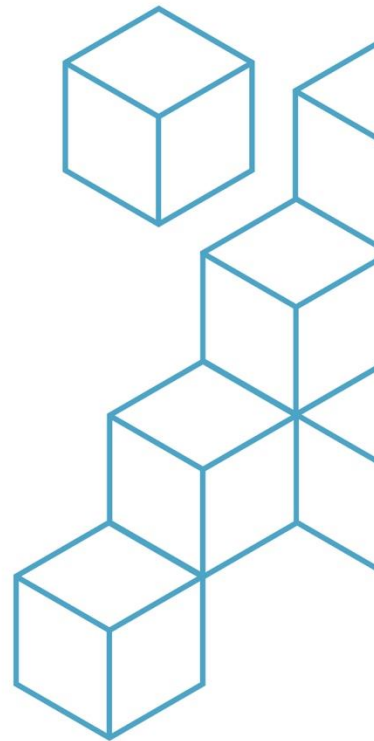


## ANALYSES

# Iran and the Gaza War: Complications in the Relationship with America and the West



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**The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, met with Ismail Haniyeh, the Chairman of the Hamas Political Bureau, in Tehran on 5 November 2023. [Anadolu/Iranian Leader Press Office]**

When Hamas conducted the 7 October operation, the world was aghast. But the authorities in Tehran celebrated the attack as an act of defiance against what they call the ‘Zionist occupiers’. The Iranian Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, praised the Palestinians for their bravery and rejected accusations that Iran had any role in the assault. He was categorical about that, declaring “...those who say the work of Palestinians stems from non-Palestinians don’t know the Palestinian nation...”. [\(1\)](#) It is very likely that Iran was caught off-guard by Hamas and was forced to play a catch-up game without inviting direct confrontation with Israel or the United States.

Yet, Iran’s long-standing antagonistic position towards Israel has led authorities in Tel Aviv and even some in Washington to point the finger directly at Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu saw Iran’s hand behind the 7 October attack, maintaining that “Iran supports Hamas... provides over 90% of Hamas’s budget. It finances, it organizes, it directs, it guides.” [\(2\)](#) He further threatened action if Iran took further action via its proxies, notably Hezbollah to the north of Israel, proclaiming “We act against Iran all the time, everywhere, in every way.” [\(3\)](#) Israel has run a consistent line on Iran, lobbying successive US administrations for a tougher position towards it. Netanyahu has personally urged decisive action, a euphemism for bombing the country. [\(4\)](#) Similarly, over the last decade, Israel has been accusing Iran of sponsoring terrorism and developing a nuclear bomb. Such accusations are justified by pointing to the declarations and behaviour of Iranian authorities in relation to Israel.

Iran does not recognise Israel and, on many occasions, has called for its annihilation. That is a point of consensus that serves as a red-line in Iranian politics. Even reformist leaders have been reluctant to cross that line. While they may not openly advocate for 'wiping Israel off the map', as the firebrand former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad did, recognising Israel is simply taboo. This goes hand in hand with Iranian support for groups that have challenged Israel, namely Hezbollah and Hamas. Tehran was directly involved with the rise of Hezbollah in Lebanon as a viable Shia fighting force in the 1980s; however, its relations with Hamas were opportunistic and effectively by accident of history. The expulsion of Hamas leaders to Lebanon by Israel in 1992 gave Iran the perfect opportunity to cultivate ties with a non-Shia group that was aligned with Iran's grand vision of destroying Israel.

Hamas's presence in Lebanon facilitated Iranian financial and military support, and the formation of an anti-Israel network that was not simply a Shia alliance. As a state governed by a highly politicised version of Shia doctrine, Iran was woefully aware of its sectarian limitations and actively sought to cultivate non-Shia allies. Iran needed Hamas as much as the latter needed the former. Hamas offered Iran street credibility in relation to fighting the Israeli occupation. Given the emotional trigger of the question of Palestine for the Muslim world, it may be argued that Hamas even occupied a higher priority than Hezbollah in the mind of Iranian leaders. This meant financial and military support for Hamas as a fighting force in Palestine. Iranian authorities could not believe their luck when Hamas gained electoral majority in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections and, following internal conflict with the Palestinian Authority, became the de facto government of Gaza Strip.

By this time, the 'axis of resistance' was in full swing. The term was adopted to counter President George W Bush's famous depiction of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as constituting an 'axis of evil'. The axis of resistance was used by Iranian authorities to showcase the array of state and non-state actors that Tehran sponsored to 'resist Israeli occupation' of Muslim lands. In the Iranian narrative, Tehran was leading a united front against the foremost threat to Muslim interests. But the Arab Spring (2010-11) was a great disrupter of this narrative. As the Syrian regime, a close ally of Iran, lashed out at its opponents and Hamas sided with popular protests against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, cracks appeared in the axis of resistance. Hamas's ties with Iran cooled significantly until 2017-18. Unverified reports suggest Iran commenced funding Hamas to the tune of US \$70 million per year. [\(5\)](#) While the actual size of Iranian support may not be verified, it was clear that Hamas and Iran had moved past their differences and became closer than ever. The strength of this relationship was on full display in January 2020 at the funeral of General Qassem Soleimani, a commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) who was assassinated by a US drone. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh was present at the funeral and delivered a eulogy. [\(6\)](#)

Yet, to assume that Iran had prior knowledge of the 7 October attack, or even instigated it, is a jump in logic and overlooks the nature of the proxy relations that Iran has cultivated across the region. Iran's patronage of Hamas and other groups serve two key purposes. First, they bolster the

proclamatory aspect of Iran's ideological commitment to defend Muslim interests against the United States and Israel. The concept of defending the 'downtrodden' (i.e. subjugated Muslims) is enshrined in the Iranian constitution and supposed to direct foreign policy. Added to this generic concern is the specific case of the Palestinian plight that has gained international attention and evoked popular sympathy in the Muslim world. Making the question of Palestine a linchpin of Iranian foreign policy serves to enhance Iran's standing in the region as the key, if not the only, champion of Palestine and Islam against the Israeli occupation.

Second, the network of proxies is expected to serve as deterrence against attacks on Iran. They can counter threats before they reach Iranian soil or threaten retaliation in case of attacks on Iran, which is dubbed 'forward defence'. [\(7\)](#) This was demonstrated in Iran's rationale for mobilising Shia militias in Iraq against the Islamic State (IS) in 2014. IS espoused an overtly anti-Shia and anti-Iran ideology; and Iranian leaders were very clear about their options: either fight IS in Iraq and Syria or let them roll into Iran and fight them on Iranian soil. The choice was clear. By the same token, Tehran has repeatedly warned the United States that any attack on Iran would unleash reprisals anywhere in the region, a veiled reference to Iran's long arm in the Middle East that could jeopardise US interests as far away as the Mediterranean Sea.

Despite Iran's extensive network of proxies and proclamatory politics of sponsoring the axis of resistance against Israel and the United States, Iran does not control them. Ideological alignment, political agenda setting, and even financial patronage do not equate to operational control. Hamas, Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies have agency and do not simply follow instructions from Tehran. The obvious case was when Hamas broke with Iran and Syria during the Syrian war. Hamas is guided by its own decision-making and operational priorities in the context of Palestinian politics.

Moreover, Iran has no interest in open confrontation with Israel or the United States. Chances are, if consulted on the 7 October operation, Iranian authorities would have strongly advised against it. Iran has nothing to gain from turning a slow-burning conflict into a raging fire that could consume everything. Open confrontation with Israel and the United States would exact a heavy price on Iran as it struggles to cope with international sanctions and an extremely unhappy populace. The Woman, Life, Freedom protests of 2022-2023 were a stark reminder of the deep divide between the ruling regime and the population. That it took almost a year to suppress the protests with the full force of security agencies revealed the fragility of the regime's hold on power. Against this precarious background, open confrontation with Israel or the United States could present an unpredictable outcome; and the Iranian leadership has tried hard to avoid that scenario.

While Iran cannot be seen to be sitting on the side-lines as Israel flattens Gaza, and has issued statement after statement on the barbarity of what it describes as the Zionist regime, it has refused to be drawn into open confrontation. Even after the Israeli assassination of an IRGC Commander and

attacks on IIRG bases in Syria, Iran has refused to hit back at Israel. [\(8\)](#) The closest Iran came at retaliation was on 16 January 2024, when Iranian rockets landed near the US Consulate in Erbil, striking targets that Iran described as Mossad bases. [\(9\)](#) There were no reports of Israeli casualties, although 3 Kurdish citizens were killed. This appears to be Iran's modus operandi, set in motion very clearly after the US assassination of General Soleimani. Iran offered advance warning to evacuate an airfield in Iraq used by US forces to avoid US casualties. Iran needs to be seen to be doing something. But it loathes instigating the wrath of Israel or the United States. This is a game of brinkmanship that has served Iran. But it is a very dangerous and increasingly risky game to maintain.

Against this background of rising tensions, the prospects of nuclear talks between Iran and the United States are very bleak. US President Joe Biden made the revival of the Joint Cooperative Plan of Action (JCPoA) a foreign policy priority when he came to office. A series of preparatory talks with third party facilitation seemed to signal progress. Iranian authorities were also open to the idea of reviving the JCPoA. While Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi had campaigned against sacrificing Iranian sovereignty at the altar of the nuclear deal, he was aware of the need to bring Iran out of isolation. He even had the support of the Supreme Leader in reengaging in talks, provided talks remain focused on levels of uranium enrichment and do not affect Iran's nuclear infrastructure. [\(10\)](#) Yet, Iran's internal turmoil of 2022-23 and the regional tension of 2023-24 emanating from the Gaza war have put nuclear talks in a very different light. Former US President Barack Obama was able to push aside his critics by separating the nuclear issue from Iran's domestic politics or foreign power projections via proxies. The 2015 signing of the JCPoA was a major diplomatic win for that approach. It even separated the issue of nuclear weapons production from Iran's budding missile technology, capable of delivering nuclear payload. For a few years, that approach seemed to work, until President Donald Trump withdrew from the deal. Since then, the landscape has shifted. The experience of the last two years has put the separation approach to test. The US administration cannot afford to engage in talks with Iran on JCPoA and the lifting of sanctions while the latter is accused of involvement in the killing of Israeli civilians and arming local forces that threaten US interests, including freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. That would simply be seen as enabling bad behaviour.

In the absence of a nuclear deal, Iran is likely to continue on its current practice of grandstanding and goading the United States. In the Iranian leadership's assessment, the United States will not over-react. This thinking betrays confidence in the prevalence of saner heads in Washington. But US voters are going to elections this year, and Iran may be contending with a less stable or predictable administration.

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