

MIDDLE EAST ON EDGE AS CONFLICT IN GAZA EXPANDS THROUGHOUT THE REGION

Bottom Line Up Front:

- Iran's "axis of resistance," comprised of groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Houthi rebels in Yemen, and mostly Shia militia groups in Iraq and Syria, demonstrates the success of General Qassem Soleimani's blueprint for spreading Iranian influence throughout the Middle East.
- Yesterday, on the day marking Soleimani's death, a pair of explosions at a memorial near his grave resulted in at least 95 killed and another 211 wounded, according to press reports, although there has been no claim of responsibility by the perpetrators of the attack to date.
- In a long-awaited speech delivered on Wednesday, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah called the recent killing of Hamas senior leader Saleh al-Aroui "dangerous" and assured that Hezbollah will retaliate while making certain to differentiate between retaliation and unbridled, open warfare with Israel.
- Nasrallah's address also reiterated the point that all members of the axis of resistance "operate independently of each other, each in its own country," noting that "we consult with each other, but each one makes decisions based on its interests and those of its population."

Iran's "axis of resistance," comprised of groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Houthi rebels in Yemen, and mostly Shia militia groups in Iraq and Syria, demonstrates the success of General Qassem Soleimani's blueprint for spreading Iranian influence throughout the Middle East. Soleimani was killed by a U.S. drone strike in Iraq four years ago yesterday, although the fruits of his labor are on clear display from Yemen to Gaza, where the power of violent non-state actors to disrupt regional stability has perhaps never been greater. On Tuesday, the day before the four-year anniversary marking Soleimani's death, deputy Hamas commander [Saleh al-Aroui](#) was killed in a targeted assassination in the southern suburbs of Beirut. Although no claim of responsibility has been put forth, Israel is believed to be behind the al-Aroui assassination, a tactic the Israelis have utilized repeatedly in an effort to weaken regional adversaries. Israel has continued to conduct strikes [throughout the region](#), recently targeting a high-ranking Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander in Syria.

Yesterday, on the day marking Soleimani's death, a pair of explosions at a memorial near his grave resulted in at least 95 killed and another 211 wounded, according to press reports. There have been no claims of responsibility for the attack, which occurred in Kerman, although that has not stopped analysts from speculating about who the perpetrators could be. The list is long, and includes the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), [ISIS's Afghan affiliate](#), as well as Sunni groups based in Iran that have targeted the regime in the past, such as Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) and Jaysh al-Adl (formerly known as Jundullah). The last week has seen the expansion of the conflict between Israel and Iran's network of terrorist proxy groups. Iran's Vice President, Mohammad Mokhber, seemed to blame Israel for the Kerman attack, stating: "the hands of the Zionist regime" have spilled the blood of innocent citizens. Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi warned Israel that it would pay "a regrettable price."

In a long-awaited speech delivered on Wednesday, [Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah](#) called the recent killing of al-Aroui "dangerous" and assured that Hezbollah will retaliate while making sure to differentiate between retaliation and unbridled, open warfare with Israel. Nasrallah returned to this theme throughout his speech, promising to say more about the topic in a subsequent speech to be delivered on Friday. Nasrallah said that the killing of al-Aroui was serious not simply because of who he was, but also because it happened on Lebanese soil, in the heart of a Hezbollah stronghold. The Hezbollah leader

spoke of his organization's restraint, noting that to date, Hezbollah has [refrained from more intense attacks](#) against Israel in order to spare retribution against the Lebanese state. He did, however, warn, "If war is waged against us, the requirements of national interests force us to go to war until the end. If the enemy launches a war on Lebanon, our fighting will be without ceilings, limits, rules, and controls. Whoever thinks about war with us will regret it, as war with us is very, very expensive. The assassination of [Sheikh Saleh] Al-Aroui is a dangerous crime that will not remain without response and punishment. Between us and you there is the battlefield, and [many] days and nights." With violence spiraling and the chances for miscommunication high, there is a significant possibility of further escalation.

Elsewhere in the region, Iraqi Shia militias continue to fire rockets and drones at U.S. forces based in the country, prompting the Biden administration to launch airstrikes on Christmas Day against Kataib Hezbollah. Closer to the Red Sea, Yemen-based Houthi fighters have repeatedly [targeted commercial ships](#) with drones and missiles, leading to growing concern about the economic damage that Iran's proxies can cause. The U.S. and its allies released a formal statement that read: "Houthis will bear the responsibility of the consequences...We remain committed to the international rules-based order and are determined to hold malign actors accountable for unlawful seizures and attacks." In and of itself, the statement might seem unremarkable, but the focus on an international rules-based order is something Nasrallah's speech seemed to engage with when he referred to international law as "hollow," mentioning the situation in Gaza, where more than 22,000 Palestinians have been killed and since the war broke out between Hamas and Israel following the Hamas terrorist attack of October 7th. Nasrallah's address made the claim that all members of the [axis of resistance](#) "operate independently of each other, each in its own country," noting that "we consult with each other, but each one makes decisions based on its interests and those of its population." It now seems that Iran and the terrorist proxies that form this axis are seeking to cement an arc stretching across the region, defending Iran's interest and in the process, fulfilling Soleimani's vision and attempting to establish a new paradigm in the Middle East.
