



Demonstrators rally to show solidarity with Palestinians and Hezbollah, in Sanaa, Yemen, in November 2024.

● KHALED ABDULLAH/
REUTERS

Axis of resilience

Israel is underestimating Iran, its allies



By Renad Mansour
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OPINION

In response to Hamas's October 7 attack last year, the Israeli cabinet launched a regional war meant to reshape the Middle East. Israel specifically targeted the so-called Axis of Resistance, a network of groups allied with Iran that includes Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Ansarullah (Houthis) in Yemen, Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and parts of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq. Working on a scale that dwarfs previous efforts against the Axis, Israel has spent the past year trying to destroy the network's political, economic, military, logistical, and communications infrastructure. It has also undertaken an unprecedented campaign against the Axis's leadership, killing the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah and several senior commanders in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The ferocity of the Israeli offensive, which has been bolstered by advanced technologies and a strategy of total war that flattens and depopulates neighborhoods and cities, will significantly alter the balance of power in the Middle East. Yet, for all its military superiority, not to mention its support from the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe, Israel is unlikely to eradicate the organizations and regimes that belong to the Axis in the way it hopes. Time and again the Axis has demonstrated an adaptability and a resilience that attest to the deep connections its member groups maintain within their own states and societies. What's more, the transnational relationships that compose the Axis mean that Hamas, Hezbollah, and the other member organizations are best understood not merely as discrete nonstate actors or insurgent armed groups but as interlinking nodes of durable political, economic, military, and ideological networks.

These networks, which are regional and sometimes even global, have allowed the members of the Axis to accommodate various shocks, including military setbacks, such as the assassination by the United States of its de facto leader, Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, in January 2020; economic collapses, such as the crippling sanctions from US president Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign and the Lebanese banking crash of 2019, which dissolved the financial accounts of many member groups; and uprisings, such as the protests that at various times contested the authority of the Axis in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza. Despite these challenges, Axis members — and the Axis as a whole — have drawn on support from their local states and communities and from one another to survive.

The historical resilience of the Axis of Resistance suggests that Israel will find it difficult to eliminate groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. In all likelihood, the Israeli strategy of total war will continue to yield short-term tactical victories that degrade the capabilities of armed groups and states, forcing them into a kind of survival mode for a time. But without a political solution that comes to terms with the social embeddedness of the groups, the Axis will likely draw again on local sources of influence, along with its transnational connections, to reconfigure itself at the local and regional levels. Since October 7, in fact, smaller groups within the Axis have seized the moment to strengthen their alliances. While Hamas, Hezbollah, and the IRGC endure the brunt of the Israeli offensives, groups such as Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and the Houthis in Yemen have capitalized on the turmoil to emerge as formidable regional players.

Resilience through adaptation

The Axis of Resistance as it exists today differs significantly from the network that was initially established in the 1980s. Back then, the nascent Islamic Republic of Iran founded and fostered Hez-

bollah in Lebanon as a means of projecting power. Its aim was to "export the revolution" and employ "forward defense" through asymmetric deterrence against perceived threats, namely Israel. Iran strategically replicated this model across various countries. Around the same time that it founded Hezbollah, for instance, Iran established Iraqi Shia groups such as the Badr Corps, which played a role in toppling Iraqi president Saddam Hussein's regime and seizing power in post-2003 Iraq. In the 1990s, Iran bolstered Palestinian factions such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas, thereby helping enhance their influence. And in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab uprisings, Iran extended its support to Assad in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen, further solidifying its regional network.

What fundamentally sustained these groups was a deep reliance on their local governing regimes and social bases. They embedded themselves within the fabric of their respective states to such an extent that the formal heads of government in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Gaza are all either members of groups that belong to the Axis or were chosen with those groups' support. Furthermore, transnational ties among the groups have served as a crucial insurance policy during periods of shock.

An early test of the Axis came in 1992 when Israel assassinated Abbas al-Musawi, who was the secretary-general of Hezbollah. At the time, a major Israeli newspaper proclaimed that "the era of conflict with Hezbollah in its comfortable playground

has ended." Despite the attack, however, Hezbollah was able to reconstitute itself. The party leveraged local support by rallying the Lebanese Shia community and securing backing from Iran, which provided financial aid, military training, and strategic guidance. This robust support network enabled Hezbollah to not only recover but also expand its influence. Under the guidance of its Shura Council and Hassan Nasrallah, Musawi's successor, Hezbollah eventually became strong enough that it was able to force Israel from Lebanese territory in 2000. This triumph, coupled with the 2006 war in which Hezbollah fought Israel to a standstill — an unprecedented feat for Arab armed groups — greatly enhanced its reputation. It also ushered in a formidable new incarnation of the Axis of Resistance.

Another challenge to the Axis came in 2011 when the Assad regime in Syria faced an existential threat in the form of a war. Protests against the regime, which initially sought reforms, were followed by an armed uprising fought by groups — with backing from Turkey and the Persian Gulf states — demanding regime change. Once again, however, the Axis was able to adapt in ways that allowed it to overcome this crisis. Assad was aided in part by important connections that the Axis made with states outside the region: most significantly, Russia came to Assad's rescue and became an influential global partner for the network. But Assad's regime also benefited from the assistance of other Axis members. Under the strategic di-



rection of General Soleimani, the IRGC's Quds Force, along with Iraqi Shia armed groups, began constructing a vital land bridge to transport supplies, weapons, and personnel from Iran and Iraq into Syria. Hezbollah fighters were eventually deployed to the frontlines of the Syrian war, where they played a crucial role in quelling the armed uprising. (Although initially reluctant to enter the Syrian conflict because of opposition from its local supporters, Hezbollah was compelled by Iran to intervene.) As Assad's government teetered on the brink of collapse, Hezbollah stepped in decisively to safeguard the regime and prevent the emergence of a new regime in Damascus that would be hostile to the Axis. The 2011 uprisings also led to the Houthis' formal integration into the Axis of Resistance. Following the overthrow of Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, Ira-



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Women wave flags of Lebanon and Lebanese Shia movement Hezbollah in front of portraits of the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei (R) and Hezbollah's late leader Seyyed Hassan Nasrallah, in the southern Lebanese town of Bint Jbeil on August 13, 2016.

● MAHMOUD ZAYYAT/AFP

nian support became instrumental in transforming the Houthis from a local armed group into a formidable military force. By providing financial aid, advanced weaponry, and military training, Iran enabled the Houthis to enhance their operational capabilities. This assistance, coupled with local support bases, allowed the Houthis to seize control of Sanaa, the Yemeni capital, in 2014 and to maintain their dominance against a Saudi-led coalition.

In addition to military attacks, the Axis of Resistance has also faced economic assaults in the form of sanctions. During the early years of this century, Iran's nuclear ambitions and its growing influence prompted an international coalition led by the United States to levy new sanctions against Iran and its allies within the Axis. The sanctions increased dramatically in 2018 when Trump reneged on the Iran nuclear deal and launched his Maximum Pressure campaign. This campaign was intended in part to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero, thereby stripping the regime of a crucial revenue source. The sanctions devastated Iran's economy, but they did not halt the regime's oil trade. Instead, Tehran found ways to sell its oil through informal markets. With the help of its allies in the Axis of



People participate in a huge pro-Palestinian protest against the escalating Israeli military aggressions in Gaza, in Sanaa, Yemen, on November 10, 2023.

● MOHAMMED HAMOUD/
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