



## Iran's New Anti-Israel "Resistance Axis"

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The recent infiltration of the Israeli airspace by an Iranian drone, and the chain of events that followed, occurred in the context of a process of transition in the Iranian strategic approach: from covert intervention by proxy to direct pursuit of the anti-Israeli "resistance axis."

The sending of the Iranian drone into Israel and the escalation that followed constitute a new phase in the Iranian-Israeli conflict, which until now has been conducted covertly and by proxy. This latest incident adds a wholly new dimension to the Islamic regime's anti-Israel struggle: transition from indirect to direct involvement. Among other things, this shift reflects the theocratic regime's greater self-confidence, apparently stemming from a subjective sense of achievement in promoting "the resistance axis" in recent years.

An examination of the evolvement of the Islamic Republic's anti-Israel policies over the past four decades can readily suggest the extent of the change. At the ideological level, these policies reflect the regime's desire to demonstrate uncompromising loyalty to the worldview of the Republic's founding father, Ayatollah Khomeini, which includes both anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist elements. On the strategic level, the enmity toward Israel gives the regime leverage in its striving for regional hegemony and leadership role in the Muslim world.

To no small extent, the establishment of Hezbollah in 1982 can be seen as a harbinger of the Iranian-led "resistance axis," a term coined by Khomeini after his advocacy of the *wilayat al-faqih* (governance of the jurist) model was staunchly opposed by the Arab-Sunni world. Hezbollah's establishment was a consequence of Iran's success, a short time earlier, in founding the *Badr*

organization (comprising Iraqi dissidents), which fought alongside Iran during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Hezbollah's fealty to Tehran was evident in a series of declarations making unequivocally clear that an Islamic order based on Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih* vision was a main plank of its worldview.

Hezbollah attracted public attention towards the end of 1983 with a series of suicide bombings of Western and Israeli targets in Lebanon, yet its anti-Israel activities extended well beyond the Land of the Cedars: In March 1992, in retaliation for the assassination of its leader Abbas Musawi a month earlier, Hezbollah blew up the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. In July 1994, the group perpetrated a terror attack on the Jewish community center (AMIA) in the Argentinian capital that killed 96 people and wounded more than 50.

For Iran, the March 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US-led coalition opened a window of opportunity to promote the resistance axis by setting up Shiite militias that would operate under its aegis. Not long after the invasion, Tehran helped build up the *Jaish al-Mahdi* (founded by Muqtada al-Sadr) and the *Kata'i'b Hezbollah* militias. These two groups began operations against coalition forces in Iraq, directed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force. Somewhat later, in 2007, the IRGC established the *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* militia led by Kais al-Khazali. Seven years later, after ISIS conquered the city of Mosul in June 2014, Iran set up the *al-Hashd al-Sha'abi* group - a roof organization of some 40 militias that operated alongside the Iraqi army in its fight to liberate ISIS-occupied territories. This proxy mode of activity suited Tehran by allowing it to operate widely in Iraq without leaving a signature of its role in the fighting. Over time, Iran's military presence in various parts of the Middle East came to reflect this proxy approach.

The civil war in Syria, which began in March 2011, led to a change in the theocratic regime's strategy and the advent of a new model. Anxious to preserve Bashar Assad's regime, Tehran not only drastically increased its military involvement but also committed regular military forces, in stark contrast to its *modus operandi* in Iraq. Indeed, at the beginning of the war Iran employed the familiar method of establishing militias, mostly Shiite, to operate under its aegis but its direct involvement quickly went well beyond the Iraqi model.

The plethora of militias set by Iran included the *Zainbayun* militia, composed of Pakistani fighters; the *Fatmiyun* militia, most of whose fighters are of Afghan origin and live in Iran (mostly without a defined status); *Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba* under the command of Akram al-Qa'abi, who not long ago established another battalion, the Golan Liberation Army, whose aim is to wrest the area from Israel; the *Abu al-Fadl al-Abbas* militia, which has operated

in Iraq and Syria; and the abovementioned *Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq* , also active in both countries.

Assad's situation appeared dire at first, but with time Iran and Russia increasingly succeeded in shoring up his regime. This achievement, which was made possible by a massive presence of Iranian forces, offered the Islamic Republic an opportunity to fulfill its goal of a "Shiite Crescent" comprising Tehran, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The theocratic regime began to plan the route of a land corridor, seeking to create territorial continuity from Iran through Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon all the way to the Mediterranean. To that end, Tehran - viewing its control of Lebanon as a fait accompli - concentrated on helping its client militias gain control of the border crossings between Iraq and Syria.

A key element of the new approach was to establish Iranian bases in Syria. Some of these were set up within Syrian bases and airports, some were set up together with Hezbollah, and some were manned only by Iran. According to reports, Tehran is establishing a permanent presence at bases in the vicinities of Deir az-Zor, Aleppo, as-Safira, al-Qusair, and elsewhere. The building of the bases, and the territorial continuity they have created, point to Iran's intention to remain on Syrian soil for the long term.

Numerous statements by militia commanders and senior Iranian defense officials clearly indicate that Tehran's presence in Syria has two objectives: to stabilize the Assad regime, and [to promote the anti-Israel resistance axis](#). The Iranian model entails creating a chain of subservient forces that will help form a resistance axis as envisaged by Khomeini, along Israel's northern border. The IRGC's commander, Ali Jafari, spoke of establishing an "international Basij" force that will take orders from Tehran. The statement was intended to clarify that all the militias under Iran's control throughout the region - in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon - will effectively become a transnational force operating under a single umbrella.

The Islamic Republic's hostility towards Israel is a proven fact, but the theocratic regime appears to be taking a different tack and launching a new stage in the struggle. The succession of belligerent statements against Israel's very existence is now backed up by operative measures suggesting that direct confrontation is the aim. At first, the revolutionary regime worked against Israel mainly on the ideological level - for example, proclaiming International Jerusalem Day; later, Iran adopted a proxy strategy, enabling it to avoid leaving direct proof of its actions; at present, Tehran is implementing a model of direct involvement. From the collapse of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime to the present, the IRGC has gained considerable experience in conventional and

asymmetric warfare. This experience has instilled self-confidence in the Iranian decision-makers, and the regime's declarations are now more explicit than in the past and should be taken into account.

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