that assigns increasing importance to extending Iranian activity and influence far beyond its political and geographic borders as a means of better coping with external threats.

One of the central goals in constructing the “Axis of Resistance” was to deter Israel from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities and to provide an immediate

response capability should such an attack occur. In line with this logic, Iran could also have expected support from its proxies during the war. But in practice, they did almost nothing to assist it on the “day of reckoning,” as they were supposed to according to Iran’s security concept.

Israel’s opening of a military campaign against Iran caught the pro-Iranian axis actors in a deep crisis after nearly two years of fighting against Israel, during which many of their leaders and thousands of operatives had been killed, and their military capabilities had been severely damaged. These military setbacks, compounded by fear of harsh retaliation from Israel or the United States, led members of the “Axis of Resistance” to refrain almost entirely from offensive action. Instead, they confined themselves to declarations of support for Iran and condemnations of the Israeli and American strikes.<sup>109</sup>

Hezbollah—intended to play a central role in the “Axis of Resistance” “ring of fire” around Israel and to assist Iran once it came under Israeli attack—did not join the war and limited itself to declarative support for Tehran. After the defeat inflicted on it by Israel, the organization was unable to fulfill its designated role, even if Tehran pressed it to join the fighting and open another front against Israel. Since the ceasefire in its war with Israel at the end of November 2024, Hezbollah has faced a series of challenges, foremost among them the loss of weapon and money-smuggling routes from Iran following the fall of the Assad regime, the Lebanese government’s ban on flights from Iran, and efforts by Lebanon’s leadership to assert a state monopoly on the use of force and dismantle militias—including Hezbollah—of their weapons. Throughout the war, Hezbollah expressed support for Iran and echoed Iranian messages accusing Israel of aggression backed by the United States. Yet the

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109 “The “Resistance Axis’ and the Israel-Iran War.” *Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center*, July 6, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/3jswzddr>

organization's leaders preferred to justify their inaction by claiming that Iran was strong enough and did not require assistance.<sup>110</sup>

As a result, the war deepened the doubts already present in Tehran regarding the effectiveness of the proxy doctrine. The war in the Gaza Strip had provided Iran with a first major opportunity to implement the concept of “unity of the fronts” on a larger scale than in the past, by activating multiple arenas simultaneously and in a coordinated manner against Israel and the United States, without itself paying a direct price. However, the war also exposed the limits of Iran's ability to harness the full capabilities available to the pro-Iranian axis.

Tehran failed to achieve, through its proxy network, its two principal objectives: stopping the fighting in Gaza in order to minimize the cost to Hamas, and exerting pressure on the United States to curb its unconditional support for Israel and force it to end the war before achieving its goals. Worst of all, the war in the Gaza Strip posed, for the first time, a genuine threat to Hamas' very survival—Hamas being an important, though not central, component of the pro-Iranian axis—and severely damaged Hezbollah, which is a key strategic asset for Iran in the region. The targeted elimination of Hezbollah's leadership, starting with Hassan Nasrallah, together with the severe blow to its military capabilities, posed a real threat to the most important regional project Iran had nurtured for decades and significantly eroded its ability to deter Israel and respond in the event of strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities.

Moreover, tensions emerged during the war between Iran and some of its proxies due to gaps between Tehran's interests and those of the organizations it supports. These gaps stemmed in part from changes in Iran's proxy-management doctrine in recent years, particularly following the killing of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, which forced Iran to manage its proxy network in a more decentralized manner than in the

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110 Orna Mizrahi & Moran Levanony, “After the Israel–Iran War: Hezbollah's decline and Israel's opportunity.” *INSS Insight*, No. 2001, July 1, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mrx6vz8k>

past. Iran continued to maintain a high degree of influence over this network, but no longer necessarily exercised full and continuous control over each of its components.

After Iran's missile and UAV attack on Israel in April 2024, intelligence sources assessed that Iran was disappointed with Hezbollah's response that night. Hezbollah did fire several salvos of dozens of rockets toward IDF bases on the Golan Heights during the Iranian attack, but this response did not go beyond the "rules of the game" that have prevailed between the organization and Israel along the northern border since the Gaza war began.<sup>111</sup> The killing of three American soldiers in Jordan in an attack by an Iraqi Shiite militia in late January 2024, along with the intensifying activity of the Houthi movement in Yemen—supported by Iran—against shipping routes in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, also risked dragging Iran into an undesired military confrontation with the United States.<sup>112</sup>

Thus, Iran's use of proxies and its support for them—designed to reduce the risk that it would be drawn into a direct military confrontation—ultimately led it into a direct military clash with Israel. After the Israeli strike in Iran on October 26, 2024, Iranian journalist Amir-Hossein Mossala gave expression to this failure. In a post on his X account, he wrote that the "Axis of Resistance," which was developed in Syria and Iraq at Iran's expense in order to secure strategic depth for Iran and push the danger of war away from its borders, had resulted in Israeli fighter jets attacking Iran via Iraq and Syria and in the deaths of four Iranian soldiers.<sup>113</sup> Although Iranian leaders refrained from publicly criticizing their allies, commentaries published in the Iranian press reflected a growing sense of disappointment. Soon after the 12-Day War,

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111 Roi Kais, "Nasrallah's identity dilemma: Hezbollah attacked, the Iranians expected more." *KAN 11*, April 17, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/58yu53x3>

112 Itamar Eichner & Lior Ben-Ari, "The Red Sea attack lasted 5 hours, U.S. threatens response: 'Iran is enabling this.'" *Ynet*, December 4, 2023. <https://tinyurl.com/wrns9zu8>

113 The X account of Amir-Hossein Motzalla, October 28, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mts46a2k>

expressions of criticism appeared in the Iranian media, alongside frustration over the reluctance of Iran's regional proxies to open additional fronts against Israel during the campaign.

Commentary published on *Asr-e Iran* argued that Iran's proxies did not provide it with any real support during the war: Hezbollah remained silent because of the blows it had suffered over the past year; the Houthis in Yemen were content mainly with verbal threats and did not take meaningful action, even though they fired several missiles toward the port of Eilat; and the pro-Iranian militias in Iraq adopted a cautious political stance and even refrained from issuing an official statement of support for Iran—underlining Baghdad's deep security dependence on the West. According to the article, the conduct of members of the Axis, along with the silence of Iran's neighbors during the war, reflects the erosion of Iran's strategic depth and its geopolitical isolation—a process that could evolve into a genuine strategic threat.<sup>114</sup>

By contrast, commentary published on the radical-leaning *Mashregh News* website emphasized the importance of “resistance” in light of the lessons of the 12-Day War. In discussing the role of the pro-Iranian axis in the war, the article argued that throughout the fighting, pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq remained on high alert, waiting for the order to act against American bases in the country. In Yemen, the Houthis were also fully prepared, increased their monitoring of American naval movements in the Red Sea, and continued to fire missiles at Israel in order to complicate Israel's air-defense efforts. In Lebanon, Hezbollah adopted a policy of ambiguity and prepared several scenarios for action in the event of increased American involvement in the war, escalation into a regional conflict, or a significant weakening of Iran. According to the website, Iran's allies in the region proposed several support plans to Tehran and waited for its approval, but Iran did not request any action beyond limited attacks because it preferred to keep the “cards” at its

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114 “Three systems in a 12-day crisis / Part One: Alone on the battlefield.” *Asr-e Iran*, July 2, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mp822ncc>

disposal for a scenario of regional war or severe damage to its own capabilities. The article concluded that the central lesson from the war is the need to preserve the resistance. Rehabilitating the “Resistance Front” in line with the doctrine of former Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani—based on the multilayered defense of Iran—is, according to this analysis, one of the key components of any future campaign.<sup>115</sup>

In any case, public discourse in Tehran indicates that Iran does not intend to abandon its partners in favor of a new regional strategy. Even amid dramatic regional developments, circles associated with Iran’s conservative–radical establishment have continued to stress that Israel’s operational achievements do not fundamentally alter the balance of power in its favor. Moreover, there is as yet no indication that these circles recognize the need for strategic rethinking, particularly with regard to the use of proxies. In addition, Iranian officials—chief among them the Supreme Leader, Khamenei—have continued to express confidence in Iran’s and the Axis’ ability to cope successfully with Israel. For example, on October 23, 2024, Khamenei declared that the Zionists had believed they could easily eliminate the resistance groups, yet they were still fighting Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and other organizations, despite having killed more than 50,000 innocent civilians and several leaders of the “Resistance Front,” and despite the United States’ continued support for Israel.<sup>116</sup>

These declarations continued after the 12-Day War as well. In a meeting with the Houthi ambassador in Tehran in August 2025, the Supreme Leader’s adviser on international affairs, Ali Akbar Velayati, praised the “resistance of the Yemeni people” and emphasized the importance of continued strategic cooperation within the “Resistance Front” and the need to improve coordination among its components in order to confront “the enemies’ plots” and preserve

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115 “It is important to examine the role of the Axis of Resistance in the recent 12-day war.” *Mashregh News*, June 26, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/2ctp86fu>

116 “Supreme Leader: Victory belongs to the Axis of Resistance.” *Asr-e Iran*, October 23, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/42nm2xd7>

unity.<sup>117</sup> A statement by the IRGC marking the anniversary of the deaths of Hassan Nasrallah and senior Hezbollah leaders in the Israeli strike in Beirut, asserted that the resistance is not an institution that can be dismantled through political or security processes, but rather an identity, an idea, and a culture rooted among the peoples of the region. According to the IRGC, the plans of the Zionists and Americans to weaken or destroy the resistance have repeatedly failed and will once again bring only humiliation and disgrace upon their enemies. The statement stressed that the resistance has not only not been weakened, it is actually growing stronger and becoming an even more prominent regional actor. The IRGC pledged to continue supporting the “Axis of Resistance” and committed to pursuing this path “until the elimination of the occupation and the liberation of Jerusalem” as a divine, national, and irreversible mission.<sup>118</sup> These declarations—similar to those heard many times in the past—can be read as empty rhetoric or bombast intended to conceal Iran’s weakness. Yet they can also be interpreted as an authentic reflection of a mindset within Iran’s leadership that continues to assess that the balance of power still tilts in its favor.

### **Iran’s Continued Commitment to Its Allies**

The mounting pressure on Iran’s proxies—especially in Lebanon and Iraq—alongside growing calls to disarm the Shiite militias, has not escaped the regime’s notice. The collapse of the Assad regime has significantly reduced Iran’s ability to rebuild its proxy network, particularly in the military sphere. Nonetheless, it is clear that Iran does not intend to abandon its allies. Moreover, Israeli strikes across the region—including the attack on Iran itself and the failed strike in Qatar—are presented in Tehran as proof that abandoning the

117 “Velayati’s meeting with the Ansarallah representative in Yemen; emphasis on unity of the Resistance Front.” *Tasnim*, August 14, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/yc3tnuzh>

118 “IRGC statement on the anniversary of the [elimination] of Resistance leaders: The IRGC views support and assistance to the Resistance in the region as a divine, national, and unstoppable mission.” *Khabar Online*, September 27, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/2892n4su>

“resistance” would pave the way for the realization of the “Greater Israel” project and the establishment of Israeli regional hegemony.

Commentary published by Tasnim News Agency in August 2025 argued that the regional “Resistance Front” still provides Iran with a trump card against Israel and the United States. According to Tasnim, the front’s main advantage lies in the significant ground forces at its disposal. As an example, the agency cited the establishment of the Islamic Resistance in Syria (Awliya al-Ba’s), a new militia supported by Iran that emerged in January 2025 and claimed responsibility for firing a rocket at Israel in June 2025.<sup>119</sup>

In light of the growing pressure on Hezbollah to disarm, Iranian voices have stressed that the resistance is the guarantor of Lebanon’s security. In September 2025, the conservative Iranian news agency SNN sharply criticized efforts to strip Hezbollah of its weapons. A commentary it published argued that the Lebanese government’s plan to concentrate weapons solely in the hands of the Lebanese army—while Israel continues its strikes in Lebanon—is not a means of strengthening Lebanese sovereignty but rather a “forced project” imposed by the United States and its allies to dismantle Hezbollah and weaken the “Axis of Resistance,” thereby “inviting the Israeli monster” to reoccupy Lebanon and drag it into another civil war. The article stressed that political logic and historical experience show that the resistance has been the only actor capable of liberating southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation and preventing the realization of the “Greater Israel” project. Therefore, disarming Hezbollah before the state possesses real defensive capabilities could open the door to another Israeli invasion.

Moreover, Hezbollah’s weapons are not only a guarantee of Lebanon’s security but also an integral part of the regional deterrence equation. Experience has shown that when Hezbollah grows weaker, Israel becomes bolder in its aggression in other arenas as well—including Syria, the Gaza Strip, and

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119 “Iran’s two strategic calculations in the struggle with the Zionists.” *Tasnim*, August 10, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mu3w647d>

Yemen. Disarming Hezbollah would abandon the Lebanese public to foreign aggression and, contrary to the government's claims, would not ensure the country's reconstruction but instead deepen emigration, instability, and despair.<sup>120</sup>

Iranian objections to disarming militias have also been voiced with respect to Iraq. The Supreme Leader's representative in Iraq, Ayatollah Sayyid Mojtaba Hosseini, declared that the American demand to disarm the Shiite militias in Iraq is an unattainable wish, and that the Iraqi people will never accept such a move. He claimed that everyone knows the United States seeks to bring to Iraq the same disaster it brought upon Syria, but that there is no justification for doing so. According to Hosseini, members of the Popular Mobilization Forces—the umbrella framework of the pro-Iranian militias—are loyal and well-trained fighters, equipped with sufficient military means and operating as part of the front of the Islamic Republic and the Islamic resistance.<sup>121</sup>

Support for continued backing of the proxies has not been limited to the conservative–hardline camp. In an interview with *Shargh* in August 2025, the reformist journalist Mashallah Shams al-Vaezin argued that Iran must not accept the American and Israeli demand to disarm the resistance and establish a new order based on its elimination—not only as a military force but also as a political movement. He emphasized the importance of preserving the resistance and presented the liberation of southern Lebanon from Israeli occupation as proof of its effectiveness. In his view, there is no way to confront an aggressive, racist occupier such as Israel except through resistance. Shams al-Vaezin added that the real purpose of the demand to disarm armed groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza is to establish a new

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120 “Disarmament of Hezbollah: a prelude to suicide and to Lebanon’s re-occupation.” *SNN*, September 6, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/yy73wjK9>

121 “Representative of the Leader in Iraq: Members of the Popular Mobilization Forces are loyal to the Leader and stand on the frontlines of the Islamic Republic.” *Asr-e Iran*, August 24, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/yas33stk>

regional order that would eliminate all states and groups opposing Israel's aggression in the region. The first step in creating such an order, he argued, is to strip these groups of their weapons, followed by their political and social liquidation, and ultimately the destruction of the ideology of resistance itself. He noted that the regional order in the Middle East—as of the 12-Day War and considering subsequent developments—still rests on the “Axis of Resistance.” Moreover, in his view, the war proved the end of the “invincible Israel” myth. The resistance is spreading across Arab and Islamic states—from Indonesia to Central Africa, from Central Asia to the Eastern Mediterranean—and the power of the “Axis of Resistance” is greater than that of rival blocs, whether the Turkey-led axis or the “Arab–Israeli” axis led by the United States, Israel, and the Abraham Accords states.<sup>122</sup>

Even so, from Iran's perspective, certain adjustments can be made within the existing framework while seeking ways to offset the gaps in its deterrent capacity. Such measures may include accelerating efforts to establish terrorist infrastructure in the West Bank (as a possible substitute for the Gaza Strip); stepping up terrorist activity inside Israel; attempting to offset the blow to Hezbollah's military power through at least partial restoration of its capabilities; continuing Iranian support for Shiite militias in Iraq; and expanding assistance to the Houthis in Yemen. The continued transfer of funds to Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as assistance to the Houthis in Yemen and Shiite militias in Iraq, indicates that Iran is determined to preserve the axis by finding alternative channels of support and exploiting opportunities—such as the violent events that occurred in southern Syria in July 2025.<sup>123</sup> At the same time, reports have suggested that Iran has been training loyalists of the Assad regime at camps in Iraq, who may attempt to re-establish a pro-Iranian presence in

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122 “A new security engineering in the Middle East.” *Shargh*, August 13, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/yc35u5mc>

123 Carmit Valensi, “The bloody clash in Sweida: Strategic dilemmas for Israel.” *INSS Insight*, No. 2016, July 22, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/vh3f6f42>

Syria.<sup>124</sup> In July 2025, Israel captured members of a terror cell linked to Iran in two separate operations in southern Syria.<sup>125</sup>

In parallel, it has been reported that Iran is also continuing its efforts to transfer weapons to its proxies in the region. In July 2025, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Iran had begun using small vehicles to smuggle weapons to Hezbollah via Syrian territory, having previously relied on large trucks. According to the report, Hezbollah succeeded in smuggling Kornet anti-tank missiles and advanced weapons into Lebanon by this method.<sup>126</sup> In September 2025, the pan-Arab daily *Asharq Al-Awsat* reported that Iran had asked a senior Iraqi official to grant it extraordinary allowances at the al-Qaim border crossing between Iraq and Syria in order to transfer cash shipments to Hezbollah through Syrian territory. The paper further reported that security officials in Syria and Lebanon had monitored growing Iranian efforts to deliver assistance to Hezbollah against the backdrop of mounting pressure on the organization to disarm. Senior figures in Iraq's Shiite "Coordination Framework" stated that Iran had instructed militia leaders to seek new ways to rebuild Hezbollah's capabilities.<sup>127</sup>

In October 2025, Israel's Shin Bet security service and the IDF thwarted a major smuggling operation of advanced weapons originating in Iran and destined for terrorist operatives in the West Bank. A joint statement by the security agencies said the intercepted shipment contained "game-changing" weapons, including anti-tank rockets, Claymore-type mines, drones capable of dropping explosives, hand grenades, machine guns, and pistols. The

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124 Hudhaifa Ebrahim, "Tehran seeks comeback in Syria through Iraqi training camps." *Ynet Global*, April 29, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/ynetpvj9>

125 Emanuel Fabian, "For the second time in days, IDF says troops arrested a terror cell in Syria working for Iran." *Times of Israel*, July 7, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/nyfv6r5x>

126 Benoit Faucon & Adam Chamseddin, "Iran is moving to rearm its militia allies." *Wall Street Journal*, July 17, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/7nza6uyw>

127 "Tehran seeks new channels to funnel money to Hezbollah." *Asharq Al-Awsat*, September 9, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/4hmu97vd>

statement added that the cache of weapons had been sent to West Bank operatives by the IRGC Special Operations Directorate and the Quds Force's special operations unit.<sup>128</sup>

In parallel, Iran continues to transfer weapons to the Houthis in Yemen. In early August 2025, Yemen's National Resistance Forces (NRF)—operating in southern Yemen with Western backing—seized a shipment of weapons en route to the Houthis. According to the NRF statement, the shipment, which was destined for the port of al-Hudaydah but diverted to the government-held port of Aden, contained UAVs, jet propulsion systems, wireless devices, and advanced control components.<sup>129</sup> In October 2025, an Iranian vessel carrying weapons—including Kornet missiles and spare parts for UAVs—was intercepted near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait while sailing from Bandar Abbas toward Houthi-controlled areas.<sup>130</sup>

One way Iran is attempting to cope with the mounting pressure on its partners in the “Resistance Front” is by expanding its engagement with central governments—especially in Lebanon—while repeatedly stressing that it does not seek to interfere in Arab states' internal affairs. During a visit to Lebanon in August 2025, Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani officially acknowledged the constraints that Hezbollah faces and stressed the need to work also with the Lebanese state authorities, while emphasizing that Iran does not intend to meddle in Lebanon's domestic politics.

In his meeting with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, Larijani said that Iran seeks friendly relations with all Lebanese, not just with a particular sect, and that it supports the Lebanese government and the decisions made by the country's legitimate institutions. He added that Tehran is prepared to offer

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128 Yoav Zitun, “29 mines, 15 rockets, 60 pistols and rifles: Iranian weapons shipment to the West Bank intercepted | Footage.” *Ynet*, October 8, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mujxdbm5>

129 “Yemen forces interdict illegal weapons systems and equipment bound for Iran-backed Houthis.” *Yemen Online*, August 16, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/ycyphfj4>

130 “Weapons shipment seized near Bab al-Mandab strait, en route to the terrorist Houthi militia.” *Yemen Vibe*, October 22, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/4tvd62jt>

assistance to Lebanon if its government requests it.<sup>131</sup> At a press conference in Beirut, Larijani emphasized that Iran supports regional states being strong and independent, and that it will respect any decision taken by the Lebanese government in coordination and consultation with Hezbollah. He stressed that the resistance constitutes a national asset of Lebanon and of all Islamic countries, and that Lebanon's enemy is Israel, which has attacked it. At the same time, he reiterated that Iran has no intention of interfering in other states' internal affairs, including Lebanon's.<sup>132</sup> On a subsequent visit to Lebanon in September 2025, Larijani declared that Iran does not give orders to anyone, and that Hezbollah's Secretary-General Naim Qassem himself decides what serves the interests of his people. He added that Iran seeks to encourage senior Lebanese officials and the various political currents to work together in consensus, and emphasized that Lebanon's internal affairs are for the Lebanese alone to decide. Larijani also addressed claims that Iran is supplying Hezbollah with weapons, responding that Hezbollah is strong enough and does not need weapons from other states. He similarly rejected claims by U.S. presidential envoy Tom Barrack regarding alleged multi-million-dollar Iranian financial assistance to Hezbollah.<sup>133</sup>

Larijani reiterated this updated Iranian approach in an interview with the Supreme Leader's official website, where he outlined Iran's revised concept regarding continued support for its proxies, while stressing the independence of central governments in the region and the need to strengthen them. Larijani argued that it is incorrect to claim that the "Resistance Front" has weakened, insisting that it is alive, breathing, evolving, and even growing stronger as pressure on it increases. He added that it is always appropriate

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131 "Details of Larijani's meeting with Aoun, according to Lebanese media reports." *Tasnim*, August 13, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/bdd6yjd2>

132 "Larijani: Iran's policy is to make the region's states independent and strong." *Tasnim*, August 13, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/5wff8m3b>

133 "Larijani: We are prepared for all scenarios / The Americans need not consider themselves guardians of the Lebanese people" *JSNA*, September 27, 2025.

to adapt decisions to changing circumstances, but that this does not in any way undermine the Islamic Republic's support for the resistance, which it continues to regard as an authentic movement and a strategic asset. Just as Iran's enemies use all the capabilities at their disposal, he argued, so too must Iran make use of its own capabilities. He emphasized that Hezbollah and the other resistance forces do not constitute a burden on Iran. They need its assistance just as Iran needs theirs for the sake of its national security. At the same time, he stressed that members of the axis must solve their problems themselves within a framework of national dialogue, and that they are not subordinate to Iran, which respects their decisions and their judgment. Moreover, he underscored that the region's central governments, including those of Lebanon and Iraq, also need to be strong, and that Iran believes in the existence of independent governments in the region alongside its support for the resistance.<sup>134</sup>

Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi has likewise expressed the view that the mere fact that Iran takes a position on developments in Lebanon or on the resistance does not mean that it is interfering in Lebanon's internal affairs. In an interview with Iranian television, the minister stressed that Hezbollah is a completely independent organization that makes its own decisions, and that Lebanon's internal issues should be resolved through dialogue among the country's various groups and sects. At the same time, he argued that regional peace would be less stable without the weapons of the resistance, and that if it were to be disarmed, no other actor would be able to curb Israel's hegemonic ambitions in the region, as has been evident in Syria. Araghchi added that Iran has warned Lebanon about this danger, but that

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134 "The Iranians are not the sort to 'surrender.'" Website of Iran's Supreme Leader, August 22, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/yezcd842>

the decision on how to act lies solely with the Lebanese themselves—and especially with Hezbollah.<sup>135</sup>

Against the backdrop of the increasing constraints faced by its proxies in the region, Tehran has in some cases shown a willingness to encourage its allies to refrain from actions that could lead to escalation—an escalation it does not currently seek. This is particularly evident in Iran’s policy toward Iraq, where the pro-Iranian Shiite militias are under mounting pressure. During visits to Iraq in the summer of 2025, Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani conveyed a clear message from Tehran to the Shiite militias opposing unilateral actions on their part. According to one report, Qaani emphasized Iran’s support for the Iraqi government and its efforts to assert its authority, and warned of the possibility of Israeli strikes against militia headquarters. He also expressed Tehran’s displeasure at the continued activity of certain groups without coordination with the government in Baghdad. According to a senior figure in the Shiite “Coordination Framework,” Qaani’s visit indicates a certain shift in Iran’s approach to the Shiite militias in Iraq, characterized by a move from unconditional support to limited and calculated guidance. This change, the official argued, stems from mounting economic and international pressure on Tehran and its efforts to improve its bargaining position with the West. At the same time, he added, Iran is working to preserve the unity of the Coordination Framework and to prevent disagreements among the Iraqi Shiite factions from undermining the cohesion of the Shiite camp—particularly in the run-up to Iraq’s parliamentary elections in November 2025.<sup>136</sup>

A further indication of Iran’s readiness to adjust its policy toward its proxies can be seen in a report by Amwaj Media, which cited Iraqi political sources as saying that the IRGC is examining, together with several major pro-Iranian

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135 “Araghchi: The Zionists are angry at our resistance to sanctions.” *Asr-e Iran*, August 14, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/34ca9pjn>

136 “Iraqi sources reveal to “Al-Ain Al-Ikhbariya” details of Qaani’s ‘secret’ visit and its link to the elections.” *Al-Ain*, July 30, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/53pkfxtt>

Shiite militias, the possibility of focusing their efforts on the Iraqi political arena. This comes in response to growing pressure on the militias from the central government in Baghdad and from the United States. At the same time, according to this report, Iran is working to encourage and support smaller Iraqi militias that are not part of the Popular Mobilization Forces, so that they can continue military activity.<sup>137</sup>

### **Iran and the Arab States After the War**

In parallel to its ongoing activity vis-à-vis the “Resistance Front,” Iran has been making a sustained effort to continue improving its relations with its Arab neighbors. The trend of détente between Iran and Sunni Arab states—primarily the Gulf states—is closely linked to their fears of Iran, especially since the September 2019 attack on Saudi oil facilities attributed to Iran, which highlighted Iran’s military advantage; to growing doubts about the reliability and security commitment of the United States toward its regional partners; and to the Gulf states’ desire to refocus on domestic issues and on long-term reconstruction and development.<sup>138</sup>

However, this trend has progressed only slowly, mainly due to mutual suspicion, continued Gulf concerns over Iran’s growing power, and various contentious issues—not least Tehran’s support for armed non-state actors in the Middle East. Moreover, with the end of the war in Gaza, Arab states—led by Saudi Arabia—may have to decide on the future of the Abraham Accords and on possible cooperation with Israel to counter the Iranian threat. At the same time, they will have to reassess their position toward Tehran which, despite the blows it has suffered, is still considered an actor with significant deterrent capabilities.

137 Mohanad Faris, “Iran floats ‘dual-track approach’ as Baghdad playbook gets reconsidered.” *Amwaj Media*, November 4, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/33sdxejb>

138 Yoel Guzansky, Raz Zimmt, and Galia Lindenstrauss, “The détente in the Middle East: Characteristics and implications for Israel.” *INSS Insight*, No. 1892, September 15, 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/bdhfdd2r>

In its efforts to strengthen ties with its Arab neighbors, Iran has drawn encouragement from their cautious stance on the war, driven primarily by fears of regional escalation that might spill over into their own territory. This concern has persisted even after the 12-Day War, as the Gulf states share the assessment that, in the absence of an arrangement between Iran and the United States, another round of war between Israel and Iran—potentially escalating into a broader regional conflagration—is only a matter of time. In addition, Arab states have expressed growing unease with what they see as Israel’s clear preference for the use of military force over political arrangements. In its recent diplomatic contacts with senior officials in the Arab world, Iran has sought to capitalize on mounting Arab fears about what they perceive as Israeli designs for regional hegemony. For example, in an August 2025 conversation with Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty, Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi stressed the need to enhance coordination among Arab and Islamic states in confronting the “Greater Israel” project to seize Arab and Islamic lands.<sup>139</sup>

Following Israel’s failed September 2025 strike on Hamas’ leadership in Qatar, Tehran took advantage of the harsh Arab criticism of Israel to portray the operation as further proof of Israel’s aggressive intentions and of the need to step up coordination in the Muslim world against it. From the perspective of Arab states—particularly the Gulf monarchies—the strike in Doha was seen as yet another indication of Israel’s offensive ambitions in the region and further deepened doubts about their ability to rely on the United States as a dependable security patron. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei reacted to the strike by saying that the incident should serve as a warning to regional states about the dangers of continued indifference to

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139 “Phone call between Araghchi and the Egyptian Foreign Minister regarding the ‘Greater Israel’ plan and the Gaza crisis.” *Mehr*, August 20, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/48pwyne>

Israel's aggression and violations of international law in the region.<sup>140</sup> In his speech at the summit of Islamic and Arab leaders in Doha, Iranian President Pezeshkian stated that the Israeli strike in Doha had proved that no Arab or Muslim state is immune from Israeli aggression, and that Islamic countries must unite against Israel.<sup>141</sup>

In sum, Iran faces serious challenges in the regional arena as well, above all regarding its ability to rebuild the “Axis of Resistance” it has cultivated over many years. Furthermore, Iran's basic capacity to expand its influence in the region is constrained by structural features of the Middle Eastern system—chief among them the region's demographic composition and the competing influence of other regional and international actors. The Islamic Republic has struggled in the past, and will likely continue to struggle, to become a regional hegemon in an area that is predominantly Arab and Sunni and that often views it as an alien—and even hostile—actor. Nevertheless, Iran has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to exploit every opportunity to strengthen its foothold and its status as a regional power. It is reasonable to assume that, despite the weakening of the Islamic Republic and the pro-Iranian axis, Tehran will continue to seize every opportunity to preserve at least part of its influence and to rebuild the capabilities of its regional allies within the “Resistance Front.”

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140 “Baqaei's response to the Israeli regime's terrorist operation in Doha.” *Tabnak*, September 9, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/2p9sx836>

141 “Pezeshkian at the Doha Summit: Israel's attack on Qatar stemmed from desperation / The aggressor must be isolated.” *Tasnim*, September 15, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/mr23vbmt>