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The Strategic Thinking of the Islamic Republic of Iran: continuity, evolution or change after the War in Gaza?

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Abstract:

The limitations that Iran has encountered in its deterrence strategy, following Israel's war in Gaza and extended to Lebanon, have forced the Iranian regime's leaders to rethink their security strategy, considering the possibility of changing the country's nuclear doctrine to achieve the atomic bomb and thus achieve a definitive deterrent. The moment is critical as it faces an escalation of the conflict with Israel, an ongoing regional military campaign against its partners of the Axis of Resistance, the re-ascension of Donald Trump to the US presidency and the approaching end of the era of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, being forced to reevaluate its strategic balance, its regional and global policies, and its security strategy.

Keywords:

Iran, Israel, USA, Middle East, Axis of Resistance, militias, nuclear doctrine, JCPOA, IAEA, negotiations, Donald Trump, strategic thinking, deterrence, Khamenei.

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Iran's strategic thinking until 2023

Since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and especially as a consequence of the traumatic experience of the war against Iraq, Iran defined a strategy, both defensive and offensive, in which, with significant resource limitations, it had to confront increasingly ambitious objectives (its foreign policy of expanding the Islamic Revolution) and unforeseen regional situations as they arose. To avoid the high costs of conventional warfare, and given the circumstances of a lack of state allies, the large number of regional and international adversaries with better resources, and the significant limitations of its armed forces due to international sanctions, Tehran was forced to develop a military doctrine that avoided direct or protracted conflict with superior powers.

Iran's weakness for a conventional confrontation against militarily stronger countries led it to identify two major enemies in the Middle East, the US and Israel, whose opposition and confrontation with these two countries becomes a basic tenet of its strategic thinking. In addition to the difference in military power, there are ideological factors that benefit the regime in clearly identifying these two enemies: the historical factor of Western interference in Iran, as well as US and Israeli support for the Sahara, lending legitimacy to the Islamic Revolution. The US and the West in general are also portrayed as responsible for imposing an international economic, political and security system that promotes the exploitation and neo-colonialism of many developing countries; and finally, anti-Zionism and sponsoring the destruction of the state of Israel facilitates the identification of Iran as the leader of the Muslim world through aid to Palestinian militias.

Considering all the aspects that make up Iran's strategic culture (geography, historical legacy, shared beliefs, etc.), strategic thinking is defined, which can be summarised in the following principles:

- 1) Iran's entire strategic thinking revolves around the primary objective of ensuring the regime's survival and its own stability. The pursuit of these two objectives is based on 1) deterring any adversary from attacking it, mainly Middle Eastern rivals (supported by the US), leading it to pursue the concept of regional strategic depth; 2) mitigating its international isolation ; and 3) preferring to be militarily self-sufficient, developing its own weapons programmes and systems. This makes it a country with a fundamentally defensive character.

- 2) Threats to the regime can be internal or external, with the regime giving priority to internal threats over external ones, such that the surveillance and control of Iranian society, the internal stability of the country, as well as any fight against any kind of subversion or rebellion are a priority in the security policy approach of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- 3) Decision-making in the area of security and defence is based on a rational logic that considers the regime's own perception of the threats to its principles and national interests, looking at issues such as when the state might be in danger, the continuity of the Islamic Revolution, religious leadership in the Muslim world in general and in particular in Shia communities, the economic viability of the regime, etc. At the same time, ideological aspects and pragmatic aspects of state interest are contemplated, with the regime's internal framework of debate and decision-making determined between these two poles of discussion. The ideology of the Islamic revolution can often conflict with utilitarian or opportunistic aspects of security or foreign policy. When these circumstances occur, the pragmatic aspects of expediency tend to prevail, as the regime's principles may be temporarily suspended.
- 4) Iran develops and implements its military strategy and doctrine in a reactive and opportunistic manner with the aim of defusing and neutralising US conventional military superiority made available to its allies in the Middle East who are Iran's rivals.
- 5) For reasons of history, regional political context, occasion, and necessity due to the assumption of not being able to win a conventional military conflict in its regional environment due to the support and superiority of US aid to its adversaries, Iran has a predilection for confronting its rivals through external militia or paramilitary groups, which develop asymmetric conflicts of no high intensity in other countries, popularly known as proxy groups or proxy warfare. In this way Iran implements its security policy, expanding its influence and avoiding being attacked at home by shifting the conflict and keeping its enemies far from its borders (advanced defence), through a type of confrontation that links it indirectly, making escalation difficult or limited.

- 6) In addition to the provision of a network of partner groups, to complement and strengthen its deterrence capabilities and better compensate for its conventional military limitations, Iran has developed three further defence elements:
- a ballistic missile and drone manufacturing programme that provides it with a rapid means of response, power projection and self-sufficiency.
 - a nuclear programme.
 - an international external network which, through hired assassins or terrorist groups, can carry out attacks against opponents or opponents of the regime anywhere in the world.
- 7) When Iran decides to intervene in another country in support of a group that is sympathetic to its ideas or regional objectives, certain characteristics tend to emerge, which demonstrate Iranian behaviour and its ability to seize any opportunity to its advantage, such as the following:
- The country is a failed or failing state of some geo-strategic importance and a disorganised political system with groups willing to use lethal force to achieve power in line with Iran's objectives.
 - There is a Shia community that considers itself under serious threat.
 - There is a direct logistical path with Iran, so that Iran can transfer personnel, materiel and weapons in support of its allies, as well as bring in militia fighters for training and indoctrination.
 - There is no external actor with sufficient will and capability to threaten Iran's objectives and end its intervention in Iran.

The outbreak of war in Gaza on 7 October 2023

On 7 October 2023, Saturday and the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, Hamas, a Palestinian terrorist group based in the Gaza Strip, launched a devastating and coordinated attack that shook southern and central Israel. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had to declare a state of war in Israel and Operation Swords of Iron was launched by the Israeli army.

In a little less than two months, what started as a one-front war in Gaza turned into a multi-front war encompassing Middle Eastern countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq and later Iran, realising for the first time the Iranian doctrine of the "arena unification campaign"¹, whereby the Iranian regime implemented its deterrence policy against Israel by creating a buffer zone called the "ring of fire"² to encircle, pressure and attack Israel through its non-state regional allies from different fronts.

In the current Gaza war, two important developments have taken place for the first time that affect the security framework of the entire Middle East:

- All members of the Axis of Resistance have decided to attack Israel militarily and simultaneously in solidarity with one of its members, Hamas.
- Iran has militarily and directly attacked Israel and has been attacked, in response, on its own territory.

On this last point, and because it is of crucial relevance, Iran's attacks on Israel and vice versa merit special comment and are described below.

On 13 April 2024, in response to the 1 April Israeli attack on the compound adjacent to the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, in which Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps General Mohammad Reza Zahedi was killed, Iran launched an attack, dubbed True Promise, against Israeli territory with approximately 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles and 120 ballistic missiles. As a result, only a few ballistic missiles penetrated Israeli air defences and landed near military bases, with Israel achieving an interception rate of over 90% thanks to its defence systems and the help of its Western and Arab allies who assisted in intercepting the missiles.

Israel's response to True Promise came five days later. On 18 April, Israeli fighter jets over unspecified airspace outside Iran fired at least three missiles at an Iranian conventional army (Artesh) air base in Esfahan. According to Western media, the target was reportedly a radar system associated with an S-300PMU2 surface-to-air missile battery, a system provided to Iran by Russia in 2016, which is part of the air defence

¹ Amir Hossein Vazirian, "Iran's unification of the arenas campaign against Israel: Foundations and prospects", Middle East Institute, September 26, 2023. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-unification-arenas-campaign-against-israel-foundations-and-prospects>

² Tom Nagorski, "Iran's 'Ring of Fire' Is In Trouble. What Comes Next?", The Cipher Brief, November 17th, 2024. <https://www.cipherbrief.com/analysis/iran-ring-of-fire-is-in-trouble-what-comes-next/>

system protecting the Natanz nuclear complex, one of Iran's main uranium enrichment facilities, approximately 170km north of Esfahan .³

On 1 October 2024, in response to the assassinations of Ismail Haniya in Tehran (leader of Hamas, 31 July 2024), Hasan Nasrallah in Beirut (leader of Hezbollah, 27 September 2024) and Abbas Nilforushan (general of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who was alongside Nasrallah), Iran launched a second strike, called True Promise 2, against Israeli territory with approximately 180 ballistic missiles, which would include Emad and Ghadr, Fatah missiles to destroy Israel's Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 anti-ballistic missile intercept systems, and, Iran said, also for the first time its domestically produced Fatah-2 medium-range hypersonic ballistic missile⁴ . Iranian Defence Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh said the targets were Israeli "military, operational and intelligence" centres associated with the assassination of Ismail Haniya, namely the Nevatim airbase outside Beth Sheva in the Negev, which houses Israeli F-35s, the Hatzertim airbase, also in the Negev desert, and the Tel Nof airbase, 20km south of Tel Aviv. In addition to these locations, there were ballistic missile impacts in at least three other areas: 1) an area south of Herzliya, near the Israeli army's Gilot Intelligence Base, which houses the IDF's 8200 Signals Collection Unit, and the Mossad Headquarters; 2) a school in Gedera, located near the Tel Nof airbase; and 3) an area near the Ayalon shopping centre in Ramat Gan. This shopping centre is adjacent to the west of Yarkon Park, where the Shin Bet is based. This Iranian strike killed a Palestinian in the West Bank, and shrapnel slightly injured two Israelis in Tel Aviv .⁵

Israel's response to True Promise 2 came on 25 October. On this day, the Israeli military carried out three waves of strikes against Iran, affecting 20 locations in the west of the country and around Tehran, namely:

- The Parchin and Joyir industrial complexes on the outskirts of Tehran, and the Taksaz Industrial Innovators Engineering Company (TIECO) factory in Shams Abad, Tehran province. The Parchin and Joyir complexes develop and manufacture advanced weapons systems, including solid-fuel ballistic missiles and drones (although there were no known nuclear activities at the Parchin and

³ ABC News, "Israelis fired 3 missiles in limited strike", Apr 19, 2024.

⁴ DefaPress, "انهدام جنگنده‌های اف-۳۵ رژیم صهیونیستی در پایگاه", October 2024. <https://defapress.ir/fa/news/695578>

⁵ The Critical Threats Project (CTP) at the American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War (ISW).

Joyir complexes at the time of the attack, explosive tests for Iran's nuclear weapons programme were conducted at the Parchin complex in the past⁶. In mid-November reports emerged that at the Parchin complex in particular Iran had probably restarted research into the development of a nuclear weapon⁷). These attacks would have seriously affected the equipment Iran uses to produce the fuel for its most advanced ballistic missiles.

- Two Russian-made S-300 air defence batteries. These destroyed batteries were reportedly one at Tehran's international airport and the other near the air defence centre of the Hazrat Amir brigade belonging to the Artesh located in the city of Eslamshahar, Tehran province. A radar was also destroyed in Qadir, about 15 km from Ahvaz in Khuzestan province.
- A missile facility in Shahrud, Semnab province, and a military complex in Parand⁸, Tehran province.
- Critical energy infrastructure defence systems in western and south-western Iran (of the Abadan oil refinery, the Bandar Imam Khomeini port and petrochemical complex and the Tangeh Bijar gas field).

The repercussions of this attack are that Iran will probably need months or almost a year to acquire new solid fuel mixture equipment, will have to stop shipping missiles and drones to some of its partners, such as Russia, Hezbollah and the Houthis⁹, and will be much more vulnerable to future attacks because its long-range air defence capabilities have been destroyed.

Consequences of Israel's attacks on Iran's strategic thinking

The current situation in the Middle East is posing a number of challenges to Iran and its Axis of Resistance partners that call into question the effectiveness of its deterrence

⁶ Jonathan Landay, "Satellite photos show Israel hit Iran former nuclear weapons test building, missile facilities, researchers say", Reuters, October 28, 2024. <https://www.>

⁷ Barak Ravid, "Scoop: Israel destroyed active nuclear weapons research facility in Iran, officials say", Axios, Nov 15, 2024. <https://www.axios.com/2024/11/15/iran-israel-destroyed-active-nuclear-weapons-research-facility>

⁸ Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, "Israel Struck Air Defenses Around Critical Iranian Energy Sites, Officials Say", The New York Times, Oct. 26, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/26/world/middleeast/israel-air-defenses-iran-energy-sites.html>

⁹ David Yagüe, "Lo que ha provocado el ataque de Israel sobre Irán: preocupación en Teherán y un inesperado efecto en Rusia e Hizbolá", ABC, 28/10/2024. <https://www.>

strategy vis-à-vis its enemies. In recent months, shortcomings in Iran's security strategy have become apparent and are prompting debate among Iran's ruling elites, pointing to adjustments or strategic change, primarily in terms of its deterrence strategy, and in particular the effectiveness of its doctrine of using militias and its strategic military capabilities with its missile and drone programme, in light of Israel's military successes against the Axis of Resistance, especially Hezbollah, and the direct attacks between Israel and Iran.

The Gaza war has caused serious damage to Hamas, but of particular concern to the Iranian regime is the situation of Hezbollah, Iran's most valuable strategic asset in the region. Tehran has been investing in Hezbollah, and in the creation and strengthening of associated non-state groups, for four decades, intending it to serve as a key deterrent against Israel. The strategy was largely based on the assumption that the threat of an indirect Iranian response through these groups would deter Israel from waging direct war against it, but this strategy has been seriously challenged by the weakening capabilities of Iran's regional allies, namely Hezbollah and Hamas, as a result of Israel's continued and growing military offensive. Iran's use of and support for Axis of Resistance groups, intended to minimise the risk of being drawn into direct military conflict, has ultimately led to a direct military confrontation with Israel: everything they planned to happen has not happened; everything they did not want to happen is happening.

With regard to the second element of deterrence, Iran's missile and drone programme was intended to deploy a protective umbrella over its allies and Iran itself, and to establish deterrence against Israel and the US, so that it could continue to maintain an offensive capability without being directly exposed to Israeli fire, thus enjoying a sphere of immunity, but this is no longer the case, especially after Israel's 26 October attack. Iran's deterrence capability has been severely disrupted in recent months, placing it in a situation of potential direct military confrontation with Israel, in complete contradiction to the fundamentals of its defence strategy.

The possibility that Israel could emerge victorious poses a very unfavourable scenario for Iran, in which in addition to losing its asymmetric deterrence capability and suffering a blow to its military and political credibility, especially vis-à-vis its allies, it could prompt Arab countries to resume talks and cooperation with Israel, creating an Arab-Israeli

coalition, despite continued diplomatic communication between Iran and the Gulf States, and rapprochement with Saudi Arabia .¹⁰

In terms of Iran's external network to carry out terrorist attacks, as the Iran-Israel conflict intensifies, Tehran is agitating the West with a wave of attempted attacks and kidnappings against targets in Europe and the US. According to a Reuters investigation¹¹ , since 2020, there have been at least 33 assassination or kidnapping attempts in the West in which local or Israeli authorities have alleged a link to Iran. Among the most recent targets of these alleged plots are allegedly senior US officials (especially those during Donald Trump's first presidency who were responsible for the assassination of General Qasem Solimani in 2020), Donald Trump himself in his last election campaign, as well as Iranian journalists and other opponents in the Iranian diaspora. Mossad director David Barnea said last year that, during 2022, Israeli intelligence had worked with international partners to disrupt 27 teams that attempted to organise attacks abroad that were "orchestrated, planned and directed by Iran".

Finally, it remains to analyse the options presented by Iran's nuclear programme in the new defence and security reality that is taking shape in the Middle East, being the only current element of Iran's security strategy on which the regime can act with a chance of success to achieve a definitive deterrent against future Israeli or US aggression.

The Iranian atomic bomb: change of doctrine or negotiation strategy?

Last summer, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officially urged Iran to improve its cooperation with the IAEA much further and to reverse all the impediments it was imposing that prevented the agency from doing its job properly. The main international concern was that Iran was known to be continuing to enrich uranium outside IAEA control and that it intended to accelerate the process by installing eight more IR-6 centrifuges at the Fordo underground enrichment plant, some 32 km north-east of the city of Qom. According to the IAEA itself, Iran would have reached a stockpile of 164.7 kg of

¹⁰ Rosaleen Carroll, "What to make of Saudi-Iranian flurry of diplomatic activity, military channels?", Al-Monitor, Nov 13, 2024. <https://www.>

¹¹ Renee Maltezou, Cassell Bryan-Low, Yannis Souliotis and Phil Stewart, "Murder for hire: Inside Iran's proxy war with Israel in the West", Reuters, October 5, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/investigations/murder-hire-inside-irans-proxy-war-with-israel-west-2024-10-05/>

uranium in the form of 60 per cent enriched UF₆ (two more kg, enriched to 90 per cent, could theoretically make four nuclear bombs) .¹²

At the same time that the IAEA was expressing concern about Iran's nuclear activity, Iran's foreign minister, Abas Araqchi, in an interview on 23 August, stated that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the international agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue, had to be renegotiated, since in its current form it could not be revived and a new negotiation would have to be opened for its modification, had to be renegotiated, as in its current form it could not be revived and a new negotiation for its modification would have to be opened, warning that this possible future negotiation would be more complex than the first one as "international conditions have changed: the war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on Europe's security prospects and international security arrangements. In addition, the war in Gaza and the violence perpetrated by the Israeli regime has completely altered the regional landscape"¹³ . Iran did not reject a new negotiation, but was going to impose more conditions.

Iran's new position on the JCPOA, where until recently it maintained the position of keeping the agreement as originally agreed in 2015, is due to the current context in the Middle East, where Israel is facing important allies of Iran, having weakened them considerably, assassinated the leaders of Hamas and Hezbollah, and attacked Iranian territory a couple of times, which has made Iranian leaders have to rethink the effectiveness of their deterrence strategy against Israel. And it is in this context that the discussion of whether or not to develop nuclear weapons as a more effective deterrent has arisen among Iran's ruling elite.

Although the production of nuclear weapons is forbidden under a fatwa of Supreme Leader Khamenei, and in this sense there is currently no other possibility, the political and even religious debate to reverse this fatwa is nothing new and has appeared over the years with some recurrence. Perhaps one of the most significant cases in recent times was when in February 2021, Iran's intelligence minister, Mahmoud Alavi, stated in an interview that "The Supreme Leader has explicitly said in his fatwa that nuclear weapons are contrary to the Shari'a and that the Islamic Republic considers them a religious

¹² Francois Murphy, "Iran's uranium enrichment rolls on, key issues stalled, IAEA reports show", Reuters, August 29, 2024. <https://www.>

¹³ Iran Press News Agency, "Iran's Araghchi: JCPOA Cannot Be Revived; New Negotiations Must Be Formed", 24 August 2024. <https://iranpress.com/iran-s-araghchi--jcpoa-cannot-be-revived--new-negotiations-must-be-formed>

prohibition and does not seek them. But a cornered cat may behave differently than when it is free. And if they [Western states] push Iran in that direction, then it is no longer Iran's fault"¹⁴ . In the past year, statements by senior Iranian security officials and parliamentarians about the possibility of Iran changing its nuclear doctrine and developing an atomic weapon have become increasingly direct and frequent, and have also found their way into the Iranian media, where discussions on the topic have become commonplace.

This Iranian perception that a nuclear balance might be the only way to achieve effective deterrence, beyond the regional conjuncture, is also framed by the dynamics of global nuclear proliferation, which also influences Iran's calculus, as it takes into account how the war in Ukraine has brought nuclear deterrence back to the forefront of relations between the great powers, particularly between the US and Russia, with the recent change in the latter's nuclear doctrine¹⁵ , but also in the Pacific with China. This is how the statements made by Iran's foreign minister mentioned above, which expressly alluded to the war in Ukraine and the new security frameworks in the world, can be understood. Nor can the regime of economic sanctions imposed by the West on Iran for its nuclear programme be ignored, leading to the Iranian argument that they are enduring sanctions for acquiring nuclear weapons without actually having them.

Of all the factors that Iranian leaders may be considering in making a decision on whether or not to obtain the atomic bomb, the key one is the evolving perception of the critical threat to the regime's survival. At the time of writing, it appears that the decision has already been made and the Iranian regime is committed to acquiring the capability to produce the nuclear bomb as soon as possible, depending on the following developments:

On 21 November, the IAEA Board of Governors approved an E3 (UK, France and Germany) censure resolution against Iran¹⁶ . The resolution censures Iran for not cooperating with the international body and for not complying with the Nuclear Non-

¹⁴ Reuters, "Iran's spy chief says Tehran could seek nuclear arms if 'cornered' by West", February 9, 2021. <https://www.>

¹⁵ Guy Faulconbridge and Anton Kolodyazhnyy, "Putin issues warning to United States with new nuclear doctrine", Reuters, November 20, 2024. <https://www.>

¹⁶ Francois Murphy, "IAEA Board passes Iran resolution as West pushes Tehran towards talks", Reuters, November 21, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/un-nuclear-watchdogs-35-nation-board-passes-resolution-against-iran-2024-11-21/>

Proliferation Treaty, requiring the IAEA to produce a full report on Iranian nuclear activities by spring 2025, which will most likely point to Iran's non-compliance with the JCPOA, setting the stage for the E3 to re-impose UN Security Council sanctions on Iran known as "snapback" sanctions¹⁷. This resolution comes after the IAEA issued a report on 19 November proving that Iran had increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium since August 2024^{18,19}.

Iran's response to the IAEA resolution promoted by the E3, and backed by the US, was immediate, the following day on 22 November, ordering the activation of "a substantial number of centrifuges to enrich uranium"²⁰, and threatening to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if snapback sanctions are activated. Iran could activate some of the IR-6 or IR-2m centrifuges it has installed at the Fordo and Natanz nuclear facilities, respectively, in recent months. The IAEA confirmed in August 2024 that Iran had installed, but not yet activated, eight IR-6 centrifuge cascades at Fordo, and in August 10 IR-2m centrifuge cascades at Natanz. In addition, it would have installed six additional IR-2m centrifuge cascades at Natanz since August 2024, bringing the total number of IR-2m centrifuge cascades at Natanz to 37. Only 15 of these 37 cascades had been activated as of November 2024²¹, increasing Iran's uranium enrichment rate over the next four to six months.

In these circumstances, Iran can consider three scenarios:

- 1) Latent nuclear deterrence scenario: Iran would continue to develop its nuclear programme to reach just the stage before producing the first nuclear bomb. In this scenario Iran would not officially block access to the IAEA or withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and would even start negotiations with the E3 in

¹⁷ Henry Rome, Louis Dugit-Gros, "Snapback Sanctions on Iran: More Bark Than Bite?", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Oct 25, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/snapback-sanctions-iran-more-bark-bite>

¹⁸ Stephanie Liechtenstein, "Iran defies international pressure, increasing its stockpile of near weapons-grade uranium, UN says", Associated Press, November 19, 2024. <https://apnews>.

¹⁹ Iran's official counter-argument to this report was issued in an official document of the Permanent Mission of Iran to the United Nations and other international organisations in Vienna, and can be read at the following link: <https://www>.

²⁰ Europa Press International, Iran announces activation of "a substantial number" of centrifuges following IAEA board resolution, 22 November 2024. <https://www>.

²¹ The official IAEA documents where these data can be checked can be downloaded from the following links dated 29 August 2024 and 19 November 2024:

- 29 August 2024: <https://www>
- 19 November 2024: <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/24/11/gov2024-61.pdf>

Geneva, but would continue to increase its enrichment capacity by activating thousands of centrifuges. The idea would be that simply being ready to make its first nuclear bomb immediately would be enough to deter attacks on its territory, since, if such attacks were to occur, Tehran could move quickly to take the final step and produce the nuclear weapon.

- 2) A scenario of a determined bid to build a nuclear bomb as soon as possible: Iran would conclude that an attack by Israel and probably the US is inevitable. If this perception of an imminent threat were to prevail, it could catalyse Iran's development of nuclear weapons by assuming the risk of a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities²², with members of the Iranian regime already arguing that it should start building the nuclear bomb before Trump officially takes office in order to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the next US administration, considering also the strong support it seems likely to show for Israel, which could embolden Netanyahu's government to attack Iran's nuclear facilities.
- 3) Diplomatic negotiation scenario: Iran, led by its new president, Masud Pezeshkian, would propose to the West to initiate diplomatic talks with a fresh approach that would not only focus on the nuclear issue, but include a broader range of political and security issues, thus ensuring the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme. This view has been expressed by Pezeshkian and his foreign minister publicly²³ and may be seeking to use the progress of its nuclear programme and the implicit threat of achieving the nuclear bomb as leverage for further diplomatic gains, including security guarantees in the region and the lifting of economic sanctions.

Regardless of which scenario Iran's leaders choose, none is easy and all have their risks. The bid for a nuclear bomb may not prevent a serious conflict with Israeli or US forces but rather accelerate it, potentially putting an end to the Islamic regime, a key issue that has determined Iran's security strategy since the triumph of the Islamic revolution.

Khamenei, by maintaining his fatwa prohibiting the production, stockpiling and use of nuclear weapons, appears to give no scope for changing Iran's nuclear doctrine, but a

²² Asriran, بگيرندمحسن رضایی : اسرائیل شاید به ایران حمله کند؛ دولتهای منطقه هر چه زودتر تصمیم, September 28, 2024.

²³ Parisa Hafezi, "Iran's Pezeshkian says Tehran ready to work with world powers to resolve nuclear standoff", Reuters, September 25, 2024. <https://www.>

fatwa can be changed according to circumstances, and the Iranian Supreme Leader has maintained that reaching the threshold of nuclear capability is crucial to deter Iran's enemies, recalling the case of Muammar al-Gaddafi, who dismantled his nuclear programme and this did not prevent his overthrow by Western-backed forces, or the contrast between the immunity enjoyed by North Korea, which possesses nuclear weapons, and the fate of Saddam Hussein, who lacked them, showing the relevance of nuclear weapons.

Donald Trump's return to the US presidency

The arrival of Donald Trump as US President on 20 January 2025 and the first steps he takes with regard to Iran will be key elements in determining the Iranian regime's perceived critical existential risk, and will play an important role in determining whether or not Iran accelerates the development of nuclear weapons.

From the past, the record is not good for Iran. In his first term, Trump pursued a strategy of 'maximum pressure' on Iran, withdrawing from the deal restricting its nuclear energy programme, re-imposing strict enforcement of comprehensive secondary sanctions on all sectors of Iran's economy, including its oil industry, and ordering the strike that killed General Qasem Solimani. Trump justified his withdrawal from the nuclear deal, which was negotiated by the Obama administration, because it did not cover the full range of Iran's threats, including ballistic missiles and support for associated militias in the Middle East.

At present, for this new mandate, in the election campaign, Trump said he would renew the campaign of maximum pressure against Iran²⁴ and the candidates he has proposed for positions of responsibility in defence, security and intelligence generally have the common denominator of having at some point publicly expressed harsh positions against Iran, especially on the issue of the nuclear programme and the return to sanctions, as well as showing support for Israel. In this regard, Mike Waltz (proposed for National Security Advisor), Pete Hegseth (proposed for Secretary of the Department of Defence), John Ratcliffe (proposed to head the CIA), and Marco Rubio (proposed for Secretary of the State Department) stand out. The only person who stands out from the group, and

²⁴ Warren P. Strobel, Benoit Faucon and Lara Seligman, "Trump to Renew 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign Against Iran", The Wall Street Journal, Nov. 8, 2024. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/trump-to-renew-maximum-pressure-campaign-against-iran-f0db5fd5>

has expressed opposing views, is Tulsi Gabbard, nominated for Director of National Intelligence.

And for the day after Trump enters the White House, what is the Trump administration going to do about Iran? We all know that it is one thing to say what you say when you are not in office or on the campaign trail, and quite another what you do when you are in power. Besides, isn't it said that Trump is unpredictable?

On 11 November Elon Musk, one of Trump's top advisors, met in New York, it is not known whether he was asked to do so by Trump, with the Iranian ambassador to the United Nations. According to The New York Times, the meeting was at Musk's request and focused on how to defuse tensions between Tehran and Washington, with unofficial Iranian sources claiming it was positive and good news²⁵.

Last October, Donald Trump was interviewed by Tehran-born American Patrick Bet-David for his PBD Podcast, covering various topics for over an hour. One of the main topics of the interview²⁶ was his position on Iran if he were to become the next US president. Some of the phrases Trump gave were: "I would like to see Iran be very successful... [...] ... the only thing is they can't have a nuclear weapon". "We can't get totally involved," Trump said when asked by Iranian-American host Patrick Bet-David if he wanted to see a new government in Tehran, "Let's face it, Patrick," he said, "We can't run it ourselves." On the question of regime change in Iran, in a 7 November interview on CNN, Brian Hook, Trump's former envoy for Iran, said that the president-elect "understands that the main driver of instability in the Middle East today is the Iranian regime", although "President Trump has no interest in regime change. The future of Iran will be decided by the Iranian people. I think we have said that repeatedly for four years. But what President Trump said in Riyadh was that he would isolate Iran diplomatically and weaken it economically so that it cannot finance all the violence that is going on with the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and those actors that are destabilising Israel and our Gulf partners today"²⁷.

²⁵ Farnaz Fassihi, "Elon Musk Met With Iran's U.N. Ambassador, Iranian Officials Say", The New York Times, Nov. 14, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/14/world/middleeast/elon-musk-iran-trump.html>

²⁶ Patrick Bet-David, "Donald Trump Gets Emotional - Speaks On Tariffs, Obama & Iran | PBD Podcast | 489", PBD Podcast, 17 Oct 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-dmwG54QsKc>

²⁷ CNN, transcript of interview with Brian Hook, November 07, 2024. <https://transcripts>.

Some Iranian leaders believe that Trump's unpredictable policies, as well as his desire to be seen as an exceptional negotiator and to boast that no new wars will be declared under his rule, could be signs that diplomacy may still be possible. In the days following the election, already knowing that Trump had won, senior Iranian officials gave cautious signals of readiness for dialogue.

Iranian President Masud Pezeshkian has repeatedly expressed his willingness to work with the US to resume negotiations on the Iranian nuclear deal and seek relief for his ailing economy through such an agreement, and Iranian Foreign Minister Abas Araqchi said that "The channels of communication between us and the Americans still exist"²⁸, although there are also factions in the Iranian elites who oppose any negotiations, especially if they are under "maximum pressure".

The point is that Iran is weaker today than it was eight years ago, when Trump took office. Now, its economy is in more dire straits, its leaders are older, and its advanced defence deterrence strategy is largely crippled by Israel's attacks on Hamas and Hezbollah and the country's missile production facilities. Even if Iran wanted to rebuild and continue to maintain its militias across the Middle East, it would require money it does not have. However, Iran's nuclear programme has expanded substantially since Trump left office in January 2021, and the international context has also changed considerably in its favour.

If, when Trump arrives at the White House, the information he receives is that Iran continues to press ahead and accelerate its nuclear weapons programme, as seems evident, the first thing he will most likely intend to do will be to re-establish the policy of maximum pressure by focusing on Iran's main source of economic income, oil sales²⁹, mainly to China, which will be a further factor to take into account in bilateral trade issues between the US and the Asian giant.

International power relations will greatly influence the Trump administration's ability to effectively impose economic sanctions on Iran, and this is not an easy context. Ties between Iran and world powers Russia and China are an important part of the strategic challenge facing the US. Over the past few years Iran has managed to establish strategic partnerships with Russia, which is heavily indebted to Iran as the latter has become a

²⁸ AFP, Iran says communication channels with US 'still exist', The Times of Israel, 13 November 2024. <https://www.>

²⁹ Warren P. Strobel, Benoit Faucon and Lara Seligman, "Trump to Renew 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign Against Iran", The Wall Street Journal, Nov. 8, 2024. <https://www.>

supplier of drones and missiles for its operations in Ukraine, and with China, which buys oil from Iran at below market price, providing Iran with critical economic support, as well as diplomatic backing, alongside Russia, in the UN Security Council.

All Arab Gulf states have also improved their ties with Iran since Trump left office in 2021, all of them seeking to de-escalate conflicts in the region involving Iran and its Axis of Resistance allies³⁰. Arab leaders share a common concern that an open war between Iran and Israel and/or the US could spread throughout the Middle East, derailing their plans or visions for economic diversification.

However, Trump may find greater support for his policies of maximum economic pressure on Iran from European leaders as they have hardened their policies towards Iran in response to its aid to Russia in Ukraine. Some European leaders support a swift reinstatement of all UN sanctions against Iran in accordance with the provisions of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 that enshrined the JCPOA in international law, as we have already seen with the censure resolution against Iran passed by the OEIA Board of Governors promoted by the E3 group (UK, France and Germany) and backed by the US.

The "Resilience" Axis

The Iranians are known for their strategic patience and ability to learn lessons and improve. General Qasem Solimani, the chief architect of Iran's entire strategy of deterrence through militias in the Middle East, stated that "The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has a structure, statutes, rules and regulations, but in reality it is an intellectual system" and summed up the purpose of its activity as "creating opportunities out of dark crises"³¹. This way of thinking can be extended to the entire Iranian Islamic regime, which has been able to adapt over time, since the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, to historical developments in accordance with both internal and external events.

Similarly, the groups or organisations that make up the Axis of Resistance have, time and again, demonstrated a persistent adaptability and resilience over time, resulting in large part from Iranian assistance and connections with each other, as well as within their own

³⁰ Reuters, "Saudi armed forces chief of staff in Iran for talks with officials", November 10, 2024. <https://www.>

³¹ "The unpublished text of Haj Qasim's speech to the commanders," Mashregh News (Ir), March 14, 2022.

societies and states - indeed, they have become so deeply integrated into the fabric of their respective states that the formal heads of government in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Gaza are all members of groups with Axis of Resistance ties or were elected with Axis of Resistance support.

The transnational relationships of these groups with each other have often enabled them to cope with various shocks, including military setbacks, as a crucial insurance policy during periods of shock. Moreover, these transnational relationships that make up the Axis of Resistance imply that Hamas, Hezbollah, or any other Axis of Resistance group, are best understood not just as individual non-state actors or armed insurgent groups, but as interconnected nodes of enduring political, economic, military and ideological networks of influence.

Despite undeniable US or Israeli military superiority, historical experience indicates that military action alone is unlikely to succeed in eradicating Axis of Resistance organisations and regimes. To be sure, Israel's strategy of total war will continue to produce short-term tactical victories that degrade the capabilities of Iranian-associated groups and militias, forcing them into a kind of survival mode for a time. But without a comprehensive political solution that takes into account the social embeddedness of these groups, the Axis of Resistance is likely to fall back on its local social bases of influence, which, coupled with its transnational connections, will allow it to reconfigure itself locally and regionally.

Iran is at a critical stage where it has to decide in a short period of time on a new strategy in light of the setbacks and challenges facing the regime. It is a reality that the Iranian leadership will have to re-evaluate its security approach, especially its deterrence strategy to ensure the fundamental objective of guaranteeing the survival of the Islamic regime amidst both internal and external threats.

Given Israel's effectiveness in the war and, as a consequence, the shortcomings that have emerged over the past year in Iran's ability to effectively deter its enemies with its current security concept, Iranian leaders need to reassess their principles and adapt them to the evolving realities and lessons learned from the arena unification campaign, and may opt for the following approaches:

- 1) Pragmatic-reformist approach: this would be led by President Pezeshkian, and would prioritise Iran's domestic challenges, in particular economic issues. This

approach would advocate seeking a negotiated solution with the West on the nuclear issue, leading to sanctions relief. It would be complemented by easing tensions at the regional level, with its Arab neighbours, with a focus on economic development.

- 2) Limited adjustments approach: this approach suggests that the Iranian leadership, despite the damage suffered so far in the war, considers the current security strategy of deterrence to be valid, albeit with certain adjustments that should be made to strengthen its deterrence capability. A section of the Iranian leadership believes that Israel lacks the capacity to achieve a decisive victory over Iran and its allied groups and that Israel's recent operational achievements do not shift the balance of power in its favour. Iran's pursuit of a nuclear threshold and the support of Russia and China would tip the strategic balance in favour of Iran and its Axis of Resistance. In this regard, on 23 October 2024, Khamenei claimed that the 'Zionists' had failed to dismantle the 'resistance' groups, asserting that Hamas, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah and the rest of the groups continue to fight despite Israel's killing more than 50,000 innocent civilians and several Axis of Resistance leaders, and despite continued US support. On 31 October, a few days after the Israeli attack on Iran, Khamenei reiterated that the Axis of Resistance would eventually prevail over the "evil front" backing Israel, and that the "resistance groups" continue to fight Israel with the same strength and determination.
- 3) Nuclear doctrine change approach: this approach would seek to modify Iran's security strategy by reconsidering its nuclear doctrine and explore the possibility of conducting a nuclear test that could serve as the ultimate 'insurance policy' against Israel and the US.

The problem with the pragmatic-reformist approach is that, despite the country's presidency being under a reformist president, most state institutions are under the control of conservative hardliners, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps increasingly influential, often adopting an ultra-nationalist and defiant stance towards the West, expressing an unbridled confidence in Iran's capabilities and a willingness to take greater risks to advance national security objectives. While the ongoing regional changes and security challenges Iran currently faces may temporarily amplify the voices within the

Iranian leadership for a more pragmatic approach, the influence of more moderate and reformist circles within the Iranian elite is very limited.

However, even if the more moderate circles succeeded in pushing through their proposal, which emphasises the need for political and diplomatic agreements and stabilisation of the economy, it does not appear to be a fundamental change in the concept of Iranian security, or of the regime, as Pezeshkian himself has expressed support for the core elements of Iran's current strategy by reaffirming his government's commitment to continued support for the Axis of Resistance as a central pillar of Iran's policy and the importance of Iran's strategic military capabilities for deterrence³². So, in reality, this approach would be more of a tactical move to focus on rehabilitating Iran's own capabilities, as well as those of its Axis of Resistance allies, which have been weakened in Israel's ongoing multi-front, or multi-arena, war.

With respect to the limited adjustments approach, supporters believe that adjustments should be made within the existing framework, addressing the shortcomings of Iran's deterrence capabilities. These adjustments would include efforts to further weaken Israel in Gaza and Lebanon, accelerate attempts to establish terrorist and insurgency infrastructure in the West Bank, increase terrorist activities inside Israeli territory, compensate for the reduction of Hezbollah's military strength by at least partially restoring its capabilities with increased Iranian involvement in running the organisation's affairs, strengthen support for Iraq's Shia militias by transferring missiles to them so that they can attack Israel, and rehabilitate and modernise missile and air defence systems damaged in the Israeli attack. In this regard, a proposal has already been passed to the Iranian parliament to increase the annual (from March next year, Persian years) defence budget by 200 per cent over the current budget³³. The question is whether tripling the defence budget will be enough to restore Iran's deterrence capabilities.

Finally, the risk of a change of approach to nuclear doctrine, by gambling on having the nuclear bomb, would most likely accelerate rather than prevent a serious conflict with Israeli or US forces that would put the survival of the Islamic regime at risk, being the

³² MEMRI, "In Letters To Leaders Of Hamas, Hizbullah And Syria, Iran's New President, Masoud Pezeshkian, Pledges: The Policy Of Supporting The Resistance Against Israel Will Continue 'Full Force'", July 22, 2024. <https://www.>

³³ Al Jazeera, "Iran plans to increase military budget by 200 percent", 29 Oct 2024. <https://www.>

main motive that has determined Iran's security strategy since the triumph of the Islamic revolution.

Ultimately, the crucial decisions for significant changes in Iran's security strategy will rest with the Supreme Leader, advised by the Supreme National Security Council. Since his appointment as Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei has generally promoted a cautious approach, particularly in foreign affairs, to ensure the survival of his regime. Following this stance one would expect him to make no far-reaching changes to Iran's security strategy. Moreover, in practice, as we have seen in this analysis, Iran lacks new and significantly different options to those already adopted, with the exception of the possible modification of its nuclear doctrine, a move that presents substantial risks. However, being at the end of his tenure and life could prompt him to take one of two opposite directions: his advanced age may lead him to avoid major policy changes or risks that could endanger his country's national security in the final years of his leadership, or, conversely, he may conclude that this is precisely the time to strengthen the Islamic Republic's defences against growing military challenges, particularly from Israel, and against internal threats to the regime's stability, taking risks that he previously avoided.

There is one more option for Iran that is often overlooked by pundits and analysts because it is so fabulous. A radical change in the attitude of Iran's ruling elites towards a less confrontational attitude, which would involve a drastic reduction of tensions with the US and its Western allies in order to modernise the Iranian economy. This new policy would include a shift away from strategic relations with Russia, an alignment that has caused even many European governments to take a harder line against Iran. And, most importantly, an overall policy shift that would involve working exclusively with UN-recognised national governments in the region, rather than empowering non-state actors. In this regard, even in the context of the wars stemming from the 7 October Hamas attack, Iran has made progress in reconciliation with Gulf Arab states, suggesting that Iranian leaders have seen benefits from policies aimed at reducing tensions. However, abandoning the Axis of Resistance would represent a bitter pill for Supreme Leader Khamenei to swallow, perhaps second only to the 'cup of poison' that the founder of the Islamic Republic, Grand Ayatollah Khomeini, drank when he had to accept the need to end the long war against Iraq even though he wanted to continue. No expert expects Khamenei to accept or admit the failure of a strategy he has relied on for nearly four

decades, but doing so may represent the only way to de-escalate an increasingly dangerous confrontation with Israel that could also draw the US into a military conflict against Iran. And it is precisely this fabulous option that Donald Trump will put on the negotiating table when Iran sits down to negotiate the end of sanctions and the policy of maximum pressure that Trump will impose the day after he is sworn in as US President.

Perhaps the solution and the ultimate decision, on the Iranian side, lie in the mind of someone as yet unnamed and unpopularly known. Khamenei is 85 years old. In this regard, on 15 November, a member of the Council of Experts, a constitutional body made up exclusively of Shia Muslim jurist clerics who have passed the filter of the Guardian Council and whose sole duty is to choose the Supreme Leader's successor, announced that the Council had selected three people as possible successors to Khamenei in order of priority, keeping the names of these people secret³⁴.

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³⁴ Morad Veisi, "Who are Khamenei's likely successors?", Iran International, Nov 17, 2024. <https://www.iraninternational.com/2024/11/17/who-are-khamenei-s-likely-successors/>