

Roundtable Takeaways

What does Iran really want? Making sense of Iran's regional policies in the context of the Gaza War

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Moderating:

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Introduction

While Israel's War on Gaza enters into its fifth month, growing tensions between Israel and the US on one side and Iran and the so-called Axis of Resistance on the other, have pushed the region on the brink of a regional conflict. Understanding how Iran adjusts its regional policy in this critical juncture is all the more difficult. Iran continues to deny any direct involvement in the intensification of Hezbollah actions in southern Lebanon, or in the strikes of Iranian backed militias in Iraq and Syria, or in the ongoing Houthi attacks to ships in the Red Sea. Iran has also maintained the channels of communication with Gulf countries open. At the same time, Tehran has not hesitated to use military force, hitting a military structure in North of Iraq, allegedly belonging to Mossad, and an Iranian terrorist group in Pakistan. What is Iran's real role in the region? How are Iran's strategy and objectives evolving in the face of current tensions? How is the relationship with pro-Iran groups adjusting to the regional situation?

How is Iran using its network of allies and how can it become a victim of its own policies?

Shahram Kholdi

Under what circumstances was the Iranian rogue state born?

- The regime of Iran was born amid a combination of dynamics that are partly related to the Arab Israeli conflict.
- Many of the Khomeinists, including Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or its founders, were trained in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) or Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) camps in Lebanon.
- You could say the regime started and thrived within a failed state, which is Lebanon of the 1970s.
- As a result of all this, Iran proudly sees itself as a rogue state and revolutionary power.

How has Iran's regime thrived?

- We have to understand the existential relationship between the genesis of Iran, its survival and continuity, not only in exporting the revolution but to thriving in creating militias.
- Iran did not just create conventional proxies; it has a dynamic relationship with them. Proxies are at the same time agents and clients and at times become patrons.

What did Iran learn from the sanctions on Saddam?

- The expansion of the IRGC into the Quds Force expanded its activities.
- Iran did not train militias simply to create guerilla warfare actors; it trained them to create non-state or quasi-state actors that would operate within states and become part of its Shiaa Imperium.
 - Many proxies are Sunnis or of a Shiaa branch that is significantly different from that of Iran.
- Iran mimicked the model Qaddafi used to support the Ireland Republic Army (IRA) or the PLO but on a more robust, state level and particularly in failed states. The goal of this was to create proxies that are:
 - economically sustainable;
 - have a military hierarchy;
 - corresponding symmetrically to the IRGC; and
 - capable of using conventional warfare to wage a symmetrical guerilla warfare.

How powerful is the IRGC within the state?

- Since the end of the construction era of President Rafsanjani, the IRGC has emerged as a parallel state within Iran.
 - The wars in Iraq and Syria, allowed Qassem Soleimani and Mojtaba Khamanei to conduct this hostile takeover and sideline conservatives and reformists.

Hezbollah, escalation in Lebanon, and the tipping point

David Wood

How does Iran militarily support Hezbollah?

- Hezbollah has 150,000 rockets
- Unknown number of precision-guided missiles
- Tens of thousands of battle-hardened fighters

What else does Iran invest in?

- Iran has assisted Hezbollah in supporting itself politically and socially outside the military arena.
 - It has provided Hezbollah with support to create social welfare programs for its supporters.
 - This is key in Lebanon. The country is undergoing its worst economic crisis since 2019 and at the best of times had a weak social safety net.

What has Hezbollah's campaign since October 8 shown us so far?

- The military campaign since October 8 has allowed us to see Iran and Hezbollah's shared offensive and defensive objectives.
- Hezbollah opened a new front because of the centrality of the Palestinian cause to the ideology of the Axis of Resistance.
 - Daily exchanges between Hezbollah and Israel at the border show escalation and breaches of rules of engagement set after previous conflicts.

Why hasn't it spiraled out into an all-out war?

- The reason is due to the defensive objectives shared by Iran and Hezbollah.
 - Iran uses the forward defense strategy for deterrence off Iranian soil. If one of its enemies directly attacks it, it could expect a response from one of Iran's proxies.
- Iran has indicated that it doesn't want to burn Hezbollah as a security asset.

And there's no doubt, if there is a full-scale war, Israel would prevail by terms of military hardware.

- Iran and Hezbollah don't want to risk their current position of relative strength.

- They see this war as part of a long-term struggle and that Israel may possibly collapse on its own due to its internal contradictions.
- Neither Iran nor Hezbollah would like the war to play out completely right now.

What does Iran gain from supporting the Houthis?

Farea Al-Muslimi

The worst of Houthis has yet to come

- Despite their attacks, the Houthis have so much more maritime tech to show, and we haven't yet seen their full capacities yet. This may go on to impact telecommunications and internet cables.

What is Iran's top priority?

- Iran's top priority is survival
 - It will employ all possible means to ensure its survival.
- Another priority of Iran is to not to go to war.
 - Iran hasn't been in a foreign war since the Iraq War, and it wants to keep it this way. They will use drones, militias, or proxies but no troops on the ground to ensure this.

Who are the Houthis? How long has Iran supported them?

- Iran invested in the Houthis since the 80-90s, and they were the flower under the tree that grew into a big tree and a valuable flower.
 - The Houthis are a mountain people from the mountainous region of Saada in Yemen. As other mountain people, they think everyone else should submit to them.
 - The Houthis became useful as Iran was investing in Hezbollah, militias in Iraq, and the regime in Syria.
 - It started as a cheap way to annoy Saudi Arabia, and eventually became one of the most valuable cards Iran has. October 7th was the time to capitalize on this fruit.
- Now the Houthis are disrupting trade in the Red Sea, affecting the whole world.
 - The Houthis and Iranians are escalating in the Red Sea as the new front of the Axis of Resistance.
- Iran was much better at localization and capacity-building than the West.
 - Iran built the Houthis' maritime capacity in a short period, and they are now very well-equipped.

Does Iran control the Houthis?

- No, the Houthis are out of control.
 - No one should underestimate Houthi maximalism, recklessness, and ideology. Houthis believe in the erasure of Israel.
 - Whether or not Iran asked them to escalate in the Red Sea, they would have gone ahead and done it.

Does Iran train the Houthis?

- Houthis first relied on Iran for military equipment, but they are savvy in fighting tech and picked up very quickly.
 - They received trainings via Zoom and in South Lebanon, more than they were trained in Iran.
 - The military relationship between Iran and Houthis is now much less than it used to be.
 - The Houthis don't need a lot of help from Iran.

How far are the Houthis willing to go?

- They will go much farther than Iran is willing.
 - Houthis have nothing to lose, they don't have a seat at the UN Security Council, they aren't trying to have the sanctions lifted, and they aren't trying to have their own version of Iran's former Foreign Minister Zarif.
 - We may see a spillover in the region as a result of what they're doing.

What is going on in the other end of Red Sea?

- The new nightmare will be in the Horn of Africa, on the other end of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.
 - There will be groups driven by crime, piracy, and ideological motives in both ends of the sea.
- Iran will be active there and we must remember that they'll have a big endgame in mind.
 - They will be aiming for long-term objectives and could ultimately achieve them through their great skills and endurance in negotiation.

Iran and its Proxies in Iraq

Tamer Badawi

How does Iran deal with its proxies in Iraq?

- In Lebanon there are two groups, Hezbollah and Amal, in Yemen, Harakat Ansarullah, also known as the Houthis, and in Iraq, there are over 40–50 groups, which means they can't be described with one label.
 - Iran works with many actors, each with a different level of autonomy and history.
 - Iran has dynamic relationships with the groups where they bargain and negotiate with them.
 - There is a lot of decentralization in the objectives of these groups.
- The relationship that connects Iran with these groups is that Iran outlines the broad strategy to drive out US forces from West Asia.
 - Iran puts limits to what the groups can do, which targets to pursue and which not to.
 - It also supplies technology to these groups and could choose to withdraw this support if the group rebels.

What was going on before October 7?

- Iraqi groups have been semi-consistently attacking US forces for several years.
- Since the appointment of Prime Minister of Iraq Mohamed Shia' al-Sudany in October 2022, by the Iran-allied Shia Coordination Framework, paramilitary groups attacks have declined.
- Iran-allied parties wanted to stabilize the government, so they deescalated with the US.
 - Since the most hostile groups such as Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba aren't under the Shiaa Coordination Framework, Iran may have intervened in favor of the government and asked them to deescalate.

What happened in the aftermath of October 7?

- The onslaught on Gaza is a crucial development for the activities of these groups.
 - October 7 became the pretext to continue high-intensity attacks on the US.
- Paramilitary groups in Iraq launched rockets and drone attacks on US and international coalition.
 - These took place not just in Iraq, but in northeastern Syria, Jordan, and toward Israel.
 - Sometimes, they took place in coordination with Hezbollah or Ansarullah.

How are these attacks different than the ones of the past?

- Past attacks were more about intimidation, but the most recent ones were lethal, targeting and killing US forces.
- There are two main features of these attacks:
 - They were launched by two main groups, Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba.
 - They aren't using facades anymore; they take credit for the attacks.
 - They don't adopt fake names or attribution to other groups to avoid US retaliation.
 - This is a very important change in the tactics and a clear disconnect from the past three years.

Did the attacks stop?

- High-intensity attacks took place from October until the end of January.
- However, things have deescalated starting in February and there are two reasons for this relative state of calm.
 - The US counter-escalated by assassinating paramilitary commanders in Baghdad, Anbar, and Babel, which was also unprecedented.
 - The paramilitary groups realized that the US doesn't have leverage over Netanyahu and so their plan hadn't worked as they had imagined.