



## ANALYSIS

### ISRAEL-HEZBOLLAH WAR AND THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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Lebanese Hezbollah is widely regarded to be the Islamic Republic of Iran's most powerful proxy militant group.<sup>1</sup> It might become its Achilles heel. There is a high likelihood that after Israel destroys or greatly undermines the political and military infrastructures of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, it will go to war with Hezbollah.<sup>2</sup> What would Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) do if Israel and Hezbollah enter a full-scale war?

Despite numerous warnings from officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) that if Israel would continue the bombing of Gaza or enter Gaza, the war would spread, we have observed little direct action from IRI's own forces. We observed that it has only been the IRI's proxies that have attacked Israel or the United States. On October 8, 2023, Hezbollah began firing on Israel. There has been a persistent low intensity exchange of fires between the two sides. According to Reuters, between October 8, 2023, and March 12, 2024, the casualties included more than 200 Hezbollah terrorists, about 50 civilians in Lebanon, 12 Israel Defense Forces (IDF) personnel, and six civilians in Israel.<sup>3</sup> Agence France-Presse, utilizing various sources, compiled the number of deaths between October 8, 2023 and August 5, 2024. According to this report, 527 people in Lebanon were killed, most of them combatants. In Israel 46 persons were killed, about half of the soldiers. About 160,000 persons have been displaced on both sides of the Israel-Lebanon border. Most estimates are that more than 100,000 persons in Lebanon have been displaced.<sup>4</sup> Israel has systematically killed top Hezbollah commanders.<sup>5</sup> Foad Shokr was killed on July 30, 2024. Shokr was the

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<sup>1</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, IISS, 2019), several chapters available at <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier>; Brian Katz, *Axis Rising: Iran's Evolving Regional Strategy and Non-State Partnerships in the Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, October 11, 2018), available at <https://www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east>; and Thomas Bergeson and Ari Cicurel, "The US must help Israel deal with Hezbollah before it's too late," *The Hill*, December 23, 2023, available at <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/4373758-the-us-must-help-israel-deal-with-hezbollah-before-its-too-late/>.

<sup>2</sup> Julian Borger, "Fears grow of all-out Israel-Hezbollah war as fighting escalates," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/17/fears-grow-of-all-out-israel-hezbollah-war-as-fighting-escalates-lebanon>.

<sup>3</sup> "Israeli jets hit Lebanon's Bekka Valley for a second day," *Reuters*, March 12, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-hezbollah-fires-more-than-100-katyusha-rockets-onto-israel-2024-03-12/>.

<sup>4</sup> Adel Miliani, "Understanding the tensions between Hezbollah and Israel in five key dates," *Le Monde*, August 5, 2024, available at [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/les-decodeurs/article/2024/08/05/understanding-the-tensions-between-hezbollah-and-israel-in-five-key-dates\\_6709662\\_8.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/les-decodeurs/article/2024/08/05/understanding-the-tensions-between-hezbollah-and-israel-in-five-key-dates_6709662_8.html).

<sup>5</sup> Azadeh Akbari, "Israel systematically eliminated top Iran proxy leaders," *Iran International*, August 4, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202408017299>.



highest-ranking military commander of Hezbollah.<sup>6</sup> Several hours later, Ismail Haniyeh, leader of Hamas, was killed in Tehran on July 31, 2024. Mohammed Nasser, head of one of Hezbollah's three regional divisions in south Lebanon, was killed on July 3, 2024. On June 11, 2024, Taleb Sami Abdullah (known as Hajj Abu Taleb), was killed in an airstrike attributed to Israel. Abdollah was the highest-ranking Hezbollah commander that had been killed by Israel between October 8, 2023, and July 2, 2024.<sup>7</sup>

In this article, we argue that a full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah would have different consequences than the full-scale war between Israel and Hamas. The relationship between the IRI and the Lebanese Hezbollah is completely different than between Iran's rulers and Hamas.<sup>8</sup> The relationship between the IRI and Hamas is primarily transactional.<sup>9</sup> Hamas is a Sunni fundamentalist group and the IRI provides them funds, weapons, and training for the purpose of attacking Israel. The IRI's assistance to Hamas is not due to political and ideological affinities. The IRI's assistance to Hamas is due to their mutual hatred for Israel. For example, in the Syrian civil war, Hamas sided with the Sunni Islamist opposition while the IRI supported Bashar al-Assad.<sup>10</sup>

The Lebanese Hezbollah is a Shia fundamentalist group that regards the Supreme Leader of Iran as its Supreme Leader.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Hezbollah takes orders from Iran's Supreme Leader rather than Lebanon's president. Hezbollah is organically intertwined with the IRGC and may be best described as the Lebanese section of the IRGC's Qods Force. Moreover, bonds of blood and marriage have forged close-knit relations between Hezbollah and the IRGC. For example, Imad Mughniyeh, the notorious terrorist mastermind and number two in Hezbollah, had an Iranian wife.<sup>12</sup> Zeinab Soleymani, the outspoken hardline daughter of Gen. Qassem Soleymani (the Qods Force's former chief who was considered the second most powerful official in the IRI before his killing by the United States in 2020), is married to Reza Safieddine, a son of Hashem Safieddine, the current number two in Hezbollah.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Hezbollah leader's 'right-hand man' killed in Israeli airstrike on Beirut," *Iran International*, July 30, 2024, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202407306612>.

<sup>7</sup> Akbari, "Israel systematically," op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> Devorah Margolin and Matthew Levitt, "The Road to October 7: Hamas' Long Game, Clarified," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 16, No. 10 (October/November 2023), pp. 1-10. Also see "Hamas," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, available at [https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping\\_palestinian\\_politics/hamas/](https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/hamas/).

<sup>9</sup> Erik Skare, "Iran, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad: A marriage of convenience," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 18, 2023, available at <https://ecfr.eu/article/iran-hamas-and-islamic-jihad-a-marriage-of-convenience/>.

<sup>10</sup> Skare, "Iran, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad," op. cit.; and Phillip Smyth, "The Path to October 7: How Iran Built Up and Managed a Palestinian 'Axis of Resistance,'" *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 16, No. 11 (December 2023), pp. 25-40.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmad Nizar Hamzeh, *In the Path of Hizbullah* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2004), pp. 32-36.

<sup>12</sup> "Imad Mughniyeh's daughter granted Iranian citizenship," *Ya Libnan*, May 30, 2014, available at <https://yalibnan.com/2014/05/30/imad-mughniyehs-daughter-granted-iranian-citizenship/>. Mughniyeh had two wives, the first one was a cousin from Lebanon and a second wife was Iranian.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Statement by the Department of Defense," *Defense.gov*, January 2, 2020, available at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2049534/statement-by-the-department-of-defense/>; and "Hashem Safieddine," *Counter Extremism Project*, no date, available at <https://www.counterextremism.com/extremists/hashem-safieddine>.

Sitting on the fence and watching the slaughter of Hamas fighters has been painful and humiliating for Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC.<sup>14</sup> Khamenei might have been surprised at Israel's strong and effective response to Hamas. Khamenei might have been even more surprised at President Biden's support for Israel and sending two aircraft carrier strike groups and an Ohio-class submarine to the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf.<sup>15</sup> Khamenei's response, however, was expected. He used his usual strategy of low intensity harassment of Israel and the United States through the IRI's proxy groups in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. Khamenei's strategy has been to gradually bleed Americans out of the Middle East while avoiding a direct war with the United States and/or Israel.<sup>16</sup>

### Israel's New Grand Strategy

The Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, and Israel's responses will probably change the Middle East in far more profound ways than we assume today. The old security paradigm is cracking and might soon crumble. Before the October 7 attacks, Israel's grand strategy was based on the assumption that it could live with militant Islamic fundamentalist groups on its borders: Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)<sup>17</sup> in the Gaza Strip, militants in the West Bank, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Periodically, Israel would attack these groups and degrade their military capabilities.<sup>18</sup> Some analysts used the analogy of "mowing the grass" for this strategy.<sup>19</sup>

Until the early 1980s, secular nationalists and leftists dominated Palestinian politics. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was considered by many as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people. Many across the political spectrum in Israel thought that the rise of ultra-right wing Islamic fundamentalist groups would divide the

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<sup>14</sup> For basic information on the IRGC, see Matthew M. Frick, "Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: An Open Source Analysis," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2008), pp. 121-127.; and, "IRGC," United Against Nuclear Iran, no date, available at <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/report/irgc-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps>.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Blank, "Two Theaters but One War: Why We Should Support Ukraine and Israel," *Journal of Policy & Strategy*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2024), pp. 37-50.

<sup>16</sup> Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Iran's Foreign Policy: Elite Factionalism, Ideology, the Nuclear Weapons Program, and the United States* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 74-89.

<sup>17</sup> PIJ is a Sunni fundamentalist group, but it is very different than Hamas. PIJ has very close relations with the IRI, receives funds, weapons, and training from the IRI. PIJ has taken an absolute neutrality in the sectarian conflicts between Shia and Sunnis in the region. PIJ is primarily a violent terrorist organization that engages in violent attacks against Israel. During the Syrian civil war, despite tremendous pressure from the IRI, PIJ refused to take a position on that conflict. PIJ also does not engage in politics and elections that Hamas does. Kacper Rekawek, "An Interview with Erik Skare on the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)," *International Center for Counter Terrorism*, November 10, 2023, available at <https://www.icct.nl/publication/interview-erik-skare-palestinian-islamic-jihad-pij>.

<sup>18</sup> Eitan Shamir, "Israel," chapter in Thierry Balzacq, Peter Dombrowski, and Simon Reich, eds., *Comparative Grand Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 217-238.

<sup>19</sup> Raphael S. Cohen, "Opinion: The problem with Israel's futile Gaza strategy, explained," *Los Angeles Times*, October 19, 2023, available at <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-10-19/israel-gaza-hamas-palestinian-attack-ground-war-netanyahu>; and, Adam Taylor, "With strikes targeting rockets and tunnels, the Israeli tactic of 'mowing the grass' returns to Gaza," *The Washington Post*, May 14, 2021, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/05/14/israel-gaza-history/>.

Palestinians and undermine the PLO's hold on the Palestinians; therefore, it would be advantageous for Israel to allow such Islamists to grow. In the early 1990s, with the Oslo process, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat agreed to abandon armed struggle, engage in peace process with Israel, and accept the two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The two-state solution would require Israel to withdraw from the West Bank, parts of East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, and accept Palestinian sovereignty of those. Not only liberal (e.g., Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, and Yair Lapid), and centrist (e.g., Benny Gantz) Israeli prime ministers have embraced this policy but also many moderates in the right-wing Likud Party (Ehud Olmert, Tzipi Livni) have done so as well. However, Benjamin Netanyahu and many on the right-wing side of the Israeli politics considered the West Bank as part and parcel of historical Israel and did not want to leave these territories. The advocates of the Greater Israel refer to the West Bank by its Biblical term "Judea and Samaria," and closely cooperate with Jewish settlers in that territory. The two-state solution and Greater Israel are incompatible. Prime Minister Netanyahu and his allies on the right pursued a policy of undermining the Palestinian Authority under Arafat and President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) and began allowing massive assistance to Hamas from Qatar.<sup>20</sup> By 2006, Hamas was able to undermine the PLO and by 2023, Hamas was more powerful than the Palestinian Authority.

The rise of Hamas allowed Netanyahu to deflect pressures from the United States, the European Union, and the moderate Arab governments (e.g., Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain) to avoid making the concessions necessary for the two-state solution such as withdrawing from the West Bank.<sup>21</sup> The periodic low intensity violent conflict with Hamas and PIJ undermined those in the center and left within Israeli politics who wished to pursue accommodationist policies towards the Palestinians. In other words, terrorist actions by Hamas and PIJ undermined the Israeli peace camp and Netanyahu's violent actions against the terrorists increased his popularity. Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has called Netanyahu's policy a "poison pill."<sup>22</sup> According to Barak:

...if you mention as a matter of fact that this [Netanyahu] government doesn't want to see a two-state solution, that's objectively accurate. A real set of theories that were promoted by Netanyahu along the last, almost a generation collapsed. There

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<sup>20</sup> "Qatar, Iran, Turkey and beyond: Hamas's network of allies," *France 24*, October 14, 2023, available at <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20231014-qatar-iran-turkey-and-beyond-the-galaxy-of-hamas-supporters>; and, David Ehl, "What is Hamas and who supports it?," *Deutsche Welle*, May 5, 2021, available at <https://www.dw.com/en/who-is-hamas/a-57537872>; and, Nima Elbagir et al., "Qatar sent millions to Gaza for years – with Israel's backing. Here's what we know about the controversial deal," *CNN*, December 12, 2023, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2023/12/11/middleeast/qatar-hamas-funds-israel-backing-intl/index.html>. According to *Deutsche Welle's* report, Qatar provided Hamas about \$1.8 billion dollars between 2012 and May 2021 with the consent of the Israeli government.

<sup>21</sup> Ehud Barak interview with Ian Bremmer, "How Netanyahu used Hamas to avoid talks of a two-state solution," *YouTube*, November 18, 2023, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V4-OWRu5HtY>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Ehud Barak was also Chief of Military Staff, a Lieutenant General, along with two others the most decorated soldier in the IDF, Defense Minister, and Foreign Minister. He is considered one of Israeli's top strategic thinkers and statemen.

was a collapse of the idea that he promoted for more than five years, that basically Hamas is an asset and Palestinian Authority is a liability, rather than the other way around. And the idea was politically motivated. He basically said, as long as he can keep the Hamas active, kicking and alive and suppressing the Palestinian Authority, whenever you or the EU or the UK or the Americans would come to us and ask, “Why the hell you don’t negotiate with the Palestinians about something reasonable?” You can tell, “Oh, we are ready, but what can we do?” Abu Mazen doesn’t control half of his own people, the half in Gaza. And no one expects us to deal with Hamas because it’s a terrorist organization. So, it was a kind of poison pill against any viable political process.<sup>23</sup>

The October 7 terrorist attacks have up-ended Netanyahu’s “poison pill” policies.<sup>24</sup> Hamas’ actions, such as slaughter of children, rape of women, and beheadings, were shocking behavior that Hamas had not engaged in before.<sup>25</sup> Such tactics were hallmarks of ISIS. We have observed only some Shia fundamentalist groups close to the IRI in Iraq and some groups in the Syrian Civil War also engage in such cruelties. Hamas’ tactics were not only not condemned but were applauded by Ayatollah Khamenei and Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah’s leader).<sup>26</sup>

Hamas has not provided the rationale for its new tactic. We surmise three rationales. First, by such extreme cruelties, Hamas wanted to close off any prospects for the two-state solution in the foreseeable future. In other words, Hamas intended to undermine the support among Israelis for the two-state solution, which appears to have succeeded. Second, Hamas was also looking to influence the politics of the region. The policies of various players in the region are divided between rejectionists and accommodationists. Rejectionist camp includes Hamas, PIJ, IRI, Hezbollah, Houthis’ Ansarullah, pro-IRI Shia fundamentalist groups in the Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, al-Qaeda, and ISIS. Accommodationists include the Palestinian Authority and most of the moderate governments in the Middle East and North Africa. Hamas’ shocking cruelties were intended to compel Israelis to wage a more violent response to Hamas than their previous retaliations. Knowing about the sympathies for the Palestinian cause and the enmity towards Israel and Jews, a violent war would undermine accommodationists in the region, which would benefit the rejectionists. Except for Bahrain, other moderate regimes have frozen or postponed their normalization process with Israel. Third, Islamic fundamentalist groups are far more violent and cruel than other groups in the region and the rise of these groups since the late 1970s have drastically increased cruelties and violence. This has given rise to a pool of people willing to engage in and support such

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Smyth, “The Path to Oct 7,” op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, “Islamic world must not remain silent in the face of Zionists’ crime,” *Khameni.ir*, October 10, 2023, available at <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/10169/Islamic-world-must-not-remain-silent-in-the-face-of-Zionists>; and, Hassan Nasrallah, “Chief of Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah delivers speech on Israel-Hamas conflict,” *YouTube*, November 3, 2023, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-OfB1to0sw>.

extreme violence and cruelties. This has given rise to competition among fundamentalist groups to attract and recruit such people to their organizations.

The October 7 terrorist attack by Hamas has caused many Israelis to abandon the notion that they could deter major attacks from the Lebanese Hezbollah on their northern border. Many Israelis have come to discard the strategy that they could coexist with militant Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups on their borders.<sup>27</sup> Thus, there is a high likelihood that the low intensity conflict may escalate into full-scale war. The Biden Administration has been very much against the spread of the war to Hezbollah.

Since around 2002, a primary role of Hezbollah has become the IRI's deterrent to Israeli surgical strikes on Iran's nuclear weapons facilities. By 2023, Iran has become a nuclear threshold state.<sup>28</sup> If Khamenei were to order a breakout and it were to be detected, then the United States and/or Israel would have the option of striking the IRI's nuclear facilities. Israel attacked Iraq's and Syria's nuclear programs in their relatively infant stages. The massive missile forces of the IRI and Hezbollah serve as a deterrent to Israel that if it were to attack the IRI's nuclear facilities, then they will retaliate with massive missile attacks on Israel. If in the case of a breakout, the United States would participate in military strikes on the IRI's nuclear facilities (and its retaliatory capabilities), then Israel could handle retaliation from Hezbollah. However, if the United States decided to live with a nuclear Iran, then Israel would have to attack the IRI by itself. Thus, Israel will face simultaneous attacks from the IRI and Hezbollah. There is little doubt that the IRI and Hezbollah have the ability to inflict great pain and cost on Israel. Perhaps, the ratio of benefits and costs has been the main reason that many in the Israeli national security establishment have not supported military attacks on the IRI's nuclear facilities. However, as the likelihood of the IRI pursuing a breakout and the doubts about the certainty of American military attacks on the IRI increase, the ratio of benefits and costs changes drastically against Israel's interests. Therefore, it would be in Israel's national interests to substantially degrade Hezbollah's capabilities before it strikes the IRI's nuclear facilities so that it would have to defend against only the IRI's retaliatory strikes.

### **Ayatollah Khamenei's Dilemmas**

The situation today, therefore, is very different than in 2006 when there was a 33-day war between Israel and Hezbollah. Like 2006, Khamenei today would want to avoid a direct war with either Israel or the United States. Unlike 2006, after October 7, 2023, Israel does not believe that it is safe to live next to Hezbollah, which is far stronger than Hamas. Therefore, Israel would not be satisfied to merely teach Hezbollah a lesson through punishing

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<sup>27</sup> Julian Borger, "Fears grow of all-out Israel-Hezbollah war as fighting escalates," *The Guardian*, December 17, 2023, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/17/fears-grow-of-all-out-israel-hezbollah-war-as-fighting-escalates-lebanon>.

<sup>28</sup> Masoud Kazemzadeh, "U.S.-Iran Confrontation after Hamas-Israel War: Proxy Wars, Nuclear Strategy, and Eschatology," forthcoming.

bombardments. The mutual deterrence relationship that was established after the 2006 war has evaporated as the small-scale cross-border attacks since October 7, 2023, demonstrate.

Khamenei could live with a limited war between Israel and Hezbollah. However, a war in which Israel's objective would be the elimination of Hezbollah's military power poses serious dilemmas for Khamenei and his regime. Khamenei knows that unlike 2006, his regime is very fragile today, substantially weakened by mass protests in recent years.<sup>29</sup> Any military confrontation that would weaken his coercive apparatuses would, in all likelihood, lead to mass uprisings and the overthrow of his regime. What happened to Moamar Qadhafi of Libya and Benito Mussolini of Italy might happen to Khamenei.

Khamenei's policy has been to avoid direct war with Israel and the United States. Khamenei has been using the IRI's proxies to harass Israel and the United States but not to use massive force that would provoke either Israel or the United States to enter an all-out war with either Iran or Hezbollah. An immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas would have allowed Khamenei to achieve all his objectives. However, the longer the Hamas-Israel war goes on and small-scale confrontations between the IRI's proxies and the United States and Israel continue, the higher the likelihood will be of either Israel or the United States entering into major wars with Hezbollah and or the IRI.

The IRI's grand strategic goals include: expulsion of the United States from the greater Middle East; abolishment of the state of Israel; establishment of a Shia bloc (IRI, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait); overthrow of the pro-United States moderate regimes in the region (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco); conversion of Sunnis to the Shia denomination of Islam; and replacement of the liberal international order under American leadership with an anti-liberal multipolar system with a pole of Muslim Ummah under the leadership of the IRI working with China and Russia to balance the global West and undermine the United States.<sup>30</sup> The fundamentalist regime has been remarkably consistent in pursuing this grand strategy since 1979. The regime has been willing to pay truly substantial costs in blood and treasure in the pursuit of its grand strategy.

Virulent anti-Israel policy has been one of the main pillars of the fundamentalist regime's grand strategy and foreign policy. The regime's name for the expeditionary section of the IRGC is "Qods Force."<sup>31</sup> The word "Qods" is the Islamic term for Jerusalem. After coming to power in 1979, the founder of the fundamentalist regime, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, designated the last Friday in the holy month of Ramadan as "International Qods Day." The Iranian government spends huge amounts of money every year to organize large marches on this day around the globe to condemn Israel and call for the liberation of Jerusalem. After Saddam's forces were expelled from Iranian territory in 1982, many argued that Iran should accept large sums as reparations, not enter into Iraqi territory, and accept peace.<sup>32</sup> Ayatollah

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<sup>29</sup> Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Mass Protests in Iran: From Resistance to Overthrow* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

<sup>30</sup> Masoud Kazemzadeh, *The Grand Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (forthcoming).

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bousset, "The Qods Force in Syria: Combatants, Units, and Actions," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 16, No. 6 (June 2023), pp. 1-9.

<sup>32</sup> Mansour Farhang, "The Iran-Iraq War: The Feud, the Tragedy, the Spoils," *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (Fall 1985), p. 675. Saudi Arabia alone had offered to provide \$25 billion reparations.

Khomeini justified the entry into Iraqi territory (and the prolongation of Iran-Iraq war for six years) by saying “*rah-e Qods az Karbala migozarad*” [the road to Jerusalem goes through Karbala]. This sentence by Khomeini became the main slogan of the war between 1982 and 1988. In other words, Khomeini justified the continuation of the war with Iraq on the argument that it was a pathway to the main war against Israel. Both Khomeini and Khamenei have called Israel a “cancerous tumor” that must be eradicated. The fundamentalist regime officials have been promising to “wipe Israel off the map.” The regime explicitly opposes the existence of Israel. The fundamentalist regime utilizes various mechanisms to cultivate, excite, and galvanize anti-Israel feelings of its supporters.<sup>33</sup>

Since October 7, 2023, the extremist hardline fundamentalists in Iran have become very frustrated with what they consider the regime’s lack of strong response to repeated attacks by Israel.<sup>34</sup> On the one hand, for 45 years the regime has used incendiary rhetoric against Israel. On the other hand, when there is an actual war, the regime appears afraid to directly enter into the conflict with Israel. The regime’s extremist rhetoric of promising “*entegham sakht*” [extreme revenge] has created heightened expectations among the regime’s social base. The extremist hardline fundamentalists who are frustrated with the actual policy of the regime have been expressing their frustrations on social media using the hashtag of “*enfeal sakht*” [extreme passivity] to ridicule the regime’s leaders.<sup>35</sup>

It is one thing to watch Israel pummel Sunni Hamas. It is a very different emotional feeling for Shia fundamentalists in Iran to watch Israel pummel Shia Hezbollah. If Israel were to attack Hezbollah the same way it has been attacking Hamas, Khamenei will be put in a precarious position. If Khamenei were to enter the war against Israel, then devastating attacks by Israel and or the United States would, in all likelihood, cause the overthrow of his regime.

If Khamenei were to stay out of the war, there is a likelihood of a coup by the IRGC to remove him and install an IRGC junta, so that this new military government would enter the war against Israel. The IRGC is the home of the extremist hardline fundamentalists.<sup>36</sup> Some in the IRGC believe that Iran is much stronger than Israel and could defeat it. For these IRGC commanders, Khamenei’s reticence to enter the war against Israel is cowardice and/or miscalculation. For others in the IRGC, although Iran is clearly weaker than the United States, it is clearly much stronger than either the Taliban or Saddam’s regime. These IRGC

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<sup>33</sup> Kazemzadeh, *The Grand Strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> “Anger of the Expert for the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, We Kept Saying Hard Revenge But Did Not Hit Back and They Kept Hitting Us,” *Voice of America, Farsi*, April 2, 2024, available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtLpHi5kt\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DtLpHi5kt_8).

<sup>35</sup> “Revolutionaries Ridicule the Regime with the Hashtag ‘severe passivity,’” *Iran Emrooz*, December 28, 2023, available at <https://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php/news2/more/111888/>.

<sup>36</sup> Kasra Aarabi, *Beyond Borders: The Expansionist Ideology of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (London: Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2020), available at <https://institute.global/sites/default/files/2020-01/IRGC%20Report%2027012020.pdf>; and, Saeid Golkar and Kasra Aarabi, *Iran’s Revolutionary Guard and the Rising Cult of Mahdism: Missiles and Militias for the Apocalypse* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Institute, May 3, 2022), available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-revolutionary-guard-and-rising-cult-mahdism-missiles-and-militias-apocalypse>.



commanders likely predict that the Biden Administration, which has observed the end-results of American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, would not enter a war with Iran.<sup>37</sup> And even if the Biden Administration did enter the war with Iran, these IRGC commanders believe that they could ultimately triumph, as did the Taliban. For some in the IRGC, the bonds of blood would require entry into the war with Israel, for not doing so would be an insult to their honor. For these men, such lack of honor would be such that they could not live with that shame the rest of their lives.

## Conclusion

If Khamenei were to enter the war as the result of a full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah, there is a very high likelihood that his regime would collapse. In a war in which the IRGC is seriously weakened, the regime would lack the means by which to subjugate the Iranian people. If Khamenei does not enter the war, there is little doubt that there will be great frustration and anger among the regime's social base. Whether or not the anger would cross the tipping point remains to be seen. We may find out whether or not those frustrations could reach the level of a coup against Khamenei. If the IRGC resorts to a coup, it is not clear whether the coup would be overt, or if it might secretly kill Ayatollah Khamenei and replace him with a more pliant person.

The Biden Administration's policy has been to contain the conflict and prevent the spread of the war to Hezbollah. The current policy is not in the long-term interests of either Israel or the United States. If the military and political infrastructure of Hamas are not destroyed, then it would be able to rebuild itself after a ceasefire and attack Israel again. If the military and political infrastructure of Hezbollah are not substantially weakened, then it could attack Israel when it best suits the interests of itself and that of the IRI. Israel clearly possesses military power to go to war with Hezbollah and substantially weaken it. The weakening of Hezbollah would serve both the national interests of Israel and the national interests of the United States. Therefore, it is in the long-term interests of the United States to support Israel's operations against these terrorist groups.

What appears certain is that a war between Israel and Hezbollah would greatly undermine the stability of the fundamentalist regime in Iran. If it were to lead to the collapse

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<sup>37</sup> There is a widespread perception that, at least since the Obama Administration, the U.S. policy has been to leave the Middle East. Those who hold this perception believe that President Biden is far more against the use of American military power than either the Obama or the Trump Administrations. Those who hold this perception also believe that because of such perception of the Biden Administration, America's enemies are emboldened to challenge both the U.S. and its allies. This widespread perception is held by many fundamentalists in Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and among the Palestinians. This perception is also held by anti-fundamentalists in the Middle East, many American allies, as well as many American observers. See Hossein Aghaie Joobani, "The Biden Iran Gamble: Between War And Diplomacy," *Iran International*, July 4, 2023, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202307043293>; and, Len Khodorkovsky, "Unmute The Iranians - Enough From The Regime, Let's Hear From The People," *Iran International*, May 31, 2022, available at <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202205315649>; and, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, "Petro Diplomacy 2023: Geopolitical Shift and New Alliances," *YouTube*, June 27-28, 2023, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-sFcXTrCCE>.

of the fundamentalist regime, it would be the greatest strategic victory for the United States since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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