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IRAN AND THE ROLE OF FACTIONAL GROUPS IN OPERATION AL-AQSA FLOOD: TOOLS AND POLICY OUTCOMES

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Abstract

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was not a spur-of-the-moment action by Hamas; it was meticulously planned with strategic support. This operation marked a significant shift in the conflict between Hamas and Israel. Discussions on the Palestinian issue now revolve around the pre- and post-Al-Aqsa Flood phases. Examining Hamas' prior preparations and connections sheds light on Iran's role. Tehran strategically leveraged the operation, using its influence in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Iran's aim was to assert dominance in the region by orchestrating low-intensity escalations against the United States and Israel. This sent a clear message: Iran wields significant influence through its proxies, which it can activate or deactivate in alignment with its regional goals.

Keywords: Iran, Al-Aqsa Flood, Gaza war, Iranian militias, Hamas, Israel, United States, Hezbollah, Houthis

Introduction

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood marked a significant departure in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly within the Palestinian-Israeli context, with its notable impact on local, regional, and global dynamics. This operation represented a transformative moment unseen since 1973 due to its far-reaching repercussions. Key aspects of the operation revolve around two central themes: Hamas' military capabilities and its remarkable preparedness in orchestrating a surprise attack and making strategic decisions of such magnitude. This naturally leads to an examination of Hamas' relationship with Iran and other regional actors. It is evident that Hamas, along with other Palestinian resistance factions, received substantial financial and military backing from Iran, which contributed significantly to their development and training, either directly or through coordination with Iran-affiliated paramilitaries in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Iran's role in enhancing Hamas' capabilities facilitated the large-scale attack launched on October 7, 2023, without direct consultation with Tehran. However, Iran swiftly sought to leverage the situation to bolster its own influence and position, even as it found itself drawn into a regional confrontation with the United States and Israel. This research article aims to dissect Iran's involvement in this process, exploring how it fits into Iran's broader regional strategy and the subsequent challenges, opportunities, and risks it poses to Iran's regional influence.

Iran's Relationship With Palestinian Factions and Hamas as Part of Its Regional Strategy

The Palestinian cause holds significant prominence within Iran's ideological narrative, with efforts spanning decades to make it a focal point of Iranian foreign policy. Over time, however, Iran has strategically transformed it into a valuable asset, aligning with its practical and pragmatic objectives. This evolution underscores the nuanced dynamics between Iran and the Palestinian cause, including the pivotal role Iran and its affiliated militias play in arming various Palestinian resistance factions.

The Significance of the Palestinian Cause for Iran

Since the initial aftermath of the occupation of Iraq in 2003, Iran recognized that the traditional strategy of regional power balance no longer aligned with its national security ambitions. The collapse of Iraq, a key component of this balance, left a significant strategic void in the region, prompting Iran to pursue a strategy of regional expansion. Iran began implementing this new strategy by establishing proxy entities beyond its borders, overseen by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which shares security, economic and political leadership responsibilities with the Iranian state. Through this approach, Iran effectively extended its military and political influence across the region. Furthermore, Iran capitalized on social and sectarian divisions, leveraging its support for various regional issues, notably the Palestinian cause and the "plight" of Shiite

populations “oppressed” by ruling regimes in countries such as Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Yemen. This rationale justified Iran’s involvement in these nations, seeking to exert greater political influence at a strategic level.⁽¹⁾

After 2003, discussions regarding the Palestinian cause at both regional and international levels inevitably involved navigating the intricate role Iran plays, which is steeped in controversy. Iran has consistently leveraged the Palestinian cause, often capitalizing on Israeli military actions against Palestinians and the substantial strategic support provided to Israel by Western powers, led by the United States. These dynamics have served to enhance Iran’s regional position and its influence across Arab and Islamic spheres. Iran has justified its involvement in the Palestinian cause by positioning itself against Arab political systems it labels as proxies of Israel and the West, criticizing Arab societies for their perceived failure to adequately support the Palestinian cause. Under the guise of resistance, Iran has crafted a comprehensive strategic framework, encapsulated in the Umm al-Qura theory (the Mother of Villages), in which it highlights various issues like the liberation of Palestine, justifies the formation of armed factions, and undertakes extensive media and political maneuvering. This strategy has resonated with certain segments of Arab societies, who increasingly view Iran as a champion of resistance. Furthermore, Iran has utilized the Palestinian cause to garner broad social support, capitalizing on its portrayal as a defender of an oppressed people’s just cause. This strategy has not only enhanced Iran’s legitimacy but has also elevated its special status and achievements within the regional and international arenas.

When discussing Iran’s relationship with Palestinian resistance factions like Hamas, it is essential to consider two distinct criteria:

■ The first criteria: the ideological and doctrinal dimensions that govern Iran’s ties with Shiite factions — adhering to the concept of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) and the supremacy of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. These factions operate within an ideological and sectarian framework aligned with Khamenei’s religious authority rather than primarily defending their own countries or territories. Instead, they serve an ideological agenda that transcends national borders. However, Iran’s primary objective appears to be related to achieving influence in regional countries by leveraging its ideological doctrine rather than genuinely advocating for improvement in the living conditions and rights of Shiites. This is evident in the challenging circumstances faced by Shiite populations in some regional nations, proving that Iran’s support may be more about geopolitical interests than genuine ideological solidarity.

■ The second criterion: the pragmatic and expedient dimension governing Iran’s relationships with certain factions that do not necessarily share its ideology. Despite ideological disparities, Iran has effectively expanded its influence by engaging with non-ideological, pragmatic groups such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and to some extent, the Houthis in Yemen. In countries like Yemen, Iran’s

involvement extends beyond ideological boundaries. Security vacuums resulting from the collapse of official security institutions and the rise of extremist groups have provided Iran with opportunities to exert influence. By collaborating with pragmatic factions, Iran aims to enhance its national security interests and wield broader influence over unfolding events in the region.⁽²⁾

Iran's Direct Support for Hamas

Hamas has been the recipient of direct support from Iran, as well as indirect assistance through affiliated factions in Iranian spheres of influence such as Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. It is unlikely that Hamas attained its missile and air capabilities solely through independent efforts. Instead of relying solely on their own resources, Hamas has formed strategic partnerships with armed groups and regimes. These partnerships, along with direct contributions from political entities and nations, have played a pivotal role in developing Hamas' capabilities. Hamas members have been provided with training opportunities and even the chance to obtain graduate degrees from countries such as Iran, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Malaysia, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Georgia, Russia, Armenia, and the United States.

This support has facilitated training for its personnel and enabled them to obtain advanced education in fields relevant to military technology. The following detailed tables shed light on the types of missiles and drones in Hamas' possession and how they were acquired, both within and outside Gaza, with considerable support from various parties, notably Iran.

Table 1: Hamas' Rocket Capabilities and Its Links to Iran

Name	Range	Original Manufacturer	Development
Fajr-3	kilometers 43	Iran	Undeveloped
Fajr-5	kilometers 75	Iran	Undeveloped
M302	kilometers 180	Syria	Undeveloped
Qassam-12	kilometers 12	Gaza with external support	Developed

Name	Range	Original Manufacturer	Development
Qassam-20	kilometers 20	Gaza with external support	Developed
S 55	kilometers 55	Gaza with external support	Developed
J-80	kilometers 80	Gaza with external support	Developed
M 75	kilometers 75	Gaza with external support	Developed
J-90	kilometers 90	Gaza with external support	Developed
A 120	kilometers 120	Gaza with external support	Developed
SH 85	kilometers 85	Gaza with external support	Developed
Ayyash-250	kilometers 250	Gaza with external support	Developed

Source: Hamas Missiles “Stunned” Israel... What Are Their Types and Military Capabilities?” *Sky News*, October 8, 2023, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://2h.ae/GfCp>. [Arabic].

The relationship between Iran and Hamas has been notably characterized by the development of drone capabilities, prominently showcased through the Ababil drone program. Beginning in the early 2000s, Tunisian engineer Mohamed Zouari underwent extensive training in Iran focused on drone manufacturing. Zouari successfully produced over 30 aircraft by 2008, although they were deployed in warfare against Israel only after 2014 due to technical constraints during their development phase. However, Israel responded aggressively to this advancement by targeting key figures involved in the program. Zouari was assassinated in Tunisia in 2016, followed by the assassination of Fadi al-Batsh in Malaysia in 2018. Israel also conducted operations targeting facilities within Gaza associated with drone development. Over 15 specialized engineers, trained in countries including Iran, Turkey and Iraq, were involved in advancing Hamas’ drone capabilities.⁽³⁾

Table 2: Hamas Drones and Iran's Involvement

Name	Missions	Original manufacturer	Development and construction
Ababil 1 or AIA		Reconnaissance	Main parts manufactured in Iran
Ababil 1 or AIB		Attack	Main parts manufactured in Iran
Ababil 1 or AIC		Suicide	Main parts manufactured in Iran
Shehab		Suicide	Gaza with external support
Zawi		Suicide	Gaza with external support

Source: "Including Al-Zawari... All You Need to Know About the al-Qassam Brigades' Arsenal of Drones," *Al-Arabi*, December 9, 2023, accessed April 30, 2024, <https://bit.ly/44Qdfcs>. [Arabic].

The Role of Proxy Actors in Enhancing Hamas' Military Power

There might be some ambiguity surrounding how Iran provided military support to Palestinian resistance factions. It is possible that many of the technological capabilities utilized by Hamas during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood against Israel, including missiles, drones and small submarines, were transferred across the Iraqi-Syrian border by local agents with allegiance to Iran. This hypothesis is supported by statements made by IRGC Air Force Commander Amirali Hajizadeh in 2021. Hajizadeh highlighted that Gaza and Lebanon were crucial frontlines in this conflict and emphasized Iran's role in enhancing their missile capabilities.⁽⁴⁾

A significant portion of the weaponry employed by Hamas, including missiles, drones and explosives, may have originated from Iranian factories situated within Syria and Iraq, areas where Iran holds considerable influence. Additionally, Iran likely dispatched a substantial quantity of logistical equipment necessary for drone production across the Iraqi-Syrian border. These supplies then would have most probably been transported to Gaza through tunnels or by sea routes.⁽⁵⁾

According to reports, Iran utilized the Iraqi-Syrian border to deliver direct financial assistance to both the Lebanese Hezbollah movement and Hamas. It has been estimated that Iran provided Hamas with over \$30 million per month, aiming to establish an extensive network of tunnels within Gaza. These tunnels were utilized by Hamas during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood and continue to be used in confrontations with Israel.⁽⁶⁾

It is worth noting that Iran played a significant role in facilitating the reconciliation between the Syrian regime and Hamas post-2017. Following this reconciliation, Iran actively worked to enhance the combat capabilities of Hamas fighters by organizing specialized training camps within Syria operated by armed factions. Additionally, Iran utilized land routes passing through Iraq to provide Hamas with advanced combat tactics, including air-to-ground combat maneuvers and military glider techniques. These tactics were reportedly employed during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.⁽⁷⁾

Iran appears to have pursued a comprehensive strategy aimed at extending its influence across the coastal areas overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, which encompass strategic ports such as Latakia, Baniyas, Hamidiya, Tartus, and Beirut. Khatam-al Anbiya Construction Headquarters, an Iranian contracting firm linked to the IRGC, has been involved in constructing additional docks and enhancing facilities in these ports to facilitate the export of oil, phosphate, and gas. Furthermore, Iran has ventured into gas exploration projects in collaboration with Russian partners.⁽⁸⁾ Beyond mere transportation and energy supply objectives, Iran's control over ports and coastal regions in Syria and Lebanon serves broader purposes. These include achieving regional balance, establishing a deterrence theory vis-à-vis Israel, and notably, developing capabilities for groups like Hamas.⁽⁹⁾

It has been highlighted that Syria and Lebanon have established factories for manufacturing mini submarines, which have played a significant role in transferring technology, missiles and logistical equipment from their coasts to Gaza. Iran has supported numerous students to pursue studies in engineering, communications and related fields in countries like Turkey, Malaysia, and Tehran. Upon completion of their studies, these individuals return to work on military projects for Hamas, often with direct assistance from Iranians.⁽¹⁰⁾

The process of Iranian control has also facilitated the use of commercial ships to transport oil, phosphate, and goods from the Syrian coast to international waters. The IRGC has developed naval bases tasked with conducting landings in international waters, dozens of kilometers off the coast of Gaza. These landings serve to enhance the military and missile capabilities of Hamas. Military parcels have been dropped into the sea by IRGC forces, as well as by Syrian and Hezbollah forces using commercial ships. Corvettes belonging to Hamas' naval force, known as the Elite Force, retrieve such parcels and dismantle them at sea. The components are then transported to unmanned ships, submarines and miniature gliders, which disperse in various directions. Some components are directed toward sea tunnels ending in Gaza's coastal strip, while others are transported near Rafah through tunnels into Gaza.⁽¹¹⁾

Moreover, the ports along the Syrian and Lebanese coasts also play a role in enhancing Hamas' capabilities in various domains. These include providing support for paragliding activities, transporting equipment for tunnel digging, facilitating the passage of cyberwarfare tools, and conducting training in naval

landing operations and boat-based combat. Hamas effectively utilized these tactics during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. According to many military analyses and intelligence reports, the operations carried out by Hamas, which involved air-to-ground, land-to-sea, and air-to-sea combat, were meticulously planned and executed in a highly professional manner.⁽¹²⁾

Iran's Role in the Attack Orchestrated by Hamas and Its Employment of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

Undoubtedly, Iran's military assistance played a crucial role in enabling Hamas to execute the operation it conducted on October 7, 2023. During the initial hours of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Hamas launched over 5,000 missiles that struck various areas of the occupied territories, including the Gaza Envelope and the outskirts of Tel Aviv. These missile attacks were coordinated with land, sea and air raids aimed at targeting camps and facilities within Zderot, Ashkelon, and other regions of the Gaza Envelope. Accompanying the missile barrage was the deployment of a significant number of drones, which served two primary purposes.⁽¹³⁾ Firstly, they were utilized for monitoring and reporting the movements of the Israeli army to the attacking Hamas forces. Secondly, some drones were employed in suicide operations targeting Israeli forces, specifically focusing on watchtowers in the Gaza Envelope area. This tactic aimed to maintain the element of surprise and confusion created by Hamas, further challenging the Israeli army's defenses.

The success of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood by Hamas was heavily reliant on a combination of technological advancements, aerial capabilities, and skilled personnel proficient in managing complex drone and missile systems. These assets have notably become more precise over time. Some of these drones were manufactured within Gaza, while others were transported to Gaza from outside sources via the sea or tunnels. Upon arrival, they were assembled by trained engineers, allowing Hamas to effectively deploy them in operations within Gaza.⁽¹⁴⁾

Cyberattacks played a crucial role in the success of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, disrupting thermal cameras and surveillance systems along the wall separating the Gaza Strip from Israeli settlements. Additionally, these attacks diverted Israeli cyber resources toward numerous government and security websites. Hamas has been actively investing in cyber capabilities since 2014, assembling a team of programmers and hacking specialists based in Gaza, as well as in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Iran, Turkey, and Jordan. Their collective efforts directly contributed to the execution of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.⁽¹⁵⁾

Furthermore, Iranian support has played a significant role in enhancing Hamas' human and logistical capabilities in naval and coastal combat tactics. These capabilities, which include skills in infiltrating Israeli territory, conducting ambushes, and executing swift and decisive operations, were directly utilized during Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Israeli intelligence reports have indicated that the elite naval force of Hamas was heavily involved in the operation, particularly in the storming of the military base at Zikim coast, known as Bhad 4. This

naval force executed rapid naval landings that caught the Israeli army off guard, contributing significantly to the confusion and disruption of its defenses.⁽¹⁶⁾

It is evident that the executing group involved in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood underwent rigorous training, attaining high proficiency levels in various fields such as paragliding, aerial combat (air-to-ground), cartography, intelligence analysis, and close combat. This training likely took place in nearby countries, possibly Syria, Lebanon, Iraq or Iran, among others. These training programs significantly contributed to the development of the attackers' capabilities and played a crucial role in the precise execution of the infiltration operation deep into Israeli territory.

Following Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip aimed at neutralizing Hamas, armed groups in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen entered a phase of controlled escalation targeting US and Israeli interests. In response, Israel conducted air-strikes on military sites associated with Iran and its allies in these nations. Notably, the Houthi militia in Yemen pledged full support for these actions and readiness to directly confront Israel. The Houthi group went beyond mere verbal expressions of support for the Palestinian cause and instead employed its military, naval and technological capabilities to launch effective attacks on ships and vessels affiliated with Israel, the United States and their allies in the Arabian Sea region. They also mobilized volunteers through mini-brigades for potential combat, even threatening to blockade the Bab al-Mandab Strait, if necessary, albeit mainly for propaganda purposes. Furthermore, the group utilized media channels to promote and enhance Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. It is now evident that the Houthi group receives substantial military and logistical assistance from Iran, particularly technology that is utilized in drone attacks and maritime operations near Yemen. This support extends to training provided to specialized groups affiliated with the Houthis, aimed at enhancing piracy capabilities and conducting sea landings. The actions of the Houthis have unfolded in tandem with Iran's increasingly assertive stance on this strategically significant conflict. Iran has capitalized on the security instability instigated by the Houthi group in the region, leveraging it to exert pressure not only on Israel but also on Western powers. These Iranian maneuvers are part of a strategy of controlled escalation designed to negotiate and maintain momentum in the ongoing geopolitical dynamics.⁽¹⁷⁾

In the context of Iranian strategic maneuvering regarding the Palestinian cause, Operation Al-Aqsa Flood serves as a significant component. Through this operation, Iran has conveyed several key messages, including:⁽¹⁸⁾

Promoting Iran's Clout From a Security Perspective

For years, Iran has positioned itself as the primary sponsor of the Hamas movement, presenting extensive support through both direct and indirect channels. This backing encompasses financial aid, training programs, rehabilitation efforts and the enhancement of combat and logistical capabilities, particularly in terms

of military equipment and technology. Through its support, Iran strategically leverages Hamas to advance its own overarching objectives, notably exerting pressure on Israel and Western powers. Additionally, Iran signals its dominance over the region's strategic security landscape, including Israel's security, through its alliances with local factions aligned with its interests.⁽¹⁹⁾

Unifying Battlefields and Strengthening Iran's Negotiating Position With the West

The relationship between Hamas and Iran is multifaceted, characterized more by strategic cooperation than a simple dynamic of subordination. While Hamas endeavors to enhance its capabilities, Iran strategically utilizes the group as a regional card to advance its own strategic objectives. Through its support, Iran has portrayed Hamas as part of the broader axis of resistance, spanning Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine, capable of striking deep into Israeli territory. This narrative has been enhanced by references to the prophecies of Iran's supreme leader regarding the potential disappearance of Israel from the map. This narrative has been promoted to convince people in the region that Iran supports humanitarian and just causes. However, Iran has leveraged the Hamas card in nuclear negotiations with the aim of securing a truce with Israel to alleviate Western pressure and sanctions while also buying time for the advancement of its nuclear program — making it a *fait accompli*.⁽²⁰⁾

Undermining and Blocking a Two-State Solution

Iran staunchly opposes the concept of a two-state solution, viewing the Palestinian conflict through the lens of absolute right versus absolute wrong. For Iran, any resolution that does not entail the disappearance of Israel and the establishment of a State of Palestine is categorically rejected. The achievement of a two-state solution would effectively diminish Iran's leverage, as it has historically utilized the Palestinian cause as a pressure point at both regional and international levels. Iran strategically supports the idea of confronting and resisting Israel through its local factional allies and endorsed initiatives like Operation Al-Aqsa Flood to maintain strategic relevance and thwart the prospect of a two-state solution, which would impede Iran's ability to exploit the Palestinian issue for its own purposes.⁽²¹⁾

Throwing the Region Into Disarray and Limited Warfare

Through Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Iran has showcased its capacity to induce regional turmoil and orchestrate limited conflicts through its network of local allies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. While Iran has asserted that it was unaware of the operation's timing and execution, its potential gains from it cannot be dismissed. Iran's role in nurturing armed factions in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is noteworthy, as these groups have collaborated to enhance Hamas' capabilities and supply it with weapons. The execution of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood by Hamas demonstrated a high level of professionalism, suggesting the involvement and

support of external entities and sponsors, without which Hamas' limited resources would have rendered such an operation implausible.⁽²²⁾

Employing Normalization as a Justification for Interference in the Region

Iran utilized Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as a platform to amplify its criticisms against nations that normalized ties with Israel. The Iranian leadership, including the supreme leader, seized the opportunity after the military operation to condemn countries aligning with Israel, particularly Arab nations that had normalized relations. This stance aimed to highlight perceived complicity in Israeli actions against Palestinians and to undermine any potential peace efforts, including the notion of a two-state solution. By framing itself as a champion of the Palestinian cause and implicating certain Arab states as betraying it, Iran sought to discredit those nations and discourage further normalization with Israel, effectively employing media and social manipulation tactics. This maneuvering has drawn scrutiny from the Arab League, which accuses Iran of exploiting the Palestinian cause to undermine diplomatic efforts and potentially embarrass Arab nations considering normalization with Israel before their populations.⁽²³⁾

The Repercussions of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on Iran and Its Proxy Actors

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood shed light on the intricate conflict dynamics involving Iran and its proxies in the region. The scope of the battle extended beyond the borders of Palestinian territories, encompassing the broader region, particularly areas where Iran holds significant influence. The aftermath of this operation provides insight into the impact on Iran and its affiliated factions, which can be observed through the following factors:

Iranian Gains at the Expense of the Palestinians

■ Blocking the two-state solution and creating challenges to the normalization trajectory: Operation Al-Aqsa Flood along with the subsequent conflict in Gaza not only derailed the path of normalization — posing strategic, geopolitical and economic challenges for Iran — but also hindered the progress of the two-state solution. A coalition of Gulf countries, along with the United States and Turkey, is actively working on crafting a new mechanism to ensure the establishment of an independent Palestinian state and facilitate peace agreements. A two-state solution is perceived as a significant obstacle to Iran's exploitation of the Palestinian cause. As a result of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, prospects for advancing a two-state solution have been hindered, particularly in the short term. This setback is attributed to Hamas' ongoing commitment to combat, as well as the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who represents an extremist faction within Israel. Moreover, the process of normalization between Arab countries and Israel has faced a fresh moral examination. Arab populations and societies have sharply criticized nations engaging in normalization, particularly in the wake of civilian casualties resulting from bombings and attacks in

Gaza. Consequently, countries in the region, especially those considering normalization, face a heightened moral dilemma in the upcoming phase.⁽²⁴⁾

■ **Iran extricated from the confrontation:** In line with its typical policy approach, Iran typically endorses militia attacks and operations while evading direct accountability. Strategically, Iran has extended its influence through similar attacks in Iraq, targeting US bases and interests through affiliated militias and replicating such actions in Syria. However, Iran often refrains from officially claiming responsibility for military operations and, at times, denies direct involvement altogether. While recent exchanges of attacks between Israel and Iran have escalated beyond the traditional shadow warfare, it is improbable that both nations will escalate to direct confrontation. Instead, they are likely to settle for the deterrence messages conveyed through previous attacks and revert to indirect engagement protocols. As Iran reinforces its indirect operations via its militias, Israel is expected to resume its covert activities within Iran's borders or spheres of influence. Additionally, Israel may urge the US administration to intensify economic and military pressures on Iran or to follow through on operations conducted inside Iraq. This could include airstrikes on sites along the Iraqi-Syrian border affiliated with the IRGC.⁽²⁵⁾

■ **A painful blow to Israel:** While Iran may not have been directly involved in the decision-making process behind Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, it undoubtedly played a significant role as a supporter of Palestinian resistance factions both before and after the operation. Strategically, the operation has underscored two fundamental dilemmas for Israel: the constraints posed by its narrow geographical area and the challenge of limited human resources. These dilemmas restrict Israel's ability to employ all warfare tactics and activate all deterrence options. For instance, Israel faces limitations in engaging in long-term conflicts extending beyond eight to 12 weeks. Moreover, Israel faces constraints in conducting ground invasions into Gaza for sustained occupation and clearance operations. Additionally, options for direct confrontation are limited due to spatial constraints and the high value placed on Israeli military and security assets. At the strategic level, the infiltration operation resulted in several significant repercussions, chief among them being the paralysis of the Israeli economy and its shift toward a wartime footing. This led to the halt of key sectors such as agriculture, industry, trade, tourism, education, and construction. Additionally, inflation worsened as the conflict persisted. Socially, there were effects such as reverse migration and widespread shock and terror among Israeli society, leading to a collapse of societal trust in Netanyahu's government and the perceived effectiveness of the military and security services.

The Palestinian armed groups that initiated Operation Al-Aqsa Flood gained an initial advantage over the Israeli military by launching a surprise attack and securing a significant bargaining chip: the prisoner and hostage card. This card constrained Israeli military action and limited its options for engaging with Gaza, particularly considering the presence of Israeli detainees there. A com-

prehensive Israeli ground invasion of Gaza became highly impractical due to the potential for significant casualties in a street-level conflict that the Israeli military was ill-equipped to handle. As a result, the attacking armed groups enforced a constrained level of confrontation, thereby diminishing Israel's available options.

Challenges and Future Prospects

As much as Operation Al-Aqsa Flood presented opportunities for Iran, it also posed significant challenges for Iran and its affiliated factions. These challenges can be outlined as follows:

■ **Restricting Iran's scope of movement:** Despite the heightened tensions during the initial stages of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, the escalation primarily aimed to enhance Israel's campaign against Hamas. Simultaneously, it sought to isolate Israel's adversaries, rendering them bereft of substantial support. The escalation suggests reluctance from the United States and other parties, even those aligned with Hamas, to engage in a full-scale regional conflict. The presence of US and European naval forces, alongside maneuvers conducted in regions like the Arabian Gulf, Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea, including the deployment of naval vessels and aircraft carriers, conveyed a singular and clear message: a robust deterrence against actors like Iran, Hezbollah, the Syrian regime, Iraqi factions, the Houthi militia or any other actor siding with Hamas. Israel's responses also prompted heightened alertness among these actors, reflecting their readiness for potential engagement. Concurrently, the United States aims to confine the conflict to a limited scale.⁽²⁶⁾

■ **Developing a strategy for conducting smart strikes against Iran-aligned militias:** Despite the prevailing state of equilibrium and relatively low-level escalation observed among most parties, whether aligned with Israel or Hamas, there remains the possibility for targeted strikes by Israel. Such strikes could form part of a strategic approach aimed at preempting and containing armed factions in the region. The rationale behind this strategy lies in the belief that leaving these factions unchecked could lead to their increased aggression and capability for future attacks. Consequently, conducting precise strikes to dismantle the infrastructure of these factions, targeting their bases, planning centers, mobilization hubs and leaderships, whether in Iraq, Iran, Syria or Lebanon, emerges as a crucial consideration in the post-conflict period following the events in Gaza.⁽²⁷⁾

■ **The possibility of Iran losing its sway in Palestine:** It is improbable that Israel will cease its efforts to counter Hamas even after the conclusion of the Gaza conflict. This could involve the continuation of a comprehensive strategy or the implementation of subsidiary tactics, including swift operations and targeted assassinations of Hamas leaders globally. Israel may also conduct strikes within and beyond Gaza to preemptively disrupt Hamas' capabilities before it can launch another devastating attack, as seen in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Israel

is likely to justify its actions as self-defense to the international community, leveraging support from the United States and Western nations. If Israel succeeds in neutralizing Hamas and other resistance factions, Iran stands to lose a significant ally in the Palestinian arena, potentially diminishing its leverage in its indirect conflict with Israel.⁽²⁸⁾

A two-state solution, despite facing opposition from various quarters including Israel's right-wing, Hamas and Iran, is anticipated to resurface as a key component of international efforts to resolve conflicts in the region. This potential revival could limit Iran's ability to leverage the Palestinian cause for its own strategic interests. While Iran has historically capitalized on the Palestinian cause to incite regional tensions, it is essential to recognize that its motivations may not solely stem from genuine support for the Palestinian cause. Persian nationalist aspirations, coupled with the desire to expand influence through Shiism and issues related to oppression against Shiites and Muslims globally, also factor into Iran's engagement with the Palestinian cause.

■ **New prospects for the Israel-Iran face-off:** It is anticipated that following the conclusion of operations in Gaza, or possibly during these operations, Israel will initiate a response targeting not only Gaza but also the Syrian regime and Hezbollah. This response is likely to involve direct strikes and significant assassinations targeting leaders from Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iran who are based in Syria and Lebanon. Military, political and training sites, as well as headquarters of various leaderships in these countries, may be among the primary targets. There could be concerted efforts to revitalize discussions about overthrowing the Syrian regime through international mobilization, given the Syrian regime's perceived indirect ties to ongoing conflicts. These efforts may also entail a response targeting Iran, its interests and allies within Iran and Iraq. Israeli intelligence reports have previously suggested the exploitation of the Iraqi-Syrian border by Iran for the transfer of weapons, technology, equipment and missiles to Gaza via land and sea routes. Consequently, Israel might consider a multifaceted response, including airstrikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and IRGC headquarters, targeted assassinations using drones, cyberattacks, retaliatory strikes and operations along the Iraqi-Syrian border. Additionally, there could be heightened international efforts to isolate Iran and its associates.

Iran perceives its affiliated factions as instruments to advance and escalate certain agendas, utilizing them to exert pressure and assert influence over Gulf states, Israel, and Western nations. Consequently, tactical pathways for these factions may involve supporting political regimes closely aligned with Iran, such as those in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. These factions are likely to resist any attempts to alter the political, security and economic dynamics within these countries, as such changes could undermine their influence. For instance, their involvement in suppressing the October Revolution in 2019 in Iraq serves as a notable example, along with their current efforts to maintain the state's monopoly and protect the Syrian regime and Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon. In

essence, the roles of these factions are expected to remain within the confines of this regional context.

In the context of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, it seems improbable that Iran will directly urge Hezbollah, the Syrian regime or factions near the Israeli border to intervene. However, this stance is likely temporary and signals the initiation of a new phase of post-war escalation. Essentially, Iran is expected to maintain its leverage over ideologically aligned factions like Hezbollah and pragmatically affiliated groups such as Hamas. These actors will likely remain under scrutiny, with the potential for repeated pressure tactics against Israel in subsequent stages.

Iran could leverage these factions to exert pressure on Western nations and their allies in the region. As external pressure on Iran rises, it is anticipated that Iran will reciprocate by exerting pressure on the West's interests and its regional allies, spanning Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. This may involve direct escalation tactics orchestrated by these factions, targeting strategic assets such as US and Western military bases, Western embassy compounds, oil facilities, airports, economic hubs in the Gulf region, and any other interests deemed close to Western powers. In the event of escalated Western pressure on Iran, particularly related to the nuclear issue or the imposition of economic sanctions, operations conducted by these factions could intensify. Additionally, with Israeli plans of swift strikes — whether military or cyber — on Iranian or Iran-aligned targets in the region, the Iranian response is anticipated to be direct, utilizing its proxies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and potentially Gaza. This indicates a complex web of potential retaliatory actions across various fronts should tensions continue to escalate.

Iran is wary of the potential implications of a two-state solution, recognizing it could diminish its leverage derived from exploiting the Palestinian cause, as witnessed in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. To maintain influence and sow uncertainty in the region, Iran might deploy its proxies and armed factions to incite new turmoil. Notably, Iran has alliances with groups like the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which control significant facilities such as the Al-Hawl camp housing over 53,000 families of ISIS members and the Ghweran prison holding more than 1,500 ISIS fighters. Any disruptions within these places could trigger widespread chaos with far-reaching consequences spanning Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and potentially even extending to the Gulf, Sinai, and nearby regions.

Conclusion

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood presented Iran with a significant opportunity to leverage its international and regional dealings with Western nations and their allies in the Middle East. While the operation was orchestrated by Hamas, Iran, along with other influential powers such as armed factions in Iraq and Syria, as well as the Syrian regime and factions in Lebanon, contributed to enhancing Hamas' capabilities and preparedness for the operation. Iran utilized armed factions

in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to enhance Hamas' strength prior to the operation. Initially, Iran attempted to stoke escalatory conflicts in these countries through its affiliated factions, but it swiftly backed down because of international pressure, including the presence of US naval forces. Subsequently, Hamas faced Israel without sustained support for the post-operation phase, relying instead on media and propaganda efforts in solidarity with Gaza's populace. Additionally, Hamas engaged in covert diplomacy and intelligence negotiations through back channels. The mounting pressures on Iran are likely to intensify in the foreseeable future, particularly considering the evolving landscape of the Israeli military doctrine post-conflict. Israel's response is expected to extend beyond Gaza alone, encompassing various actors and countries affected by the conflict, including Lebanon, Hezbollah, and armed factions in Iraq and Syria. This could lead to a prolonged series of undeclared confrontations and swift operations between Israel and Iran, reflecting the paradigm of protracted shadow wars characterized by assassinations, drone strikes, and cyber confrontations.

Iraq is poised to play a pivotal role in curbing Iran's regional influence, given its connection to the dynamics surrounding Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. The United States and Israel may perceive Iraq as essential in disrupting the network of violent actors and armed factions operating in the region. Effectively halting Iran's expansion hinges on addressing the situation in Iraq, with direct support for Iraqi state efforts crucial in impeding Iran's utilization of armed factions across the Middle East. This underscores the significance of Iraq as the linchpin for initiating change and countering Iran's regional ambitions.

Endnotes

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