

REPORT

# IRAN, ISRAEL, AND STRATEGIC CHOICES: NAVIGATING A NEW ERA OF CONFLICT

October 29, 2024



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The recent airstrikes against Iranian territory, referred to by some as devastating, represent the first direct military assaults on Iran since the Iran-Iraq War. Historically, Iran has employed a strategy of nurturing a network of non-state allied proxies to conduct advanced operations, effectively projecting conflict beyond its borders. This strategy serves as both a military and ideological bulwark against perceived threats, encapsulated in the military doctrine of “forward defense.” This approach reflects Iran’s ongoing efforts to safeguard its sovereignty and ruling establishment amidst a long history of foreign threats and occupations.

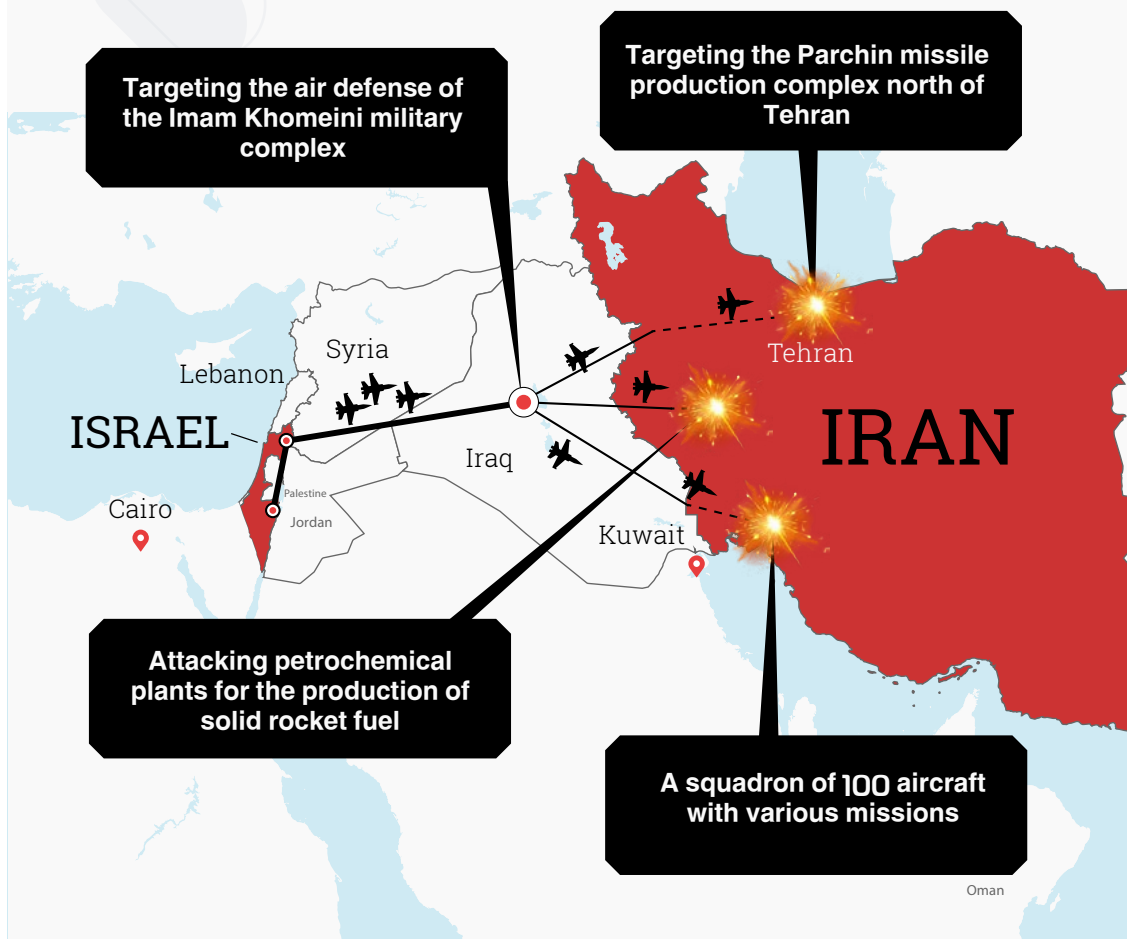
In light of Israel’s calculated strikes on Iranian installations and its systematic aerial campaigns targeting Iranian territory, this report seeks to address pivotal questions: How will future interactions between Israel and Iran unfold? Can Iran sustain pressure on Israel and deplete its resources using conventional tactics? What will become of the Iran-aligned militias given the current confusion that surrounds this network?

### **The Impact of Israeli Attacks on the Existing Rules of Engagement**

In the aftermath of the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, Iran endeavored to frame Hezbollah’s successes as a model for distancing Israel from Iranian borders while exerting influence in more distant arenas. Engaging deeply in Syria and Iraq, Iran aimed to secure vital communication lines with Hezbollah — a strategic fulcrum for operations designed to keep Israel preoccupied. This approach helped establish engagement rules that solidified Iranian influence, forming a cornerstone of its military doctrine that emphasized the strengthening and preservation of its strategic sphere.

The unsparing assaults by Hamas against Israel in October 2023 added yet another layer of pressure on Israeli forces, reinforcing Tehran’s conviction in its deterrence strategy initiated with Hezbollah. To counter this, Israel launched a series of counter-escalation campaigns, aiming to shift the theater of conflict away from its own borders. Central to Israel’s success in this endeavor has been its capability for precise intelligence gathering and the application of advanced technology — tools that have enabled it to identify and monitor constituents within what Iran calls the “Axis of Resistance.”

# Israel's Attack on Iran - Trajectory and Targeted Sites



This intelligence operation has led to targeted killings of Iranian officials in Syria, attacks on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, and the assassination of senior Hezbollah leaders.

Israel's unexpected success in curtailing the capabilities of both Hezbollah and Hamas may have emboldened the state to recalibrate its confrontational dynamics directly with Iran. Targeted strikes damaged critical military sites associated with Iran's munitions program, including a missile production facility in northern Tehran, a solid rocket fuel plant in the west, and air defense structures. While these strikes did not dismantle Iran's overall military capabilities, they convey a potent message: Israel can penetrate Iranian territory, exposing vulnerabilities that could leave Iran defenseless against Israeli incursions during times of heightened tension.

### **Iran's Strategic Options in Light of Eroding Military Deterrence**

Confronted with mounting pressure, Iranian leaders are grappling with urgent questions about how to sustain effective deterrence. Tehran may turn to support from Russia and China to maintain internal cohesion in light of Israel's growing military supremacy, buoyed by a Western indifference and a muted international response. However, Moscow and Beijing's strategies are likely to be dictated by their broader negotiations with other powers, which may fall short of satisfying Iranian aspirations to restore equilibrium in ongoing conflicts.

In a bid to restore coordination among its allied militias, Iran has initiated a new framework aimed at revitalizing the Axis of Resistance, consolidating oversight in Tehran. An Iranian parliamentary proposal seeks to establish a "Defensive-Security Alliance Among Resistance Factions and Supporting States," to be administered by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This initiative aims to reinforce the axis and influence regional security, military, and political dynamics in light of the setbacks incurred by key resistance leaders during recent Israeli operations in Gaza and Lebanon.

However, this initiative may appear belated, given the significant leadership losses suffered by these resistance factions. The material losses alongside Syria's hesitance to fully embrace such a proposal —

driven by aspirations for a more influential Arab role that spares it the dire scenarios in Gaza and Lebanon — complicate matters further.

Simultaneously, as Iran advances its nuclear program, resistance from major powers against escalatory actions might incentivize Tehran to expedite its nuclear pursuits as a matter of existential strategy. The prospect of announcing nuclear armament could fundamentally alter the geopolitical landscape, compelling a reevaluation of negotiation strategies that could enhance Iran's leverage, albeit at considerable risk to the ruling establishment's survival.

Alternatively, Iran might opt for a de-escalation of tensions and reengagement in diplomacy to ease pressure from Western powers. Acknowledging the imperative to address economic concerns, the new administration under President Masoud Pezeshkian has hinted at potential gestures toward Western engagement —particularly in recalibrating the US-Iranian conflict by leveraging pressure tools to negotiate more favorable terms. Pezeshkian's remarks during the recent UN General Assembly echoed this intent, as Tehran hopes that tightening its “fire ring” around Tel Aviv will translate into Western concessions aimed at alleviating sanctions and mitigating the consequences for its nuclear agenda. Yet, turbulent developments have complicated these carefully constructed plans.

### **The Perils of Escalation for Both Sides**

Despite Israel's recent triumphs and its ongoing struggle to resolve the hostage crisis stemming from its operations in Gaza, attacks targeting high-profile locations within Israel, including the prime minister's residence, signify that the conflict remains unresolved. Amid Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's assertions of maximalist military objectives across the Middle East, the nation grapples with internal instability and the resettlement of displaced citizens and hostages. The atrocities witnessed will undoubtedly cast a long shadow over future generations.

For Israel, sustaining a constant state of conflict is increasingly untenable, especially given the severe economic toll exacted by ongoing warfare. Future developments may compel Israelis to reassess their current policies. Enhanced military control has failed

to alleviate persistent security challenges, complicating efforts to achieve fundamental objectives such as hostage recovery and domestic tranquility.

On the other hand, it is fair to argue that the effectiveness of Iran's conventional deterrence has waned in the face of Israel's vastly superior technological capabilities, bolstered by Western support. The narrowing options available to Tehran could lead to a precarious acceleration of its nuclear efforts, intended to counterbalance Israel's dominance. However, such a trajectory is fraught with peril, risking regional instability and escalating tensions with the West, potentially igniting a regional arms race. Thus, Iran should gravitate toward diplomatic avenues to enhance its standing.

In our assessment, Iran's actions have contributed to the weakening of nation-states in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, thereby facilitating Israel's incursions across Iranian borders. Furthermore, Israel's strategy to sow division among Palestinian factions, notably between Fatah and Hamas, has obstructed pathways to Palestinian statehood and laid the groundwork for the confrontations that erupted on October 7.

Against the backdrop of the forthcoming US elections, prevailing sentiment in Washington strongly favors unyielding support for Israel, with scant attention paid to engaging with Iran or addressing its interests. Tehran is concerned that a potential Republican presidency led by Donald Trump — who dealt a significant blow to Iranian interests with the assassination of Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani — could severely disrupt the fragile dynamics of resistance established since then.

## **Conclusion**

The lessons underscored by recent events are stark and profound. The cycle of violence begets only further violence; both Iranian and Israeli leaders must heed the warning that the sacrifice of others ultimately rebounds on them. Perhaps now is the moment for deep reflection to avert the pitfalls of history. While both sides may confront narrow paths in navigating this enduring stalemate, there are myriad lessons awaiting reassessment on both fronts. The Arab initiative aimed at resolving the Palestinian issue and fostering relations with

Israel stands out as a potential exit that requires commitment and acceptance from both sides.

Furthermore, the adverse outcomes now evident in the region reinforce the views of Saudi Arabia and Arab nations regarding the imperative of preserving national entities and curbing and preventing external militia or foreign state interference in decisions that serve perilous agendas.



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