

# DIFFERENCES AFFECT THE IRANIAN 'AXIS OF RESISTANCE' RESPONSE TO THE MIDEAST CRISIS

## Bottom Line Up Front:

- Iran and other members of its “axis of resistance” differ in their political circumstances and strategic calculations, complicating Tehran’s response to the Israel-Hamas war.
- Iran sees the “axis of resistance” as a tool to achieve gains from the Mideast crisis while avoiding direct conflict with the United States.
- Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia factions are part of the governing structures in their countries, placing pressure on these groups to align their actions to maximize the gains of the Palestinians in the ongoing conflict with Israel.
- Through its actions against Israel and the United States, the Houthi movement in Yemen might trigger U.S. retaliation and jeopardize anticipated gains in talks to end the long-running conflict in the country.

**The actions and responses of Iran’s [“axis of resistance”](#) to Israel’s war to remove one axis member, Hamas, from power reflect differing perceptions and calculations among Tehran and its protégé movements.** Perhaps reflecting a belief that Iran would prod the entire axis to act in unison on Hamas’ behalf, on the day of the attack, Hamas’ military commander Mohammed Deif called on the group’s axis allies to join the struggle. In an audio message, he reportedly stated: “Our brothers in the Islamic resistance in Lebanon, Iran, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, this is the day when your resistance unites with your people in Palestine.” Yet, far from directly expanding the Israel-Hamas war into a regional conflagration, the responses of the axis members have been varied and nuanced, reflecting their separate calculations of potential consequences and outcomes. In the aggregate, Tehran and its proteges appear to have assessed that none of their actions will be sufficient to cause Israel to abandon its all-out ground operations to eliminate the Hamas military infrastructure in Gaza. Instead, Iran and its allies seem to be pursuing alternative goals, including trying to drive a wedge between the United States and its Arab allies; applying pressure on Israel to support an eventual Palestinian state; building their domestic support bases to outflank domestic opponents; and ensuring that the vast bulk of their arsenals remain intact, if needed for future conflicts. Tehran might hope that large pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Europe leads to closer Iran-European Union relations and possibly a relaxation of European sanctions on Iran. The axis retains the potential to expand its activities against Israel or the United States if circumstances change – for example if U.S. forces attack Iran directly.

Iran itself, which has funded the axis with hundreds of millions of dollars per year collectively, appears to have been deterred by U.S. statements and deployments, to date, from taking direct and attributable action against Israel. Iran’s reluctance to risk provoking conflict with the United States appears to reflect the Supreme Leader’s longstanding insistence on fighting Tehran’s battles through non-Iranian surrogates, removed from Iranian territory itself. A November 15 Reuters report claimed that Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, told the political leader of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, during their early November meeting in Tehran, that: “You gave us no warning of your October 7 attack on Israel, and we will not enter the war on your behalf.” The Reuters report went further to assert that Khamenei pressed Haniyeh to silence those Hamas figures who are calling for Iran and its powerful ally, [Lebanese Hezbollah](#), to join the battle against Israel fully. Appearing to corroborate the substance of the report, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said in his high-profile November 3 speech that Hamas had kept its attack on Israel a secret from its allies in order not to “upset anyone” in the axis. Another

Hamas political leader outside Gaza, Khaled Meshal, seemed to reflect the movement's disappointment at the overall axis response in an October 16 television interview, in which he thanked Hezbollah for its actions thus far but said "the battle requires more." The Hamas criticism might also reflect the underlying sectarian tensions within the alliance: Hamas is one of the only Sunni Muslim factions in the group ([Palestinian Islamic Jihad](#), or PIJ, being the other). The others, including the Alawite family that dominates Syria, are Shias of varying schools of thought.

Even if the axis has not deployed its full capabilities to support Hamas, the crisis marks the first time that the coalition – which Iran has nurtured over the past four decades to overturn what Tehran sees as a regional power structure favoring Israel, the United States, and Sunni Arab powers such as Saudi Arabia – has mobilized on multiple fronts simultaneously. However, the various actions of the members of the axis reflect their own domestic contexts, interests, and calculations – all while serving the broader goal of complicating Israel's offensive and imposing costs on the United States for supporting Israel. Iran's most powerful regional ally, Lebanese Hezbollah, is the axis member considered most likely to [directly join the war](#) on Hamas' side by using its large rocket and missile arsenal, as well as ground forces, to divert large numbers of Israel Defense Forces (IDF) troops and Israel Air Force (IAF) combat aircraft to Israel's northern front. To date, Hezbollah has largely confined its strikes to northern Israeli towns near the border and artillery exchanges. Its actions seem to reflect comments by Nasrallah in his November 3 speech that the "[October 7 Hamas attack on Israel] was 100 percent Palestinian in terms of both decision and execution. This operation has no bearing on any decision or move to be taken by any other faction within the resistance axis." His stance appears to reflect pressure from other major Lebanese factions – particularly parties dominated by Maronite Christians and Sunni Muslims – not to bring destruction to South Lebanon again by triggering a full-scale conflict with Israel. Hezbollah participates in Lebanon's parliament and has several members in cabinet positions, giving Hezbollah a considerable stake in Lebanon's security and stability. Still, border exchanges have escalated in recent weeks, and it is possible that war could erupt on the Israel-Lebanon front at any time. Just yesterday, Hezbollah struck an Israeli military base at Biranit in northern Israel, the same day that Senior White House Advisor for Energy Security Amos Hochstein was visiting the country.

The actions of other members of the axis reflect their inability militarily to attack Israel directly. However, Iran-backed factions in Iraq and Syria, as well as the [Houthi \(Ansarallah\) movement in Yemen](#), are able to accomplish separate goals while also demonstrating a level of unity and commitment to the Iran-led alliance. [Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria](#) have launched more than 60 attacks on U.S. bases in both countries since October 17. The attacks have caused little damage, no U.S. deaths, and prompted U.S. retaliatory strikes on three occasions – all in Syria. However, the attacks ensure that the Iraq and Syria-based factions will continue to receive Iranian support and weaponry and, in the case of Iraq, help the commanders of armed factions build their popularity and outflank their political opponents in Baghdad. Most notable among them is Shia cleric Moqtada Al Sadr, with whom the Iraqi militia leaders are competing for the allegiance of Iraq's majority Shia population. Iran-organized militias in Syria do not have the political weight of their Iraqi counterparts and, of the axis members, are perhaps the most amenable to direct Iranian control. However, attacking U.S. forces in Syria helps them recruit and build battlefield experience and potentially draw some of the limited Syrian government resources away from the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and toward the Iran-backed militia forces in the east.

The Houthis appear to be acting almost purely on their own anti-Israel ideology. The movement has the most to lose should its actions provoke retaliation from the United States or cause U.S. officials to abandon diplomacy on a settlement in the long-running conflict in Yemen. Despite the risks, since the October 7 Hamas attack, the Houthis have fired Iran-supplied land attack missiles toward Israel and launched volleys of drones toward Israel and U.S. naval vessels in the Red Sea. On November 8, the Houthis shot down a U.S. MQ-9 "Reaper" armed drone. On November 19, the Houthis seized a commercial ship in the Red Sea that is partially owned by an Israeli shipping magnate and reportedly took 25 members of the crew hostage. The Houthis have threatened to seize additional ships if they are owned by Israelis or carrying Israeli goods, claiming there are legitimate targets. It is longstanding U.S. policy to maintain the free flow of commerce through the region, particularly energy exports, and the [Bab](#)

[el-Mandeb Strait](#) is a vital chokepoint. Significant Houthi interference with commercial shipping through the Strait is almost certain to trigger U.S. intervention due to the political and potentially economic implications. Stepped-up Houthi seizure of ships in the region is likely also to embolden those U.S. leaders that advocate [restoring the movement](#) to the U.S. list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTO).

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