

MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

October 2023

Your window on Iran from inside and abroad





MONTHLY REPORT

Iran Case File

October 2023

ISSN 1658 - 8320

WWW.RASANAHAH-IIIIS.ORG

Rasanah_iiiis

info@rasanahiiiis.com

+966112166696

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of Rasanah.

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIR	6
Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Testing Iran's Credibility Over Its Support for the Palestinian Cause	8
The Repercussions of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on Iran's Economy	11
Lifting of Arms Embargo Increases Iran's Ambition for Exports.....	14
The Hawza and the Palestinian Cause	16
IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS.....	20
Pro-Iran Militia Strikes on US Targets in Iraq	22
The War in Gaza: Iran's Interests, Challenges of Stirring the Syrian Front	24
Houthi Attacks on Israel: Support for the Palestinians or an Attempt to Reduce Pressure on the "Axis of Resistance?"	27
IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POWERS	30
Iran's President Speaks With Pope Francis on Gaza, Iranian Discontent Over the Nobel Committee	32
Operation Al-Aqsa Flood: The Odds of Confrontation Between the United States and Iran	35



Executive Summary

The Iran Case File (ICF) for October 2023 mainly focuses on Operation Al-Aqsa Flood (Storm) and the violent Israeli response to it. The file reviews the repercussions of the attack on all levels inside Iran; politically, economically, militarily and intellectually as well as its consequences for Iran's relations with regional and global powers. At the political level, Iran praised Operation Al-Aqsa Flood launched by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023 and considered the attack a turning point in the continuation of armed resistance against Israel. Some Iranian "hardliners" voiced their willingness to join the war on Hamas' side but soon modified their threatening rhetoric. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and a number of officials in the Raisi government denied having any role in sparking the conflict. This repeated denial fueled widespread criticism against the Iranian government amid questions about the reasons for Iran's reluctance to provide military support for Hamas which is one of the most important parties in the so-called "Axis of Resistance."

The Iranian economy was impacted in different ways from Operation Al-Aqsa Flood after Iran announced its support for Hamas. On the negative side, the Iranian stock market suffered losses, foreign currency rates became unstable and European tourists cancelled their bookings. On the positive side, the Iranian economy benefited from the increase in oil prices, which enabled Iran to raise its defense spending to 5% of the total government budget.

Iran's direct involvement in the ongoing events will play a role in expanding the circle of conflict and the negative repercussions on the Iranian economy may extend to the wider global economy, especially if oil supplies are affected.

At the military level, as Iran confirmed in October the end of the restrictions imposed by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on its missile-related activities, sanctions might be reimposed on Iran under the snapback mechanism. If Iran decides to sell its short-range missiles to Moscow, it could provoke a strong reaction from France, Germany or the UK to trigger the snapback mechanism. This would ultimately lead to the complete failure of efforts to reach a nuclear agreement with Iran. At this point, global leaders would have to consider the consequences of leaving Iran's nuclear ambitions unrestricted.

At the ideological level, the supreme religious authority in Najaf and seminaries in Qom expressed their solidarity with the Palestinian cause. The Qom hawza stated it was willing to send clerics and students to fight on the side of the resistance in Gaza, if the supreme leader permits it. This position reflects a political strategy to appease public pressure on the religious elite.

The Najaf hawza, on the other hand, adopted a more reasonable position; prohibiting the purchase of products from Israel and its supporters. It also called on the international community to stand up against Israeli "brutality" but did not speak of sending fighters or

call for a general mobilization/targeting of Western or Israeli sites outside the conflict zone.

Iran's foreign relations with Arab and international powers experienced significant developments during October 2023. In terms of relations with Iraq, the file analyzes the targeting of US sites in Iraq by pro-Iran militias. The attacks were triggered by US support for Israel and the latter's brutal targeting of Palestinian civilians after the strikes by Izz ad-Din al-Qassam on Israeli settlements near the Gaza Strip barrier. The Iran-provoked attacks on US sites in its spheres of influence by its proxy arms, albeit very limited, aims at easing pressure on the "Axis of Resistance" and reinforcing its anti-Israel narrative. Iran seeks to highlight the role of the "Axis of Resistance" in defending Palestinian territories and improve its public image among Muslims as a result of its non-direct support for Hamas.

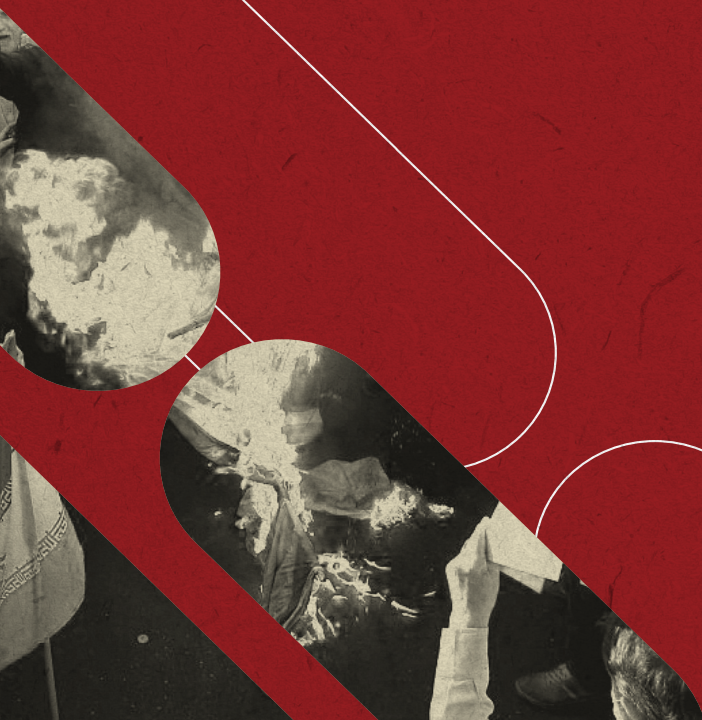
As for Iran's interactions with Syria, the escalating clashes between Iran-backed militias and US troops in Syria and the Israeli airstrikes on Syrian sites and airports received regional and international attention. These developments in Syria are part of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood's consequences that threaten to drag Syria into the Gaza conflict scene. It seems that the decision on whether to engage or not in the Gaza war is no longer Syrian. Rather, it has become directly related to Tehran's strategy in using this front to achieve its interests and is also related to the reactions of the United States, Israel and Russia to the conflict.

As for Yemen, the Houthi attacks on Israel held manifold implications related to the position of the "Axis of Resis-

tance" on Israel. The attacks are seen as an attempt to save the face of the "Axis of Resistance," especially since most of them were not accurate and did not affect the equation of the war. This gives an indication that the Houthi attacks on Israel and their raising of anti-Israel slogans aim at exploiting the Palestinian cause for their own benefits and reducing the criticisms unleashed against the "Axis of Resistance" as it has become exposed to due to its indirect support for Hamas.

At the international level, the recent Hamas-Israel war increased the risk of a direct clash between the United States and Iran. Hamas' Operation Al-Aqsa Flood against Israel was a painful blow to the strategic ally of the United States in the region. The attack prompted the United States to boost its military presence to deter Iran from participating in the war that Israel waged on Gaza. However, this may not prevent the expansion of the confrontation with Iran and its regional allies. Regarding Iran-Europe relations, Iran's bilateral relations with European countries remained lukewarm. Relations are expected to become more tense as the consequences of the Hamas attack on Israel are still unfolding and in case Iran is found to have supplied weapons to Hamas, relations may become even more strained.

DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAN'S INTERNAL AFFAIRS



During the month of October, Iran experienced notable domestic developments on the political, economic, military and ideological fronts — which are discussed as follows:

- Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Testing Iran's Credibility Over Its Support for the Palestinian Cause
- The Repercussions of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on Iran's Economy
- Lifting of Arms Embargo Increases Iran's Ambition for Exports
- The Hawza and the Palestinian

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Testing Iran's Credibility Over Its Support for the Palestinian Cause

Over the past four decades, Iranian officials have been issuing threats to destroy Israel, in a show of solidarity with the Palestinian cause. But Iran, which spearheads the so-called “Axis of Resistance” and which has blessed Operation Al-Aqsa Flood since its very beginning, has not so far directly engaged in the war waged by Israel against the Gaza Strip. Moreover, Iran has not even ordered its proxies such as Hezbollah to step in to stop the Israeli advances on the front lines in the Gaza Strip. As a result of this situation, Iran is facing a litmus test for its credibility, particularly among the Iranian people, who are wondering about the significance of Iran confining its actions to condemnations and threats. They say that the slogans the country has been raising do not reflect the ongoing reality (Iran's relative restraint); despite the massive casualties, the huge devastation of infrastructure and the constant Israeli threats to carry out a ground invasion of the Gaza Strip.

Iranian Position Supportive of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

Following the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood carried out by Hamas against Israel on October 7, 2023, Iran rushed to congratulate the movement, considering the operation a turning point down the path of continuing the armed resistance against Israel. Iranian lawmakers chanted “Death to Israel,” declaring their support for the operation. After the intensification of the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip, Iranian officials ramped up their

threats against Israel, with the media outlets affiliated with the “hardliners” expressing that Iran is ready to enter the war and support the resistance to stop the crimes perpetrated against the dwellers of the Gaza Strip at the hands of the Israeli occupation forces. Several remarks were made and positions adopted by Iranian officials, particularly by Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian who threatened Israel by saying, “If the Zionist aggressions does not stop, the hands of all parties in the region are on the trigger.”⁽¹⁾

The revolutionary rhetoric calling for involvement in the battle has escalated, demanding the release of ballistic missiles and drone squadrons to strike Israel, thus tipping the scale in favor of the Palestinian movement and the “Axis of Resistance.” It has been announced that 6 million Iranians have registered to fight against Israel in Gaza in a symbolic campaign.

On October 16, 2023, Abdollahian said that there is the likelihood for what he called a protective and preemptive move by the “Axis of Resistance” in the coming hours. He also reiterated that “all options are on the table,” adding that “If the crimes against humanity in Gaza are not stopped, all options will be on the table and the region will be out of control at the expense of the aggressors themselves.”⁽²⁾

Additionally, the IRGC has also issued threats. Ali Fadavi, the deputy commander of the IRGC, threatened Tel Aviv that it will face another shock

in case it does not bring to a halt the atrocities that it is perpetrating in the Gaza Strip.⁽³⁾

On October 22, the Iranian foreign minister warned the United States and Israel, saying the region is today much like “a powder keg.” “If the United States and the Israeli regime do not stop their crimes against humanity immediately, there will be a possibility of anything at any moment and the region may spin out of control,” he added.⁽⁴⁾

Toning Down Iranian Threats Against Israel and Denying Involvement in the War

The Iranian response has been significantly toned down, with the rhetoric of threats quickly waning, especially after Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reiterated that Iran has nothing to do with the offensive (launched on October 7). He reiterated that the Hamas offensive was completely a Palestinian decision. Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi reiterated to his French counterpart Emmanuel Macron in a phone call that the Palestinians make decisions independently. Permanent Representative of Iran to the UN Amir Saeid Iravani made similar comments in which he reiterated that his country will not intervene in the dispute in Gaza as long as Israel does not attack Tehran and its interests. He noted that Iran unwaveringly supports Palestine, but it will not participate in the Palestinian battle, since Palestine shall undertake this mission on its own. During his meeting with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in New York, Abdollahian asserted that what happened on October 7 was a decision taken independently by the Palestinians. Finally, he made remarks to CNN that Iran supports Pal-

estine and does not deny this, but it has nothing to do with Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Despite the adamant Iranian refusal to get embroiled in the war, the Wall Street Journal reiterated that Iranian security officials assisted in the planning of the attack carried out by Hamas against Israel, and gave the green light for the attack in a meeting held in the Lebanese capital Beirut.⁽⁵⁾

Following Iran’s denial of involvement, the Iranian newspapers that have spoken of the necessity to mobilize and send fighters to Hamas have toned down their escalatory rhetoric. Moreover, they have cited justifications for the Iranian government’s non-involvement, such as alleging that Iran is not part of the “Axis of Resistance,” which consists only of the Iran-backed paramilitaries. They have also claimed that Iran’s role is confined to media support. Other newspapers contended that Iran’s prime mission at present is strengthening the “Axis of Resistance’s” rhetoric.⁽⁶⁾

Even the speech delivered by Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s secretary general, was disappointing to both the supporters of the Iranian government and the “Axis of Resistance.” Echoing the remarks of Khamenei, Raisi and other Iranian officials, Nasrallah denied any involvement of Hezbollah and Iran in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood launched by Hamas against Israel. Moreover, he reiterated that Hamas had kept the operation secret from the “Axis of Resistance.”

The Iranian denial of any involvement and unwillingness to enter the war to support the Palestinian resistance comes despite the huge and extensive military cooperation between Iran and the Palestinian resistance factions, particularly Hamas and Islamic

Jihad. This is in addition to Iranian support through funding, weapons and training via the Lebanese Hezbollah or the IRGC's Quds Force. Experts also speak of a joint operations room between Iran and Palestinian resistance factions to manage the ongoing military operations.

The repeated Iranian denial of involvement in triggering the war and its unwillingness to support its ally Hamas has sparked criticism among supporters and backers of Iran as well as its foes. There are accusations that Iranian officials are ignoring the pleas made by Hamas to the so-called "Axis of Resistance" to take a stronger position that is in harmony with the current stage's requirements such as supporting the movement and easing the pressure it is facing militarily.

Conclusion

The Israeli war against the Gaza Strip has entered its second month, with thousands of people being killed, infrastructure totally devastated and Israel insisting on moving ahead with a

full-blown ground invasion of Gaza to wipe out Hamas. However, Iran, which spearheads the "Axis of Resistance," continues to pursue a policy marked by citing justifications for non-involvement and paradoxical moves. At times, Iran heats up the rhetoric, making vows and threats, and at others it tones down the rhetoric, expressing unwillingness to expand the war's scope. This contradiction reveals the government's concerns about being catapulted into a direct confrontation with the United States, particularly in light of the huge Western support for Israel and US threats that it will directly intervene on the side of Israel in case Tehran joins the war.

The Repercussions of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on Iran's Economy

In this file, we review the economic repercussions of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on the Iranian interior. The Gaza war has impacted the Iranian economy directly and indirectly. The Iranian people are afraid that their country's open support for the Hamas attack will lead to a direct involvement in the war, leading to rising tensions with the United States, Israel and Europe.

Below are the most significant repercussions of the operation on Iran's economy:

Exchange Rate Volatility

The Iranian currency, the toman, depreciated against foreign currencies as regional events unfolded. The dollar rose by 6.5% against the toman at the beginning of the war in Gaza, increasing the dollar exchange rate to over 53,000 tomans before it declined slightly at the end of the month (see Figure 1). Although Iran is not directly involved in the conflict, it is likely that the dollar will rise against the toman if the war in Gaza persists and the possibility of an Iran-US nuclear agreement remains uncertain.

Figure 1: The US Dollar Against the Toman (September-October 2023)



Source: Bonbast (live exchange rates in Iran's free markets)

Stock Exchange Decline

The main Tehran Stock Exchange index fell for eight consecutive days, with the index dropping by 2.5% and losing 51,000 points on October 28. The pace of withdrawals from the market increased due to fear of events escalating and Iranian involvement in the conflict. The CEO of the Iranian stock

exchange announced that the National Development Fund (sovereign wealth fund) intervened in the market by purchasing shares to compensate for some of the losses.

Increasing the Budget for Armaments

According to the Iranian news agency ISNA, Iranian lawmakers approved an increase in the share of armaments

and defense from the state general budget to 5% to strengthen the defense base and secure national interests and security. The decision was made on October 24, following the escalation of events in Gaza.⁽⁷⁾

Tourism

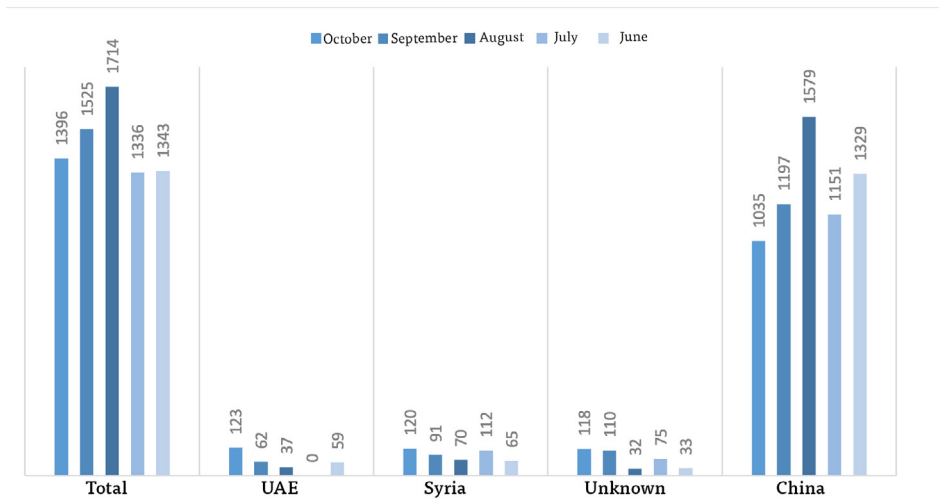
Several incoming tourist trips, specifically from Europe, were canceled following the events in Gaza. The events were exploited to tarnish the image of tourism in Iran, according to the Director of the Iranian Air Travel and Tourism Offices Hormatollah Rafiei. However, incoming tourism from the Eastern bloc, which includes China, Russia, Iraq and some Gulf countries, was not affected, according to him.⁽⁸⁾

Rising Oil Prices

The global rise in oil prices with the

escalation of events benefits Iran. The price has increased by about 10% since the launch of the Hamas attack, exceeding the \$90 per barrel level, before slightly declining again. It is expected that price hikes will resume if the ongoing conflict intensifies and expands. Although Iran does not receive money from oil exports directly due to sanctions and financial transfer restrictions, it benefits from cash sales. The country barter some of its exports for imports from China and other countries and accumulates cash reserves abroad from the sales of oil and its derivatives. It is worth noting that Iran’s daily exports of oil and gas condensates have been increasing since the start of this year, exceeding 1.5 million barrels in September (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Preliminary Estimates of Iran’s Oil and Gas Condensate Exports (February-October 2023) in Thousand Barrels Per Day



Data source: United Against nuclear Iran, Iran Tanker Tracking. Designed by Rasanah IIIS.

On the other hand, Iran’s direct involvement in the war could risk the flow of a fifth of the world’s daily oil needs that pass through the Strait of

Hormuz. This could mean volatility in prices and instability facing Western and industrial economies in particular, and the global economy in general,

and the possibilities of expanding the circle of conflicts in the region.

Conclusion

It is clear that the Operation Al-Aqsa Flood had some negative repercussions on the Iranian economy in terms of stock markets, currency fluctuations and European tourism. However, the rise of oil prices will give the coun-

try an economic boost and allow it to increase its defense allocations. Still, if Iran decides to participate directly in the conflict, its economy would be further affected with the expansion of the conflict circle. This could extend to the global economy, especially if oil supplies are harmed or the flow of oil trade routes is disrupted.

Lifting of Arms Embargo Increases Iran's Ambition for Exports

While Iran continues to enrich uranium in alarming quantities and at daunting levels, the UNSC imposed limits on its trade in advanced missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles expired on October 18, 2023. Though nothing deterred Tehran from developing and transferring sophisticated missiles to its proxies in Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, it would now be legitimately trading missiles and their sub-systems with other countries. The United States and Europe, on their part, have not lifted the sanctions.

The West Refuses to Lift UN Sanctions on Iran Under the JCPOA

UNSC Resolution 2231, adopted on July 20, 2015, to support the implementation of the JCPOA, imposed limitations on non-nuclear issues such as conventional-arms transfers, missiles and UAVs that went into effect 90 days later i.e., on October 18, 2015. All UN member states were to abide by the determination. Only with prior approval from the UNSC, Iran could legally sell or acquire the barred technologies. Though restrictions on conventional arms transfers, minus sales or purchases of missiles and armed UAVs, expired in 2020, Iran could only acquire a few trainer jets from Russia. The last remaining set of restrictions now is on Iran's nuclear activities which elapsed on October 18, 2025, almost two years later.

Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a detailed statement, "As of today, there will be no restrictions on

the transfer of missile-related items, services and technology to/from the Islamic Republic of Iran, and cooperation in all military and defense areas would be carried out, without any restriction, based on the needs and discretion of the Islamic Republic of Iran, within the framework of bilateral contracts with other countries."⁽⁹⁾

Tehran also "underlined that any measure, at the national or regional level, aiming at imposing sanctions or restrictions on defensive engagements and cooperation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, is in contradiction with the termination of restrictions of UNSCR 2231, in particular paragraphs 1 and 2 and the timetable foreseen therein, and violates the resolution substantively. The Islamic Republic of Iran reserves its right to take appropriate measures to secure its national interests."

Washington took a preemptive measure by imposing fresh sanctions on a group of people and firms based in Iran, China, Hong Kong and Venezuela, tied to the development of Iran's ballistic missile and drone programs.⁽¹⁰⁾ The US Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned 11 people, eight entities and one vessel for aiding Iran in its production and proliferation of missiles and drones. The sanctioned entities include Iran-based equipment firms and their directors, a Hong Kong-based distributor of electronic components, several Iranian officials including the Defense Attaché in Venezuela Jaber Reihani and the general cargo vessel Parnia used for arms exports. In sync with US policy, the EU will not lift

the sanctions on Iran's missile and weapons programs. Russia welcomed the expiry of the UNSC sanctions and supported Iran's right to deal in missile technology trade.⁽¹¹⁾

Arms Exports

Iran has been gearing up efforts since October 2020 to start the import and export of weapons. The sales pitch has been ready since then with English-language promotional material for several of its ballistic-missile designs, new export designations for several systems and advertisements about the availability of tactical systems for export.⁽¹²⁾

Iran's Deputy Defense Minister Seyyed Mahdi Farahi had claimed in June that many potential customers for its missiles await Tehran's nod for export.⁽¹³⁾

Deterred by the diplomatic and financial cost of arms deals with Iran, there appears to be no eager government barring Russia. Moscow has been waiting for Iran's nod to sell short-range ballistic missiles Fateh-110, Fateh-313 and Zolfaghar since October 2022.⁽¹⁴⁾

To maintain the prospects of a new nuclear deal with the United States, Iran refrained from shipping the missiles. With the Hamas-Israel war raging and the UNSC sanctions on missile technology elapsing, Tehran has little incentive to not trade its missiles for

long awaited Su-35S. Possibly, Tehran has already manufactured the missiles for Russia and deliveries may start soon. Thus far, Ukraine has not found debris of any Iranian ballistic missile fired from Russia. Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu's visit to a missile exhibition in Tehran in September reaffirms Moscow's continued confidence in the Iranian supply line.⁽¹⁵⁾

Conclusion

If Iran proceeds with the sale of short-range ballistic missiles alongside the existing supply line of UAVs, the E-3 may opt for the snapback option. As per the JCPOA, the snapback move cannot be vetoed by the UNSC. The United States, however, is not eligible to invoke the clause due to its withdrawal from the accord.

Iran also works hard to export domestic-made arms abroad. Apparently, there are many countries willing to acquire Iranian arms given their low prices — yet they are deterred by some concerns and potential political and financial repercussions, given the tight US monitoring of Iran's arms exports. The only country, now, that can import arms from Iran is Russia because it is in dire need of arms to manage its war in Ukraine.

The Hawza and the Palestinian Cause

The hawza in Qom took a position on the unfolding crisis in Gaza. Hawza jurists, teachers and Friday prayer leaders condemned the violence in Gaza, expressing readiness to go fight in Palestine to liberate Al-Aqsa Mosque, if the supreme leader gives them permission. Others announced the formation of transboundary, Mahdi-inspired jihad brigades in preparation for the day of the battle. The Najaf hawza, meanwhile, adopted a softer position and appeared more realistic, calling for sparing innocent lives, issuing a fatwa rendering unlawful the purchase of Israeli goods and condemning whosoever supports Israel.

The Hawza Teachers and the General Call (to War)

The hawza decried what it classified as Zionist crimes against the Palestinians in Gaza. In a statement, it said that both teachers and students (in the hawza) are ready to put on combat gear and go to Gaza to totally wipe out Israel, if the supreme leader gives permission.⁽¹⁶⁾ These remarks were echoed by the hawza's offshoots in other regions such as Lorestan and elsewhere.⁽¹⁷⁾ Headmaster of Amir-Al-Momenin School in Tabriz Ruhollah Najati took a harsher position when he said that the Khamenei Brigade of Martyrdom-Seekers had been formed to engage in the war against Israel. Of the missions of the brigade, he said, "This brigade will begin its activities as an international and transboundary brigade operating within the Mahdawyoun Brigade."⁽¹⁸⁾ As for this battalion's position on the war in Gaza, he said, "We are consulting at present with regard to sending

the Khamenei Brigade of Martyrdom-Seekers to Gaza. After getting the legal permission (fatwa), we will reach out to al-Quds."⁽¹⁹⁾ These remarks were directed toward the home front to enhance legitimacy and quell seething local public opinion. At the same time, he attacked Shiite Azerbaijan, saying that Zionism controls the country's decision-making and pulls the strings there. This indicates that the events in Gaza are being employed to serve Iran's outside interests. In addition, Iranian preachers did not hesitate to employ the events internally to enhance the presence of the IRGC. Rasool Falahi, Rasht's Friday prayer leader, said in his sermon, "Several thousand members of the youth, military, internal security, the IRGC and naval forces personnel have declared their readiness to be dispatched to Gaza." He then warned that the scope of the war could be expanded to tighten the noose around the Zionists through attacks from multiple fronts.⁽²⁰⁾ Ahwaz Friday prayer leader and the supreme leader's representative Abdul Nabi Mousavi struck a similar tone, saying, "We want to declare to the whole world that a gesture from the supreme leader is enough for 2 billion Muslims and the entire Muslim community worldwide to wipe out the Zionist regime off the map within less than 24 hours."⁽²¹⁾

Therefore, the hawza, represented by teachers and Friday prayer leaders and students, worked to employ the events to solidify the taqlid incubators at home and eliminate any blame that could be assigned to the Iranian leadership that has not directly involved

itself in the war or even via its proxies throughout the region. Yet they have employed the ongoing battle to undermine Iran's foes, accusing them of being "puppets of global Zionism."

Najaf and the Gaza War

The supreme marjaya in Najaf issued a statement supportive of the Palestinian cause, calling on the world to stand in the face of Israeli brutality.⁽²²⁾ In the same context, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani issued a fatwa rendering the purchase of Israeli goods unlawful, saying, "dealing in Israeli products as well as those of the companies that have certainly been proved to be significantly supportive of Israel is legally impermissible."⁽²³⁾ It appears that this position which is considered hardline compared to Najaf's previous stances and statements, came in response to pressures from the Iraqi street and an attempt to appease the Shiite community at home. Yet the hawza wants to defend itself against the accusation that it is a silent hawza. This accusation has been employed by Najaf's adversaries against the supreme marjaya on many occasions, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of rivals in Qom, of which Najaf is well aware this time. In addition, Iraq's Shiite Islamist movements rushed to declare support for the Palestinian cause and what they designated as the Islamic resistance in Gaza against the Israeli occupation army following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. At the same time, these activist movements — Shiite Islamist movements — have differed over how to support Gaza. On October 9, the Sadrist Movement called for a million-man demonstration in Baghdad's Tahrir Square in support of Gaza against the Israeli bombard-

ment.⁽²⁴⁾ Then Sadr came out on October 10, praising Hamas, Islamic Jihad and al-Qassam Brigades, and criticized some Arab governments which he did not name. He also described the Israeli actions as Zio-Umayyad terrorism, a striking statement with a sectarian slant on history (of the Shiite-Sunni dispute). Sadr's aim was to enhance his legitimacy within the Shiite community. Yet he criticized the head of the Palestinian Authority, extending his critical statements to the United States, France, Germany and the West in general.⁽²⁵⁾ In a Friday sermon held on October 13 in Baghdad's Tahrir Square, he reiterated what he said in his previous speech. But at the same time, he called on the protesters not to utter any word or take any action without referring to the hawza for fear that things could get out of control, thus putting Western interests in the country at risk, which would be detrimental to Iraqi national security. Yet Sahab al-Kahf (Companions of the Cave) militia announced its blessing of Operation al-Aqsa Flood, considering the operation to be revenge for the killing of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. It also threatened to flatten US bases to the ground if the military leadership commands it to.⁽²⁶⁾ By referring to the military leadership, the militia meant the supreme leader in Iran rather than the Iraqi political leadership. The Dawa Party, through its chief Nouri al-Maliki, declared support for Operation al-Aqsa Flood, criticizing the West's support for Israel. He then announced that he stands with the resistance in Palestine, expressing readiness to offer any kind of support and solidarity.⁽²⁷⁾ It is notable in these various remarks and statements that the Shiite movements are keen to be visible and affirm their

positions. They have also employed the event to pacify angry domestic public opinion and divert any blame that could be assigned to themselves.

Conclusion

The hawza in Qom, including the jurists, teachers and students, declared readiness to engage in jihad if the supreme leader granted them permission. However, the issue has not been immune to political employment at home. The supreme leader did not grant the permission despite the fact that he previously granted permission to fight in Iraq, Syria and Yemen. The events have also been employed to mount attacks on Iran's adversaries and neighbors, accusing them of being "tools of global Zionism." The clerics'

attack on Azerbaijan is a case in point. Najaf was not also totally isolated from the events, but its statements were more sober and calmer. Yet it staved off the accusation of being a silent hawza, the accusation leveled against it on previous occasions. Regarding Iraqi Shiite Islamist movements, the way they interacted with the events varied according to their respective affiliations. The Wilayat al-Faqih loyalists affiliated with Tehran announced that they were just waiting for the supreme leader's permission to enter the battle. The Sadrists, those considered independent-minded, called for mobilization and support, criticizing Arab governments and regimes, but they did not speak of any direct involvement in the battle.

Endnotes

- (1) Parisa Hafezi, "Iran Warns Israel of Regional Escalation if 'Aggressions Do Not Stop,'" *Reuters*, October 15, 2023, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://reut.rs/49xzzK2>
- (2) "'Genocide' in Gaza Will Have Repercussions for Region: Iran Warns US, Israel," *Anadolu Agency*, October 23, 2023, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/46hN25M>
- (3) "Iran Blames US for Waging Proxy War in Gaza Strip," *Fars News Agency*, October 22, 2023, accessed November 14, 2023, <https://bit.ly/40ATP9w>
- (4) نامه نیوز، هشدار امیرعبداللهیان به اسرائیل: نسل کشی را متوقف نکنید منطبقه از کنترل خارج می‌شود. (30/7/1402 هـ.ش) تاریخ اطلاع: 5 نوامبر 2023 م. <https://2u.pw/fk7FGBP>
- (5) Summer Said, Benoit Faucon and Stephen Kalin, "Iran Helped Plot Attack on Israel Over Several Weeks," October 8, 2023, accessed November 5, 2023, <https://2u.pw/BHwldQD>
- (6) - ایران انترناشنیونال، صحف ایران: طهران تکتفی بدعم «محور المقاومة» وموسكو تستغل حرب غزوة لدعم موقعها في أوكرانيا. (24/10/2023 م) تاریخ اطلاع: 5 نوامبر 2023 م. <https://2u.pw/9KX7GWM>
- (7) میدل ایست نیوز، «ایران تقرر تخصيص 5% من ميزانية البلاد سنوياً لتعزيز القاعدة الدفاعية»، 24 أكتوبر 2023 م. تاریخ اطلاع: 9 أكتوبر 2023 م. <https://cutt.us/OLa7q>
- (8) میدل ایست نیوز، «ما هو تأثير حرب غزة على السياحة في إيران»، 25 أكتوبر 2023 م. تاریخ اطلاع: 9 أكتوبر 2023 م. <https://cutt.us/HgTHY>
- (9) "Iran Issues Statement on Termination of Sanctions," *Tasnim News Agency*, October 18, 2023, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3SVNUu7>
- (10) Fatima Hussein, "US Imposes More Iran Drone Sanctions as UN Rules Set to Expire," *AP*, October 18, 2023, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://bit.ly/47YcW3>
- (11) "Foreign Ministry Statement on the Expiry of Certain Restrictions as Per UN Security Council Resolution 2231," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation*, October 17, 2023, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://bit.ly/46g3eV8>
- (12) William Alberque and Fabian Hinz, "IISS Experts on the Expiry of UN Limitations on Iran's Missile Exports," *IISS*, October 24, 2023, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://bit.ly/47afY0W>
- (13) Video on Telewebion, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://telewebion.com/episode/0x6b4cbd0>. [Persian].
- (14) "Iran Agrees to Ship Missiles, More Drones to Russia," *Reuters*, October 19, 2022, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://reut.rs/3MF9y9y>
- (15) Maziar Motamedi, "Russian Defence Minister Shoigu Tours Missile, Drone Display on Iran Visit," *Al Jazeera*, September 20, 2023, accessed November 4, 2023, <https://bit.ly/46hsVEJ>
- (16) وكالة فارس، حوزويان تهران آماده پوشيدن لباس رزم و اعزام به غزه هستند، 16 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 06 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/3SvnUW1>
- (17) حوزة نيوز، اساتيد و طلاب حوزة علميه لرستان آماده اعزام به غزه، 16 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 04 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/3SuEnda>
- (18) دیده بان ایران، تشکیل گردان استشهدای جیش الخامنیه ای برای جنگ با اسرائیل، 20 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 02 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/49Dq7VJ>
- (19) دیده بان ایران، تشکیل گردان استشهدای جیش الخامنیه ای برای جنگ با اسرائیل، 20 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 02 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/49Dq7VJ>
- (20) دیده بان ایران، نماینده ولی فقیه در گیلان: چندین هزار نیروی نظامی و سپاهی برای رفتن به غزه اعلام حضور کرده اند، 20 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 02 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/49mbu8R>
- (21) وكالة ایستا، رهبر انقلاب اذن دهند کمتر از 24 ساعت طومار رژیم صهیونیستی در هم پیچیده می‌شود، 20 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 01 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/47jWczz>
- (22) وكالة انباء الحوزة، بیان مکتب السيد السیستانی حول ما يتعرض له قطاع غزوة من قصف متواصل، 11 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 23 أكتوبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/46LBNuJ>
- (23) بغداد، المرجع السیستانی یحرم التعامل مع المنتوجات الإسرائيلية او دعمها، 03 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 23 أكتوبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/3tkWdCn>
- (24) بیان مقتدی الصدر على الصفحة الرسمية في فيس بوك، 09 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 04 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/3Qk6cCa>
- (25) كلمة سماحة القائد السيد مقتدى الصدر (أعزه الله) حول الأحداث في غزوة، الصفحة الرسمية على فيس بوك، 10 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 04 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/3StmueH>
- (26) صفحة الحركة على تليجرام، 10 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 04 نوفمبر 2023 م). https://t.me/aishab_alkahf/84
- (27) كلمة الأمين العام لحزب الدعوة نوري المالكي حول الاحداث الجارية في فلسطين، منشور على يوتيوب بتاريخ، 12 أكتوبر 2023 م. (تاريخ اطلاع: 04 نوفمبر 2023 م). <https://bit.ly/47iCCUr>

IRAN-ARAB INTERACTIONS

Iran's interactions with the Arab world, particularly Iraq, Syria and Yemen witnessed significant against the backdrop of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and Israel's heinous attacks targeting Gazan citizens. These developments are discussed as follows:

- Pro-Iran Militia Strikes on US Targets in Iraq
- The War in Gaza: Iran's Interests, Challenges of Stirring the Syrian Front
- Houthi Attacks on Israel: Support for the Palestinians or an Attempt to Reduce Pressure on the "Axis of Resistance?"

Pro-Iran Militia Strikes on US Targets in Iraq

Israel has not stopped its aggression on the besieged Gaza Strip, with Western support since the October 7 attack by the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades (the military wing of Hamas) on Israeli settlements in the Gaza envelope. The US Pentagon revealed that US forces had been attacked more than a dozen times in Iraq since October 17, 2023. It attributed these attacks to the pro-Iran proxies operating in Iraq where nearly 2,500 US soldiers are deployed to fight ISIS and prevent its resurgence in the country.

The Context of Targeting US Sites

Prior to the attacks on US targets in Iraq, pro-Iran proxies in the region had praised the Hamas attack on Israel. They warned Washington of providing military support to Israel in the ongoing war in Gaza and that they would engage in the war by striking US sites in Iraq. Head of the Badr Organization Hadi al-Amiri, who is close to Iran — in a clear threat to kill Americans and target US bases — said, “Our position is clear. They [the Americans] must understand clearly that if they intervene, we will intervene ... we will consider all US targets legitimate... and we will not hesitate to target it... They must stop supporting this Zionist entity.”⁽¹⁾

Other Iraqi militia leaders made similar statements. Secretary-General of Iraqi Kata’ib Hezbollah Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, said, “It [Hamas’s attack] will pave the way for a deterrence strategy against the Zionist-American axis.”⁽²⁾ In addition, Secretary-General of Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq Qais al-Khazali said, “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has warmed our hearts and the hearts of all believ-

ers and free resisters in every corner of the earth... we will continue to closely monitor the events, prepared and not just spectators.”⁽³⁾

Iraqi militias’ threats to the United States were clear. The secretary-general of the Sayyid al-Shuhada Brigades (KSS) warned the US administration against providing support to Israel in its war against the besieged Gaza Strip, threatening to turn US deployments in the region into legitimate targets for the “Axis of Resistance.”

Some Iraqi militia leaders also contacted Hamas leaders; Qais al-Khazali and the head of the al-Nujaba militia Akram al-Kaabi spoke with the head of the Hamas Political Bureau Ismail Haniyeh to show their support for the movement.

These positions reflect a great appraisal and support of Iraqi militias for Hamas’ attack on Israel as well as an explicit acknowledgment of their involvement in the attacks on US targets in Iraq. This is evident in the position of Iraqi Shiite cleric and leader of the Sadrist Movement Muqtada al-Sadr; he delivered a speech urging his wide audience to congregate in massive demonstrations to express their rejection of the brutal Israeli aggression on Gaza.

Motives for Targeting US Sites

Some Iranian reports revealed the most important proof of Iran’s direction to its proxy militias in Iraq and its approval of the Hamas attack.⁽⁴⁾ The reports noted that the day after the Hamas operation, a meeting was held in Baghdad attended by Iranian officials — whose names were not announced — and Iranian Ambassador

to Iraq Mohammad Kazem al-Sadegh. The meeting also included Deputy Commander of the Quds Force Mohammad Reza Falahzadeh, leaders of some militias in Iraq such as Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, al-Nujaba and Kata'ib Hezbollah as well as the leader of the State of Law Coalition (Eitilaf Dawlat al-Qanun) Nouri al-Maliki.

During the meeting, Iranian officials called for intensifying media propaganda supporting Hamas and rejecting Israeli hostility and establishing a center to register volunteers for the war against Israel. They also urged the need to enhance the military capabilities and readiness of the forces on the ground and to secure the strategic road that connects Iraq and Syria, in case of any urgent situation that requires rapid mobilization in the future.

The coordinated attacks of Iran-backed militias against US targets in Iraq and Syria that conjoined with the missile strikes against Israel by both pro-Iran Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis are part of Iran's strategy to send a clear message to the regional and international actors. Iran wants to demonstrate its strength and influence through its proxy arms in the region and to show that they can work in harmony and change the current equations. Iran also wants to show that it is capable of challenging Israel by opening various fronts against it.

Although the Iran-backed attacks against US and Israeli targets are limited and do not change the course of the war in Palestine, they constitute an attempt by Iran to promote its anti-Israel narrative. The attacks also aim at highlighting the role of the "Axis of Resistance" in defending Arab lands, particularly the occupied Palestinian territories, against Israeli aggression.

They also serve to improve Iran's public image among Arab Muslim peoples as its soft power has declined in many Arab countries as a result of its malign behavior and fueling of sectarian conflicts.

In addition, the attacks aim to provoke the feelings of Sunnis against Israel, the United States and their allies in the Middle East.

Iran has exploited the war on Gaza, besieged for nearly two decades, through limited strikes by its militias. This is to put public pressure on Arab countries that have normalized relations with Israel and to disrupt the road in front of countries that are after fostering peace with Israel. Other motives behind Iran's position include convincing a broad Arab segment that in the current situation the "Axis Resistance," rather than talks, is the most effective way to defend Arab and Islamic lands and end the Israeli occupation. This would allow Iran to promote its expansionist project in the region as a resistance project.

Conclusion

The limited attacks by pro-Iran militias in Iraq against US targets are expected to continue but are unlikely to escalate beyond Iraq's borders. This is because the expansion of the war into a regional war does not serve the interests of these militias and their sponsors. Washington has sent a clear message of deterrence by deploying aircraft carriers off the Israeli coast in case Iran and its allied forces launch missile and drone strikes against Israel.

The War in Gaza: Iran's Interests, Challenges of Stirring the Syrian Front

Since the Gaza war erupted, Iran's political and military positions have swayed. This is primarily because of the intricacies of Iran's strategic positions, created by the repercussions of the Gaza war, particularly against the backdrop of pro-Israel international positions. Iran, therefore, faces a very complicated situation; whether to engage actively and effectively in this war through its proxies, or just to continue its political and media mobilization campaign while maintaining some limited military skirmishes in support of Hamas. The US-West reaction has added a further burden on Iran; diplomatic and political pressure has been placed on Iran through Western speeches targeting Iran. At the military level, the United States mobilized its forces across the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Gulf. Iran realized the aim behind this US move, thus it activated its fronts in the region, including the Syrian front, within the framework of its "flexible deterrent" strategy. This activation means Iran has modestly involved itself in this conflict through limited military responses and operations that do not pose a serious threat to Western and Israeli interests and goals in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria in particular. Through its various fronts and proxies, Iran will have a margin of "plausible deniability." This file discusses Iran's options to activate the Syrian front, US-Israeli responses and Russia's position on the Gaza war as well as the possible escalation that the Syria front may witness.

Pro-Iran Militias in Syria: Presence and Responses to the Gaza War

The Hamas attack on Israel created repercussions that spilled over into the Syrian arena. Iran pushed its militias in Syria and Iraq to launch attacks against US bases in both countries. Dozens of Iranian militias in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other countries ⁽⁵⁾ have been deployed in Syria since 2011. Since the start of the Gaza war, the pro-Iran militias in Syria have reportedly repositioned their elements to expand their presence along the southern strip of Syria. They have launched missiles from Syria to the Golan Heights, which has been controlled by Israel since 1967.

The goal of this deployment was to place pressure on the United States and Israel and to threaten to stir this stagnant front since the conclusion of the Agreement on Disengagement, signed in 1974. It is also noteworthy that the limited strikes offer Iran and its proxies a way to support Hamas and the "Axis of Resistance" as well as to add impetus to their slogan to liberate Jerusalem. This goal has been created and promoted by Iran for three decades. ⁽⁶⁾ Iran can support its resistance elements without engaging in a large-scale conflict, and without turning this conflict into an open battle against Tel Aviv. If the conflict was to expand, then Tehran would be forced to intervene directly.

The limited strikes did not only target Israel in October, but also US bases in Syria. The attacks on US military

sites in Syria aimed to impact the US position, force Washington to return to the negotiating table and strengthen Iran's hand in the nuclear talks. The continuous targeting of the US presence in Syria ⁽⁷⁾ creates a state of insecurity and instability for the United States and its assets in the country as well as in Iraq. If the war in Gaza continues, expands and escalates, the cost of the US military presence will also escalate accordingly.

The United States and Israel Prevent Iran's Exploitation of the Syrian Front

Amid the escalating war in Gaza and the increase in hostilities against US sites in Syria and Iraq, US airstrikes targeting Iranian militia sites at the Qaim crossing on the Syrian-Iraqi border have increased. They have also targeted Aleppo and Damascus International Airports, which have been subjected to a number of Israeli airstrikes since the Gaza war started to prevent the landing of planes from Tehran. As soon as the debris from the strikes are removed and it is announced that the mentioned airports have resumed service, they are soon vulnerable to airstrikes once again. The Israeli-focused targeting of these two airports is part of its targeting of the "Iranian supply line," weapons stores, headquarters and military sites of Iranian militias. The Israeli airstrikes send threatening messages to Damascus in an attempt to halt any potential attack from Syria, in retaliation for the Gaza war.

Russia's Response to the Pro-Iran Militias' Escalation in Syria

The reality of Russian relations with both Iran and Hamas on the one hand and Israel on the other puts Moscow in front of a set of complex calcula-

tions. It also forces Russia to pursue a balanced position on what is happening in the Syrian arena, ensuring that the latter is not drawn into the course of the Gaza war that has been ongoing since October. In this context, Moscow deems the troubled trajectory of the Russia-Ukraine war and the possibility of the Arab world facing a bloody round of conflict between Israel and Hamas as a favorable opportunity to deflect US and Western attention and efforts allocated to support their allies in the ongoing wars in Ukraine and Gaza. Although Russian-Israeli relations have experienced challenging times since February 2022, especially during the leadership of former Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, both countries have maintained deep and strong relations. Russia will unlikely allow pro-Iran militias to target Israel from Syrian territory. Regarding the Russian position on the escalation of Iran's militias against US forces in eastern Syria, the situation is inherently different than Russia's considerations on the Iranian militias targeting of Israel in southern Syria, due to the fact that Russia and Iran have a joint cause to counter US influence regionally and internationally.

Russia is walking on a tightrope with regard to the current developments. The US- Western focus on the Gaza conflict and its future regional implications may truly add value to Moscow. However, Russia does not want to see an Iranian-Israeli war that could drag in Syria as this will pose a challenge and threaten its strategic presence and bases in Syria.

Conclusion

Iranian proxies attacking US forces and sites in eastern Syria and Israel in

the south as an act of retaliation is not new. Syria has been the battlefield to send limited and restrained political messages through launching attacks. In light of the new variables in the region, the attacks launched by Iranian proxies reflect Iranian interests and strategic goals. Iran aims to remove US forces deployed along its strategic corridor linking Tehran and Lebanon to the Mediterranean coast across the

Iraqi and Syrian territories. Resuming attacks, now, against US military sites, is not actually to tip the scale in the on-going war in Gaza but to realize vital interests and entrench its presence and influence in Syria.

Houthi Attacks on Israel: Support for the Palestinians or an Attempt to Reduce Pressure on the “Axis of Resistance?”

The Houthis joined the military attacks of the so-called “|Axis of Resistance” against Israel, following Hamas’ Operation Al-Aqsa Storm on Israel and the cruel Israeli response by targeting Palestinian civilians and infrastructure. The Houthis announced in late October that they had launched ballistic missiles and drone attacks against Israel in response to the Israeli aggression on Gaza. In this file, we review the motives of the Houthi attacks and their repercussions on the ongoing war in Palestine.

Motives for the Houthi Attacks on Israel

Following the Hamas October 7 attack and Israel’s violent retaliation that has claimed the lives of thousands of innocent Palestinian civilians, the so-called “Axis of Resistance” held a relatively negative position; expressing condemnation using anti-Israel slogans. They conducted insignificant attacks that were solely for influencing public opinion and securing political gains.

The Houthi attacks are similar to the ones by the Lebanese Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq. Many commentators argued that the Houthi attacks were just an attempt to save face before the Yemeni public and reduce pressure on Iran-backed groups.

The Houthis have always raised the slogan of “resistance” and exploited the Palestinian cause as a bargaining chip. The Houthi’s main claim for the

coup against the legitimate government in Yemen was the Palestinian cause. They have used it to justify their violence inside and outside Yemen over the past years.

The latest Houthi attacks on Israel came just after the Iranian threats that the continuation of Israeli strikes on Gaza would lead to the opening of new war fronts — confirming that the Yemeni militia moved with Iranian directives.

In addition, some consider the attack on Israel to be an opportunity for the militias to gain not only domestic support but also increase their popularity among some Arab and Islamic circles. However, many observers have questioned the Houthi position on Israel because the Houthis have not attacked any Israeli and US ships/battleships deployed near their controlled sites. Instead, the Houthis have fired drones and missiles that traveled 2,000 kilometers and landed in Jordan and Egypt or could be easily intercepted by US and Israeli forces.

Majid Azzam, a Palestinian researcher and analyst, confirmed that the Houthi attacks were not a real and effective response, saying, “What happened was a face-saving measure.” He added, “I wish it was real.”⁽⁸⁾

Implications of the Houthi Attacks on the Course of the War

According to many military experts, the Houthis cannot influence the course of the Hamas-Israel war because Israel is supported by the Unit-

ed States and its allies in the West. In addition, the Houthi missiles are not accurate and are easy to intercept by Israel's advanced technologies. Israel possesses the most efficient air defense systems such as the "Arrow 3" system which can intercept threats at a height of 100 kilometers. This system is designed to identify, track, intercept and destroy missiles that carry multiple warheads and can safeguard large areas of strategic and residential locations. Moreover, the Houthi missiles can be shot down by US and Israeli warships in the Red Sea before they reach their target.⁽⁹⁾

In this regard, Head of the head of the Juhod Studies Center (Efforts) Dr. Abdulsattar al-Shamiri stated, "This front will undoubtedly raise tensions and almost widen the scope of the fighting, but it will not alter the overall situation in Gaza or Israel significantly." He emphasized that the Houthi threat is confined to the potential of attacking ships sailing across the Red Sea in any direction.⁽¹⁰⁾

Given that the Houthi attacks did not pose a real threat to Israel, the latter did not carry out any military response against the militia and contented itself with a statement of downing Houthi projectiles and threatening to retaliate. It is worth noting that the Houthi attacks were not a surprise to Israel, as an Israeli army spokesman said, "The Houthi group's announcement of launching missiles and drones on Israel did not surprise us."⁽¹¹⁾

Conclusion

The success and impact of the attacks on Israel are not a priority for the Houthis. Rather than achieving military goals, it is clear that the Houthi attacks on Israel were carried out for

political and media gains. The attacks also reinforce the position of the so-called "Axis of Resistance" supported by Iran which projects the slogan of opposing Israel and supporting the Palestinian cause only to advance its interests and expansionist project in the region. The Houthis attacked Israel for the sake of their own interests, not to change the equation of the ongoing war in occupied Palestine. In fact, the Houthi attacks on Israel helped divert the attention of the media and observers from the massacres committed by Israel in Gaza.

Endnotes

- (1) الغد العراقية، سياسي عراقي بارز يهدد باستهداف مصالح أميركا إذا دعمت إسرائيل، (10 أكتوبر 2023م)، تاريخ الإطلاع: 1 نوفمبر 2023م، <https://cutt.us/AArRX>
- (2) القدس العربي، هل ستدخل الفصائل الولائية العراقية الحرب في غزة؟، تاريخ الإطلاع: 1 نوفمبر 2023م، <https://cutt.us/Bblrt>
- (3) الشرق الأوسط، العراق: حلفاء إيران يؤيدون «طوفان الأقصى» الفلسطينية، (07 أكتوبر 2023م)، تاريخ الإطلاع: 1 نوفمبر 2023م، <https://cutt.us/KQKad>
- (4) راديو فردا، اختصاصي: جلسة مقام های ایرانی و گروه های نیابتی عراق به منظور آمادگی برای جنگ احتمالی با اسرائیل، (21/مهر/1402)، تاريخ الإطلاع: 1 نوفمبر 2023م، <https://bit.ly/3sjQLBY>
- (5) مناف سعد، ميليشيات إيران في سوريا... الأسماء والأرقام والانتشار، المجلة، 29 أكتوبر 2023، تاريخ الإطلاع: 02 نوفمبر 2023، <https://bit.ly/3MrD22X>
- (6) فارس، ٦ ارتش محور مقاومت مقابل رژیم صهیونیستی؛ یادگاران حاج قاسم + عکس و فیلم، 29 مهر 1402ه.ش، تاريخ الإطلاع: 05 أكتوبر 2023م، <https://bit.ly/3MrD22X>
- (7) المرصد السوري، إيران ومليشياتها في تشرين الأول: 15 استهداف لقواعد التحالف الدولي خلال الثلث الأخير من الشهر.. وتحركات مكثفة واستفزاز كبير في دير الزور وقرب الحدود مع الجولان المحتل، 04 نوفمبر 2023، تاريخ الإطلاع: 04 نوفمبر 2023، <https://bit.ly/3sooAlp>
- (8) 'الحره' «طريق التضاهي».. ماذا وراء إعلان الحوثيين فتح جبهة ضد إسرائيل؟، 31 أكتوبر 2023م تاريخ الإطلاع (131 أكتوبر 2023م) <https://cutt.us/aWp92>
- (9) العربية» لأول مرة تستخدمه إسرائيل.. ما هو نظام «أرو» الدفاعي؟، 31 أكتوبر 2023م (تاريخ الإطلاع 1 نوفمبر 2023م) <https://cutt.us/ski2r>
- (10) سيوتنيك» هل تدخل إسرائيل حرباً ضد «أنصار الله» في البحر الأحمر بعد نشرها تعزيزات بحرية؟، 2 نوفمبر 2023م (تاريخ الإطلاع 2 نوفمبر 2023م) <https://cutt.us/DXJEg>
- (11) الشرق الأوسط «الحوثيون يعلنون إطلاق صواريخ ومسيرات باتجاه إسرائيل» 131 أكتوبر 2023م (تاريخ الإطلاع 1 نوفمبر 2023م) <https://cutt.us/Mnd56>

IRAN'S RELATIONS WITH REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL POWERS

The United States has been providing Israel with advanced defense systems and military support to ensure its safety, as it indirectly blames Iran for Hamas attack. The US has also deployed aircraft carriers to the Mediterranean Sea and the Arabian Gulf for additional protection. In terms of Iran's relationship with Europe, President Ebrahim Raisi reached out to Pope Francis to support his efforts in achieving a ceasefire in Gaza. However, Iran criticized the Nobel Committee for awarding the Peace Prize to jailed Iranian citizen Narges Mohammadi, claiming that it was a "biased and political" decision.

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood: The Odds of Confrontation Between the United States and Iran

The relationship between the United States and Iran was hovering around “calculated escalation,” with the dispute being managed in a way that it does not reach the point of open confrontation and the channels of diplomacy are kept open. But Operation Al-Aqsa Flood brought the two countries to the verge of a potential confrontation which both countries have been keen to avoid over the past four decades.

Iran’s Role in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

The United States accuses Iran of being indirectly responsible for the unprecedented attacks carried out by Hamas and the resistance factions in the Gaza Strip against the occupied territories. The operation inflicted material and human losses on Israel that it has not seen in decades. The operation has also irreparably damaged the reputation and image that Israel has long worked to entrench and promote — that it is a superior, invincible military power. US circles accuse Iran of involvement in this operation to block the US-led regional arrangements — which would weaken Iran’s clout — whether directly through training and providing factions with weapons or through joint coordination.

Whether or not Iran participated in planning the operation, it has temporarily led to blocking the US-led regional arrangements to restructure the regional landscape and create a new balance of power. The operation has led to postponing the deal between

Israel and Saudi Arabia for which the Biden administration has exerted tremendous efforts. The deal would have enabled the United States to restore its regional clout and presence, which has been shaken in recent years, particularly after the Saudi-Iran rapprochement deal under which the two countries normalized relations. It has also led to blocking Chinese efforts, with Beijing’s emergence as an influential actor in the region. Moreover, this trajectory — of the Saudi-Israel deal — would have created a new security structure between Israel and the Gulf states. This trajectory could have been shored up through ambitious economic cooperation plans, most prominently the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, announced during the G20 summit in September 2023. In this context, the Palestinian cause was on the back burner. US pressures aimed to deal with the *fait accompli* imposed by Israel in the occupied territories. Ahead of the operations, Khamenei criticized the path of normalizing relations with Israel, saying that it is a “losing bet.”⁽¹⁾ The political and military leadership subsequently blessed the operation, deeming it a victory for what Iran considers the “Axis of Resistance.” Iran also directed stinging criticisms against the United States over its role in the region.

US Movements to Deter Iran and Its Regional Proxies

Given the US concerns that Iran may intervene directly in the conflict following the retaliatory operation carried

out by Israel with the aim of obliterating the resistance factions, foremost among which is Hamas, and ending its rule in the Gaza Strip, the United States has shouldered the responsibility of providing Israel with absolute protection, including a regional force of deterrence through deploying aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean and Arabian Gulf. This is in addition to the deployment of forces and defense systems, not to mention participating along with Israeli forces in the attack on Gaza, according to the Iranian foreign minister. This is in addition to providing a protective cover for Israeli crimes and violations against Palestinian civilians, which have reached unprecedented levels. However, the United States fears that developments could lead to Washington's immersion in the battle or if the war's scope expands, which will have far-reaching consequences, including the inflow of Middle Eastern refugees into Europe, ramping up waves of extremism throughout the region and perhaps destabilizing the global oil market and economy. This is in addition to improving the image of Iran in the region, which could take advantage of the ongoing events and further advance its nuclear program.⁽²⁾

US movements have so far contributed to deterring Iranian proxies in Lebanon. —Hezbollah — from following up on the Iranian strategy to unify the theaters of confrontation with Israel. This strategy has emerged in recent years, contributing to curbing the outbreak of a large-scale dispute between the Palestinian factions and Israel over the past two years. Given the awkward position in which Iran, its ideology and its clout are facing due to the military operation, the pro-Iran armed groups

in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen have adopted a unified rhetoric and threats against the United States. They have also directly and indirectly engaged in the ongoing confrontation. The Iran-aligned militias have waged nearly 30 attacks on US bases in Syria and Iraq since the start of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood until the end of October. The Houthis have also mounted drone and missile attacks targeting the occupied Palestinian territories, some of which were intercepted by the US air defense systems. Additionally, Hezbollah launched attacks on the northern borders with Israel, but they are still of limited scope, however, the militia is keen not to expand the war's scope. Yet Israel responded on a measured scale since it does not want to engage in an open war on the northern front while it is mired in a war in the south with the Palestinian resistance factions.

Complicated Calculus

The United States does not want to see the ongoing confrontation turning into an open regional war between the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance" and itself. This would catapult the whole region into a vortex of violence and disputes, with no one knowing their scope or reach. Similarly, Iran has no desire to expand the war's scope and escalate it into a direct confrontation. It also does not want Hamas to lose the ongoing battle or to have its rule in Gaza ended and its military force, in which Iran has invested tremendous money and efforts, decimated. Hamas' loss would end the influence of one of Iran's advanced defense lines against the United States and Israel. Moreover, ending the resistance's role will enable Israel to focus its efforts on confronting Hezbollah, the rest of the resistance

factions and maybe Iran itself. Additionally, this path will pave the way for accomplishing the course of the Abraham Accords and changing the geopolitical rules of engagement to the detriment of Iran. The Greater Middle East (also referred to as the New Middle East); the US project for reconfiguring the region in accordance with the demands of the West will be the biggest threat to the Iranian ruling system. Israel and the United States believe that a ceasefire without wiping out Hamas means an ignominious defeat and an existential threat to Israel. Meanwhile, there is insistence on the part of Israel and the United States to emerge from this war with victory. This victory at the very least would weaken Hamas and destroy its ability to mount new attacks on Israel while the biggest accomplishment would be taking advantage of US support to liquidate the Palestinian cause through imposing forced eviction of Gazans, thereby putting an end to the entire Palestinian issue. But this vision and the challenges posed by the ongoing dispute could prompt Iran to intervene in the dispute and open multiple fronts against US forces as well as Israel through its paramilitaries throughout the region. Iran's aim will be to ease the pressure that Gaza is facing. This could compel the Americans to reconsider their plans and to accept to live with the current realities in the region. Perhaps Iran will benefit from the wave of popular anger in the United States, the West and the Arab and Islamic world, which is putting pressure on the United States to change its biased position in the dispute. Iran also bets on the dispute contributing to damaging the US image worldwide, not to mention benefiting from the Russian and Chi-

nese roles, who find the dispute as a possible opportunity to curb US clout. This comes within the ongoing global competition and disputes involving international parties, whether in the Russia-Ukraine war or in the South China Sea.

Conclusion

The calculus appears complicated. Despite the fact that the dispute is edging closer to the point of a confrontation which could conflate at any time between the United States and Iran, the two sides are still keen not to engage in any direct confrontation. This comes especially as Iran is viewing the ongoing confrontation as one of the conflict's other rounds and that ensuring the republic's survival is the utmost priority now. But if Iran evaluates that exterminating the Palestinian resistance would pose a threat to it and its regional clout, the calculus could change. Still, Iran's movements will continue to have limits so that the escalation does not evolve into direct confrontation.

Iran's President Speaks With Pope Francis on Gaza, Iranian Discontent Over the Nobel Committee

Iran's engagement with European nations and the EU institution remained rather dull except for the fact that the Iranian president called Pope Francis and Tehran responded angrily to the Nobel Committee's decision to award the Peace Prize to jailed Iranian citizen Narges Mohammadi.

Raisi Speaks to Pope Francis

As the Hamas- Israel war rages on in Gaza, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi telephoned Pope Francis to support his efforts for peace and assured Tehran's backing.⁽³⁾

The Iranian presidency's website reported that President Raisi expressed his appreciation for the Pope's appeals for a ceasefire in Gaza. "As the leader of the world's Catholics I will do everything in my power to stop these attacks and prevent more women and children from becoming victims in Gaza," the Pope was quoted as saying by the Iranian state media.⁽⁴⁾

The Pope has been actively engaging with world leaders for an end to the ongoing war, the cessation of hostilities against civilians and the release of Israeli hostages.

"I continue to think about the serious situation in Palestine and in Israel where many, many people have lost their lives. In God's name, I beg you to stop: cease using weapons! I hope that avenues will be pursued so that an escalation of the conflict might be absolutely avoided so that the wounded can be rescued and help might get to the population of Gaza where the humanitarian situation is extremely

serious. May the hostages be freed immediately," said Pope Francis during the Angelus address.

Iran Criticizes the Nobel Committee

The conferment of the Nobel Peace Prize to human rights campaigner Narges Mohammadi predictably angered Iran. Tehran denounced it, describing it as a "biased and political" action. On the other side, Nobel Committee chairwoman Berit Reiss-Andersen hailed Mohammadi for her "brave struggle" and called for her release.⁽⁵⁾ "We note that the Nobel Peace Committee awarded the Peace Prize to a person who was convicted of repeated violations of laws and criminal acts," Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani said in a statement. "We condemn this biased and political move." The 51-year-old journalist and activist has been jailed for most of the past two decades on multiple charges including spreading propaganda against the state and committing acts against national security.

Kanaani also slated the Nobel Committee for making "false claims," which are "indicative of the approach of some European governments to falsify information and produce confusing and deviant narratives about internal developments in Iran."

"This is not the first time the Nobel Committee has allocated this prize to suspicious Iranian elements. In 2003, Shirin Ebadi was awarded the same prize, turning her into a prominent opposition figure working to achieve

regime change in Iran. But while the Nobel Prize for other science fields — which rarely goes to non-Western figures — may enjoy some credibility, the Nobel Peace Prize is a highly politicized award with a history of being used to advance the Western political agenda against governments opposing Western hegemony,” wrote The Tehran Times.⁽⁶⁾

Mohammadi began a hunger strike on September 7 over being blocked along with other inmates from accessing medical care and to protest the country’s mandatory hijab for women.⁽⁷⁾

“Mohammadi has gone on a hunger strike to protest against the authorities’ failure to address her demands, including their refusal to transfer her to a specialist hospital,” HRANA reported.⁽⁸⁾

“Narges went on a hunger strike today ... protesting two things: the Islamic Republic’s policy of delaying and neglecting medical care for sick inmates, resulting in the loss of the health and lives of individuals. The policy of ‘death’ or ‘mandatory hijab’ for Iranian women,” read her family’s statement.⁽⁹⁾ The Norwegian Nobel Committee urged Iran to give Mohammadi the

medical help she needs. “The requirement that female inmates must wear a hijab in order to be hospitalized is inhumane and morally unacceptable,” the committee said.^{(8) (10)}

The committee added, “Narges Mohammadi’s initiation of a hunger strike demonstrates the seriousness of the situation. The Norwegian Nobel Committee urges the Iranian authorities to provide Narges Mohammadi, and other female inmates, with whatever medical assistance they may need.”

Conclusion

Iran’s latest reactions indicate that Tehran needs the Europeans despite its discontent and ideological differences with them. Pope Francis, according to Iran, can save the so-called “Axis of Resistance” by asking him to call for a ceasefire. However, Iran does not refer to the Pope when it comes to the minority rights of Iranian Christians. Iran raises the issue of human rights violations in Gaza because it benefits its policy, but it turns a blind eye to violations when related to the demands and freedom of its citizens like Mohammadi.

Endnotes

- (1) "Iran's Khamenei Says Normalizing Israel Ties Is a Losing Bet - State Media," *Reuters*, October 3, 2023, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://2u.pw/xv5qnlw>.
- (2) Tara Copp, "The US Will Send a Carrier Strike Group to The Eastern Mediterranean in Support of Israel," *AP*, October 9, 2023, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://2u.pw/3LtTQkK>.
- (3) "Pope Francis Speaks With Iranian President by Phone," *Vatican News*, November 5, 2023, accessed November 8, 2023 <https://2u.pw/0B2y052>.
- (4) "Iran Asks Pope to Press for Ending Israeli Crimes in Gaza," *Tasnim News Agency*, November 6, 2023.
- (5) Jon Gambrell, "Jailed Iranian Activist Narges Mohammadi Wins the Nobel Peace Prize for Fighting Women's Oppression," *AP*, October 7, 2023, accessed November 8, 2023 <https://2u.pw/lZVcapf>.
- (6) "Faramarz Kuhpayeh, "On the Politicized Prize," *The Tehran Times*, October 6, 2023, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://2u.pw/hFePLRo>.
- (7) "Jailed Iranian Nobel Laureate Mohammadi Goes on Hunger Strike, Activist Media," *Reuters*, November 6, 2023, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://2u.pw/z6vKqMB>.
- (8) "Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Narges Mohammadi Initiates Hunger Strike," HRANA, November 6, 2023, accessed November 8, 2023 <https://2u.pw/lv36N4v>.
- (9) *Ibid.*
- (10) "The Norwegian Nobel Committee Deeply Concerned About the Health of Narges Mohammadi," *The Nobel Peace Prize*, November 6, 2023, accessed November 8, 2023, <https://2u.pw/tSa2eo3>.



Iran Case File

October 2023



Iran Case File

October 2023

WWW.RASANAH-IIHS.ORG