

# Understanding Iran's Position in the Post-October 7 Middle East

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**ABSTRACT** *On October 7, the Middle East witnessed a dramatic shift that reshaped geopolitical and security dynamics. Iran's central role in this transformation has not been limited to influencing the Israel-Palestine conflict but has also produced significant implications for regional stability and global power competition. While Iran denied its organizational role in Hamas's Operation al-Aqsa Flood, Tehran's "forward defense" approach has facilitated a new dynamic of wearing down Israel through its regional armed partners while avoiding direct confrontation. This dynamic has created the risk of direct conflict and even war between Iran and Israel. Categorically avoiding the option of war, Iran has made strategic use of regional diplomacy, particularly its rapprochement with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia. However, Iran's domestic challenges, anticipated policy shifts in the U.S. under Trump, and regional rivalries complicate Tehran's position. This commentary examines Iran's policy toward Israel from historical, strategic, and contemporary perspectives. It explores the strategic calculations and balancing actions and mechanisms implemented by Iran in the post-October 7 period to avoid a full-scale war in the region.*

**Keywords:** Iran, Hamas, Israel, Khamenei, Hezbollah

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**O**n the morning of October 7, the world awakened to a radically transformed Middle East. This region has diverged significantly, reshaping its landscape and influencing global great power competition.<sup>1</sup> In this evolving Middle East—characterized by fragile balances, permeable borders, and the obsolescence of traditional norms—Iran has emerged as a pivotal player. Iran's traditionally problematic relationship with Israel—even reaching ontological enmity—has taken on a new dimension where, with the removal of intermediaries, the parties are at times engaging in direct conflicts, preparing for doomsday scenarios. This new situation, involving Iran-Israel and perhaps now openly Israel and the U.S. confronting Iran, is poised to move the entire Middle East into a brand-new formation that is even more unstable than before. For this reason, it is necessary to thoroughly understand Iran's role in the new situation and the internal and external dynamics that determine this role.

### **Iran's Traditional Role in the Israel-Palestine Conflict: The Road to the October 7**

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's role in the Israel-Palestine conflict has evolved significantly. To comprehend this evolution, it is beneficial to first examine the pre-revolution period. Before 1979, Iran was one of the earliest countries to de facto recognize Israel and engaged in cooperation with it in several areas, most notably oil trade. Moreover, this

relationship provided Iran with regional advantages, as the Arab-Israeli wars opened opportunities in its rivalry with Arab nations, particularly Gulf states like Saudi Arabia.

The Shah advocated for a “secure Israel” while simultaneously calling on Israel to return the occupied territories to the Arabs. Additionally, his criticisms of the Jewish lobby and Zionism<sup>2</sup> were largely rhetorical, serving as public relations efforts to project an ethical stance rather than signaling impactful policy towards Israel. In this context, Iran chose not to join the 1973 oil embargo, instead capitalizing on the surge in oil prices to its economic advantage. Moreover, Iran reaped substantial profits through its indirect oil trade with Israel during this time.<sup>3</sup>

However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution opened the door to an entirely different approach and hostility by framing Iran's foreign policy based on opposition to the U.S. and Israel. The leader of the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini, referred to the U.S. as the “Great Satan” and Israel as the “Little Satan.” Decades of anti-American sentiment were redirected towards its regional ally, Israel, and further imbued with theological significance. Jerusalem (al-Quds) became one of the major goals of the Islamic Revolution.

So much so that during the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini coined the slogan “the road to Jerusalem passes through Karbala,” which explained the underlying reason for the war's prolonged duration in an unusual way. Despite

pushing back Iraq within the first two years, Iran rejected Saddam's offer for a ceasefire<sup>4</sup> and continued the war for six more years, largely on Iraqi territory. Resisting Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon and fighting against Saddam were seen as parts of the same broader narrative.

Around the same time, Khomeini declared the last Friday of Ramadan as Quds Day. Quds Day is celebrated annually in Iran as a day of protests against Israel, referred to as the "Zionist regime." The countdown timers installed in various Iranian cities, showing the remaining time until Israel's destruction,<sup>5</sup> and the naming of the elite Revolutionary Guard unit responsible for overseas military operations as the "Quds Force" can also be seen as parts of the same ideological framework.

Although the U.S. is labeled the "Great Satan" and Israel the "Little Satan," Israel holds a more negative and inferior position in Iran's official discourse. No diplomatic contact has ever been established between the two countries. While there has been occasional speculation about direct meetings between Iranian and U.S. presidents —such as the phone call that took place between Obama and Rouhani<sup>6</sup>— there has never been even the slightest possibility of a similar scenario between the presidents of Iran and Israel.

Regarding its approach to Palestinian factions, Iran has historically had a contentious relationship with the Palestine Liberation Organiza-

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tion (PLO). A significant factor in this strained relationship was Yasser Arafat's support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War, which Tehran has neither forgotten nor forgiven. Rejecting the two-state solution and the Oslo Accords, Iran has consistently advocated for the establishment of a single, independent Palestinian state. To this end, it has actively supported armed groups as a means of achieving this objective.

With the shift in the Palestinian struggle's focus from secular/leftist organizations to groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Iran's influence also began to grow. While Hamas developed a pragmatic relationship with Iran, the Islamic Jihad organization, founded by Fathi Shaqaqi —known for his admiration for Khomeini and the Iranian Islamic Revolution— came to the forefront due to its closer ideological alignment with Iran.

Iran has been providing political, military, and economic support to these groups for years. While this support is often framed within an ideological context, its outcomes align closely

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with Iran's regional political objectives. This support, instrumentalized to limit Israel's sphere of influence and expand Iran's own, was a crucial factor in leading Hamas to the October 7 operation. Although Iran claims it was unaware of the Operation al-Aqsa Flood in advance, this assertion only pertains to the timing of the attack. Iran's long-standing collaboration with these groups, including periodic military exercises and the development of military strategies, facilitated Hamas's ability to carry out the October 7 attacks.

Despite denying prior knowledge of the attack, Iran openly declared its political support for Hamas and the Operation al-Aqsa Flood after October 7.<sup>7</sup> Thus, while it disclaims involvement in the planning and execution of the attack, its post-attack statements reflect a form of ownership of the event's aftermath. These disclaimers also serve as a justification for Iran to avoid direct involvement in the conflict. Iranian officials have made it clear that they do not intend to become directly involved in this war. This raises the question:

what are the underlying rationale and objectives behind Iran's embrace of this process?

### Iran's Strategic Goals

In the aftermath of October 7, armed groups in the region supported by Iran have intensified their attacks on Israel and the U.S. These groups' assaults are significant in terms of enhancing Iran's regional deterrence capabilities. It can be argued that Iran, through these groups and by employing a strategy of "forward defense," is attempting to prevent the war from reaching its territory.

Iran's foremost objective following October 7 has been to achieve the defeat of Israel through the support it provides to armed groups in Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. However, in pursuing this aim, Iran seeks to avoid direct warfare with Israel and to keep the battlefield limited. This is because a scenario in which the war expands could bring Iran and Israel into direct confrontation. Such a development would likely prompt the U.S. to intervene alongside Israel, resulting in significant devastation for Iran. Additionally, the possibility of Israel resorting to the use of nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out. Therefore, Iran has endeavored to confine the conflict to the Gaza region. This objective is, in fact, being realized through the attacks carried out by proxy groups. The actions of these groups serve as a deterrent by demonstrating how perilous a large scale war would be for the U.S.



Giant 'Aqsa Flood' and anti-Israel banners are displayed on buildings at Valiasr Street and Palestine Square in Tehran, in support of Hamas and Palestinian resistance as clashes continue between Israeli forces and Palestinian armed groups.

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and how it could become a target for Iran backed groups in the region. For this reason, the U.S. is also exerting pressure on Israel to prevent it from taking steps that would escalate the war.

However, paradoxically, the actions of these groups lead Israel to hold Iran increasingly accountable, thereby providing Israel with continual justification to target Iran more directly. This outcome fundamentally contradicts Iran's intentions and heightens the risk of an Iran-Israel conflict. Fundamentally, Iran's strategy reflects a paradox: by targeting Israel and the U.S. regionally to avert a broader war, it concurrently increases the potential to initiate the very conflict it seeks to avoid.

This contradiction is likely to escalate and potentially culminate in a larger

conflict. Moreover, it could provide not only Israel but also the U.S. with grounds to target Iran directly. For instance, the drone attack claimed by the Iran backed group The Islamic Resistance in Iraq at the beginning of 2024, which resulted in the deaths of three American soldiers, brought U.S. intervention against Iran backed groups in Syria and Iraq—and, more critically, Iranian military personnel—onto the agenda.

Had the U.S., like Iran, not sought to avoid escalating the conflict, a pretext for an Iran-U.S. war could have been easily found. During the second Trump Administration, the U.S. will be more inclined to identify such pretexts. However, instead of pursuing direct conflict, the U.S. chose to conduct airstrikes against Iran backed groups in Syria and Iraq, thereby avoiding a full scale war.

Despite this, the exchange of fire between Iran backed groups and U.S. forces persisted,<sup>8</sup> with the U.S. periodically conducting airstrikes against these groups to suppress their attacks.<sup>9</sup> While Washington intensified its rhetoric against Iran during this period, it refrained from launching a direct attack on Iranian territory.

Following October 7, the Red Sea emerged as one of Iran's indirect theaters of conflict. It was reported that Ansarullah, the Houthis organization operating in Yemen, conducted 130 attacks between October 7, 2023, and September 20, 2024.<sup>10</sup> These attacks are significant in demonstrating that the war is producing detrimental effects on global trade. From another perspective, Iran's use of the Ansarullah "trump card" to threaten international commerce signifies an extension of its deterrent power beyond the regional sphere.

While prioritizing its attacks on Hamas and Hezbollah, Israel has not neglected targeting Iranian assets in Syria. In this context, Israel has been engaging with Iran in both Lebanon and Syria. On April 1, 2024, during an airstrike in Damascus, Israel targeted the Iranian embassy, resulting in the death of seven Iranian military personnel, including General Mohammad Reza Zahedi.<sup>11</sup> In September, during another attack in Lebanon that assassinated Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Israel also killed Iranian General Abbas Nilforushan.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the Israeli assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran intensified the conflict.

This demonstrates Israel's broader strategy of not only focusing on its immediate adversaries, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, but also actively countering Iran's influence and military presence in the region through precision strikes. Such operations highlight Israel's approach to disrupting Iran's regional network while sending clear deterrent messages to its adversaries. Of course, these attacks marked a transition to a scenario where the indirect conflict between Iran and Israel escalated into a direct confrontation.

## Israel-Iran Direct Conflict

As the pattern of conflict in the region intensifies and increasingly spreads across a larger geographical area, the possibility of the long-standing covert war between Iran and Israel evolving into an open and direct confrontation has gained significant traction. Indeed, the April 1 attack on Iran's embassy in Damascus marked a critical turning point, prompting Iran to launch its first-ever direct attack against Israel in its history. Perceiving the attack as a violation of its national sovereignty, Iran responded on April 13-14 with hundreds of drones and missiles targeting Israel.<sup>13</sup>

However, the symbolic dimension of this response was more pronounced than its material impact. Rather than inflicting substantial physical damage, Iran aimed to demonstrate its military capabilities and to signal that it could strike Israel using missiles launched directly from its territory. This act

underscored Iran's intent to assert its deterrence and strategic reach in the face of escalating tensions.

The assassinations of Ismail Haniyeh, Hassan Nasrallah, and Abbas Nilforushan created a situation that necessitated a response from Iran. Israel's actions dealt a significant blow to Iran's deterrence capabilities, prompting regional partners to question Tehran's inaction. Additionally, a segment of the Iranian population demanded a strong response against Israel. This sentiment culminated in protests outside the National Security Council headquarters, with demonstrators calling for punitive measures against Israel.

As discussed in the first section of this commentary, the post-revolution political narrative of Iran is rooted in the Islamic Republic's self-conception as the voice of the oppressed against "the Great Satan" and its allies. Any damage to this narrative risks widening the gap between the Iranian state and its populace, potentially undermining the system's foundations.

These protests also reflected dissatisfaction with the peaceful tone projected by Iran's reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian during his speeches and statements at the United Nations. Pezeshkian and his administration showed a cautious inclination to de-escalate regional tensions and avoid triggering a direct Iran-Israel war. It can be suggested that certain figures within his cabinet oppose excessive Iranian involvement in the Gaza issue. Foremost among these is

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former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who has been appointed Vice President by Pezeshkian. A widely circulated video on social media shows Zarif stating in a speech, "Iranians are tired of their government being more pro-Palestinian than the Palestinians themselves."<sup>14</sup> This statement reflects a growing sentiment among some Iranian officials advocating for a more measured approach to the Palestinian issue. Iran's delay in retaliation, as well as the measured nature of its eventual response, clearly stemmed from deliberations involving such rational and strategic calculations of Pezeshkian's team.

Ultimately, however, the faction advocating for intervention prevailed. On October 1, Iran launched a ballistic missile attack without prior warning. This assault was more intense than the one in April, inflicting limited but notable damage to military facilities. While the full extent of the damage remains unclear due to Israeli censorship, reports<sup>15</sup> suggest that the Nevatim Airbase and an area in close proximity to Mossad headquarters were struck.

## Iran's most significant advantage in this diplomatic effort lies in its recently improving relations with Gulf states, which have opened new avenues for Tehran to leverage regional alliances and mitigate potential opposition in the face of escalating tensions with Israel

This shift signaled Iran's departure from a merely symbolic stance, positioning itself as a state willing to engage in active conflict. The attack not only reassured Iran's regional allies but also placated domestic public opinion, reinforcing the image of a decisive actor capable of asserting its strength against Israel.

Speculation about how Israel would respond to Iran's actions persisted for days. Finally, on October 26, Israel launched a direct airstrike against Iran using fighter jets. The attack was highly calculated, avoiding targets such as Iran's nuclear facilities or oil refineries that could escalate the conflict into a broader war. In response, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, stated that the Israeli attack should "neither be exaggerated nor underestimated."<sup>16</sup>

The question of whether Iran will respond to Israel's latest attack remains

uncertain. The death of four Iranian soldiers as a result of the strike<sup>17</sup> and the desire to prevent the normalization of sovereignty violations serve as strong motivations for Tehran to retaliate.

However, the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States introduces a new dimension to the equation for Iran. Given the expectation that Trump and his administration will pursue a highly aggressive policy toward Iran,<sup>18</sup> Tehran may avoid taking steps that could actualize Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's ambitions for war. This cautious approach reflects Iran's consideration of potential U.S. reactions under a hawkish administration, which could significantly influence its strategic calculations.

The limited nature of Israel's strike can largely be attributed to pressure from the United States, which is actively working to prevent a large-scale regional war. Additionally, another factor contributing to this restraint is Iran's ongoing focus on regional diplomacy, which has likely played a role in moderating the response and maintaining a degree of control over the situation.

### How Iran Uses the Regional Diplomacy

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi undertook an extensive regional diplomatic tour ahead of Iran's October 1 attack on Israel and Israel's retaliatory strike on October 26. The

tour included visits to Lebanon, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iraq, Oman, Jordan, Egypt, Türkiye, Bahrain, and Kuwait.<sup>19</sup> It can be suggested that Araghchi's primary objective was to secure support for Iran in the event of an Israeli attack or, at the very least, to persuade these countries to remain neutral. He also reportedly urged them not to assist Israel, particularly by denying it access to their airspace or other forms of logistical support.

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Iran's relations with the Gulf region were particularly problematic during Trump's first term. However, the roots of these problems go much further back. For many years, the U.S. and Israel used the Iranian threat as a pretext to arm the Gulf and prepare the ground for U.S. military bases. Especially after the end of the Cold War and starting with the First Gulf War, the U.S. began playing the role of a military security umbrella for the region. In 2016, with the execution of Ayatollah Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, Iran-Saudi Arabia relations experienced one of their most severe crises. Following attacks on Saudi Arabia's diplomatic missions in Iran, diplomatic ties were severed, and the two countries faced a significant crisis. In 2019, the attack on Saudi oil facilities by the Iran backed Houthis

in Yemen<sup>20</sup> was one of the most intense manifestations of the conflict between the two nations.

During this period, the normalization of relations between the UAE and Bahrain with Israel within the framework of the Abraham Accords and their support for Trump's maximum pressure policy against Iran exemplified their anti-Iranian positioning. Furthermore, tensions rose over developments related to the islands dispute between Iran and the UAE. Bahrain, meanwhile, served as another arena for the broader competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

However, with the onset of the Biden Administration, these crises began to de-escalate. A significant breakthrough occurred in March 2023, when Iran and Saudi Arabia signed a surprising normalization agreement in Beijing, mediated by China. According to the agreement, the two countries committed to reopening their embassies and even cooperating in the field of security.

Shortly thereafter, embassies in both countries were reopened, marking a significant step toward normalization. The indirect conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Yemen came to a halt, and even Bahrain began preparing to normalize its relations with Tehran. However, the October 7 attacks significantly influenced the trajectory of developments along the Tehran-Riyadh axis. The subsequent Israeli strikes following the Operation al-Aqsa Flood served



Funeral ceremony for Iranian General Abbas Nilforoushan, killed in the Israeli attack on the Lebanese capital Beirut on September 27, was held in Tehran, Iran on October 15, 2024.  
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as a critical test for the Saudi-Iran détente, both in terms of their bilateral relations and broader regional implications.

The increasing influence of Iranian backed groups in the region was closely monitored by Saudi Arabia with growing concern. Meanwhile, Gulf Arab states, wary of being caught in the crossfire of the Iran-Israel confrontation and its potential repercussions, adopted a highly cautious diplomatic approach. This careful maneuvering underscores the fragility of the détente process amidst heightened regional volatility.

On the other hand, this situation also yielded a positive outcome by ensuring that the conflicts remained within certain limits. While this result was not directly a consequence of the Iran-Saudi normalization pro-

cess, it stemmed from the risk of an uncontrolled escalation that could potentially harm Gulf countries. Nonetheless, the fact that Iran-Saudi normalization had commenced and reached a certain maturity just before the October 7 events enabled the effective use of diplomatic channels. This, in turn, contributed to containing the Iran-Israel conflict, preventing it from spiraling further out of control.

Saudi Arabia quickly issued a statement condemning Israel's attack on Iran. Similarly, the UAE and other countries also denounced the Israeli assault. A noteworthy development in this context was the progress in military cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two nations conducted a joint military exercise in the Sea of Oman.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Saudi Arabia's Chief of General Staff,

Fayyad al-Ruwaili, visited Tehran on November 10, 2024, where he met with his Iranian counterpart, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, to explore opportunities for deepening military collaboration.<sup>22</sup> This visit underscores a significant shift in the security dynamics of the region.

### What Will the New Era Bring?

The trajectory of Iran's future will be shaped by a multitude of factors. The Trump Administration's hawkish stance toward Iran is well anticipated. Although Iran categorically denied allegations of its involvement in an assassination attempt against Trump, such claims intensified the already tense atmosphere between the two nations. From the outset, Iran's leadership responded to Trump's election with caution and prudence, opting to keep the door open for negotiations. While the Democratic Party's governance appeared more favorable for Tehran, Iranian leaders consciously avoided using rhetoric that could suggest burning bridges with Trump. Moreover, Tehran has reportedly taken steps to de-escalate regional tensions, as illustrated by claims<sup>23</sup> that the Supreme Leader encouraged Hezbollah to pursue a ceasefire.

During Trump's presidency, if regional conflict dynamics fail to de-escalate, scenarios advocating for U.S. military intervention in Iran, as desired by the Israeli government, may gain traction. Consequently, Tehran might be inclined to urge restraint among the armed groups it supports.

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Iran may also adopt a more measured response to Israeli aggression, potentially even scaling back its regional presence and influence.

On the other hand, Iran appears poised to enhance its regional diplomacy. The evolving relationship with Saudi Arabia represents a pivotal shift, enabling Iran to engage with regional actors in a manner that counters U.S. influence. Given the shifting Gulf dynamics after October 7, particularly the increasingly negative perception of Israel and Riyadh's visible distancing from Tel Aviv, Trump's ability to rebuild his prior alignment with Gulf states seems implausible. The Gulf's changing posture limits the feasibility of uniting these states against Iran or fostering closer ties with Israel under a renewed Trump Administration.

In this context, Iran is expected to strengthen its diplomatic engage-

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ment with European countries to offset strained relations with the U.S. Particularly concerning its nuclear program, Tehran may adopt a more conciliatory approach, prioritizing collaboration with the United Nations and the European Union. This strategy aligns with the current reformist government, which is committed to maintaining dialogue with the West. In sum, Iran seems prepared to make calculated concessions to avoid significant losses in the new global order.

Domestically, Iran faces mounting pressures, including economic and social crises, compounded by uncertainties surrounding its political future in the post-Khamenei era. Given these challenges, the government is likely to pursue initiatives aimed at fostering internal unity. Such initiatives have already surfaced under Pezeshkian's Administration, with Kurdish, Baluchi and Sunni minorities being appointed to key governmental positions. These moves suggest Tehran's intent to for-

tify its domestic front against external threats.

However, Iran's vulnerabilities in foreign policy extend beyond its tensions with Israel and the U.S. The South Caucasus and its disputes with Azerbaijan are additional points of contention. The Iran-Azerbaijan rivalry persists across various domains, further exacerbated by Azerbaijan-Israel relations, which often intertwine with the broader Iran-Israel conflict. Speculation on social media about Iran potentially retaliating against Israel through Azerbaijan, or claims of Azerbaijan's territory being used for intelligence purposes against Iran, underscore the intensity of these tensions. While recent joint military exercises between Iran and Azerbaijan<sup>24</sup> suggest that their rivalry remains controlled, the possibility of escalation cannot be entirely ruled out.

In conclusion, Iran faces the intricate task of navigating interconnected domestic and international dynamics. Its strategy seems to prioritize pragmatic measures that minimize losses while maintaining strategic flexibility. This approach underscores Iran's inclination to accept smaller setbacks to preserve its broader geopolitical and national interests, steering clear of isolationist policies or dramatic withdrawals from the international stage. ■

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