



BEYOND “MAXIMUM PRESSURE” IN US POLICY ON IRAN

Leveraging Regional Partners to Contain Iran’s Actions
and Shape its Future Choices



Middle
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MEI Strategic Initiative
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IRAN STRATEGIC INITIATIVE

This report is part of an MEI strategic initiative that examines how to enhance regional cooperation between the United States and its partners on addressing the challenges posed by Iran across the region, particularly in key areas like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Israel-Palestine, and the Ukraine war. Through a series of articles, short papers, events, podcasts, and a final policy report, the initiative showcased a broad range of viewpoints and subject-matter expertise to inform a holistic and resolute approach toward Iran.

Cover photo: US President Trump speaks about the Iran deal at the White House, on Oct. 13, 2017. [Photo by Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images.](#)

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Photo above: A portrait of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in Azadi (Freedom) Square in Tehran. [Photo by Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images.](#)

Introduction and Strategic Context

The Islamic Republic of Iran is currently in its weakest and most isolated position since the founding of the regime in 1979, and it is struggling to preserve its regional network of proxies and non-state allies, whose activities undercut regional and global security. This so-called “Axis of Resistance”¹ is part of Iran’s broader “forward defense”² strategy designed to safeguard the regime at home and project power across the region by employing its own military, diplomatic, cyber, and propaganda tools as well as the capacities of the axis partners. For the past year, however, Tehran’s strategy has faced unprecedented pressure along multiple fronts and across various spheres

While the current situation raises the risks of regional escalation or miscalculation by a cornered Iran, it also offers a window of opportunity for the United States and its partners to redraw the geostrategic realities of the Middle East along more stable lines as well as push the Iranian regime to contain and roll back its disruptive actions. Seizing the moment will require a sober assessment of where the region stands as well as a deeper understanding of the political dynamics inside of Iran itself.

President Donald Trump now faces a much different Middle East in his second administration than the one he dealt with before,³ a region reshaped by more than a year of war as well as several years of shifting patterns of relationships between key regional powers, particularly Israel, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.

1. Matthew Czekaj, host, Middle East Focus, “The Axis of Resistance Pt. 1: The Proxies,” Middle East Institute, October 22, 2024, 37 min., 48 sec., <https://www.mei.edu/multimedia/podcast/axis-resistance-pt-1-proxies>.

2. Alex Vatanka, “Whither the IRGC of the 1920s? Is Iran’s Proxy Warfare Strategy of Forward Defense Sustainable?,” *New America*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/whither-irgc-2020s/>.

3. Paul Salem et al., “Four years of tectonic shifts that redrew the Middle East,” Middle East Institute, December 17, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/four-years-tectonic-shifts-redrew-middle-east>.

The region is currently experiencing an upheaval that includes:

- Inconclusive conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon;
- Iran-backed militias like Hezbollah and Hamas seeing the worst losses in their history;
- The fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the takeover of Syria by opposition forces, and the evacuation of Iranian military and diplomatic personnel⁴;
- Ongoing threats to international shipping in the Red Sea from the Houthis in Yemen; and
- A reduced but once again growing threat from the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

At the same time, the region continues to witness some countervailing trends:

- Unprecedented moves toward greater economic diversification and integration with the wider global economy, particularly in areas such as the Gulf;
- Long-standing partners like Saudi Arabia leading efforts to stabilize the region and reduce military confrontations via diplomacy with traditional foes like Iran;
- Efforts by the same leading countries to promote greater regional integration and diversify relationships with global powers, like Russia and China; and
- Increased military and security cooperation among a wider range of partners in the US Central Command (CENTCOM) area of operation.

The drivers of these trends mostly emanate from regional actors, rather than external forces like the United States, China, Europe, India, and Russia. Nevertheless, the US remains the most influential external actor, with multiple defense, diplomatic, and economic policy tools and an extensive network of relationships to shape dynamics, including on responding to Iran’s role in the region.

Iran remains the overriding strategic challenge and threat to US national security interests in the Middle East.⁵ In

4. Farnaz Fassihi and Ronen Bergman, “Iran Begins to Evacuate Military Officials and Personnel From Syria,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/06/world/middleeast/iran-syria-evacuation.html>.

5. “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence



Photo above: Iranians shout anti-Israel and anti-US slogans during a funeral for Abbas Nilforoushan, an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander who was killed in an Israeli airstrike on Oct. 15, 2024. Photo by Morteza Nikoubazi/NurPhoto via Getty Images.

addition to its weakened regional position, Iran’s nuclear program has moved closer than ever to having the ability to produce a weapon.

During his first term, Trump’s foreign policy methods were unpredictable and unconventional. In the Middle East, the main outcome was the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.⁶ On Iran, Trump withdrew America from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)⁷ — a year into his administration and pursued a

policy of “maximum pressure,” consisting of economic and diplomatic measures to coerce Tehran into curbing its nuclear program and limiting its malign regional influence. This approach did not achieve its intended outcomes.

Iran’s current predicament should prompt a major rethink of US policy on Iran, one that is bipartisan and seeks to tackle the various challenges posed by Tehran: its nuclear program, ballistic missiles, cyberthreats, and proxy networks. It should also put Iran’s future and the needs and aspirations of the Iranian people closer to the center of the policy deliberations and discussions in Washington.⁸

Community,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 5, 2024, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2024-Unclassified-Report.pdf>.

6. “The Abraham Accords Declaration,” US Department of State, September 15, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

7. “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” US Department of State, July 14, 2015, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/>

[organization/245317.pdf](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/organization/245317.pdf).

8. This report’s central focus is on key aspects of America’s relationship with regional partners in advancing a new Iran policy. For a recent assessment offering a set of strategic ideas on what new US policy on Iran might look like in several dimensions, see “A bipartisan Iran strategy for the next US administration—and the next two decades,” Atlantic Council Scowcroft Middle East Security Initiative, October 8, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/organization/245317.pdf>.

Trump now faces an important strategic choice on Iran policy: will he return to an updated version of “maximum pressure” and act as an unpredictable disruptor, or will he prioritize his penchant for deal-making and seek a quick pathway to a new nuclear deal with Iran? Recent evidence suggests he may be open to a different approach from his last term.

Since retaking office, Trump has stated that “hopefully, [the concerns over Iran’s nuclear facilities] can be worked out without having to worry about [Israel striking Iran’s nuclear sites],” and that “it would really be nice” if this could be resolved by means of an agreement.⁹ Trump’s meetings with high-level officials regarding Iran in his first few days of returning to office, as well as his hope that Iran will make a deal, seemingly demonstrates his interest in resolving the Iranian nuclear issue diplomatically.

In navigating this strategic choice, Trump should make use of a key asset and force multiplier in advancing a new Iran policy: America’s regional partners, whose security has been negatively impacted by Iran. This new approach should also encompass fragile theaters like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine, whose governance has been further weakened by the infiltration and influence of Iran-backed non-state actors as part of Tehran’s “forward defense” strategy. The massive economic, social, and demographic challenges in those countries are exacerbated by poor leadership, weak governance, and endemic corruption, but Iran’s regional strategy has preyed upon these internal vulnerabilities for years.

This report analyzes three overarching dynamics:

- The shifting strategic landscape across the Middle East in 2023-24;
- The impact of these shifts on Iran and its Axis of Resistance; as well as

org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-bipartisan-iran-strategy-for-the-next-us-administration-and-the-next-two-decades/.

9. “President Trump Signs Executive Orders,” The White House, YouTube, January 24, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rmWeGbfN8o&t=17m37s>.

- Iran’s current position and standing at home and in the region.

Those dynamics, in turn, inform the report’s three main strategic recommendations for the incoming administration:

1. **Security: Step up US security and defense commitments and coordination** with regional partners facing ongoing threats from Iran and its regional network, with a particular emphasis on deepening the process of regional security cooperation among America’s military partners themselves.
2. **Diplomacy: Establish new diplomatic partnerships with key partners** from across the Middle East to advance a more coordinated US policy that addresses key aspects of Iran’s policies and actions in the region and beyond.
3. **Shaping Iran’s future: Utilize this regional network of partners to shape the calculus of the regime and create openings for the people of Iran** as the country prepares for a leadership transition in the next few years.

In advancing a more comprehensive US policy approach on Iran, the Trump administration and figures in both parties of Congress should take a long-term approach and not expect immediate outcomes. The impact from a strategic policy shift may take years to achieve, and likely will stretch beyond the four years the Trump administration will have in a second term, because the threats and challenges posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran have taken deep root over decades.

In seeking to contain these threats, the United States should also work with partners in the region to shape strategic choices for Iran’s leaders and people — with a focus on creating new opportunities in the long term for the Iranian people to have more of a voice in how they are governed. In addition, Washington should seek to shape the broader Middle East landscape by working toward a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This issue is a key component of a more integrated, comprehensive Middle East strategy and directly linked to the challenges posed by Iran, as Tehran and its partners

“In navigating this strategic choice, Trump should make use of a key asset and force multiplier in advancing a new Iran policy: America’s regional partners, whose security has been negatively impacted by Iran.”

exploit the lack of a resolution to their own benefit. A separate Middle East Institute paper examines this dynamic. This report was shaped and informed by a team effort at the Middle East Institute to examine all aspects of the Iran challenges facing the next US administration in work that was produced throughout 2024.

A Shifting Regional Landscape Undermines Iran’s Position, 2023-24

As President Trump returns to office, he faces a Middle East that is significantly different from the one he dealt with at the end of his first term in 2021. In the past two years, four key drivers have reshaped¹⁰ the landscape in ways that complicate Iran’s position:

- Israel’s military efforts against Iran and its Axis of Resistance,
- The surprise fall of the Assad regime and opposition takeover of Syria,
- Iran’s evolving ties with Russia and China, and
- The strategic repositioning of the Gulf states on Iran.

Israel Works to Restore a Semblance of Strategic Deterrence Against Iran

The Hamas attack¹¹ on Oct. 7, 2023, brought an end to a period of intermittent and mostly covert conflict between Israel on the one hand and Iran and its network

10. Paul Salem, “The Middle East’s changing strategic landscape,” Middle East Institute, November 7, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/middle-east-s-changing-strategic-landscape>.

11. Paul Salem et al., “Special Briefing: A year of after-shocks since Oct. 7,” Middle East Institute, October 7, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/special-briefing-year-after-shocks-oct-7>.

of partners on the other. Unlike direct conventional war, this campaign, which began after the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, was distinguished mostly by indirect military actions, acts of terrorism, targeted assassinations, cyberwarfare, and airstrikes against proxy targets.¹²

In 2024, Israel and Iran crossed the threshold in two different instances of direct military strikes on each other’s territories, once in April¹³ and again in October.¹⁴ These attacks occurred in the context of a regional security landscape that had deteriorated sharply. Shortly after the war on Gaza began in October 2023, several of Iran’s regional partners, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and a number of militias operating in Syria and Iraq, began a multi-front war of attrition against Israel while its attention was focused on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Israel, along with support from the US and its allies, contained the impact of these attacks by Iran’s network

12. For one articulation of the key components of this strategy written by one of its architects, read Gadi Eisenkot and Gabi Siboni, “The Campaign Between Wars: How Israel Rethought Its Strategy to Counter Iran’s Malign Regional Influence,” The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 4, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/campaign-between-wars-how-israel-rethought-its-strategy-counter-irans-malign>.

13. On Iran’s attack on Israel, watch Nimrod Goren et al., “The Geopolitical Implications of Iran’s Attack on Israel,” moderated by Paul Salem, Zoom webinar, April 16, 2024, by Middle East Institute, 1:01:28, <https://www.mei.edu/events/geopolitical-implications-irans-attack-israel>; for an assessment of Israel’s retaliatory strike on Iran in April, see: Alexander Palmer et al., “Assessing Israel’s Strike on Iran,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 3, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-israels-strike-iran>.

14. Alex Vatanka et al., “Weekly Briefing: Iran’s growing burden of confronting Israel,” Middle East Institute, October 15, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/weekly-briefing-irans-growing-burden-confronting-israel>.



Photo above: A Syrian man waving the independence-era Syrian flag over central Umayyad Square in Damascus on Dec. 11, 2024. Photo by Bakr Al-Kasem/AFP via Getty Images.

of partners. The Biden administration and CENTCOM played a pivotal role in quietly forging regional military and security partnerships¹⁵ and in limiting the responses and the consequences of direct military exchanges between Iran and Israel, but this did little to deter the threats posed by Hezbollah, the Houthis, and other groups aligned with Iran.¹⁶

15. Michael K. Nagata et al., “Expert Views: A US regional response to the security threats posed by Iran and its proxies,” Middle East Institute, October 22, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/expert-views-us-regional-response-security-threats-posed-iran-and-its-proxies>.

16. C. Todd Lopez, “Israel, U.S., Partners Neutralize Iranian Airborne Attacks,” US Department of Defense, April 16, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3742552/israel-us-partners-neutralize-iranian-airborne-attacks/>; on US diplomacy aimed at limiting Israel’s retaliatory strike, see: Michael R. Gordon et al., “How Biden Pushed Israel to Limit Its Iran Attack and Still Inflict a Heavy Blow,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 26, 2024, <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/how-biden-pushed-israel-to-limit-its-iran-attack-and-still-inflict-a-heavy-blow-10a8c00a>.

In the summer and fall of 2024, Israel conducted a dramatic series of strikes, most notably the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh while he was in Tehran at the end of July.¹⁷ In September, Israel carried out successive pager and walkie-talkie attacks¹⁸ on Hezbollah personnel, stepped up its military operations in southern Lebanon, and killed many of the group’s senior commanders, including its leader Hassan Nasrallah.¹⁹ In October, Israel announced that it had killed Hamas leader

17. Paul Salem et al., “Special Briefing: The regional impact of Ismail Haniyeh’s assassination,” Middle East Institute, July 31, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/special-briefing-regional-impact-ismail-haniyehs-assassination>.

18. Paul Scham, “In a high-risk move, Israel ramps up escalation against Hezbollah,” Middle East Institute, September 23, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/high-risk-move-israel-ramps-escalation-against-hezbollah>.

19. Paul Salem et al., “Special Briefing: Nasrallah killing reshapes the regional power balance,” Middle East Institute, September 30, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/special-briefing-nasrallah-killing-reshapes-regional-power-balance>.

Yahya Sinwar, another close partner of Iran, in a military strike in the Gaza Strip.²⁰

Israel's invasion of Lebanon,²¹ combined with more aggressive direct military action against Iran on its own territory and its partners in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, marked a substantial shift away from the security paradigm that had guided Israel's actions for more than a decade and a half. It remains to be seen whether this movement from covert war to a more direct, confrontational approach amounts to an enduring change in tactics or whether Israel has a clear political endgame in mind.

The Surprise Fall of the Assad Regime and Opposition Takeover of Syria

The end of the Assad dictatorship in Syria (the “heart of the resistance”) was another setback for Iran, which lost a key ally it needed to support and arm Hezbollah in Lebanon and, in the process, the ability to project power in the region. The Assad regime in Syria has been Iran's ally since 1979 and was a necessary bridge and partner in building and sustaining the Lebanese militant group. Tehran, as an example, provided Damascus with substantial military and financial support throughout the Syrian civil war to keep the Assad regime in power, in addition to funding and recruiting pro-regime militias.

The sudden downfall of Assad's government not only disrupts Iran's strategic foothold in the Levant, but also challenges its influence in the broader Middle East, demonstrating the limitations of its strategy to “unify and coordinate arenas,” which in and of itself created

20. Khaled Elgindy et al., “The Killing of Hamas Leader Yahya Sinwar: A Turning Point in the War?,” moderated by Zeina Al-Shaib, Zoom webinar, October 18, 2024, by Middle East Institute, 1:09:37, <https://www.mei.edu/events/killing-hamas-leader-yahya-sinwar-turning-point-war>.

21. Heiko Wimmen et al., “Israel Invades Lebanon: Precursors, Prospects, and Pitfalls,” International Crisis Group, October 8, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/israelpalestine-lebanon/israel-invades-lebanon>.

and exported instability in weak states. Now Iran, while potentially losing its strategic presence in Syria, will also lose its ability to resupply Hezbollah in neighboring Lebanon, as the group's new leader has acknowledged.

This underscores the volatility of regional alliances but also the complexities Iran faces in navigating its foreign policy objectives amid a rapidly changing political landscape. It may become vital for Iran at this point to secure a role in shaping the future of Syria's political landscape to prevent the emergence of an adversarial government and to preserve some degree of strategic influence in the region. Accordingly, Iran is likely to reposition, assess the landscape, secure investments in Iraq and Yemen, and eventually look for opportunities to double down on propping up allies in Lebanon and elsewhere while expanding its regional alliances with Russia and China to sustain its ambitions. It may, having re-evaluated its defense creed, become open to a new approach, including negotiation with regional powers and the Trump administration. Stronger relations with Gulf Arab states may offer the chance for greater regional stability.

Iran's Evolving Ties with Russia and China

During the past five years, Iran's relations with Russia and China have evolved significantly, shaped by geopolitical shifts, security cooperation, economic interests, and regional concerns. Both Russia and China have become increasingly important partners for Iran, particularly as the latter has faced heightened pressure from Western sanctions and growing isolation. But it would be a mistake to overstate how strongly and deeply Russia and China back Iran — these relationships represent tactical alliances of convenience rather than strategic partnerships grounded in shared worldviews and ideologies. As a result, there is ample space for the United States to drive wedges between Iran and these two countries.

Relations With Russia

During the past decade, cooperation between Russia and Iran has centered around Syria. Moscow and Tehran's

mutual inability to forestall the sudden collapse of the Assad regime in early December 2024 may prove to be a major turning point in their bilateral relationship going forward. But it is important to note that, until now, the two countries had also increased their military cooperation on several fronts unrelated to Syria: in particular, during the past two years, Iran has been sending drones and ballistic missiles to Russia to support the latter's war against Ukraine.²²

With the intensification of US sanctions on Iran, Russia has also become a more important economic partner. Moscow and Tehran have helped each other to bypass Western sanctions, particularly in sectors like oil and natural gas.²³ Russia also provided Iran with access to certain technologies, including in the nuclear sector, as well as cooperation on energy and infrastructure projects, although much of the rhetoric has yet to be implemented. Nonetheless, trade between the two countries increased, with Russia becoming a major supplier of wheat to Iran.²⁴ At the same time, as Russia came under increasing Western sanctions due to its aggression against Ukraine, Iranian experience with circumventing sanctions became ever more valuable to Moscow.

Russia remains a key player in Iran's nuclear development, continuing its role in the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant,²⁵ and is in talks

about further nuclear cooperation, contingent on Tehran's ability to find the necessary capital. Moscow has generally defended Tehran's nuclear program in international forums, presenting it as peaceful, and continues to support Iran's right to develop nuclear energy. The United States and the United Kingdom have raised concerns that Russia has shared nuclear secrets with Iran in return for Tehran supplying Moscow with ballistic missiles to bomb Ukraine.²⁶

Relations With China

In March 2021, Iran and China signed a 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership cooperation agreement,²⁷ which lays out a roadmap for significantly deepening their political, economic, and security ties. The accord reportedly includes provisions for increased Chinese investment in Iranian infrastructure, energy, and industry, as well as broader collaboration in areas like technology, defense, and agriculture. Notwithstanding this agreed-upon framework for closer cooperation, much of what was pledged in the agreement has yet to be implemented by either side. But the tightening relationship has already borne some fruit on the international stage. In March 2023, China announced it had brokered a deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restart diplomatic ties after a rift that lasted more than seven years.²⁸

22. Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, "The Uncomfortable Reality of Russia and Iran's New Defense Relationship," *War on the Rocks*, July 24, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-uncomfortable-reality-of-russia-and-irans-new-defense-relationship/>; Dana Stroul, "Russian-Iranian Cooperation and Threats to U.S. Interests," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 17, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russian-iranian-cooperation-and-threats-us-interests>.

23. Thomas Kohlmann, "Why Iran and Russia can dodge Western sanctions," *Deutsche Welle*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-iran-and-russia-can-dodge-western-sanctions/a-68928255>.

24. Ariane Lüthi, "Russia-Iran: how the wheat trade is flourishing despite sanctions," *SWI swissinfo.ch*, July 13, 2023, <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/business/russia-and-iran-under-sanctions-daily-bread-from-a-fellow-pariah/48653614>.

25. "Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant (BNPP)," *Nuclear Threat*

Initiative, last reviewed June 9, 2023, <https://www.nti.org/education-center/facilities/bushehr-nuclear-power-plant-bnpp/>.

26. Dan Sabbagh, "Alarm in UK and US over possible Iran-Russia nuclear deal," *The Guardian*, September 14, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/14/alarm-in-uk-and-us-over-possible-iran-russia-nuclear-deal>; Patrick Wintour, "Iran's missile supply to Moscow may reveal true scale of Pezeshkian's powers," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/sep/10/irans-missile-supply-to-moscow-may-reveal-true-scale-of-pezeshekians-powers>.

27. Alex Vatanka, "Making sense of the Iran-China strategic agreement," *Middle East Institute*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/making-sense-iran-china-strategic-agreement>.

28. Giorgio Cafiero, "A year ago, Beijing brokered an Iran-Saudi deal. How does détente look today?," *Atlantic Council*, March 6, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-saudi-arabia-china-deal-one-year/>.



Photo above: A man in Tehran holds a local newspaper reporting on the China-brokered deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore ties on March, 11 2023. Photo by ATTA KENARE/AFP via Getty Images.

China has been one of Iran's most important trading partners, particularly in terms of energy.²⁹ Despite US sanctions, China has continued to purchase Iranian oil (around 90-95% of its total), often through indirect channels, and has invested in energy infrastructure in Iran.³⁰ Iran has received major Chinese financial infusions into sectors like energy, mining, and construction. In exchange, China has gained access to Iran's oil and other resources at discounted rates.³¹

29. Umud Shokri, "Obstacles and opportunities for closer Iranian-Chinese economic cooperation," Middle East Institute, Jun 23, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/obstacles-and-opportunities-closer-iranian-chinese-economic-cooperation>.

30. "Iran's Petroleum Exports to China and U.S. Sanctions," Congressional Research Service, November 8, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12267>.

31. "Iran & China: A Trade Lifeline," United States Institute of Peace, July 5, 2023, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2023/jun/28/iran-china-trade-lifeline>.

Iran and China have also discussed and pursued military cooperation, although this relationship is less prominent than their economic ties. There have been reports of Chinese weapons and technology being transferred to Iran,³² as well as joint military exercises in the Persian Gulf. Both countries share a common interest in challenging US military and political dominance around the globe, but particularly in the Middle East and Asia — an aim the two also share with Russia.

And like Russia, China has been instrumental in helping Iran mitigate the effects of Western sanctions, particularly those reimposed after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. Iran has increasingly turned to both countries as critical partners in ensuring its survival amid economic and diplomatic pressure.

32. Dan Darling, "China Seizes Arms Exporting Opportunity in the Middle East," *Defense and Security Monitor*, Forecast International, June 1, 2023, <https://dsm.forecastinternational.com/2023/06/01/china-seizes-arms-exporting-opportunity-in-the-middle-east/>.

“The Trump administration enters office at a time when the Middle East is in the midst of a major evolving and unpredictable transformation in the strategic landscape. The main outcome ... is that Tehran finds itself in its weakest and most isolated position since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.”

Strategic Repositioning of Gulf States: Hedging Relations with Iran and Global Powers

The Arab Gulf states have undertaken important tactical shifts of their own with Iran, and ties between key regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran are markedly different today compared to what they were like during the first Trump administration. A clear gap now exists between Israel’s dramatically stepped-up military campaign against Iran and its network of partners on the one hand and the Gulf states’ attempts to de-escalate tensions with Iran through direct diplomatic outreach on the other. The latter represents a pronounced backtracking from the more confrontational approach that countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE used when they started their military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015.

The Arab Gulf states are not a monolith though — countries like Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait have had much different relations with Iran than Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or Bahrain. For years, Oman has sought to bridge the divide between Iran and the US and has served as a quiet mediator and interlocutor. Qatar plays a similar role in its own way, seeking to deescalate tensions through diplomacy even as it houses the main US air base in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have had the most noteworthy shift in relations with Iran over the past two years. In 2013-18, their diplomatic relationship with the regime in Tehran was increasingly adversarial, even though they maintained economic and commercial ties. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were skeptical about the 2015 nuclear deal and the fact that it did not address Tehran’s destabilizing regional actions. Saudi Arabia later cut diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016, only restoring them seven years later,

in March 2023, as part of the above-mentioned China-brokered deal.³³

Following that much-publicized Saudi-Iranian handshake in Beijing, Riyadh doubled down on its efforts to secure a defense pact with the US, underscoring the kingdom’s apparent lack of confidence that its newly restored relations with Tehran would last. In the year and a half since Saudi Arabia and Iran’s rapprochement, most of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states — and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain especially — have been working in closer alignment to prevent a wider escalation between Iran and Israel. Several Arab Gulf governments were instrumental in preventing the direct military confrontations between Israel and Iran in April and October from spilling over, including by using their defensive military capabilities to help thwart much of Iran’s attacks against Israel.³⁴

Nonetheless, the Gulf countries continue to hedge in their relations with Iran, particularly as the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza has inflamed tensions across the region. This past fall, the GCC affirmed its neutrality³⁵

33. “Saudi Arabia cuts diplomatic ties with Iran,” *Al Jazeera*, January 4, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/1/4/saudi-arabia-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-ira>; Adam Gallagher et al., “What You Need to Know About China’s Saudi-Iran Deal,” United States Institute of Peace, March 16, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/03/what-you-need-know-about-chinas-saudi-iran-deal>.

34. Matt Bradley, “An uneasy alliance of Arab states helped defend Israel from Iran. Their resolve may soon be tested.,” *NBC News*, April 16, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iran-attack-israel-hamas-war-saudi-arabia-jordan-uae-coalition-rcna147965>.

35. Maha El Dahan and Pasha Magid, “Exclusive: Gulf states sought to reassure Iran of their neutrality in Iran-Israel conflict, sources say,” *Reuters*, October 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com>.

in the event of direct war between Israel and Iran, and the primary signal from the Gulf these days is one of de-escalation with Iran.

The Gulf states' hedging strategy is in part a product of their uncertainty over the regional strategic landscape and is driven by self-interest and self-preservation. But it is also borne out of the lessons learned from the actions of multiple US administrations over the past quarter century and concerns about America's overall strategic reliability. The shift in US policy on Iran — from brokering the JCPOA to applying “maximum pressure” just three years later — resulted in a spike in threats and attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In turn, the US response to these threats did not meet the hopes and expectations of these two countries under either the Trump or Biden administrations.

In sum, the Trump administration enters office at a time when the Middle East is in the midst of a major evolving and unpredictable transformation in the strategic landscape. The main outcome of these developments is that Tehran finds itself in its weakest and most isolated position since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. But Iran retains important capacities to create crises and influence the trajectory of the Middle East — its ability to serve as a disruptor across the region and world endures. Israel nonetheless appears poised to continue its assertive efforts to restore some sense of strategic deterrence against its adversaries in multiple arenas. The Gulf states remain focused on working to reform their economic and social systems, and, as a result, they want to avoid a wider regional war that could damage the gains they have achieved in recent years.

How This Shifting Regional Landscape Impacts Iran's Axis of Resistance Partners

In the strategic landscape that is unfolding in the Middle East in early 2025, the Islamic Republic of Iran has faced

[com/world/middle-east/gulf-states-sought-reassure-iran-their-neutrality-iran-israel-conflict-sources-2024-10-03/](https://www.csis.org/analysis/world/middle-east/gulf-states-sought-reassure-iran-their-neutrality-iran-israel-conflict-sources-2024-10-03/).

major losses among its network of partners. Iran has appeared to lack the will and capacity to offer support to Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Assad regime in Syria as they all faced existential threats and challenges to their grip on power. In a short period of time, Iran witnessed the loss of an entire generation of commanders in its own al-Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) at the same time that Israel eliminated the top leaders of Lebanon's Hezbollah and the Palestinian group Hamas.

The current situation represents a marked departure from the strategic environment the Islamic Republic of Iran had helped create in the Middle East over the past four decades. Since its Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has built up its influence and control across many states in the region, in particular Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, by usurping, subverting, or repurposing the sovereignty of those areas.

One feature that should shape the calculus of the incoming Trump administration is this changed regional landscape. This section briefly analyzes the current state of affairs in Iran's “Axis of Resistance” network, with Iran facing major losses in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine but seeing some resilience in its support networks in Iraq and Yemen.

Syria: Loss of the Assad Regime

Syria has long served as Iran's main Arab state partner. The collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad on Dec. 8, 2024, represents the greatest and most recent strategic blow suffered by the Islamic Republic of Iran.³⁶

For years, Iran has used Syrian territory as a transit point for weapons shipments to Lebanon's Hezbollah.

36. Zeina Karam and Abby Sewell, “The fall of Bashar Assad after 13 years of war in Syria brings to an end a decades-long dynasty,” *AP News*, December 8, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-bashar-assad-war-1468a97ff95bb782f5933856d99c9a8d>; Charles Lister et al., “Special Briefing: After Assad's fall, what's next for Syria and the region?,” Middle East Institute, December 9, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/special-briefing-after-assads-fall-whats-next-syria-and-region>.



Photo above: A portrait of slain Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh is displayed during a demonstration denouncing his killing held in the Lebanese coastal city of Sidon on Aug. 2, 2024. Photo by Mahmoud Zayyat/AFP via Getty Images.

Iran also positioned personnel from the external military and intelligence service of the IRGC inside of Syria and recruited fighters from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and other countries to support the Syrian regime in the country's civil war. Iran-backed forces utilized Syria to make, store, and transport weapons that would be subsequently distributed to armed groups in the country and around the region.³⁷ As a result, Syria became central to Israel's strategy of cutting off Iranian supplies to Hezbollah and preventing the militant group from rearming; to achieve this, the Israeli military intensified strikes against ammunition warehouses and smuggling routes inside the country.

In late November 2024, an alliance of Turkish-backed rebel forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham exploited

37. "Israeli minister says Iran using Syria facilities for weapons production," *Reuters*, September 12, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-minister-says-iran-using-syria-facilities-weapons-production-2022-09-12/>.

weaknesses inside of the Assad regime, the strategic distraction of Russia, bogged down in a war of its own making in Ukraine, as well as the losses suffered by Hezbollah to launch a new offensive. The rebels quickly gained ground as the regime's front lines collapsed, prompting Syrians across the country to rise up and leading, just days later, to Assad fleeing on Dec. 8.³⁸ Iran evacuated many of its commanders and personnel from Syria in early December.³⁹ But the uncertainty and fluidity of the situation on the ground makes it difficult to assess what Iran might do next in reaction to this major strategic setback.

38. Charles Lister, "How the World Got Syria Wrong," *Foreign Policy*, December 8, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/08/syria-assad-regime-collapse-geneva-astana-un-wrong>.

39. Farnaz Fassih and Ronen Bergman, "Iran Begins to Evacuate Military Officials and Personnel From Syria," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/06/world/middleeast/iran-syria-evacuation.html>.

Lebanon: Devastating Blows to Hezbollah

Hezbollah has served as a central strategic partner for the Islamic Republic of Iran since the 1980s. Therefore, the losses Hezbollah has suffered in the past three months since Israel launched a stunning series of strikes against it, combined with the likely elimination of Assad's Syria as a functioning supply corridor, removes a key force multiplier from Iran's Axis of Resistance network.⁴⁰

Hezbollah was one of Iran's most successful investments, and Tehran spent decades cultivating it as an influential force and a successful challenger of Israel. Throughout this time, the group operated with impunity as a state within a state, wielding an extensive security apparatus and arms arsenal provided by Iran, and cultivating local support by running a parallel social welfare network. As a political party, it has insinuated itself into the Lebanese political system, infiltrating all agencies and state institutions, bolstered by a targeted and sophisticated disinformation campaign and multipronged media effort spearheaded by its media arm, Al-Manar TV. Beyond Lebanon, Hezbollah had also expanded its operations to Syria and helped train Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Yemen.

This past fall's US-brokered cease-fire agreement in Lebanon requires the demilitarization of the area south of the Litani River and the disarming of Hezbollah.⁴¹ As in Syria, the current situation in Lebanon remains fluid and uncertain, but it is a new environment in which Hezbollah lacks the capacities and leadership it had before the start of this latest war.

40. Patricia Karam, "Hezbollah and Iran's calculus as the conflict with Israel heats up," Middle East Institute, September 23, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/hezbollah-and-irans-calculus-conflict-israel-heats>.

41. "Joint Statement from President Biden of the United States and President Macron of France Announcing a Cessation of Hostilities," The White House, November 26, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/11/26/joint-statement-from-president-biden-of-the-united-states-and-president-macron-of-france-announcing-a-cessation-of-hostilities/>.

Palestine: Major Degradation of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad

Iran has sought to exploit the Palestinian cause for its own gain for years, and it has used the lack of the resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as a means to expand its power and influence, often in opposition to neighbors in the Gulf and Arab states like Jordan and Egypt that have peace treaties with Israel. Tehran has provided extensive training, weapons, and funding to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other factions, helping these groups target Israel while allowing Tehran to maintain a degree of separation and deniability.⁴² Iran has also maintained a number of television and radio stations in the West Bank and Gaza, which play a part in destabilizing Palestinian politics.

The Hamas-led Oct. 7 attack on Israel could not have happened without involvement from Iran, training the group received in Lebanon and Syria, and the creation of a secret joint command center in Beirut.⁴³ After more than a year of fighting, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's vow to completely eliminate Hamas is unrealized: though its military capabilities are much diminished, the militant group retains some operational capacity.

Iraq: Deep Embedding in Its Political Economy

Iran expanded its influence westward following the 2003 Iraq war, after the United States ended a policy of "dual containment" of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Iran. Iraq has become an essential security, trade, and political lifeline for Iran during the past two decades, and Tehran has pursued a multi-dimensional policy

42. Joby Warrick et al., "Hamas received weapons and training from Iran, officials say," *The Washington Post*, October 9, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/09/iran-support-hamas-training-weapons-israel/>.

43. Farnaz Fassih and Ronen Bergman, "Hamas Attack on Israel Brings New Scrutiny of Group's Ties to Iran," *The New York Times*, October 13, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/13/world/middleeast/hamas-iran-israel-attack.html>.

there, deploying hard, sharp, and soft power to shape and influence local developments.

Iran trains and finances Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs, or Hashd-al-Shaabi), an umbrella organization of some 60 Shi'a armed groups.⁴⁴ Additionally, Iraq has served as a key market for Iran's energy and goods and a source of spoils from kleptocratic corruption.⁴⁵ Iraq's Shi'a political elite have decades-long personal connections to Iran, enabling the latter to wield outsized leverage over Iraqi policymaking. The Iranian leadership exercises soft power vis-à-vis Iraq primarily through Shi'a religious ties and a large media presence. Nevertheless, Tehran's sway is not absolute, and Iraq's body public remains deeply divided about Iranian influence.

The regional impact of Iran's non-state Iraqi proxies and their level of assistance to the wider Axis of Resistance network's efforts have proven fairly modest to date. Though Iraqi militias have been active against Israel⁴⁶ since Oct. 7, 2023, in support of Gaza and Hamas, they reduced their attacks as of last November, fearing retaliation.⁴⁷ Iran similarly made a resolute effort, following US retaliatory airstrikes, to curtail militias in Syria and Iraq that had been regularly attacking US bases and military targets, particularly during the post-Oct. 7 period. Finally, given Hezbollah's dramatic weakening, pro-Iran Iraqi militias, under Tehran's

44. Ranj Alaaldin, "The Popular Mobilization Force is turning Iraq into an Iranian client state," Brookings, February 2, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-popular-mobilization-force-is-turning-iraq-into-an-iranian-client-state/>.

45. "Iraq criticizes Iran's gas supply cuts, citing contract violations," *Shafaq News*, December 1, 2024, <https://shafaq.com/en/Economy/Iraq-criticizes-Iran-s-gas-supply-cuts-citing-contract-violations>.

46. Michael Knights et al., "Tripling of Iraqi Militia Claimed Attacks on Israel in October," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 15, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tripling-iraqi-militia-claimed-attacks-israel-october>.

47. Ameer al-Kaabi et al., "Iraqi Militias Downscaling Their Anti-Israel Actions," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 26, 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-militias-downscaling-their-anti-israel-actions>.

guidance, tried to fill the void to bolster the beleaguered Syrian army — to little effect.⁴⁸

Yemen: Capacities to Threaten Red Sea Shipping, the Gulf States, and the Global Economy

Iran exploited the past decade of conflict inside of Yemen to create a partnership with the Houthis, a local Zaydi movement that controls the northwest of the country and its capital.⁴⁹ Iran views its support for the Houthis as an opportunity to expand its influence in the Gulf of Aden and Bab el-Mandeb, a key global maritime chokepoint,⁵⁰ and to keep Saudi Arabia and the UAE bogged down. Iran has provided the Houthis with arms and equipment, including ballistic missiles and drones,⁵¹ which have been used against Saudi and Emirati targets, such as petroleum facilities. Iran has furthermore supported the Houthi war effort by providing financial assistance and smuggling oil into the country. Hezbollah was reportedly active in Yemen before the Gaza war, providing political advice and military training to Houthi militias.⁵²

After Oct. 7, the Houthis launched attacks on Red Sea shipping, disrupting international commerce on one of the

48. "Pro-Iranian militias enter Syria from Iraq to aid beleaguered Syrian army," *Reuters*, December 2, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pro-iranian-militias-enter-syria-iraq-aid-beleaguered-syrian-army-2024-12-02/>.

49. Cameron Glenn et al., "Who are Yemen's Houthis?," Wilson Center, July 7, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/who-are-yemens-houthis>.

50. "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments," US Energy Information Administration, August 27, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>.

51. "Iran: Enabling Houthi Attacks Across the Middle East," Defense Intelligence Agency, February 2024, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Documents/News/Military_Power_Publications/Iran_Houthi_Final2.pdf.

52. Michelle Nichols and John Irish, "Iran, Hezbollah enabled Houthis' rise, says UN report," *Reuters*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-hezbollah-enabled-houthis-rise-says-un-report-2024-09-26/>.



Photo above: Supporters of Yemen's Houthis gather with pictures of Hamas' slain leader Yahya Sinwar during a rally held in the Houthi-controlled capital Sanaa on Oct. 18, 2024. Photo by Mohammed HUWAIS/AFP.

world's busiest waterways.⁵³ They also launched missiles and drones at Israel, triggering retaliatory airstrikes with unclear consequences for their military capacities.⁵⁴

Down but Not Out

The apparent removal of both Hamas and Hezbollah from the military balance in the Middle East and the fall of the Assad regime have eliminated much of Tehran's leverage, leaving Iran with fewer ways to threaten Israel and deter it from taking offensive action. Nevertheless, Iran maintains willing partners in each of these five areas, particularly

53. "Houthi Attacks in the Red Sea: Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, September 6, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12301>.

54. Adam Rasgon, "Israel Strikes the Houthis, an Iranian Ally, in Yemen," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/29/world/middleeast/israel-strikes-houthis-yemen.html>.

Iraq and Yemen. In the short run, Iran's actions in the region and its nuclear program will dominate US policy choices. The longer-term challenges for US policy center around how to shape Iran's calculus in the coming years and what can be done to plan for the competition for influence after wars and kinetic operations draw to a close in the region.

The Strategic Position of the Islamic Republic of Iran Abroad and at Home

The Islamic Republic of Iran is now at a pivotal crossroads. A brief glance at the regime's current strategic ledger finds it facing more disadvantages as a result of its overall strategy:

- Unprecedented damage to the Axis of Resistance network, undercutting its "forward defense" strategy;
- Weakened defenses at home, as Iran's security

establishment appears to have been caught unaware, not only by Israeli strikes against its own personnel in places like Syria and attacks by the Islamic State inside of Iran during the past year, but also by successful Israeli surgical strikes against Iranian military targets and Israel's ability to easily take out Iranian air-defense systems; and

- Continued challenges from the Iranian people at home, who suffer from economic difficulties, isolation, and extreme repression by the regime.

In the past few years, the Iranian regime has worked to build in ways that sought to reinforce its grip on power at home:

- Stronger coordination and closer ties with global powers such as Russia and China that seek to challenge the international order;
- Improved relationships across the Arab world by stepping up diplomatic contacts and selectively pulling back from targeting certain other Middle East countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as Iran became more focused on its direct confrontation with Israel; and
- An image and propaganda boost among certain sectors of the Arab public after the Oct. 7 attacks and Israeli military actions, particularly against Palestinians in Gaza, created an opening for the Iranian regime to portray itself at the vanguard of resisting the Israeli occupation.

The negatives in this ledger vastly outweigh the positives for Iran's strategic position in the world, region, and at home at this moment in time. Led by the aging Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Iran is facing an impending leadership transition as well as thorny strategic choices after absorbing great losses over the past year.

One overarching strategic question confronting the regime is whether it will double down on its nuclear program as it sees its regional strategy of "forward defense" through the Axis of Resistance come under intense pressure and begin to crumble. Tehran's recent decision to accelerate its uranium enrichment to a level that is close to bomb grade has worried United Nations

officials and other leaders, raising questions about Iran's strategic intent and actions.⁵⁵ Whatever decisions Iran makes about the future of its national security strategy, including the fate of its nuclear program, will take place in the rapidly changing regional and broader geostrategic environment described and analyzed in this report. This section of the report examines Iran's regional and foreign policy approach more closely as well as looks at internal debates within Iran about its foreign policy and the broader legitimacy of the regime.

External Ties: The Strategic Dilemma in Iran's Foreign Policy Approach

Tehran's "forward defense" strategy — while not yet dead — is fast becoming a liability for Iran given the increasing determination of Israel and the US to hold it responsible for its proxies' actions.

Tehran's long-term investment in cultivating ties with Arab Islamists to turn Iran into a hub for anti-status quo militant groups fell short. While Tehran's actions have made it into a leading political actor in some theaters, Iranian advances in these states have sharpened tensions with other Arab countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE.

Iran's regional agenda has been shaped primarily by Khamenei's office in conjunction with the IRGC leadership. The cost-benefit calculation of Tehran's policy is still evolving based on events on the ground. But at this stage, it is reasonable to conclude that deteriorating economic conditions in Iran are turning the costs associated with Tehran's interventionist Arab policies into a possibly fatal flaw in its strategy toward the Arab world.

That flaw is increasingly self-evident to at least some members of Iran's leadership. So while the IRGC continues to employ bombastic anti-US and anti-Israel rhetoric, it also wants to remain relevant after the 85-year-old Khamenei leaves the scene. Therefore, the IRGC has no choice but to

55. "Iran's nuclear leap 'extremely serious', Western source says," *Reuters*, December 7, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-nuclear-leap-extremely-serious-hurts-diplomacy-western-source-says-2024-12-07/>.

“The Iranian regime still must decide whether it is willing, in the long run, to reconstruct its regional agenda in ways that are more acceptable to the US and its Arab and Israeli partners.”

make careful calculations about its actions both at home and abroad as the services’ bosses know that their job security depends on maintaining at least a degree of legitimacy inside Iran. In practice, this means less pan-Islamism and militant clericalism and more focus on improving the political and socio-economic situation at home.

Irrespective of this push in Tehran to reexamine its regional policies, for now nothing suggests that Iran is fundamentally rethinking them, and it remains to be seen if such calls will shape actions going forward. Khamenei’s top advisor, Ali Larijani, visited Damascus and Beirut in mid-November 2024 with a two-part message from his boss that Trump’s re-election is not a death sentence for the Axis of Resistance.⁵⁶ Larijani reportedly aimed to reassure Assad and Hezbollah about Iran’s commitment to its Arab partners while also making the case for agreeing to a cease-fire in Lebanon, even if it meant accepting the effort led by US special envoy Amos Hochstein.

Nonetheless, the Iranian regime still must decide whether it is willing, in the long run, to reconstruct its regional agenda in ways that are more acceptable to the US and its Arab and Israeli partners. This sort of soul-searching is inevitable for a regime that is under huge domestic and foreign pressure to change course.⁵⁷

For now, officials in Tehran are prioritizing preserving as much of the Axis of Resistance as possible versus

56. Yara ABI AKL, “Larijani delivers new Iranian message to Beirut: An agreement, but not without Hezbollah,” *L’Orient Today*, November 18, 2024, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1435943/larijani-delivers-new-iranian-message-to-beirut-an-agreement-but-not-without-hezbollah.html>; Matthew Czekaj, host, “The Axis of Resistance Pt. 2: Iran,” *Middle East Focus*, October 24, 2024, 25 min., 24 sec., <https://www.mei.edu/multimedia/podcast/axis-resistance-pt-2-iran>.

57. Alex Vatanka, “Khamenei’s American reality check,” *Middle East Institute*, November 21, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/khameneis-american-reality-check>.

fundamentally rethinking the model’s future. But the fact that the Iranian regime is essentially alone in confronting Israel and the United States may force a rethink in the coming months and years.

Much fanfare about closer ties with Russia and China notwithstanding, the most Iran can hope for in the midst of its conflict with Israel is diplomatic expressions of support from Moscow and Beijing.⁵⁸ Add to this mix the shifting regional diplomatic positions, particularly among Arab Gulf states, and there may be an emerging pathway for a regional approach by the United States that seeks to contain Iran’s negative actions but also aims to shape its current debate and future trajectory.

Iran’s Internal Divides and Emerging Political Legitimacy Questions

A number of domestic realities are also bound to shape the calculations of Iran’s senior leadership. Iranians have deep misgivings about Tehran’s regional interventions, and these foreign and domestic policy challenges are emerging while Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei is focused on his succession.⁵⁹

58. Alex Vatanka, “Iranians worry about Russia’s dependability as a strategic partner,” as found in “Weekly Briefing | Harris vs. Trump: Two competing visions on the Middle East,” *Middle East Institute*, November 5, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/weekly-briefing-harris-vs-trump-two-competing-visions-middle-east#vatanka>.

59. Arash Ghafouri and Alex Vatanka, “Key takeaways from new polling on Iran’s foreign policy and regional role,” *Middle East Institute*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/key-takeaways-new-polling-irans-foreign-policy-and-regional-role>; Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, “Why Iran is Entering a Dangerous Moment,” *Journal of Democracy*, September 2024, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/why-iran-is-entering-a-dangerous-moment/>; Marie Abdi, “Moving to a post-Khamenei era: Cutthroat competition within the supreme



Photo above: Pro-Iran Hezbollah militants hold flags during a funeral procession for five of their colleagues killed in clashes with the Turkish army in the Syrian province of Idlib, March 1, 2020. Photo by Marwan Naamani/picture alliance via Getty Images.

Khamenei has dominated the political order since 1989, and his departure will be a hugely sensitive moment for the Islamic Republic. There are no signs that a consensus candidate has been selected, which suggests his passing could usher in a period of uncertainty for the regime in terms of leadership as well as the trajectory of its policies at home and abroad.

This scenario offers an opportunity for various political factions in Tehran as well as foreign powers to attempt to steer Iran in different directions — either to stay on the so-called revolutionary course of the last 45 years or to make a change and focus on nation-building at home while seeking de-escalation with long-time foes abroad, such as Israel and the United States.

Though the Iranian regime has declared⁶⁰ that it seeks regional solidarity and stability, in reality its ideological pronouncements and interventionist foreign policy contradict this. Those policies have led to such severe economic decline at home, impacting every aspect of people’s lives, that very few in Tehran deny that an easing of its international isolation is needed to revive the country’s prospects. For over four decades, Iran’s leadership has prioritized its Islamist ideology at the expense of the security and economic well-being of its people. Minimum concessions will not be enough to placate domestic detractors and foreign opponents; without major policy changes, the regime in Tehran will continue to be under the gun.

leader’s office,” Middle East Institute, February 29, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/moving-post-khamenei-era-cutthroat-competition-within-supreme-leaders-office>.

60. Seth J. Frantzman, “Iran’s FM launches historic regional tour, strengthening ties with Arab states,” *The Jerusalem Post*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-825002>.

As Tehran weighs the choice of continued standoff against the United States versus the possible benefits of détente, the American question is probably the most sensitive and consequential issue shaping the future of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei's deep suspicion of the US, his unwillingness to believe in the possibility of meaningful discussions with Washington, and his devotion to a regional Islamist agenda have been the guiding principles of his foreign policy.

As was the case in 2013-15, there is a chorus of voices, including that of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, pleading with Khamenei to accept the need for a new round of direct talks with the Americans.⁶¹ As domestic calls for open and direct negotiations with Washington have grown, the split between pragmatists and Khamenei's supporters is increasingly evident, and disagreements over foreign policy, including what to do with the US and Iran's regional ambitions, are at the heart of the divide. This puts the onus on Khamenei, who fears any serious compromise with Washington over its demand for a comprehensive Iranian pullback from the region will put his Islamist agenda at risk.

These debates about Iran's foreign policy, including questions about the costs of its "forward defense" strategy and the economic difficulties resulting from sanctions and isolation, all add to an uncertain mix of domestic political factors that could inevitably shape the trajectory of Iran's upcoming leadership transition when Supreme Leader Khamenei eventually passes from the scene.

The Iranian regime's domestic vulnerabilities have continued to grow as it has doubled down on a risky regional and global strategy that has produced more economic hardship and isolation over the past decade. A new generation of Iranians has witnessed the economic and social transformations taking place across the Gulf, and a strong case could be made for a new regional pathway that seeks to shape and influence the trajectory of

61. Alex Vatanka, "Pezeshkian in New York and Khamenei's moment of truth," Middle East Institute, September 27, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/pezeshkian-new-york-and-khameneis-moment-truth>.

Iran's future leadership and political transition in ways that can benefit the people of Iran and the broader region.

Three Strategic Policy Recommendations for a Second Trump Administration's Iran Policy

Iran's current predicament should prompt a major rethink of US policy on Iran, one that is bipartisan and seeks to tackle the various challenges posed by Tehran, especially its nuclear program, ballistic missiles, and proxy networks. It should also put Iran's future and the Iranian peoples' needs and aspirations closer to the center of the policy deliberations and discussions in Washington.

In navigating the new regional landscape, Trump should make use of a key asset and force multiplier in advancing a new Iran policy: America's regional partners, whose security has been negatively impacted by Iran. This new approach should also address fragile theaters like Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Palestine, whose governance has been weakened because of the infiltration and influence of Iran-backed non-state actors as part of Tehran's "forward defense" strategy.

Three overarching strategic recommendations should shape a second term Trump administration approach on Iran — all aimed at fostering partnerships with America's friends facing challenges from Iran in the region:

1. Step up US security and defense commitments and coordination with regional partners facing ongoing threats from Iran, with a particular emphasis on deepening the process of regional security coordination among America's military partners.

The US should capitalize on the losses that Iran has absorbed during the past year due to its overextension in the region. Israel will continue to defend itself and remain a threat to Iran's regime, making the latter insecure; and other US partners, particularly Arab Gulf states, will likely continue to seek pathways of diplomacy. The Trump administration should utilize this interplay of a "good cop,

“Step up US security and defense commitments and coordination with regional partners facing ongoing threats from Iran, with a particular emphasis on deepening the process of regional security coordination among America’s military partners.”

bad cop” approach that blends the right mix of incentives and disincentives to shape Iran’s actions. This means maintaining America’s current troop presence in places like Syria and Iraq and working with partners to block Iran’s destabilizing actions.⁶²

The Trump administration has already signaled that it is prioritizing issues closer to home, including an ambitious overhaul of the US federal government and a major initiative on illegal immigration.⁶³ President Trump has also signaled a top priority in a new form of global economic engagement involving high tariffs against the likes of China, Europe, Canada, and Mexico. This set of priorities could mean that a second Trump term would need to rely even more heavily on security partners in the Middle East to address the emerging landscape and deal with continued threats posed by Iran and other actors like the Islamic State.

On Iran, a stepped-up effort by the United States and its Middle East partners to block Iranian weapons shipments to its network of proxies and non-state allies, sever its logistic lines, and limit its cash flow will impede Iran’s ambitions and help regional actors restore stability to this turbulent region.

In addition, the US should actively engage in helping promote regional security, including improving the

human security conditions across the failed and failing states contested by Iran, particularly in the five arenas of contestation outlined in section II of this report.

- **Lebanon:** Strengthen the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF),⁶⁴ which needs to take control of southern Lebanon from Hezbollah, secure the border, and thwart the smuggling of weapons, by mobilizing a transformational and comprehensive aid package.⁶⁵ Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states can play an important role, in coordination with the US, in helping to overhaul the LAF’s capabilities to counter Iran’s remaining influence in Lebanon.
- **Iraq:** Focus on helping Iraqis ensure Iran’s proxies do not solidify a permanent state within a state by bolstering meaningful institutions providing education, security, and economic prosperity. This would include US military assistance to loyal security units, financial assistance to strengthen the banking sector, and grants to Iraq’s higher education system. The goal would be to strengthen an Iraq that enjoys support from its diverse communities, a monopoly on force, and good relations with its regional neighbors and the West.⁶⁶
- **Syria:** Maintain the current US troop presence in order to counter emerging threats from the Islamic State while avoiding getting caught in any future internal conflict that might draw regional and global actors

62. Charles Lister and Joseph L. Votel, “As ISIS rebuilds in Syria, the U.S. is making a bewildering call,” *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/09/17/iraq-withdrawal-us-forces-isis/>.

63. Zachary B. Wolf, “Trump’s master plan for a radical reformation of the US government,” *CNN*, November 7, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/07/politics/donald-trump-government-what-matters/index.html>; Ted Hesson, “Trump aims to deport all immigrants in the US illegally,” *Reuters*, December 8, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-he-aims-deport-all-immigrants-us-illegally-2024-12-08/>.

64. Fadi Nicholas Nasser, host, Middle East Focus, “Hezbollah, Israel, and the Lebanese Armed Forces,” Middle East Institute, October 10, 2024, 45 min., 24 sec., <https://www.mei.edu/multimedia/podcast/hezbollah-israel-and-lebanese-armed-forces>.

65. Nassar, “Hezbollah, Israel, and the Lebanese Armed Forces.”

66. Robert S. Ford, “US success in Iraq means being a more reliable partner than Iran,” Middle East Institute, November 26, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-success-iraq-means-being-more-reliable-partner-iran>.



Photo above: Lebanese Army troops take part in a military parade marking the 78th anniversary of Lebanon's Independence Day held at the Ministry of Defense in Yarzeh on the eastern outskirts of Beirut on Nov. 22, 2021. [Photo by Fadel Itani/NurPhoto via Getty Images.](#)

into Syria again. If the United States can find a way to work with Syria's new government, it should closely cooperate with regional partners to ensure that aid and assistance is disbursed in ways that minimize Tehran's ability to reassert its influence.

- **The Palestinian Authority:** Work with regional partners to strengthen the capacity of the Palestinian Authority security forces and prepare for the post-war situation in the Gaza Strip that creates a credible pathway to a two-state solution.
- **Yemen:** Strengthen and expand the network of regional security partners working in Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multinational coalition aimed at securing the Red Sea from Houthi attacks.⁶⁷ Bahrain is

67. "Statement from Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on Ensuring Freedom of Navigation in the Red Sea," U.S. Department of Defense, December 18, 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/>.

the only country in the region that is nominally part of these efforts, though other countries play a quiet role in security efforts, and it would be beneficial and send a strong signal to Iran if this coalition were broadened with more regional actors.

2. Establish a new diplomatic partnership with key regional partners from across the Middle East that seeks to advance a more coordinated US policy on Iran that addresses key aspects of Tehran's policies. Given the likely diplomatic style of the Trump administration, which will be more characterized by free-wheeling and unpredictable moves, a traditional diplomatic contact group and sets of formal discussions about how to coordinate on Iran policy seem less likely. Nonetheless, an opportunity exists for the United States to have regular sets of conversations with regional partners — and a key focus of such high-level talks should be to establish a new modus vivendi with Iran that gets the regime to roll

back its destabilizing regional and global actions. These regional partnerships in the Middle East should be linked to relationships America has in Europe, which has deeper economic ties with Iran than the US and can play a stronger role in restricting Iranian weapons shipments to Ukraine and North Africa. Japan can play a more active part in helping address the sanctions-busting efforts by Iranian oil ghost fleets heading to China. In addition, India and Azerbaijan are positioning themselves to serve as critical nodes in transregional transit corridors involving Iran — thus, they would have to be part of any new “maximum pressure” campaign involving secondary sanctions.⁶⁸ But the Middle East partners are most closely situated in trying to respond to key issues, as they live in the same neighborhood as Iran.

- **Iran’s nuclear program.** A critical question that a regional partnership framework between the United States and key Arab countries should address is Iran’s nuclear program. The nuclear file is likely to dominate the early months of the second Trump administration, and it would be advantageous if the United States established an informal regional contact group to produce stronger diplomatic cohesion with important regional partners on what to do about Iran’s nuclear program. Given certain regional states’ repositioning on Iran in recent years and the growing economic ties between Iran and its neighbors, a return to “maximum pressure 2.0,” an effort centered on imposing mainly economic costs on Iran, may be more complicated to implement. In addition, if the United States and China are heading into a major economic war involving tariffs, trade, and technology in a second Trump term, as early

68. Umud Shokri, “Persian Gulf-Black Sea corridor: A new era for Iran-Europe trade or just another risk?,” Middle East Institute, November 25, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/persian-gulf-black-sea-corridor-new-era-iran-europe-trade-or-just-another-risk>; Vali Kaleji, “Iran Drives Development of Persian Gulf-Black Sea International Transport and Transit Corridor,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, The Jamestown Foundation, July 14, 2021, <https://jamestown.org/program/iran-drives-development-of-persian-gulf-black-sea-international-transport-and-transit-corridor/>.

indicators seem to suggest, this could produce negative externalities in the Middle East and some unexpected scenarios that would be best navigated in partnership with America’s regional friends. Furthermore, a second Trump term could produce new openings to resolve the nuclear issue that did not exist in the first term. Tehran managed to endure the “maximum pressure” campaign of the first Trump administration, but doing so came at a heavy cost. With Trump now back in the White House, Tehran is clearly attempting to preemptively block any further tightening of sanctions. Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi has urged the American president not to revive his “maximum pressure” campaign but rather to aim for “maximum wisdom” in dealing with Iran,⁶⁹ in which case Tehran could be expected to respond in kind to avoid conflict. Tehran knows that mere reassurances that it will not weaponize its nuclear program will not suffice, and there is a broader recognition of the need for compromise. As one political commentator put it, “the era of no war, no peace is over. It’s now the era of either war or peace.”⁷⁰ And time is of the essence. For the pro-negotiation voices in Tehran, the Republican control of all levers of power in Washington means that a deal with the Trump administration will be more likely to be adopted with broader institutional support than the ill-fated JCPOA.

- **Coordinated regional diplomacy on Iran’s regional actions.** One shortcoming in the Iran approach adopted by US administrations for the past 25 years, including the first Trump term, was that it did not prioritize shaping Iran’s foreign policy and regional approach beyond some targeted kinetic measures. Now that Iran is in a strategically vulnerable position after experiencing major losses in Syria, Lebanon,

69. “A strategic message for America and Israel before the third “honest promise”/Trump from the perspective of Iranian political leaders,” *Mashregh News*, November 1, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/3y9ddme9>.

70. “The era of neither war nor peace is over, it is a period of either war or peace,” *Nameh News*, November 18, 2024, <https://tinyurl.com/4tks798v>.

US Policy on Iran: Past, Present, Future

US policy in the Middle East has suffered from a lack of strategic focus and attention deficit disorder, having shifted for the past quarter century from one frame to another: global war on terrorism, counterinsurgency, counterproliferation and stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, very fleeting support for freedom during the Arab uprisings starting in 2011, and a return to a focus on counterterrorism during the anti-Islamic State campaign beginning in 2014.

Iran has loomed large over the strategic landscape throughout this period, and the United States sought to respond by setting a strategic framework that included not only security and military steps but also diplomacy as well as economic incentives and coercive measures. Yet Washington's strategic approach toward the Islamic Republic exhibited two main faults. First, for nearly two decades, stretching across four US administrations (George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Trump 1, and Biden), American policy on Iran has been primarily focused on constraining its nuclear program. One consequence of this narrow policy emphasis was that other issues were de-prioritized. Those blind spots included concerns expressed by US regional partners; Iran's poor record on human rights, freedom, and basic governance; Iranian actions to destabilize the region; Tehran's ongoing efforts to advance its political and ideological objectives in certain countries, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen; and Iran's strategic re-alignment closer toward Russia and (to a lesser extent) China in a new global era of geopolitical competition.

The second weakness was that the past four administrations' Iran strategies sought to contain and engage Iran in international frameworks rather than with the involvement of regional partners. Middle East governments were too often not consulted on US Iran policy. The most important of these frameworks began with the formation of the P5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members, China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, along with Germany), in 2006, which helped produce the 2013 interim agreement and 2015 Iran nuclear deal.¹ However, this arrangement ultimately only succeeded in producing a temporary de-escalation in the nuclear standoff and never properly addressed any of the other Iranian threats or concerns originating from the region.

From October 2023 on, the Biden administration found itself seeking to contain the fallout from the wars and regional tensions emanating from the Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's reactions. But it fell short of producing a major breakthrough that shifted the region's strategic landscape, particularly on Iran.² The main drivers of events in the Middle East have been the key regional powers: Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and non-state actors like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis.

1. "The Interim Nuclear Deal," United States Institute of Peace, June 11, 2024, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/interim-nuclear-deal>; Kali Robinson, "What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal?," Council on Foreign Relations, October 27, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

2. For an assessment of the Biden administration's approach to the Middle East, see: Brian Katulis, "America's Strategic Drift in the Middle East: An Assessment of the Biden Administration's Policy One Year Into the Israel-Hamas War," Middle East Institute, October 2, 2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/americas-strategic-drift-middle-east-assessment-biden-administrations-policy-one-year>.

“Trump’s return to the White House is widely seen in Tehran as an opportunity for renewed US-Iranian negotiations that could extend beyond the nuclear file. This openness is essentially a product of a number of geopolitical predicaments that Tehran is presently confronting.”

and Palestine, the leadership in Tehran may have an interest in adapting its regional approach. To supplement the kinetic action undertaken by Israel and at times the US against Iran’s Axis of Resistance, Washington might pursue a conversation with key Middle Eastern allies on initiatives designed to constrain Iran’s regional adventurism and produce a strategic shift in its foreign policy approach. Such a shift is more likely to happen operating in close concert with America’s Arab partners, particularly the Gulf states. Trump’s return to the White House is widely seen in Tehran as an opportunity for renewed US-Iranian negotiations that could extend beyond the nuclear file. This openness is essentially a product of a number of geopolitical predicaments that Tehran is presently confronting.

- **Creating a more favorable strategic environment by building a bridge to a two-state solution on the Israeli-Palestinian front.** A genuine American-led effort toward a two-state solution that is backed by US Arab allies will either (at best) give Tehran a reason to rethink its commitment to militarily confront Israel or (if opposed by Tehran) give Arab states reason to consider if Iran is sincere in seeking regional de-escalation.
- **Building a diplomatic and economic support network to address contested countries like Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.** Beyond the military and security cooperation measures needed to strengthen the Middle East’s state system, a series of diplomatic and economic steps will be required once the dust settles from current conflicts and transitions occurring around the region, especially in those countries that are at the center of the struggle for influence with Iran. In President Trump’s first term, he caused a minor diplomatic incident of confusion in 2018 in claiming that Saudi Arabia

had committed to spend the necessary money to rebuild Syria.⁷¹ Saudi Arabia denied this claim, and no significant resources were dedicated to rebuilding the parts of Syria then controlled by the US-led international coalition. The scale of efforts to rebuild and strengthen governance and economic transformation in places like Syria and Lebanon are well beyond what the United States will be willing to contribute, and a team effort will be required.

- **Coordinating diplomatic moves with regional partners on Russia and China.** In addition to these elements of diplomatic coordination on key aspects of Iran’s behavior in the region, the United States will need to work more closely with key Middle East partners that have relationships of their own with Russia and China. In this new geopolitical environment of complex multipolarity, a US president who prides himself on unpredictability and making unexpected moves will need to take some steps toward greater reassurance and coordination with key Middle East partners in the multi-level chess game of how to navigate Iran’s relationship with China and Russia. Specifically on this front, the Trump administration will need to coordinate with Middle Eastern partners on policies on two main fronts. First, Washington and regional governments must work together to disrupt the lines of support (economic, technical, military, and political, including on the international stage) that Iran receives from Russia and China that have sustained the regime and allowed it to carry out destabilizing regional activities. Second, they should align on policies that can discourage or

71. Tom DiChristopher, “Saudi Arabia clarifies Trump tweet: No new Saudi pledges to rebuild Syria,” *CNBC*, December 26, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/26/saudi-arabia-clarifies-trump-tweet-no-new-pledges-to-rebuild-syria.html>.



Photo above: Iranians wave flags of Iran, Iraq, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Units, Hashd Shaabi, and the IRGC at a rally commemorating the Islamic Revolution in Azadi (Freedom) Square in Tehran on Feb. 11, 2020. [Source: Morteza Nikoubazl/NurPhoto via Getty Images](#).

punish Iran for cooperating with Russia and China on activities that break international law, meddle in foreign democratic campaigns, as well as support other malign regimes and non-state actors in the region and around the world. In other words, the United States needs to work with regional partners to pull Iran out of Russia's and China's orbits and provide the Iranian regime with more dependable intraregional integration alternatives that could incentivize a change in its behavior.

3. Look for creative diplomatic pathways to work with regional partners to shape Iran's future trajectory.

Washington should utilize this regional network of partners to shape the calculus of the regime and create openings for the people of Iran as the country heads toward a leadership transition in the next few years.

The starting point for a more effective and comprehensive

US policy on Iran is with Middle Eastern partners that often were not consulted closely enough by Washington in the past. The top-level priority right now is the urgent issue of ensuring regional security and avoiding a wider Middle East war as Israel tries to build up a stronger deterrence posture against Iran and its Axis of Resistance network. The second priority in fostering a stronger partnership framework is to help build a more effective collective response that will fund and create the new diplomatic and political conditions for stronger states less susceptible to Iran's negative influence across the region. This is a multi-year effort.

But a third arena for US-Middle East cooperation on Iran is equally important: The United States and its Middle East partners should seek to shape Iran's future transition by making moves today that impact Iran's political economy, especially given that some of these Gulf states are critical trading partners with Iran and therefore hold real leverage.

This means that countries like Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, which maintain extensive economic and energy ties with Iran, adapt their approaches in anticipation of the coming leadership transition when Supreme Leader Khamenei passes from the scene. The Gulf states have spent the past decade building new economic and social models, and, in many ways, these have become a model for social and economic progress — if not models for full freedom and human rights — for the next generation in Iran. Now is the time for Arab Gulf states to act in unison and make clear to Tehran that de-escalation cannot come at the expense of their ties with Washington. This, in turn, could lead to a fresh attempt at a Gulf security dialogue. Iran might be forced to accept if it is serious about détente.

Iran's future political leadership transition is very likely to be complicated and uncertain. But stepped-up engagement that seeks to leverage the current relationships Iran has in the region could help create new pathways and possibilities for the people of Iran to live in different economic and social conditions.

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