

Introduction. The concept of the Axis of Resistance

Zbigniew Brzezinski defined Iran as a geopolitical pivot with the capacity to become a geopolitically active element. The American political scientist was not wrong, and history shows that the political entity that has inhabited Iranian territory has always played an important international role throughout time.



Figure 1. Map of the Persian Empire in 500 BCE (Fleck and Hassen, 2018: 373)

Leaving aside Iran's influence in Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent and focusing on the Middle East, the various historical waves of the Persian Empire have left a series of related populations throughout the region. However, within Iran itself, there are divisive forces, as it is not completely unified on the basis of a homogeneous population. For this reason, the Persian majority is joined by other large minorities, in , the Azeris, Kurds, Baluchis and Arabs, among many others.

Contemporary Iran has attempted to re-establish ties with its kindred peoples in the Middle East who formerly constituted the 'domain of Iran' or *Iranshar*, but with a project

of 'empire of the mind' that seeks unity through culture and religion rather than concepts of race and territory (Axworthy, 2016: 3).

In this regard, it is important to consider the unifying factor that the Iran of the ayatollahs has exerted on the Shiite populations of the region, not all of whom follow the Iranian Twelver rite, but who have gradually been drawn into its sphere of religious, cultural, economic, political and security influence. In a more pragmatic explanation, Iran has systematically taken advantage of the weakness of the states in the region, exploited their vulnerabilities and filled the power vacuums with militias and affiliated organisations.

Iran's partnerships are not only regional. Aware of its position, it has maintained an alliance of convenience with the formerly exploitative Russia, which is interested in finding a partner that will allow it to move south to the open waters of the Indian Ocean (Aleksei, 2023: 222). The Russians were also looking for an ally to maintain their bases in Syria in order to continue their presence in the Mediterranean (Ulusoy, 2021: 192-194).

For its part, China is interested in establishing an east-west bridge to secure communications. Despite the good relations between the Chinese and the Iranians, the former have long perceived the weakness of the Axis of Resistance and have therefore sought to engage with all actors in the region in order to maintain connectivity (康欣; 雷婧莹/ Kang and Lei, 2024: 124 and 154).

To put this in a temporal context, after the 2001 attacks in the US, President George W. Bush demonised several countries, including Iran, and labelled them the 'Axis of Evil' for their possible links to terrorism or possession of weapons of mass destruction. In response to this concept, the Libyan newspaper Al-Zahf Al-Akhdar coined the term "Axis of Resistance" for the first time in opposition to the American classification (Soage, 2020: 95).

However, the first description of Iran and its allies was made in 2004 by King Abdullah II of Jordan, who described them as the "Shiite Axis or Shiite Crescent". Subsequently, the Iranians adapted the term "Axis of Resistance" to describe all like-minded regimes in the region. The term *mehvar-e moqavvamat* was used in 2006 in Damascus by former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who proclaimed a link between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other organisations (Polat, 2016: 480). This

demonstrated that the Axis of Resistance was not monolithic, but rather represented an entire political alliance against the interests of those considered oppressors.

Iran was aware that Syria was the cornerstone of its axis, as acknowledged by Ali Akbar Velayati, international affairs adviser to leader Khamenei. The loss of influence in Syria would cause such significant destabilisation that it could have a domino effect, severing the chain to Palestine and affecting first Iraq and then Iran itself (¹). The Iranians viewed any association against their alliance with pathological fear, as it could jeopardise their vision for the Middle East, while also excluding them from participation in a new configuration of the region².

Iran's fears were soon confirmed with the formation of the so-called 'group of friends of the Syrian people', which, with the US, Israel, Turkey and many European and Arab states, formed an association of more than 90 countries³. Although the initiative gradually lost momentum, the concept itself remained and would endure over time.

Given the global and regional rivalries, it was clear that two opposing blocs would emerge, one in favour of and one against the Axis of Resistance. Therefore, this document will examine the constitution and current status of the concept of Iranian expansion towards the Mediterranean, which is going through one of its worst moments.

Background to the conflict

In its early years, the Islamic Republic regime suffered Western sanctions and Saddam Hussein's Iraqi offensive. The Iran-Iraq conflict brought about the rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps or Pasdaran and the creation of Shiite militias in Iraq, which would lay the foundations for the extension of Iranian power in the Middle East.

Iranian influence was already evident in Lebanon, where Shiites professed the same branch of religious worship. In 1982, this union was sealed when an AMAL commission,

¹ Syria is the golden link in the chain of resistance against Israel. [Accessed: 8 February 2015]. Available at:

<https://www.mizanonline.ir/fa/news/127672/است-اسرائیل-با-مقابله-در-مقاومت-زنجیره-طلایی-حلقه-سوریه>

² For a more detailed view of Iran's ambitions to establish a network of connectivity to the west, we recommend reading the document: The importance of land corridors (II): Iran's race to the Mediterranean Sea. Available at:

http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26_2021_JOSCAS_Iran.pdf

³ UN Department for General Assembly and Conference Management. "Group of Friends of the Syrian People." Available at: <https://unterm.un.org/unterm2/en/view/eca50d06-0bdb-4f87-a660-406f9139a91f>

composed of Abbas al-Musawi, Sheikh Naim Qassem and the young Hassan Nasrallah, travelled to Tehran (Majdyar, 2014: 3). This led to the founding of Hezbollah in 1985, which was promoted from Iran (Lucic, 2009: 81).

Paradoxically, the US intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) left Iran free of the Taliban and Saddam's regime. Under these conditions, the Iranians began to expand their networks and link territories under their control. Iranian influence in Iraq would soon become apparent through its support for Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, who would rule the country from 2006 to 2014 (Sari, 2021: 434). This influence has continued in parliamentary life through the Dawa Party.

Iran had also set its sights on Yemen, located at one end of the Bab el Mandeb Strait, through which one of the most important maritime routes on the planet runs. Yemeni Shiites are originally Zaidi Quintimans, another branch of this religious denomination, but in one of its tribes the Ayatollah regime found the possibility of exerting its influence. To this end, they recruited Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi who, after a stay at the Iranian seminary in Qom, founded the Houthi movement and identified himself with the Lebanese postulates of Hassan Nashrallah (MEMRI, 2009). Despite the fact that the moderate Zaidis considered this an act of treason and despite Hussein's death in 2004, the links with Iran were continued by his brother Abdulmalik (Ortiz de Zárate, 2024).

The so-called Arab Spring of 2011 spread throughout the region, affecting many regimes and, to a large extent, Bashar al-Assad's Syria. Although Syrians and Iranians had common interests, Syrian independence was based on greater secularisation and the fact that the ruling minority was Alawite, albeit also Shiite, belonging to another religious branch. The mismanagement of the crisis forced Assad to place himself in the hands of the Iranians, who would then use Syria as a platform from which to operate in the region (Kaderli and Işyar, 2025: 59)⁴.

The consolidation of Iran's presence in the Levant would come after the US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Maliki's sectarian behaviour against Sunnis sparked an uprising among them, many of whom joined the ranks of Al Qaeda. Daesh, or Islamic State, emerged as

⁴ Iranian General Qassem Soleimani had advised Assad to use the police to quell the rebellion. Ignoring this advice, Assad deployed the army. This caused the protests to turn into an insurrection. For a more detailed look at Iran's influence in Syria and the entire Middle East, we recommend reading the article: "Leadership from the other side of the hill". Available at:

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2019/DIEEEA33_2019CASTRO_Soleimani.pdf

a splinter group of this organisation, whose leader, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, proclaimed an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria in 2014. Although the Americans returned to overthrow Daesh, General Qassem Soleimani's intervention in support of both state regimes consolidated Iranian influence throughout Mesopotamia and the Levant (Jahanbani, 2020).

UN sanctions against several Houthi leaders and former Yemeni President Saleh left the latter in a weak position, as he had economic interests abroad. In 2017, the Houthis assassinated Saleh, thereby gaining a privileged position among the other Zaidi tribes, which benefited Iranian interests (Zimmt, 2018: 2).

Hezbollah's subsequent control of the Lebanese parliament from 2018 onwards further strengthened Iran's position in the region, with a strong influence in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, through which it established a corridor to reach the Mediterranean and harass Israel (Dolatabadi, Beigi and Choul, 2020: 123). Meanwhile, it also controlled the Strait of Hormuz, due to its proximity to its territory, and the Bab el Mandeb, which was monitored by its Houthi allies in Yemen.

Meanwhile, the Arabs saw that the situation was increasingly tilting in Iran's favour due to the progressive defeat of Daesh in Mesopotamia, where, in many cases, it was being replaced by groups affiliated with Iran. The area was becoming more dangerous for them than just a corridor between Beirut and Tehran because it could become the *Wilayat Imam Ali* or province of Imam Ali (Jones, 2019: 5).

Although the concept of the Axis of Resistance existed beforehand, in 2018, the conditions were right for it to be put into action. It is more than likely that there was some kind of long-term plan to implement it and that its architect was General Soleimani. In this way, a land communications bridge was established that would link Shiite communities to the west. At the same time, it provided a safer and cheaper communications route than air transport for sending weapons to its *proxies* in the region and for harassing Israel from Lebanon (Chulov, 2016).



Figure 2. Land bridge established westward by Iran. (Jones, 2019: 5)

Meanwhile, Israel sought to keep the threat as far away from its territory as possible, so it decided to intervene after the 2020 meeting between Hezbollah leader Hajj Hashem in the Golan Heights and Syrian General Ali Amad Assad (Truzman, 2020).

Despite Israeli actions, the bridge to its territory continued to be consolidated and, within it, the Sunni terrorist group Hamas began to hatch a plan that would end in tragedy. In 2022, Yahya Sinwar, leader of this organisation in the Gaza Strip, wrote a letter to Ismail Haniyah, president of the organisation's political structure, who was in Qatar. In this document, several possible options for the eradication of Israel were presented, all of which sought, to a greater or lesser extent, to degrade the 'occupying state' with the help of its partners in the Resistance Axis (Benson, 2025).

Although it cannot be proven that Iran was aware of the preparations for the attack on Israel, several meetings were held in Beirut, notably in April 2023, when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah received Hamas leaders Haniyeh and Saleh Arouri (Truzman, 2023). In September, Nasrallah met again with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders Saleh Arouri and Ziyad al-Nakhalah (Frantzman, 2023).

Current status of the conflict

The dismantling of Hamas

The 2023 terrorist attacks against Israeli territories near the Gaza Strip were a real wake-up call for the Israelis, whose Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, declared that he was fighting on seven fronts, linking Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and, of course, Iran (I24News, 2025).

Israel's mobilisation was swift, and within its own territory, it began a series of operations to eliminate the operational capacity of Hamas and its affiliated groups, systematically eliminating their leaders on the ground, notably the deaths of Yahya Sinwar, Mohamed Deif and Marwan Issa in 2024 (NDTV World, 2024). Similarly, the leader of Hamas' political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, was assassinated in Tehran, where he was present to attend the inauguration of the new Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian (Bergman *et al.*, 2024).

In May 2025, Israel would once again eliminate the new leader on the ground, Mohamed Sinwar, Yahya's brother. With his death, not only had the quintet that had planned the terrorist attack been eliminated, but a power vacuum had been created in the organisation at a critical moment, which could lead to the disappearance of Hamas due to a lack of leadership and support (Abualouf, 2025). In early September, Israel carried out a bombing raid in Doha against members of the Hamas leadership and its negotiating team. The fact that the attack took place in the Qatari capital constituted a shift in perceptions in the Arab world (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2025).

The decline of Hezbollah

Hezbollah was the Shiite stronghold that harassed Israel from southern Lebanon. Its position in Lebanese public life gave it a role that, on many occasions, was superior to that of the state itself. In 2006, it had shown Israel that it could not be eliminated by conventional means, so the Israelis subsequently engaged in a selective campaign to eliminate its most important leaders and weapons systems, decapitating much of the organisation's leadership, as well as the Radwan Force, the unit responsible for infiltrating Israeli territory (Wechsler, 2024).

The organisation's structure was severely damaged in an operation carried out by the Israeli secret services. They were aware that Hezbollah's command and control network relied on radiotelephones and pagers to avoid detection or interference. The Israelis therefore managed to modify the devices so that they would explode when a pre-set signal was given, which occurred in mid-September 2024 (VV. AA., 2024). The coup de grâce against the organisation would be the elimination of its leader, Hassan Nashrallah, along with its headquarters (Young, 2024).

In the absence of leadership in Hezbollah, the elderly Naim Qassem (previously referred to as the former leader of AMAL) has had to take charge. During the summer of 2025, he made desperate appeals to his acolytes not to lay down their arms in the face of pressure from the Lebanese government, the peace proposal from the US envoy, Tom Barrack, and attacks by Israel (Al Jazeera, 2025). Hezbollah's delicate position not only removed the threat from the north for Israel, but also provided it with the opportunity to launch operations deep into the Resistance Axis.

Syria: the fall of the central link in the chain

The Assad regime remained in place thanks to the support provided by Iran since Soleimani and Nasrallah convinced leader Khamenei to maintain the Alawite government after the Arab Spring. Both argued that the fall of the Syrian regime would also mean the fall of the Axis of Resistance (Grajewski, 2024).

For more than thirteen years, Iran invested huge amounts in sustaining the Syrian regime and its security, creating militias through the Quds Force, sending Afghan Hazaras to swell the ranks of the Fatemiyoun brigades, and supporting certain units of the regular army (Semenov, 2017).

Assad controlled about two-thirds of the territory, while in the north, the Kurds of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) held the northeast of Rojava; the Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS) group occupied the Idlib region, and the pro-Turkish Syrian National Army (SNA) was in the areas where Turkey had deployed in previous military operations⁵. At the end

⁵ For a more detailed account of the events surrounding the fall of the Assad regime, we recommend reading the document: "The third partition of the Middle East and the Syrian question". Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2320762/la_tercera_particion_del_orient_e_proximo_y_la_cuestion_siria_2025_dieeee03.pdf/07f0fbfb-ca0e-6722-2d4a-a105510ddce2?t=1736514718145

of November 2024, with the support of the SNA and other Islamist factions, HTS launched a rapid offensive that culminated in Assad's flight to Russia and the establishment of a provisional HTS government headed by its leader, Abu Mohammed al-Golani, who softened his name to Ahmed al-Sharaa (Gebeily and Azhari, 2024).

As his regime collapsed, Assad saw his Russian and Iranian supporters retreat to their bases in Tartus and Latakia, respectively, and towards Iraq. For the Russians, embroiled in Ukraine and concerned about Turkey's reaction, Assad had become too intolerant to seek a negotiated solution to the conflict in Idlib. Meanwhile, the Iranians' movements were increasingly restricted in Syria, while Assad had prevented them from using the Golan Heights to harass Israel. It is possible that the Syrians had leaked information about the whereabouts of senior Iranian commanders on their territory, which led to the attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus in April 2024 (Grajewski, 2024).

The links in Iraq and Yemen

Iran still maintains a significant presence in Iraq, where its influence on public life is evident through political activity, allied militias and economic relations. At the time of writing, the results of the 2025 elections are not yet available, but the contest is between the more independent Prime Minister Sudani and the more pro-Iranian former Prime Minister Maliki. However, it is after the elections that lengthy negotiations between political groups, including Sunni and Kurdish counterweights, will take place, which will sway Iraqis to one side or the other (Rudolf, 2025).

The Houthis of Yemen are geographically a loose link in the current small chain of the Axis of Resistance. The fall of their allies in Mesopotamia and the Levant leads them to consider the very continuity of their regime⁶. The exchange of missiles and drones led Israel to launch an attack on the Houthi leadership at the end of August 2025, killing their prime minister, Ahmed Ghalib al-Rahwi, along with several members of the government () (Al-Goidi, 2025). If the deterioration of Iranian capabilities prevents continued support for the Houthis, they will have to seek another source of support. Faced with this uncertain

⁶ For a more detailed reading, we recommend the article: "The Twelve-Day War: The Lion of Judah Against the Lion of the Sun." Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/la_querra_de_los_doce_dias_2025_dieeee51

future, one possible option could be to establish direct relations with global powers such as Russia or China, which are eager to establish bases in the region (Ali, 2025).

Role of external actors in the region

The Axis of Resistance had been formed as a loose alliance that had taken uncoordinated steps, provoking a reaction that was too forceful to withstand the pressure exerted. According to the theory of alliance equilibrium (Walt, 1990; 5), another alliance had been created to counterbalance the Axis of Resistance, regardless of ideology or foreign aid received. It is therefore understandable that the Sunni countries in the area have collaborated with Israel and the US to neutralise the power of Iran and its allies.

Israel seems to have benefited the most, having drastically reduced the threat from the seven fronts it faced after the attacks of September 2023. The chain of links leading to its territory from Iran has lost its continuity, so the threat from the growing Shiite arc has been so degraded that it no longer poses an existential problem.

The Americans, regardless of which administration occupies the White House, have also benefited greatly. President Trump is not interested in devoting too many resources or getting involved on the ground in a theatre of operations that is secondary to his global vision. With the break-up of the Axis of Resistance, this problem would be solved, allowing him to focus on his real concern, namely China, which should take good note of US capabilities (盧政鋒/Cheng-fung Lu, 2025; Sobolik, 2025).

The Sunni countries in the region also appear to benefit, as Saudi Arabia and its Emirati partners see an opportunity to do good business with Israel and, as far as possible, can return to the path of the Abraham Accords, which led to Bahrain and the Emirates recognising Israel. It is possible that the support in weapons and technology from Israel and the US will provide these states with the possibility of shaking off the nightmare of harassment by the Houthis in Yemen (Engelsberg Ideas, 2025). However, Doha's attacks on the Hamas leadership may have had an unintended effect in the Arab world.

Turkey and its Qatari partner also see great opportunities in the breakdown of the East-West bridge that constituted the Axis of Resistance. Turkey is strengthening its influence to the south, while becoming the logistical *hub* for hydrocarbons travelling from the Gulf

and Central Asia basins to Europe. Qatar sees the possibility of exporting its gas to Turkey by pipeline via Syria, saving significant costs (Daily Sabah, 2025; Khatatneh, 2025; Matoi, 2025).

Russia appears to be a possible loser. However, Assad's drift was not in its interests either. It is therefore in the process of reconfiguring its presence, in which relations with the new Syrian government are not entirely bad. Even so, the Russians have withdrawn from their bases in Syrian territory and have maintained only an uncertain presence in Tartus and Latakia (Times of Israel, 2025; Giustozzi, 2025). Furthermore, the Russians have always been interested in Iran depending on them and not the other way around. If the lack of support for the Houthis continues, Russia may regain the former presence that the USSR had in the southern Arabian Peninsula.

China is a truly pragmatic player. Eager for the region's hydrocarbons, it is interested in ensuring that the commercial transit of these products through the Strait of Hormuz never stops. The mere threat of a blockade of the strait is a great fear for the Chinese, who have very good business relations with the Saudis and Emiratis. Furthermore, any Iranian nuclear adventure could drag the countries in the region into an arms race. Nothing could be further from China's intentions, whose interest is to continue buying oil at competitive prices (Calabrese, 2025).

Conclusions and outlook

The Axis of Resistance took more than forty years to consolidate, but in less than two years it has suffered such setbacks and reversals that it is now seriously damaged. One of its possible critical vulnerabilities may lie in its very conception, as the establishment of an alliance with expansionist aims is extremely unstable due to the disparate interests of its members.

In this sense, it is easy to see how there was a hard core around Iran, made up of Hezbollah and the Houthis of Yemen. Now that the chain is broken, these actors are left with the arduous task of fighting for local power. Hezbollah is in a significant state of decline and its specific weight within Lebanese political life has diminished along with its de facto power. For their part, the Houthis are just another Zaidi tribe within Yemen, and

any show of weakness in front of other tribes could lead them into a ruthless struggle for internal power.

The rest of the actors belonged to alliances of convenience. Hamas and its affiliated groups are Sunni in origin and close to the Muslim Brotherhood, so the link that unites them to the Ayatollah regime is their hatred of Israel. Assad was a partner of convenience who sought to regain the autonomy he had before the Arab Spring. Iraq is a conglomerate of powers in which the Iranians have supporters but do not have absolute control.

However, it is more than likely that the efforts of Iran and its partners will continue, albeit with less intensity, following the concept of "Down but Not Out" (Ali-Khan and Cambanis, 2025). In those areas where they have lost the ability to impose themselves, they may form groups that resort to insurgency to maintain their presence from underground. However, since Soleimani's death, the senior commanders of the Pasdaran, who had experience in managing tribal groups in the Middle East, have also been eliminated, so control of these groups may be even more difficult, not only because of the lack of support, but also because of the absence of effective command and control over their activities.

Another important aspect is the internal dynamics within Iran. Although everything points to the authorities seeking some kind of negotiation to shore up the regime, the approach of the various factions in power may be very different. The fundamentalism of the Pasdaran could resist major changes, while the reformists would be more open-minded. In any case, Iran will have to ensure that the US and Israel do not inflict further physical and economic damage on it, while at the same time shoring up relations with Russia and securing China's support. At the regional level, it needs greater understanding with the Gulf monarchies and Turkey to ensure the stability of hydrocarbon prices and facilitate their transport.

APPENDIX

Chronology of the conflict and geopolitical indicators

TIMELINE OF THE CONFLICT	
DATE	EVENTS
1982	A Lebanese AMAL commission travels to Tehran, beginning the future Hezbollah's ties with Iran.
1993	Mohamed Houthi returns from Iran indoctrinated in Twelver Shiism.
2001	US President George W. Bush designates Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the Axis of Evil
2003	The US-led coalition overthrows Saddam Hussein's regime, allowing Shiite militias to expand.
2011	The 'Arab Spring' in Syria forces Assad to seek support from Iran
2014	Daesh occupies areas of Iraq and Syria. A "land bridge" linking Iran with Iraq, Syria and Lebanon is created.
2020	Death of Qassem Soleimani
2023	Terrorist attack by Hamas against the Israeli civilian population near the Gaza Strip. Intervention by Hezbollah from Lebanon and the Houthis from Yemen. Netanyahu launches his seven-front war campaign against the entire Axis of Resistance.
2024. April	Israeli attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus. IRGC senior commanders in the Levant killed.
2024. July	Death of Ismail Haniyah in Tehran.
2024. September	Death of Hasan Nashrallah in Beirut
2024. December	HTS overthrows the Assad regime in Syria

2025. June	Israel executes Operation Rising Lion against Iran's infrastructure, command and control network, and nuclear programme
2025. June	The US carries out Operation Midnight Hammer against Iranian nuclear facilities

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