



Mathurin Hybrid Initiative

Global Advisory Report

Iran-Israel Relations: A Catalyst for War?

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Growing Apart:

The Israel-Iran relationship is a critical and highly volatile factor in the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape. Decades of hostility, sparked by ideological, strategic, and geopolitical manoeuvring, have entrenched divergences in their interests. Ideologies continue to impede significant reconciliation processes. With the persistence of these underlying tensions, relations between Iran and Israel remain a defining feature of broader regional dynamics, especially within the recent highly volatile context of Israel and Palestine.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 formed the genesis of the inter-state animosity - when regional dynamics altered with the rise of Ayatollah Khomeini. Relations deteriorated with the Iranian adoption of a strong anti-Israel stance, advocating for the Palestinian cause, while aligning itself with anti-Israel movements and groups – including Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza; Lebanon’s powerful Hezbollah; and Tehran militias in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. This collection of state and non-state actors has been referred to as the axis of resistance. This has fuelled both a sense of insecurity in Israel and antagonism between the two nations, resulting in rising regional tensions.

In the Shadows:

Iran’s nuclear pursuits have also been a point of contention between the nations. Bellicose rhetoric from Iranian leaders has heightened the sense of threat for Israel. This has led Israel to vocally critique Iranian nuclear armament, advocating for strict sanctions and, at times, dangling the threat of military intervention as a preventative towards Iranian nuclear development. As a result, the two nations have long been engaged in a series of covert operations and intelligence warfare, covering both cyberattacks, assassinations, sabotage, and actions aimed at disrupting each other’s military capabilities and interests.

Furthermore, the sense of threat in Israel is compounded by growing Iranian influence and presence in neighbouring nations, such as Syria and Lebanon. Iranian support for militant groups across the region has led to violent confrontations and destructive skirmishes – such as the 2006 Lebanon War. Israel also conducts airstrikes in Syria to target Iranian-backed militias and weapons. This further escalates regional power struggles, increasing tensions within an extremely volatile and sensitive system.

Increasing escalations:

Escalation generates escalation. While the violence against Palestinians in Gaza continues into a second week, the ugly prospect of a rapidly spreading conflict rears its head. Fore-boding indicators, such as failed US-led diplomatic efforts, are a sign of a deteriorating situation which has the potential to see Israel and US forces facing-off against Iran and its militia proxies.

Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran's foreign minister, warned: "If the Zionist aggressions do not stop, the hands of all parties in the region are on the trigger".

Yet Israel will not cease and the risk of a full-scale ground attack into North Gaza remains imminent. On top of regional inter-state tension comes the US deployment of a second aircraft carrier in the Eastern Mediterranean – intended to boost Israeli security and to act as a deterrent for state or non-state actors wishing to involve themselves in the conflict. Vague rhetoric conceals the potential for violent confrontation as Iran undoubtedly feels this addition deployment as an American escalation.

There is a very real and distinct possibility that the 'axis of resistance' will expand and catalyze the war with Hamas. Israel has been engaged in clashes with Hezbollah along the northern border with Lebanon, exchanging artillery fire. Lebanon's Hezbollah poses a greater threat than Hamas due to its possession of advanced weaponry and experienced forces. The West Bank is also experiencing increasing levels of violence while Israel is also accusing Iran of deploying weaponry in Syria to create a second front. All of this is piling pressure onto an already violent Israel as the Middle East becomes a tinderbox in a firework factory.

Who is to say what Iran ultimately wants. The prolonged shadow war between the two nations has previously, for Iran, been played out at arm's length. Yet, the time has been ripe for Iran to have a crack at Israel especially as the nation grapples Benjamin Netanyahu's antidemocratic and far-right policies. Additionally, there is a growing perception that the US is losing leverage in the Middle East. Iran has also reinforced its ties with both Russia and China. All of this rides on the back of public fury in the Arab world over Israeli aggressions towards Gaza. A combination of factors has ultimately resulted in a growing Iranian confidence. Such levels of assertiveness from Iran may well induce a reckless, spiralling escalation in the Middle East, spinning the war with Hamas into a globally intertwined phenomenon.

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