



ing intensity not only against Hamas but also against Hezbollah, Iran, the Assad regime, and other Axis members. Yet, its actions over the past year suggest that Israel has strategically underestimated the resilience of the network and the extent to which a military solution, even one not constrained by international law, can bring about societal change in other countries. The past year has proved that the network is, to a meaningful extent, still able to adapt to military and economic challenges. While many of its member groups will remain underground or close to home during this period of intense conflict, they will nonetheless continue to draw on domestic support, on other members of the network across the region, and on global allies such as Russia and China. To eradicate the network fully is an impossible task and would likely require, at a minimum, demolishing, occupying, and reestablishing new states wherever the groups are embedded. For a country such as Israel, which has been accused of war crimes at the International Criminal Court and the United Nations, that sort of effort would prompt blowback from key allies and the international community. History suggests that Israel's military actions are unlikely to succeed without a comprehensive political solution, especially when those actions are conducted outside its own territory. Instead, the Israeli

Resistance, Iran used these markets to trade energy resources, fund military operations, and gain access to US dollars. In Iraq, for example, Iran worked with the rest of the Axis to combine Iranian and non-Iranian fuel before selling it to countries in Asia. The revenues from this trade allowed Iran to purchase weapons components and ship them to its allies throughout the region. It also gave the Axis additional global connections in the form of Chinese oil buyers. The last major challenge that the Axis of Resistance faced before Israel's post-October 7 offensive against Hamas and Hezbollah was the assassination of General Soleimani by the United States in January 2020. General Soleimani had helped found the Axis, and his role as its de facto leader, as well as his top-down command style, meant that his death was a major setback for Iran and its allies. Yet, even though the attack sent shockwaves through the network — Axis member groups in Iraq went underground — in the end, it demonstrated the adaptability of the Axis to deal with serious threats.

After General Soleimani's death, the Axis transitioned from a top-down Iranian-driven network into a more horizontally integrated alliance. Iran retained a pivotal role in setting the Axis's strategic direction, but the new structure allowed the other members greater autonomy and more independent interactions with both Tehran and one another. In the reformed axis, Hezbollah's Nasrallah became an important broker: he provided regular strategic guidance to Esmail Qaani, General Soleimani's

successor. Qaani aimed to transform the Axis into a more formal and coherent institution, empowering its members to take greater control and operate as equals. (This goal was helped, somewhat inadvertently, by the fact that Qaani had neither General Soleimani's deep-rooted personal connections nor his proficiency in Arabic, which made Nasrallah's guidance even more crucial.)

In Iraq, for instance, Nasrallah and his representative, Mohammad al-Kawtharani, emerged as key advisers to the Baghdad government. They helped quell the Tishreen (October) Uprising that had erupted a few months before General Soleimani's assassination, in which protesters demanded an end to the Iran-allied post-2003 governing regime. Nasrallah and Kawtharani helped fortify the regime against popular protest. During this period, Kawtharani also significantly expanded Hezbollah's economic interests across Iraq, thereby filling the void left by General Soleimani's death. These changes, although driven by a negative shock, reshaped the Axis once again.

Responding to Israel's total war

The previous threats to the Axis of Resistance pale in comparison to the total war that Israel launched in response to Hamas's October 7 attack. As before, however, the Axis was forced to adapt for its own survival. In particular, it has continued to transition to a more horizontal command structure and has further tightened its transnational connections.

To a much greater degree than in previous conflicts, Israel's war against Hamas and Hezbollah has drawn a strong response from other allies within the Axis, such

as the Houthis and Kataib Hezbollah, which has its roots in the Badr Corps of the 1980s and is currently linked to the PMF in Iraq. Previously, these groups were peripheral to the broader dynamics in Middle Eastern conflicts. Over the past year, however, they have deepened both their autonomy and their regional influence.

The Houthis, for instance, began for the first time to use anti-ship ballistic missiles to disrupt commercial shipping routes. They attacked ships traveling through the Red Sea, forcing freight companies to reroute around Africa, which led to increased costs and delays in the delivery of energy, food, and consumer goods around the world.

Kataib Hezbollah has also sought more involvement and influence in the transnational arena as Hamas and Hezbollah came under attack. In a move that challenged popular conceptions of its role as an Iranian proxy, the group killed three US service members in January 2024 along the Jordanian-Syrian border in an attack on a US military outpost known as Tower 22. This action was undertaken against the wishes of the IRGC, which subsequently pleaded with Kataib Hezbollah to call a cease-fire. The attack nevertheless revealed a new configuration of the Axis that involved more proactive and autonomous decision-making from its members.

The post-October 7 reorientation has also fostered closer ties among some of the members of the Axis of Resistance. For several years, the Houthis maintained only a nominal presence in Iraq, with a single representative in

Baghdad. That envoy's work seemed more symbolic than substantive. In response to Israeli offensives against Hamas and Hezbollah, however, the Houthis deepened their collaboration with the PMF. This intensified cooperation saw an increase in weapons sharing and joint operations and showcased an enhanced capability to attack Israel. Members of the Axis also worked together across borders more

Emergency personnel walk outside a US Embassy branch office situated near the site of a drone blast that killed one man and injured at least 10 others in Tel Aviv, Israel, on July 19, 2024. **RICARDO MORAES/REUTERS**



concertedly following the assassination of Nasrallah in September. In the aftermath of his death, dozens of Hezbollah's economic elites and their families relocated to southern Iraq, traveling by land through Syria with Assad's assistance. They quickly found places to resettle as Hezbollah had increased its business activities in Iraq after General Soleimani's death, including making investments in infrastructure, land, and residential complexes. These economic links allowed Hezbollah's elites to move out of the direct line of fire in Lebanon while continuing to generate revenue. Once more, the Axis's transnational connections provided a crucial lifeline for its members during a period of profound difficulty.

Need for accountability
Israel, of course, understands the transnational nature of the Axis of Resistance. It is precisely because of this understanding that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet embarked on its total war strategy in response to October 7, a strategy that involved offensives of vary-

Members of Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah movement attend a funeral in Baghdad, Iraq, on November 21, 2023. **AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP**

campaign will probably result in an even more unstable Middle East, one in which genuine peace is only a distant possibility. Israeli massacres of civilians, which have been condemned by the United Nations and by human rights organizations, have proved devastating for civil society and are being used by Axis groups to foster their ideology of resistance. Rather than enabling Israel's ruthless strategy, therefore, international actors need to find a political settlement that begins with a cease-fire to the bloody wars in Gaza and Lebanon. The next step should be to bring in the governments linked to the Axis to negotiate a broader settlement that takes into account the true nature of the power dynamics in the region. Without such an inclusive approach, regional conflict in the Middle East is destined to persist, to the detriment of future generations.

People walk by the painted posters of the former Hamas leader Ahmad Yassin (1), the former chief of the Iranian Quds Force General Qassem Soleimani (2nd-L), the former chief of Lebanon's Hezbollah Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah (2nd-R), and the Houthi leader Mahdi al-Mashat in Sanaa, Yemen, in January 2024. **AHMAD AL-RUBAYE/AFP**

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