

# IRGC IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

## PROXY WARFARE & REGIONAL DOMINANCE



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## INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

# IRGC in the Middle East:

## The Axis of Resistance

<b>Classification:</b>	Declassified – Analytic Purposes
<b>Subject:</b>	Iranian Military Doctrine
<b>Region:</b>	Middle East

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps — principally through its Quds Force expeditionary arm — has spent four decades constructing the most sophisticated state-sponsored terrorist and insurgent network in the contemporary world. What Tehran calls the “**Axis of Resistance**” is, in operational terms, a **distributed force-multiplication architecture: a constellation of armed Non-State Actors stretching from the Lebanese Mediterranean coast through Gaza, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, each receiving Iranian weapons, financing, training, and strategic direction in exchange for serving as kinetic instruments of Iranian regional policy.**

It must be understood that this architecture is not circumstantially assembled. It was deliberately designed.

The Quds Force, under successive commanders from Ahmad Vahidi through Qasem Soleimani to the current Esmail Qaani, developed over four decades a doctrine of asymmetric forward deployment — positioning lethal capability against Iran's adversaries at maximum geographic range while maintaining deniability and minimizing direct Iranian exposure.

The result is a network through which Tehran can:

- threaten American bases in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf
- sustain military pressure on Israel from four simultaneous fronts
- hold Saudi and Emirati energy infrastructure at risk
- interdict global maritime commerce through Bab al-Mandab and the Red Sea
- project influence into Pakistani domestic politics through a combination of financial patronage and support for Baloch insurgent actors

The sustained military campaign of Epic Fury — American and allied strikes against Iranian nuclear facilities, IRGC command nodes, and defense infrastructure since late 2025 — has degraded but not dismantled this network. Hezbollah absorbed

unprecedented leadership losses in 2024. Hamas lost Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, and Ismail Haniyeh within months of one another. The Houthis have sustained consistent American and allied bombardment through the Red Sea interdiction campaign. The IRGC's own command tier has been depleted: Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the Quds Force Syria-Lebanon commander, was eliminated in the April 2024 Damascus strike. Thirty-one autonomous regional IRGC commanders now operate with significant independence, their command chains to Tehran severed or degraded.

Yet the network functions.

Hezbollah fired its "Al-Asf al-Ma'kul" salvo from southern Lebanon as recently as March 2026, demonstrating residual rocket capacity despite the 2024 war.

The Houthis activated their Bab al-Mandab "Hour Zero" threat concurrent with the Hormuz closure. Iraqi armed groups placed bounties on US and CIA commanders in theater.

The Pakistan-border Jaish al-Adl relationship continues to generate cross-border provocations.

What has changed is not the network's existence. What has changed is its degree of independence from Tehran — and that change cuts both ways.

## STRATEGIC ARCHITECTURE: THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

### THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE IS A DOCTRINE BEFORE IT IS A NETWORK.

Its intellectual foundations lie in Khomeinist revolutionary theory — the concept of the Islamic Republic as the vanguard state of an anti-imperialist, anti-Zionist bloc that transcends sectarian identity even as it relies predominantly on Shia political communities for organizational infrastructure.

The doctrine was formalized in the 1980s with the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon, institutionalized through the 1990s with Hamas and PIJ financial cooperation, and expanded to Iraqi Shia militias through the post-2003 vacuum, Yemeni Houthi networks through the 2010s, and Syrian state structures through the civil war period.

The architecture has three operational layers.

**At the strategic layer**, the Quds Force provides command guidance, intelligence sharing, weapons transfers, and financial support.

**At the operational layer**, proxy military organizations — Hezbollah, the PMF's armed factions, Houthi military structures, and Hamas's Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades — execute missions aligned with IRGC strategic objectives.

**At the tactical layer**, sub-organizations and loosely affiliated groups carry out specific operations — rocket attacks, drone strikes, maritime interdiction, IED campaigns — with degrees of independence that give Tehran deniability.

The financial throughput sustaining this architecture has historically been substantial: **IRGC and Iranian government funding for the full proxy network has been estimated between \$1.5 billion and \$2 billion annually at its peak in 2020–2023, with Hezbollah receiving the largest single allocation.**

The 2024 Lebanon war and its destruction of Hezbollah's front-line infrastructure, combined with the Epic Fury strikes on Iranian oil and financial infrastructure, have reduced these flows materially. But a degraded Axis is not a dismantled one.

It must be accepted that the primary operational consequence of network degradation is not network dissolution. It is network decentralization — and decentralized networks are harder to target, harder to predict, and harder to deter.

## HEZBOLLAH: THE IRGC'S MOST CAPABLE PROXY

Hezbollah is not merely Iran's most important proxy. It is the closest thing the Islamic Republic has to an external military force. Built by the Quds Force in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley in 1982 from the wreckage of Amal and the Palestinian guerrilla infrastructure, Hezbollah evolved from a militia into what Israeli military analysts describe as a near-peer adversary capable of sustained conventional-style military operations alongside its terrorism and guerrilla capabilities.

### THE ARSENAL

At its 2024 pre-war peak, Hezbollah's arsenal included an estimated 130,000 to 150,000 rockets and missiles of varying range and precision, including:

- Falaq-1 and Falaq-2 rockets
- Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 medium-range rockets capable of striking central Israel
- Zelzal-2 ballistic missiles with 200-kilometer range
- precision-guided variants of the Fateh-110, M-600, and potentially the Scud-D with CEP under 10 meters
- Kornet anti-tank guided missiles
- Yakhont/P-800 anti-ship missiles
- growing drone inventory including suicide UAVs modeled on Iranian Shahed designs

The precision guided munitions program — a Quds Force priority for a decade — was the most strategically significant component: hundreds of accurate missiles capable of striking specific Israeli infrastructure targets represented a qualitative shift from the 2006 war's unguided Katyusha barrages.

The 2024 Lebanon war degraded this arsenal substantially. Israeli preemptive strikes targeting PGM storage sites, Hezbollah commanders' communications, and supply routes through Syria destroyed a significant portion of the precision inventory. The IDF 98th Division's reinforcement along the Litani River line in March 2026, combined with continued Hezbollah rocket fire from southern Lebanon, indicates that residual capacity — estimated by Israeli intelligence at 25,000 rockets — remains deployable.

### POST-NASRALLAH COMMAND ARCHITECTURE

Hassan Nasrallah was eliminated by an Israeli airstrike on Hezbollah's underground headquarters in Beirut's southern suburbs on September 27, 2024 — the most consequential single assassination in Hezbollah's history. His successor, Naim

Qassem, has led the organization since October 2024. Qassem is a veteran Hezbollah official with deep ties to the Iranian clerical establishment, but he lacks Nasrallah's charisma, political authority, and operational command instincts. His first months in command were defined by organizational crisis, leadership vacuum at the military wing, and the shock of unprecedented Israeli intelligence penetration of Hezbollah's communications.

Fuad Shukr, the Hezbollah military commander, was killed in a Beirut airstrike in July 2024. The military command vacuum he left has not been publicly filled with a confirmed successor, suggesting either that a successor has been named under operational security restrictions, or that the military wing is operating in a more decentralized fashion — each geographic command acting with greater autonomy.

Mohammad Reza Zahedi, the Quds Force commander for Syria and Lebanon, was killed in the April 2024 Damascus consulate strike. His death severed one of the primary direct links between Quds Force strategic planning and Hezbollah's operational implementation. His replacement has not been publicly identified.

The organizational consequence of these losses is not Hezbollah's dissolution. The organization has demonstrated extraordinary resilience across forty years. It is Hezbollah's reduced capacity for complex, coordinated, multi-domain operations — the kind of operation that defined its strategic value to Iran in pre-war assessments. It remains capable of rocket fire, guerrilla tactics, and targeted assassinations. It is less capable of the theater-wide precision strike campaign that its pre-2024 arsenal would have enabled.

## THE FINANCIAL FLOWS

Iran's annual financial support to Hezbollah has been estimated across a range of sources at between \$700 million and \$1 billion at its peak.

The money flows through several channels:

- direct IRGC Quds Force transfers through Lebanese banking intermediaries
- Iranian-controlled charitable and reconstruction funds operating through Lebanese Shia community organizations
- revenue from Hezbollah's own criminal enterprises; and construction and infrastructure contracts awarded to Hezbollah-affiliated companies in Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese markets

Post-Epic Fury, Iranian oil revenues — historically the primary source of Hezbollah funding — have been materially reduced by infrastructure strikes. The consequent pressure on Hezbollah's operational budget is real. It is not, however, existential.

## HAMAS AND PALESTINIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD

Hamas is the most politically complex of Iran's proxy relationships. Founded in 1987 as a Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas is ideologically Sunni, not Shia. Its relationship with Shia Iran is a marriage of strategic convenience, not theological affinity: Iran provides funding, weapons, and training; Hamas provides a Palestinian resistance credential that Iran leverages for regional legitimacy and confrontation with Israel.

## OCTOBER 7<sup>TH</sup> AND ITS AFTERMATH

The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel — Operation Al-Aqsa Flood — was the most consequential act of terrorism in Israel's history.

The Qassam Brigades breached the Gaza perimeter fence, killing 1,200 Israelis and taking approximately 250 hostages. The operational planning reflected direct Iranian intelligence involvement in the strategic architecture of the attack, even if tactical execution was Hamas's own. Iranian officials were briefed on the plan and provided political endorsement, though the precise degree of Tehran's operational foreknowledge remains contested.

The Israeli response destroyed the command architecture that executed October 7:

**Yahya Sinwar** — Hamas's Gaza chief, the operational architect of October 7 — was killed by Israeli forces in southern Gaza in October 2024. His death ended the organizational continuity that survived the 2014 and 2021 Gaza wars. His brother Mohammed Sinwar continues to operate within Gaza's remaining militant infrastructure.

**Mohammed Deif** — commander of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, the military wing — was killed in a targeted airstrike in July 2024. Deif had survived multiple previous Israeli assassination attempts and was the single most capable military mind in the organization. His loss is operationally irreplaceable in the near term.

**Ismail Haniyeh** — Hamas's political chief — was killed in Tehran in July 2024 in a strike that Iran officially blamed on Israel. Haniyeh was the political face of Hamas's international diplomacy and the direct interlocutor with IRGC leadership. His assassination on Iranian soil represented an unprecedented Israeli intelligence penetration of Iranian security. His successor Khaled Mashal has returned to a leadership role, operating from exile.

## PALESTINIAN ISLAMIC JIHAD

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) is a smaller, more Iranian-directed organization than Hamas. Unlike Hamas, PIJ has no social services infrastructure, no political wing, and no independent fundraising base. It is essentially an IRGC Quds Force operational instrument with Palestinian cadres. Ziad Nakhleh, PIJ's Secretary-General, maintains direct communication with the Quds Force and coordinates rocket launch timing with Iranian operational requirements — a command relationship that is tighter than Iran's relationship with Hamas's leadership.

PIJ's Saraya al-Quds (Jerusalem Brigades) operates with rocket inventories that are partially supplied directly through IRGC channels rather than through commercial smuggling networks.

Iran's annual financial support to PIJ is estimated at \$100 million, smaller than the Hamas allocation but proportionally more controlling given PIJ's size.

## FINANCIAL FLOWS TO PALESTINIAN GROUPS

Iran's total annual financing for Palestinian armed groups has been estimated at between \$200 million and \$350 million, split primarily between Hamas's military wing (Qassam Brigades) and PIJ, with smaller amounts going to other Gaza-based armed factions.

The money moves through direct Quds Force cash transfers via:

- Lebanese hawala networks
- IRGC-linked cryptocurrency transactions
- weapons smuggling operations

The post-2023 Gaza war has complicated these flows — Hamas's physical infrastructure in Gaza has been extensively destroyed, degrading its capacity to receive, store, and deploy IRGC-supplied weapons. But Hamas's leadership in exile maintains financial channels, and the organization's political reconstitution will require IRGC financial support that Tehran has every incentive to provide.

## THE HOUTHIS: IRAN'S MARITIME WEAPON

The Houthis, formally Ansar Allah, are Iran's most strategically impactful current proxy in terms of global economic effect. Their control of western Yemen and the coastal territory adjacent to the Bab al-Mandab Strait gives them command of one of the world's two most critical maritime chokepoints, through which approximately 12 percent of global trade and 8 percent of global liquefied natural gas transit annually.

### FROM INSURGENCY TO STRATEGIC INSTRUMENT

The IRGC's relationship with the Houthis dates to the early 2000s, when Quds Force operatives began providing training, weapons, and strategic advice to what was then a regional insurgent movement focused on north Yemeni autonomy. The relationship deepened after the 2014 Houthi takeover of Sanaa and reached its strategic maturity in 2019, when Houthi forces — equipped with IRGC-designed Quds-1 cruise missiles and Shahed-series drones — struck Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq and Khurais processing facilities, temporarily eliminating 5 percent of global oil supply in a single operation.

The Red Sea interdiction campaign that began in late 2023 elevated the Houthis from a regional insurgent force to a global economic actor. At its peak, the campaign redirected 90 percent of container traffic previously transiting the Red Sea to the Cape of Good Hope route, adding 10 to 14 days of transit time and several hundred million dollars per month in additional shipping costs across global supply chains.

### THE ARSENAL

The Houthis' weapons capability reflects a decade of IRGC transfer and indigenous manufacturing development.

Key systems include:

- Badr-1 and Badr-F ballistic missiles (range 300–450 km)
- Quds-1 and Quds-3 subsonic cruise missiles
- Toufan anti-ship ballistic missile variants
- Shahed-136-derived one-way attack UAVs produced domestically under IRGC technical guidance
- anti-ship cruise missiles, including the P-15 Termit and domestically produced variants
- underwater unmanned vehicles for naval mining operations

IRGC engineers and technical advisors — operating under Quds Force supervision through a Yemen operational cell — have been present in Houthi-controlled territory, training local technicians in missile production, maintenance, and targeting.

Abdul Reza Shahlai — the senior Quds Force official responsible for the Yemen operational portfolio — coordinates IRGC strategic guidance to Houthi military planning. Tactical Houthi military decision-making is led by Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the movement's Supreme Leader, who has demonstrated both strategic vision and tactical ruthlessness in managing the campaign against Saudi-led coalition forces and international shipping.

### FINANCIAL FLOWS TO THE HOUTHIS

Iran's annual financial support to the Houthis has been estimated at between \$150 million and \$300 million, encompassing direct cash transfers, weapons deliveries valued at market price, IRGC personnel costs, and technical assistance. The money flows primarily through maritime smuggling routes along the Yemen coastline and through Omani and Iraqi financial intermediaries.

The Houthi relationship with IRGC is functionally different from the Hezbollah relationship: ***the Houthis have demonstrated a capacity and willingness to make independent strategic decisions — including escalation decisions that create risks for Iranian regional policy — that Tehran cannot always control.***

## IRAQI ARMED GROUPS: THE MESOPOTAMIAN FRONT

The Iraqi theater represents the most complex of Iran's proxy relationships — because in Iraq, the boundary between proxy non-state actor and legitimate state institution has been deliberately erased. The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, Hashd al-Sha'abi) were formally incorporated into the Iraqi security apparatus in 2016, giving IRGC-aligned militias legal standing within the Iraqi state structure while maintaining their operational independence from Baghdad's political command.

### THE PMF ARCHITECTURE

The PMF is a coalition of approximately 60-plus armed groups totaling an estimated 120,000 to 170,000 fighters.

Within this coalition, the IRGC-aligned “core” factions include:

- **Kataib Hezbollah** — the most directly IRGC-linked of Iraq's armed groups. Founded and originally commanded by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (killed alongside Qasem Soleimani in the January 2020 US airstrike), Kataib Hezbollah maintains communications infrastructure, weapons, and command relationships that are fully integrated with Quds Force operational planning. Abu Alaa al-Walaih has led the organization's military wing following al-Muhandis's death. Kataib Hezbollah has been directly responsible for attacks on US forces at Ain al-Assad, Al Tanf, and Erbil airbases.
- **Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq** (League of the Righteous) — led by Qais al-Khazali, one of the most politically ambitious commanders in the PMF ecosystem. Khazali has simultaneously maintained close ties to the Quds Force while pursuing a political career within Iraqi parliamentary politics. AAH has been responsible for drone and rocket attacks on US facilities and has claimed to have assets positioned to target CIA officers.
- **Badr Organization** — led by Hadi al-Amiri. Badr has deeper roots in the legitimate Iraqi political establishment and has used this positioning to entrench IRGC influence within the Iraqi Interior Ministry, border security apparatus, and intelligence community.
- **Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba** — led by Akram al-Kaabi, who maintains close coordination with both IRGC Quds Force and Syrian armed groups. Nujaba has been particularly active in Syria and has expressed explicit intentions regarding potential attacks on the Golan Heights.

## FINANCIAL FLOWS THROUGH THE PMF

The financial architecture supporting IRGC-aligned PMF factions operates through several channels that are partially legitimate. PMF salaries are drawn from the Iraqi government budget — meaning Iraqi taxpayers subsidize organizations receiving additional IRGC funding.

The IRGC supplement runs through direct cash transfers via Lebanese intermediaries; Iranian-controlled construction and reconstruction contracts in Iraqi cities; revenue from IRGC-linked companies with Iraqi government energy sector contracts; and weapons transfers.

The aggregate Iranian financial commitment to Iraq's IRGC-aligned PMF factions has been estimated at between \$300 million and \$500 million annually, making Iraq the second-largest single allocation after Hezbollah.

## SYRIA: THE LAND BRIDGE AND FORWARD DEPLOYMENT

Syria is simultaneously a battlefield, a supply corridor, a forward deployment base, and a diplomatic prize for the IRGC. Iran's intervention to preserve the Assad regime beginning in 2012 was not primarily motivated by brotherly solidarity with a fellow Alawite-governed state. It was motivated by strategic necessity: **Syria is the physical bridge connecting the IRGC logistics network to Hezbollah in Lebanon.** Without Syrian territory, the weapons transfer pipeline that has armed Hezbollah's arsenal over four decades is broken.

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 — accelerated by rebel advances that Quds Force advisors and Iranian-backed PMF fighters failed to stop — represented the most significant strategic loss for the IRGC's regional architecture in a generation. The land bridge, which had operated through Syrian government-controlled territory for decades, is now contested. Key weapons storage facilities at Damascus International Airport, the T4 airbase in Homs governorate, and Mezzeh military airport — all of which served as IRGC logistics nodes — are either destroyed or no longer under Iranian control.

The consequences for Hezbollah rearmament are significant. The precision guided munitions reconstitution that Hezbollah requires following its 2024 arsenal losses cannot be conducted through the Syrian land bridge at the same volume or reliability as before the Assad government's fall. Alternative routes — maritime via Lebanese ports, air via direct Tehran-Beirut flights, overland via Iraq — are more expensive, more exposed, and lower-capacity.

## FINANCIAL ARCHITECTURE: FUNDING THE AXIS

The IRGC's proxy financing operation is the largest state-sponsored terrorism financing architecture in the world. Understanding its structure requires distinguishing between the sovereign allocation — funds flowing directly from the Iranian government budget — and the IRGC's autonomous revenue streams, which the Corps generates independently through its commercial conglomerate, oil smuggling operations, and crypto-enabled sanctions evasion.

### SOVEREIGN BUDGET ALLOCATION

Iran's official defense budget allocates approximately \$6 billion to \$8 billion annually, a significant portion of which flows to the Quds Force's external operations account. The US Treasury has estimated that the Quds Force's external operations budget reached \$1 billion to \$2 billion annually at its 2020–2023 peak. Epic Fury strikes on Iranian oil infrastructure have reduced the sovereign allocation, though precise current figures are not available in open sources.

### IRGC COMMERCIAL REVENUE

The IRGC controls an estimated 20 to 30 percent of Iran's formal economy through holding companies including the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, Mehr Economic Institution, and Bonyad Mostazafin (Foundation of the Oppressed).

These entities generate *legitimate* commercial revenue from construction, telecommunications, automotive manufacturing, and financial services. A portion of this revenue supplements the proxy financing budget and provides the IRGC with financial independence from the sovereign budget.

### CRYPTOCURRENCY AND SANCTIONS EVASION

Iran's cryptocurrency-enabled sanctions evasion has grown substantially since 2019. The Chainalysis 2026 Crypto Crime Report identified Iran as a primary state actor in crypto-based sanctions evasion, with total Iranian crypto-linked activity in 2025 estimated at approximately \$3 billion.

IRGC-linked entities use cryptocurrency — specifically Tether (USDT) on the Tron blockchain — to convert oil revenue into transferable digital assets, route value across jurisdictions, and pay proxy organizations without detectable financial institution involvement.

## TOTAL PROXY FINANCING ESTIMATE

Aggregating across the network, the IRGC's annual financial support to its full proxy network was estimated at approximately \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion at peak (2020–2023):

- Hezbollah: \$700M–\$1B (largest single allocation)
- Iraqi PMF factions: \$300M–\$500M
- Houthis: \$150M–\$300M
- Hamas and PIJ: \$200M–\$350M
- Syrian operations: \$100M–\$200M (reduced post-Assad fall)
- Smaller affiliated groups (Afghanistan, Bahrain cells): \$50M–\$100M

Post-Epic Fury, these figures have contracted. Hezbollah's allocation has been most severely affected by both IRGC revenue constraints and Hezbollah's own reduced capacity to absorb and deploy the funds. The Houthi allocation remains relatively stable, sustained partly through Quds Force prioritization of the maritime interdiction campaign as Iran's most active ongoing pressure instrument.

## TERROR AND INSURGENT GROUPS OPERATING IN SHARED OPERATIONAL SPACE

The IRGC's proxy network does not operate in a clean, compartmentalized ecosystem. It shares operational geography, financial channels, and logistics infrastructure with a range of additional terrorist and insurgent actors — some aligned with Iran, some hostile to it, and some whose presence creates both opportunity and risk for IRGC operations.

### AL QAEDA AND THE SAIF AL-ADEL NEXUS

al Qaeda's presence in Iran is the most operationally significant of the Sunni jihadist overlaps with IRGC territory. Saif al-Adel, AQ's operational chief and interim emir, has been assessed by US intelligence as Iran-based since the early 2000s. Saif al-Adel operates from Iranian territory with a degree of Iranian tolerance — not ideological alignment, but mutual convenience:

***Tehran gets an intelligence window into AQ, AQ gets operational sanctuary.***

The AQ-Iran relationship is not an alliance. It is a calculated, arms-length cohabitation. Iran has used AQ operatives as leverage — releasing or restricting them based on diplomatic calculations with Western governments.

The Harmouch/MWI assessment confirms NCTC's September 2025 warning and Michael Morell's on-record assessment that AQ is "rebuilding for a major attack." AQ's Phase 3 reconstruction under Saif al-Adel is drawing on Pakistani, Afghan, and Bangladeshi recruitment networks that overlap with the IRGC's own South Asian influence operations.

### ISKP (ISLAMIC STATE KHORASAN PROVINCE)

ISKP and the IRGC are enemies. ISKP's three confirmed attacks inside Iranian territory reflect the Islamic State's theological rejection of both Shia Islam and state accommodation. ISKP's January 2024 Kerman bombing (95 killed) was the deadliest terrorist attack in Iran since the 1980s. ISKP's expansion into Azerbaijan and its Baluchistan safe-haven risk create a security environment that simultaneously pressures IRGC-linked border communities and generates cross-border instability.

The two organizations compete for the same ungoverned spaces and occasionally for the same pool of marginalized recruits.

### JAISH AL-ADL (PAKISTAN-IRAN BORDER)

Jaish al-Adl, a Sunni Baloch militant group operating along the Iran-Pakistan border, has conducted cross-border attacks on IRGC personnel, killing dozens of Iranian border guards and intelligence operatives since its founding in 2012.

In January 2024, Iran conducted Quds-4 missile and Shahed drone strikes on alleged Jaish al-Adl positions inside Pakistani territory in Baluchistan — triggering a Pakistani military response that struck positions inside Iranian territory, marking the first direct military exchange between the two nominally friendly states since 1998.

Jaish al-Adl's relationship with Pakistani intelligence (ISI) has been a persistent source of Iran-Pakistan tension.

### HAMAS-ALIGNED GROUPS IN LEBANON

Alongside Hezbollah, several Hamas-aligned Palestinian groups — including the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command (PFLP-GC), Palestinian Islamic Jihad's Lebanese cells, and smaller factions — operate in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps. These groups share logistics infrastructure with Hezbollah, receive Iranian financial support through separate Quds Force channels, and have historically been used for deniable operations against Israeli targets in Lebanon, Europe, and beyond.

## KEY FIGURES: ROLES WITHIN THE STRUCTURE

- **Esmail Qaani** — Commander, IRGC Quds Force. Qaani succeeded Qasem Soleimani following the January 2020 US airstrike. His command now operates in a degraded environment with 31 autonomous regional commanders operating with reduced central direction — a structural decentralization that creates both resilience and strategic coherence risk.
- **Abdol Reza Shahlai** — Senior Quds Force officer, Yemen portfolio. The architect of the Arbabsiar cartel plot and the Quds Force's primary operational liaison to Houthi military planning. A \$15 million US reward has been placed on his head.
- **Mohammad Reza Zahedi** — Quds Force Syria-Lebanon Commander (ELIMINATED, April 2024). Killed in the Israeli airstrike on the Iranian consular annex in Damascus. Zahedi was responsible for Hezbollah weapons transfers, the Syria logistics network, and direct coordination with Hezbollah's military wing. His successor has not been publicly identified.
- **Naim Qassem** — Hezbollah Secretary-General (post-Nasrallah). A longtime Hezbollah religious and political figure who served as deputy secretary-general under Nasrallah for 30 years. His ascension reflects organizational continuity more than strategic vision. He lacks Nasrallah's independent command authority and is more dependent on IRGC guidance for strategic decision-making.
- **Hassan Nasrallah** — Hezbollah Secretary-General (ELIMINATED, September 27, 2024). Killed in an Israeli airstrike on Hezbollah's underground headquarters in Beirut's southern suburbs. His death was the most consequential single assassination in Hezbollah's history.
- **Fuad Shukr** — Hezbollah military commander (ELIMINATED, July 2024). Killed in a Beirut airstrike. FBI Most Wanted Terrorist in connection with the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing. His death removed Hezbollah's most operationally experienced military mind.
- **Hassan Ezzedine (Hajj Khalil)** — Hezbollah military, believed to have assumed increased operational authority following Shukr's elimination.
- **Abdul Malik al-Houthi** — Supreme Leader, Ansar Allah. Has demonstrated the capacity to make independent strategic decisions — including the Red Sea interdiction campaign — that amplify Iranian strategic interests while not being directly controlled by Tehran.
- **Qais al-Khazali** — Secretary-General, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. The most politically ambitious of Iraq's IRGC-linked militia leaders, operating simultaneously within Iraqi parliamentary politics and as a Quds Force proxy commander. OFAC-designated.
- **Hadi al-Amiri** — Leader, Badr Organization. The senior statesman of Iran's Iraqi network. His penetration of legitimate Iraqi state institutions —

particularly the Interior Ministry — gives IRGC access to Iraqi border security and intelligence databases.

- **Abu Alaa al-Walai** — Kataib Hezbollah military commander. The most directly IRGC-commanded figure in Iraq's PMF, following al-Muhandis's death. Kataib Hezbollah's ongoing attack operations against US forces and the bounty program targeting US commanders are products of his command.
- **Akram al-Kaabi** — Secretary-General, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. An increasingly prominent figure in the IRGC's Iraq network, particularly given his Syria operations experience and explicit statements regarding potential attacks on the Golan Heights. OFAC-designated.
- **Falih al-Fayyadh** — PMF Chairman and National Security Advisor, Iraq. The senior civilian official overseeing the PMF's formal integration into the Iraqi state. Serves as the interface between IRGC strategic guidance and Iraqi government cover for PMF operations.
- **Ziad Nakhleh** — Secretary-General, Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The most directly IRGC-directed of the Palestinian faction leaders. Coordinates with Quds Force on operational timing and receives IRGC financial transfers directly.
- **Yahya Sinwar** — Hamas Gaza Chief (ELIMINATED, October 2024). The operational architect of October 7. Mohammed Sinwar, his brother, continues to operate within Gaza's remaining militant infrastructure.
- **Mohammed Deif** — Hamas Qassam Brigades Commander (ELIMINATED, July 2024). His death deprived Hamas of its most capable military mind.
- **Ismail Haniyeh** — Hamas political chief (ELIMINATED, July 2024, Tehran). His assassination on Iranian soil represented unprecedented Israeli intelligence penetration of Iranian security.
- **Khaled Mashal** — Hamas political leadership, exile. Operating from Qatar and Turkey, Mashal maintains the diplomatic and financial continuity of Hamas's political office.
- **Saif al-Adel** — AQ operational chief and interim emir. Iran-based. Direct nexus to the IRGC's calculated tolerance of AQ sanctuary on Iranian territory.

## REGIONAL ATTACK POTENTIAL

The question the analysis must ultimately answer is not whether the Axis of Resistance is capable of attacks across the region. The evidence that it is capable is four decades old. The question is where, at what scale, under what conditions, and with what probability.

## UNITED STATES ASSETS IN THE REGION

American forces in the Middle East operate across a geographic arc from Kuwait and Bahrain through Qatar, UAE, Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, with Naval forces in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf.

The threat to these forces from IRGC-directed networks is not theoretical. It is ongoing.

Iraq presents the most persistent direct kinetic threat. The bounty program targeting US commanders and CIA officers — confirmed in current intelligence state — demonstrates both intent and a degree of operational planning for targeted operations against named individuals. Kataib Hezbollah's drone and rocket attacks on Ain al-Assad airbase have been the most frequent single category of anti-US attacks since 2020.

The Kuwait 6-US-KIA incident — attributed to a Russian intelligence pipeline — illustrates that the threat environment in Gulf state facilities encompasses the full intelligence sharing and operational coordination network between IRGC, Russian GRU, and PMF-affiliated intelligence cells.

Bahrain (NAVCENT) hosts the US Fifth Fleet headquarters and is within range of Houthi missiles and the IRGC maritime and air capabilities across the Gulf. Iranian drone strikes on three AWS data center facilities in the UAE and Bahrain (March 1, 2026) demonstrated that Iranian capabilities can reach Gulf state infrastructure at will. NAVCENT represents a higher-value target; an attack on it would represent a strategic escalation that Iran would calibrate against its interests in the specific operational moment.

Qatar (Al Udeid) — the largest US military base in the Middle East, housing approximately 10,000 personnel and serving as the CENTCOM forward headquarters — is within Houthi and IRGC missile range. The 194 arrests near Al Udeid suggest Qatari intelligence have identified surveillance or planning activity. Qatar's simultaneous hosting of US forces and relationships with Hamas and Iran creates a complex security environment.

Red Sea Naval Operations present a structural sustainability problem. The Economist's March 13, 2026 assessment confirms that Gulf interceptor depletion "far outstrips Ukraine" — a fundamental constraint on the US Navy's ability to defend both its assets and commercial shipping simultaneously under sustained Houthi engagement.

## ISRAEL

The IRGC's threat to Israel is the most extensively documented attack vector in the Axis of Resistance portfolio. Iran conducted its first direct conventional strike on Israeli territory on April 13–14, 2024, launching more than 300 drones and missiles. The overwhelming majority were intercepted by Israeli and allied air defenses. The attack failed in kinetic terms. Its strategic message was unmistakable: Iran has the will and the means to strike Israel directly from Iranian soil.

The post-Epic Fury environment creates conditions in which the probability of a second direct Iranian strike on Israel increases with Iranian perceived existential threat. The Hezbollah front — IDF 98th Division reinforcing along the Litani line, an estimated 25,000 rockets remaining, Hezbollah's "Al-Asf al-Ma'kul" salvo launched March 2026 — represents near-term kinetic pressure. The Houthi threat to Israeli ports and the Eilat-Ashdod Red Sea shipping corridor represents economic pressure. The remaining IRGC missile capability for a direct Iran-to-Israel strike represents the strategic deterrence layer.

Israel's strategic vulnerability is the convergence of these fronts simultaneously. The IDF has demonstrated the capacity to handle any one of them with acceptable losses. The question — which the 2024 Lebanon war partially tested and left partially unanswered — is whether Israeli air defense, intelligence capacity, and military manpower can sustain simultaneous multi-front pressure from Hezbollah, Gaza remnants, Houthis, and direct Iranian strikes.

## ARAB STATES: SAUDI ARABIA, UAE, AND GULF PARTNERS

Saudi Arabia and the UAE face the most direct Houthi threat and secondary threat from Iraqi PMF and Iranian ballistic missiles. The 2019 Abqaiq-Khuras attack demonstrated that Iranian-supplied weapons in Houthi hands can strike the heart of Saudi energy infrastructure with precision. The Saudi energy industry has invested extensively in air defense upgrades since 2019, but the fundamental geographic vulnerability of above-ground processing facilities to saturation missile and drone attacks has not been resolved.

The UAE faces two simultaneous threat vectors: Houthi drone and missile attacks (Abu Dhabi was struck in January 2022 by Houthi cruise missiles, killing 3) and IRGC kinetic options against UAE financial and energy infrastructure if UAE-US security cooperation is used as a launch platform for Epic Fury operations. Kuwait's hosting of US forces makes it a target for IRGC-aligned PMF operations. Bahrain — hosting the US Fifth Fleet and with a majority Shia population that includes IRGC-linked civil society and political networks — faces both the conventional naval threat and the domestic destabilization risk.

## PAKISTAN

The IRGC-Pakistan relationship is the most complex bilateral dimension of Iranian regional influence because Pakistan is simultaneously a nuclear state, a nominal Iranian economic partner, a host to Baloch insurgent groups that have attacked Iranian territory, and a country with a significant Shia minority whose political organizations receive Iranian financial support.

The January 2024 Iran-Pakistan mutual strike exchange illustrated that the relationship operates at a constant low-level kinetic threshold. Iran's Shia network in Pakistan — centered in Quetta, Lahore, and Karachi — provides financial, political, and intelligence infrastructure that gives Tehran windows into Pakistani domestic politics, military relationships, and nuclear establishment dynamics. This is not primarily a kinetic threat vector. It is an influence operation that positions IRGC to gain intelligence on Pakistan's nuclear command structure — the most strategically consequential information in the entire Middle East and South Asia theater.

The AQ-AQIS nexus and the AQIS-TTP convergence create a secondary threat dynamic: Pakistani terrorist networks that receive some Iranian tolerance operate in proximity to nuclear-related facilities and personalities. This is not IRGC-directed. It is IRGC-tolerated and IRGC-monitored — a distinction that provides Tehran with influence leverage in Pakistani political calculations without requiring direct Iranian action.

## ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

The IRGC's Middle East network is the most consequential force-multiplication architecture in contemporary conflict — more strategically effective than any single-nation conventional military of equivalent cost, more resilient than any terrorist network relying on a single organizational structure, and more persistent than any insurgency that lacks a state sponsor with four decades of institutional commitment.

The 2024–2026 degradation of the network is real. It is the most significant structural disruption the Axis of Resistance has absorbed since its construction. It is not a dismantling.

The network's resilience reflects three structural characteristics that no amount of targeted elimination resolves.

First, organizational depth: Hezbollah, the PMF factions, and Ansar Allah are not personalist movements that collapse with their leaders. They are institutions with bureaucratic structures, territorial control, social services, and economic relationships that give them organic survival capacity.

Second, IRGC's reconstitution doctrine: the Quds Force has rebuilt degraded proxies twice before and is structurally committed to reconstituting the current losses.

Third, Iranian political will: the Islamic Republic's identity is constitutively linked to the resistance axis. No Iranian government — successor to Khamenei or not, reformist or hardliner — will abandon the proxy network without something approximating a peace settlement that Tehran has no current incentive to accept.

The threat to US assets in the region is highest in Iraq, where PMF factions operate with genuine operational independence and political cover. The threat to Israel is highest from the Hezbollah northern front and from a potential direct Iranian second strike in an existential-threat escalation scenario. The threat to Gulf states is highest from Houthi maritime and air capabilities. The threat to Pakistan is primarily sub-kinetic — influence operations and border tension management — with the potential for kinetic escalation in the Baluchistan border corridor.

The United States, Israel, and their partners have the military capacity to degrade the Axis of Resistance's operational capability further. What none of them has demonstrated, across four decades of attempting it, is the strategic patience and political consistency to sustain the pressure long enough to reach the network's reconstitution floor — the point at which IRGC cannot rebuild faster than it is being dismantled.

Tehran has been absorbing targeted kills, OFAC designations, and proxy degradation since 1983. It has learned no lessons from these disruptions in the sense of moderating its behavior. It has learned every operational lesson about adapting, dispersing, and reconstituting.

The question for American strategy is not whether the Axis can be further degraded. It is whether further degradation, in the absence of a comprehensive political settlement, produces a security outcome or simply a more dispersed and more autonomous network — thirty-one IRGC commanders and their proxies, operating with less central control, more local initiative, and reduced Tehran accountability.

That scenario is not obviously more manageable than the one that preceded Epic Fury.



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