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## The Impact of the “Al-Aqsa Flood” Operation on Iran’s Role in the Arab Region

### Introduction:

*The Iranian reaction to the outbreak of the “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation carried out by Hamas against Israeli settlements in the vicinity of the Gaza Strip on October 7, 2023 has raised many questions regarding the extent of Tehran’s involvement in supporting what is known as the “Axis of Resistance” in the Arab region, as well as the credibility of this role. Concurrently, there is an inquiry into the validity of the indicators of Iranian involvement in this operation. While some assessments suggest that Iran was taken by surprise by the timing of the operation and that it was not their preferred moment to launch it, other evaluations posit that without Iran’s military and logistical support for the Palestinian factions Hamas and Islamic Jihad over the years, the operation would not have been possible.*

Regardless of the arguments about the validity of either hypothesis, Tehran has reaped several gains from the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation, though it has also suffered significant damages and losses. Among the gains were achieving objectives such as reinforcing the principle of “unified fronts” through Iran’s proxies continuously supporting the Palestinian factions in Gaza, leveraging Arab and Islamic sympathy against Israeli practices in Gaza to foster closer ties between Iran and regional states, and exploiting global and regional distraction by the events in Gaza to advance its nuclear program. However, the outcomes of this operation diverged from expectations. Some Western estimates indicated that Israel emerged stronger following its defeat of Iran’s regional proxies, especially after the fall of the Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad, a development

that poses serious repercussions for the future of Iran’s role in the region.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

- 1- To identify Iran’s objectives behind the Al-Aqsa Flood operation.
- 2- To analyze the characteristics of Iran’s role in this operation.
- 3- To present the consequences of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation on Iran’s role in the Arab region.
- 4- To forecast the future of Iran’s role in the Arab region.

### **Research Questions:**

- 1- What are the main objectives of Iran behind the Al-Aqsa Flood operation?
- 2- What are the key features of Iran’s role in the Al-Aqsa Flood operation?



3-How has the Al-Aqsa Flood operation affected Iran’s role in the Arab region?

4- What are the main determinants of the future of Iran’s role in the Arab region?

### ***Temporal Framework of the Study:***

The study covers the period from October 7, 2023 the date the Al-Aqsa Flood operation was launched by Hamas against Israel until February 2025.

### ***Study Contents:***

- 1- The main objectives of Iran behind the Al-Aqsa Flood operation.
- 2- The characteristics of Iran’s role in the Al-Aqsa Flood operation.
- 3- The repercussions of Iran’s role on the Arab region.
- 4- Key features of the future of Iran’s role in the Arab region.

### ***First: The Main Objectives of Iran Behind the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation***

Several motivations prompted Iran’s support for the Al-Aqsa Flood operation carried out by Hamas against Israel, which can be outlined as follows:

#### **1- Enhancing Regional Role:**

Although Iran officially claimed it was unaware of the timing of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation, it was among the first states to support it. On the very day the operation commenced October 7, 2023 Mohsen Rezaee, Secretary of Iran’s Supreme Council for Coordination among the three branches of government, affirmed Iran’s commitment to supporting its Palestinian brethren. This led to accusations of Iran’s involvement in orchestrating the operation. Generally, Iran sought through this support to promote the capabilities of Hamas, its ally, to strengthen its regional role by asserting that it possesses powerful allies capable not only of protecting it but also of advancing its foreign policy agenda in the region.

Iran’s ambitions extend beyond regional influence to attaining global significance by competing with major powers, which would lead to recognition of its interests in the Middle East, the formation of a political axis to promote a shift

toward a multipolar international order, ending the dominance of the US dollar in the global financial system, and mitigating the impact of Western sanctions on Iran <sup>(1)</sup>.

#### **2- Escalating the Role of the “Axis of Resistance”:**

Iran aimed to strengthen the role of its armed proxies in the region and intensify their confrontation with their regional adversaries through the Al-Aqsa Flood operation. For Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine, Iran intended for them to be integral to its strategy of deterrence against Israel and to demonstrate the vulnerability of Israeli security apparatuses. For many years, Israel had propagated the myth of the high efficacy of its intelligence units, asserting that any threat within or outside Palestine would be detected and neutralized in advance. However, the military wing of Hamas, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, disproved this claim. Regarding Hezbollah, Iran sought through its support for the Gaza war to highlight the effectiveness of the “unified fronts” principle in threatening Israel’s national security, including breaching its security systems, displacing northern populations, and weakening the Israeli economy <sup>(2)</sup>.

As for Iran’s armed groups in Iraq, their involvement as a support front for Hamas in Gaza was intended to demonstrate the ability to threaten US interests not only in Iraq but across the Arab region. Concerning the Houthis in Yemen, Iran leveraged them to disrupt global navigation by obstructing Israeli, US, and British vessels from passing through the Bab al-Mandab Strait to the Suez Canal, as these powers are among Israel’s chief supporters <sup>(3)</sup>.

#### **3- Deterring Israel:**

Israel remains a central focus of Iran’s national security policy due to their historical tensions. Thus, maintaining an advanced defensive posture against Tel Aviv is a cornerstone of Iran’s strategy in Syria and the Levant. Israel is viewed as Iran’s foremost regional threat, responsible for numerous attacks against Iranian critical infrastructure, nuclear sites, scientists, and military personnel involved in Iran’s nuclear and missile programs.

The Al-Aqsa Flood operation was seen by Iran as an unprecedented opportunity to affirm, with the help of its allies, its capability to safeguard its national security against Israeli threats. Iran also aimed to neutralize Arab normalization agreements with Israel, particularly the Saudi-Israeli rapprochement promoted prior to October 7, which Supreme Leader Khamenei condemned as a betrayal of the Islamic world <sup>(4)</sup>.

#### **4- Avoiding Direct War with Tehran:**

A deeply ingrained notion among Iranians is the aversion to entering wide-scale direct confrontations, largely due to the heavy toll of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988). Consequently, since the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation, Iran has sought to avoid direct military engagement with Israel or the United States. This stance was clearly expressed by Supreme Leader Khamenei on October 8, 2023, when he denied any Iranian involvement in Hamas's operation against Israel.

Further evidence of this cautious approach was seen after the January 2024 attack on the US base "Al-Tanf 22" near the Syria-Jordan border by Iran-backed militias. Khamenei instructed the Iranian National Security Council to avoid triggering a direct war with the US and to dissociate Iran from the actions of the militias responsible. This was likely coordinated following a secret visit by Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani to Baghdad, which was aimed at preventing a direct American retaliation against Iran. Subsequently, the US targeted militia bases in the Iraq-Syria border area rather than Iran itself.

A similar approach was applied during US and UK strikes on Iran's ally, the Houthi group in Yemen, under "Operation Prosperity Guardian" starting December 2023. Iranian naval forces in the southern Red Sea, including the Alborz destroyer and the Bushehr warship, refrained from retaliatory actions. Iran also withdrew its intelligence ship "Behshad" from the area, which Western sources had accused of aiding the Houthis by providing information on vessels passing through the Red Sea, facilitating Houthi attacks <sup>(5)</sup>.

#### **5- Reducing International Isolation:**

Iran aimed through the Al-Aqsa Flood operation to weaken Israel by exposing the fragility of its security apparatus and positioning itself as the primary actor in subsequent negotiations with international and regional powers managing the aftermath. Accordingly, Iran would become the regional power with which other states seek to strengthen relations rather than Israel.

If Iran succeeded in this role, it would be able to forge stronger economic partnerships with major global powers, especially eastern ones like Russia and China. Iran would be regarded as a key actor in Middle Eastern security and military arrangements, potentially relied upon by these powers not only to secure their interests in the region but also to expand their influence at the expense of the US role. This would also help Iran mitigate the effects of imposed economic sanctions <sup>(6)</sup>.

#### ***Second: Features of Iran's Role in the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation***

Several features have emerged regarding Iran's role in the Al-Aqsa Flood operation, the most significant of which are as follows:

##### **1- Military Support:**

The attacks launched by Iran-affiliated armed groups in the region (Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen) have revealed significant similarities and in some cases, direct matches between their weapons and those manufactured in Iran, particularly concerning unmanned aerial vehicles (drones). Some reports indicated that the drones used by Hezbollah in Lebanon on April 17, 2024, during an attack on the village of Arab al-Aramsha in northern Israel, were designed based on the Iranian Ababil drones <sup>(7)</sup>.

On July 28, 2024, the Israeli army spokesperson, Daniel Hagari, stated that the missile Hezbollah used in the attack on Majdal Shams was the Iranian-made "Falaq-1" missile. This missile was developed in the 1990s, has a diameter of 9.4 inches, a length of 4.3 feet, and a range of approximately 6.2 miles <sup>(8)</sup>.



## **2- Military Escalation with Israel:**

The Al-Aqsa Flood operation resulted in direct confrontations between Israel and Iran. On April 1, 2024, Tel Aviv targeted the annex building of the Iranian consulate in Damascus, killing 16 members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), including the IRGC commander in Syria, Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi. Iran responded with its first direct military attack against Israel on April 13, 2024, as part of the “Al-Wa’d Al-Sadiq 1” operation, involving missile and drone strikes on Israel. However, many assessments questioned the military effectiveness of these attacks despite their political significance.

Iran continued its escalation by launching the “Al-Wa’d Al-Sadiq 2” operation on October 1, 2024, which it claimed was retaliation for the assassination of the former head of Hamas’s political bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran during the inauguration of Iranian President Masoud Beheshti-Kiani in late July 2024, as well as the assassination of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and IRGC commander Abbas Nilforushan. In response, Israel struck several military sites inside Iran on October 26, 2024, deploying approximately 100 fighter jets, disrupting much of Iran’s air defense systems and targeting a nuclear research center in Tehran.

## **3- Proxy Attacks on Military Bases in the Arab Region:**

Iranian proxy militias in Iraq and Syria expressed support for the Al-Aqsa Flood operation since its outbreak. However, the attack on the Al-Ma’adani Hospital in central Gaza on October 17, 2023, which resulted in the deaths of approximately 500 civilians, along with continued unlimited U.S. support for Israel under the Biden administration, pushed these militias into active confrontation by targeting American bases in both Iraq and Syria.

The first attacks targeted the Ain al-Asad airbase in Iraq’s Anbar province and the Harir airbase in the Kurdistan region on October 18, 2023, using drones without reported casualties. Responsibility was claimed by the “Al-Warithin

Formation,” an armed faction affiliated with the Iraqi Hezbollah Brigades, which takes direct orders from the IRGC’s Quds Force <sup>(9)</sup>.

Subsequently, other American bases in Iraq and Syria were repeatedly targeted, including the Koniko gas field base near Deir ez-Zor in northeast Syria and the al-Tanf military base operated by the international coalition against ISIS at the Syria-Jordan-Iraq border triangle. The attacks were carried out by the “Islamic Resistance in Iraq,” a coalition of Iran-aligned armed groups that emerged as a support front for Palestinian factions following the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation on October 7, 2023.

A major turning point was the attack on “Base Tower 22” on the Syria-Jordan border at the end of January 2023, which resulted in the deaths of three American soldiers. This incident marked the crossing of the U.S. “red line,” which Tehran’s proxy militias had previously avoided by refraining from causing casualties. Consequently, the U.S. launched retaliatory strikes against Iranian militias in the Iraq-Syria border region, specifically in al-Bukamal, al-Mayadin, and al-Qaim areas frequently targeted by the U.S. and occasionally by Israel <sup>(10)</sup>.

## **4- Houthi Disruption of Navigation in the Red Sea:**

The Houthis entered the conflict between Israel and Hamas in November 2023 by announcing attacks on commercial ships and tankers heading to and from Israel in the Red Sea and the strategic Bab al-Mandeb Strait, through which approximately 15% of global maritime trade passes <sup>(11)</sup>. In response to expanding American and British strikes on Houthi strongholds in Yemen under the so-called “Operation Prosperity Guardian,” the Houthis shifted tactics to target U.S. and British vessels. Notably, on November 19, 2023, the Houthis seized the “Galaxy Leader” ship, owned by Israeli businessman Abraham Ungar, declaring the seizure a retaliation for ongoing Israeli aggression in Gaza.

The Houthis continued to attack ships using ballistic and naval missiles alongside drones in both the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea. In a televised speech in August 2024, Houthi leader



Abdul-Malik al-Houthi announced that the number of targeted vessels had reached 177<sup>(12)</sup>. Through these threats, Iran achieved several objectives: negatively impacting the Israeli economy as part of its support for Hamas and Hezbollah against Israel; disrupting international maritime trade to pressure Western powers; and asserting control over the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandeb Strait as new leverage in future negotiations with major powers.

### ***Third: The Impact of the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation on Iran's Role in the Arab Region***

The most notable consequences of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation on Iran can be summarized as follows:

#### **1- Weakening of Allies:**

The aftermath of the Al-Aqsa Flood operation led to a significant decline in the military capabilities of Iran's allies in the region due to severe setbacks suffered by their proxies amid Israel's war against Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen.

Israel's campaign against Hamas and Islamic Jihad weakened their military capacities and resulted in the assassination of numerous military and political leaders. According to statements from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office and the Israeli army spokesperson, 22 out of 24 brigades of Hamas's military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, were dismantled. Approximately half of Hamas's military leadership was targeted, including six brigade commanders, over 20 battalion leaders, and about 150 company commanders. Israel claimed to have killed around 17,000 Hamas fighters and destroyed about 80% of Hamas's tunnel networks.<sup>(13)</sup> Despite potential exaggerations in these claims, Hamas suffered substantial battlefield losses, evident in its acceptance of a ceasefire in mid-January 2025.

Similarly, confrontations between Israel and Hezbollah caused heavy losses to Hezbollah's

military capabilities. Former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant stated at the end of October 2024 that Hezbollah's remaining missile and rocket stockpile was estimated at 20% of its pre-October 2023 level. Israeli estimates indicated Hezbollah had about 50,000 rockets before October 2023,<sup>(14)</sup> whereas Western estimates suggested a stockpile of up to 150,000 rockets<sup>(15)</sup>. Numerous senior and mid-level Hezbollah leaders were killed, including former and current Secretary-Generals Hassan Nasrallah and Hashem Safi al-Din, as well as key commanders of elite units and weapons divisions.

Regarding the Houthis' continued threat to navigation in the Red Sea, the U.S. launched a multinational naval coalition on December 18, 2023, called "Operation Prosperity Guardian" under the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), led by the U.S. Navy's Task Force 153, to counter Houthi attacks. Due to reluctance from Western and Arab states to participate directly, the coalition's military operations remained largely limited to U.S. and British actions, alongside Israeli airstrikes on Houthi positions in Sanaa, Hudaydah, and Amran on January 10, 2025<sup>(16)</sup>.

The new U.S. administration under Donald Trump reclassified the Houthis as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, signaling intentions to impose economic sanctions on them and their affiliates, aiming to cut off their financial resources and reassess U.S. aid to Yemen, particularly in Houthi-controlled areas that might fund military campaigns against shipping or Israel. The U.S. is the largest donor to humanitarian efforts in Yemen<sup>(17)</sup>.

In contrast, the U.S. and Israel adopted a different approach towards Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, focusing on political pressure on the Iraqi government to neutralize threats against U.S. bases and Israel. Attacks by the "Islamic Resistance in Iraq" against Israel and U.S. bases declined, indicating pressure on these militias from both Baghdad and Tehran to avoid provoking the Trump administration.



Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ Al Sudani’s visit to Tehran on January 8, 2025, was aimed at persuading Iran to disband its proxy militias to avoid antagonizing the Trump administration. Tehran rejected disbandment but agreed to freeze their military activities, following a secret visit by IRGC Quds Force Commander Esmail Qaani to Baghdad<sup>(18)</sup>.

## **2- Decline in Iran’s Regional Role:**

The severe blows to Iran’s regional allies following the Al-Aqsa Flood operation resulted in the erosion of Tehran’s regional influence, which it had painstakingly built over decades at an estimated cost of \$50 billion in Syria alone<sup>(19)</sup>.

Following this significant setback to its militia network, Iran lost much of its regional influence, and the cost of retaliatory attacks against it diminished. Israel tested this twice: first on April 19, 2024, when it bombed the Hashtom Shakari airbase near Natanz uranium enrichment facility in response to Iranian missile and drone attacks on Israel after the Damascus consulate attack; second on October 26, 2024, when Israel struck several military sites inside Iran in retaliation for Iranian attacks on Israeli sites on October 3, 2024, following the assassinations of Hamas political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah alongside IRGC commander Abbas Nilforushan<sup>(20)</sup>.

Israel’s successful attacks within Iranian territory and the limited Iranian response exposed Tehran’s relative weakness in defending itself and its proxies.

## **3- Strengthening Relations with Arab States**

One of the regional outcomes resulting from the eruption of the “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation was the indefinite postponement of normalization between Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It could even be argued that this outcome may have been the sole strategic objective realized by Iran and, by extension, Hamas at the regional level. Prior

to the events of 7 October 2023, normalization efforts between the two states had been progressing steadily. However, the Hamas attack on Israel significantly raised the moral and humanitarian, in addition to political and strategic, costs of rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Consequently, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan declared on 1 November 2024 that “normalizing relations with Israel is not under consideration until a resolution is reached regarding the Palestinian state.”<sup>(21)</sup>

In parallel, Iran sought to capitalize on the popular and official outrage over Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip by further consolidating its relations with Arab countries. This trend had been initiated under the administration of former President Ebrahim Raisi, particularly with the signing of the agreement to restore diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia on 10 March 2023. These bilateral ties saw some improvement following the “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation. Raisi conducted the first visit by an Iranian president to the Saudi capital since President Mohammad Khatami’s visit in 1999. This visit was to attend the emergency Arab-Islamic summit convened in Riyadh in November 2023 to discuss Israeli practices in Gaza. Furthermore, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian met with Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan in Doha in October 2024, during which he extended an invitation from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to visit Iran.

In addition, Iran’s efforts to improve relations with Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco have witnessed notable progress over the past two years. Among the most significant indicators was Pezeshkian’s visit to Egypt on 18 December 2024 the first by an Iranian president in approximately eleven years. This was accompanied by numerous visits and communications by successive Iranian foreign ministers namely the late Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, his successor Ali Bagheri Kani, and current minister Abbas Araghchi to various Arab capitals following the

“Al-Aqsa Flood” operation. These diplomatic engagements have included over ten official visits and dozens of phone calls, signaling a growing rapprochement between Iran and the Arab world (22).

#### **4- Accelerating the Development of the Nuclear Program**

Following the onset of the “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation, Iran accelerated its uranium enrichment activities (23). It is noteworthy that the year 2024 witnessed a significant escalation in Iran’s nuclear program. According to the most recent report issued by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on 19 November 2024, Iran’s stockpile of enriched uranium had reached 6,604.4 kilograms equivalent to 32 times the limit permitted under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Additionally, Iran possessed 182.3 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60% purity, a level approaching the 90% threshold required for nuclear weapons production sufficient for the production of approximately four nuclear bombs, should a political decision be made (24).

Iran’s increasing emphasis on uranium enrichment is attributed to the transformation of its nuclear program into a “central line of defense,” following the erosion of what has been termed the “forward defense line” a reference to Iran’s network of regional militias weakened in the aftermath of the “Al-Aqsa Flood” operation. Consequently, the nuclear program has emerged as Iran’s most strategic bargaining chip in negotiations with international actors, as Tehran continues to threaten potential shifts in its nuclear doctrine, including the pursuit of nuclear weaponization(25).

#### **5- Focus on Modernizing Military Arsenal**

Direct confrontations between Iran and Israel in April and October 2024 exposed a noticeable decline in Iran’s military capabilities both defensive and offensive when compared to Israel’s military superiority. In response,

Tehran has prioritized the modernization and expansion of its military arsenal. A key indicator of this strategic shift was the Pezeshkian government’s decision to increase the national defense budget by approximately 200% for the fiscal year 2025(26).

Iran’s military development throughout 2024 remained focused on asymmetric capabilities, particularly ballistic missile and drone programs. Among the most prominent missile developments was the unveiling of the “Kheibar (Khorramshahr-4)” medium-range ballistic missile, with a range of 2,000 kilometers and equipped with cluster munitions capable of striking multiple targets. Iran also announced the “Jihad” solid-fueled ballistic missile, (27) with an operational range of 1,000 kilometers, and the “Etemad” missile, with a range of 1,700 kilometers (28).

Furthermore, during a military parade on 21 September 2024, Iran revealed a new unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), the “Shahed-136B” an upgraded version of the “Shahed-136” featuring enhanced capabilities and an extended operational range exceeding 4,000 kilometers. The “Rezvan” drone, with a range of 20 kilometers, was also showcased(29).

In addition, Iran’s space program experienced notable advancement in 2024. The country launched a larger number of satellites than in previous years, including “Keyhan-2,” “Hatef-1,” and “Mahda” in early 2024, followed by “Jamaran-1” in September. Iran also launched satellites in cooperation with Russia, such as “Hodhod” and “Kawthar,” in November of the same year(30).

Concerns surrounding Iran’s space program stem from two primary issues: first, the potential for these satellites to conduct intelligence and surveillance activities targeting nations considered adversaries by Tehran; and second, the possibility that the launch vehicles used to place these satellites into orbit could be repurposed as long-range missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads, should they undergo appropriate technical modifications.





#### ***Fourth: Key Features of the Future of Iran’s Role in the Arab Region***

Several defining characteristics are expected to shape the future of Iran’s role in the Arab region, which can be outlined as follows:

##### **1- Continued Support for Proxy Actors**

It is unlikely that Iran will abandon its regional proxies, despite the unprecedented decline in their military and political capacities. Tehran is expected to continue supporting its two remaining militarily capable proxies in the region namely, the Houthi movement in Yemen and the various armed militias in Iraq.

Moreover, Iran is likely to maintain support for other proxies that have sustained significant losses by exploring alternative mechanisms of assistance. Evidence of this is found in Iran’s repeated attempts to deliver material and logistical support to Hezbollah in Lebanon via Syrian territory. These efforts have largely failed due to two main factors: first, Israel’s monitoring and preemptive strikes along the Syrian-Lebanese border; and second, the new Syrian administration’s commitment to thwarting such attempts <sup>(31)</sup>.

Following the failure of overland arms transfers, Iran sought to use Beirut International Airport as an aerial conduit. However, these attempts have also been constrained due to Lebanese authorities preventing Iranian aircraft from landing, especially in response to Israeli threats of targeting them as occurred with Mahan Air aircraft in February 2025<sup>(32)</sup>.

In light of the heavy losses suffered by Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Iran has turned its focus to rebuilding the movement’s presence in the West Bank. This serves the dual purpose of creating a new front against Israel and posing a strategic challenge to Jordan, with whom Iran shares a latent rivalry. The Palestinian Authority, however, has rejected any Hamas activities that might destabilize the West Bank,

launching widespread security operations, particularly in Jenin <sup>(33)</sup>.

Iran is also seeking to compensate for the strategic loss of influence in Syria following the removal of former President Bashar al-Assad. This has prompted Tehran to support certain minority groups such as the Kurds, Alawites, and remnants of the previous regime who are presumed to be at odds with the new administration in Damascus. Notably, media sources have reported Iran’s agreement to supply the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) with 100 drones in response to Turkish-backed military operations in northern Syria <sup>(34)</sup>.

##### **2- Searching for New Fronts**

Given the diminishing effectiveness of Iranian proxy support in areas like Lebanon and Gaza, and the erosion of its influence in Syria particularly due to Israeli resistance to any Iranian aid to Hezbollah or Palestinian factions Tehran may look to new regions beyond the Levant to reassert its influence. One potential area is Sudan, particularly in light of the strengthening ties between Iran and the Sudanese Armed Forces led by General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in recent months. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were restored in June 2023, followed by a series of official exchanges, including the visit of Sudanese Foreign Minister Ali Youssef Ahmed Al-Sharif to Tehran in February 2025, during which he met with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and President Masoud Pezeshkian.

Several reports indicate that Iran has supplied the Sudanese military with drones specifically the Mohajer-6 model alongside other weapons and ammunition. In exchange, Tehran has reportedly requested permission to establish a naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea. Although the Sudanese military has denied these claims, their plausibility is supported by the army’s previous approval of a Russian base in the same city and Iran’s close ties with Moscow <sup>(35)</sup>.



Eritrea is also considered a potential front for Iran. Reports suggest that Tehran maintains a military naval base near the port of Assab, in a remote desert area in northern Eritrea close to the Djiboutian border. This base reportedly hosts Iranian warships, submarines, military personnel, and ballistic missiles, and is protected by Iranian drones.

Given the growing relationship between Iran and Eritrea and Asmara's hostility toward Israel Tehran may use this alliance to increase its presence along the Red Sea coast. Eritrean ports could potentially replace Syrian land routes for arms smuggling to Hezbollah and Palestinian factions, following Iran's strategic loss in Syria.

Eritrea is among the few countries in the region that openly support Iran and its affiliates. It has not condemned Houthi attacks on ships in the Red Sea and frequently criticizes Israel and the United States. Moreover, the potential for cooperation between Eritrea and Iran remains viable due to their shared experience with international sanctions. Eritrea needs weapons; Iran seeks a strategic foothold along the Red Sea <sup>(36)</sup>.

Libya may also emerge as a prospective front for Iranian influence. This is particularly plausible in light of Iran's expanding ties with Moscow, a major player in eastern Libya, and its continued support for Russia in the war in Ukraine. For Iran, the Libyan coast offers a strategic gateway to the Mediterranean Sea and proximity to Israeli borders, along with a unique opportunity to expand economically and culturally into Africa.

### **3- Continued Engagement with Arab States**

Iran is expected to persist in strengthening its relations with Arab countries in the coming period, as part of its broader strategy of regional diplomatic engagement. The key objectives of this approach include:

- Preserving a presence in the Arab region long a priority for Iranian decision-makers

albeit through political and diplomatic rather than military means;

- Preventing the United States and Israel from leveraging Iran's neighbors to contain or threaten it;
- Mitigating the adverse effects of Western sanctions imposed by the U.S. and EU on political and economic fronts.

This strategy has shown signs of success, especially in terms of neutralizing Arab involvement in the ongoing confrontation between Iran and the U.S.–Israel axis. For instance, several Gulf states refused to allow the use of their airspace or territories for strikes against Iran during the Israeli offensive on 26 October 2024 <sup>(37)</sup>.

Thus, it is unlikely that Tehran will relinquish this diplomatic advantage, particularly in light of Israeli attempts to undermine it especially following the return of Donald Trump to the White House. Trump is reportedly seeking to resume efforts to normalize relations between Israel and Arab states and to establish a regional alliance against Iran, echoing his first-term policies (2017–2021).

### **4- De-escalation with the United States**

Since Donald Trump's re-election in November 2024, Iran has actively sought to avoid provoking Washington, particularly in view of Trump's past policies, which included the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in May 2018, the implementation of a "maximum pressure" sanctions campaign targeting key sectors of the Iranian economy most notably oil and the assassination of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 near Baghdad Airport.

Iranian officials have increasingly expressed a willingness to resume negotiations with world powers regarding its nuclear program. This includes statements from President Pezeshkian, Foreign Minister Araghchi, and Supreme Leader advisor Ali Larijani. Even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has hinted at the possibility of renewed talks with the U.S., <sup>(38)</sup>



recalling his previous endorsement of “heroic flexibility” before the 2015 nuclear deal an echo of Ayatollah Khomeini’s historical decision to accept a ceasefire with Iraq, famously likened to “drinking the poisoned chalice.”

This trend aligns with signals from Trump himself, who has reiterated his willingness to negotiate with Iran, insisting that his primary objective is to prevent Tehran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Some reports have even claimed that a secret meeting occurred in mid-November 2024 between Elon Musk U.S. businessman and Trump confidant and Iran’s UN representative Saeed Iravani. While both U.S. and Iranian officials have denied or declined to confirm the meeting, <sup>(39)</sup> the possibility of such diplomatic engagement remains plausible given the mutual interest in resolving the nuclear crisis.

#### **5- Strengthening Partnerships with Major Powers**

In response to mounting pressure from Western powers and Israel, Iran has deepened its economic and political partnerships with non-Western powers, particularly Russia and China. On 17 January 2025, Iran and Russia signed a comprehensive 20-year partnership agreement during a summit between Presidents Pezeshkian and Vladimir Putin in Moscow<sup>(40)</sup> modeled on Iran’s 25-year strategic cooperation agreement with China signed in March 2021.

Additionally, Iran formally joined the BRICS group in January 2025, <sup>(41)</sup> alongside other new members including the UAE, Egypt, Ethiopia, and Indonesia, joining the original five (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). This follows Iran’s accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July 2023.

Iran views these partnerships as the international dimension of its foreign influence. While its regional influence is exercised through the so-called “Axis of Resistance,” its strategic ties with major powers form the global pillar of its external leverage. Through these alliances, Tehran hopes to cushion

the effects of Western sanctions, though the effectiveness of such partnerships remains a subject of debate even among Iranian analysts.

#### **Key Conclusions**

- 1-The aftermath of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood has led to a significant erosion of what is referred to as Iran’s “forward defence line,” marking an unprecedented decline in its regional influence. This is expected to have long-term ramifications on Tehran’s behaviour toward the Middle East.
- 2-It is unlikely that Iran will relinquish its declining regional influence. Rather, it is expected to attempt its revival either by rebuilding the capabilities of armed groups weakened after Al-Aqsa Flood or by seeking alternatives in new areas such as Sudan, Libya, Eritrea, and others.
- 3-The process of reconstructing Iran’s regional influence is likely to be prolonged. This may result in a period of “strategic latency,” possibly prompting Iran to adopt an inward-focused posture. However, such a withdrawal is expected to be temporary, as the foundational principles and ideological tenets of the Islamic Republic are inherently outward-looking; internal retreat would pose existential risks to the regime.
- 4-Tehran is likely to persist with its policy of regional engagement and rapprochement with Arab states. This is considered a strategic choice to reduce the economic and political isolation imposed by the West and to prevent the use of Iran’s Arab neighbours as tools of containment and pressure by external powers.
- 5-Iran is now facing serious threats in the wake of Al-Aqsa Flood. For the first time, Tehran perceives itself as a direct target not only by Israel alone but also with possible support from the United States. Central to these threats are its nuclear program and missile capabilities.

Furthermore, discourse on regime change has gained greater traction in Tel Aviv and Western capitals than in the past.

- 6- The fate of the nuclear agreement remains uncertain. However, with the expiration of key provisions on 18 October 2025, Tehran will be compelled to seek a resolution to the crisis with the West. The nature of this potential resolution will significantly shape Iran's regional posture, potentially leading to either escalation or de-escalation.

### **Main Recommendations for Arab States to Confront Iran's Role**

#### **1- At the Security and Military Level**

- Consider establishing a committee under the League of Arab States to coordinate responses to emerging regional threats post-Al-Aqsa Flood, particularly those posed by regional powers such as Israel, Iran, and Turkey.
- Arab states should enhance their military capabilities in proportion to their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in order to keep pace with the region's evolving security challenges.
- Examine the possibility of creating a joint committee for Red Sea littoral states under the auspices of the Arab League to coordinate with major international powers active in the region and curb Iran's ambitions to dominate this strategic maritime corridor.
- Intensify efforts to integrate Iran-backed armed groups into national armies, as a strategy to neutralize their destabilizing impact and restore state authority.

#### **2- At the Political Level**

- Explore expanding the "New Levant" alliance to include Syria and Lebanon, in addition to Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan, as a means of creating a broader geopolitical bloc.
- Establish a dedicated committee within the Arab League to monitor crisis-affected states particularly Libya and Sudan and engage with external actors involved, to accelerate political settlements.
- Arab states, especially Gulf countries, should play a role in the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 group (plus the United States), particularly concerning Tehran's regional influence.
- The Arab League should work to empower national governments in Arab capitals where Iranian proxies are active, in order to mitigate the direct threats posed by these groups to the national security of host countries.

#### **3- At the Economic Level**

- Strengthen economic integration among Arab states to cushion the impact of global economic crises, such as the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.
- Consider the possibility of offering Iran economic incentives in exchange for limiting the activities of its affiliated armed groups in the region.
- Pursue stronger economic partnerships with major global powers to reduce instability and avoid further regional tensions.



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## The Impact of the “Al-Aqsa Flood” Operation on Iran’s Role in the Arab Region

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### Abstract:

This study examines the impact of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on Iran’s role in the Arab region and the extent of that impact. It highlights Iran’s objectives in the aftermath of the operation, particularly its efforts to reinforce its regional influence and challenge the credibility of Israeli deterrence. The study also explores Iran’s involvement in supporting Al-Aqsa Flood, notably through the activation of the so-called “Unity of Fronts” strategy, Hezbollah’s engagement in the confrontation with Israel from the early days of the conflict, targeting of U.S. military bases in the region, and disruption of Red Sea navigation through threats posed by the Houthis in Yemen.

Moreover, the study evaluates the potential repercussions of the operation on Iran, including the erosion of its regional influence, the weakening of its militia network, the acceleration of uranium enrichment, and the increased focus on modernizing the military arsenal of both the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Iranian Army. The paper concludes by offering insights into the future trajectory of Iran’s regional role, particularly its efforts to deepen ties with Arab states, strengthen partnerships with major powers such as Russia and China, and pursue de-escalation with the United States.

**Keywords:** Iran, Flood Al-Aqsa, Israel, Hamas

## تأثير عملية «طوفان الأقصى» على الدور الإيراني في المنطقة العربية

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### المستخلص:

تتناول الدراسة تأثير عملية طوفان الأقصى على دور إيران تجاه المنطقة العربية وحدود هذا التأثير، مع تسليط الضوء على أهداف إيران التي سعت لتحقيقها جراء تلك العملية، سواء ما يتعلق منها بدورها الإقليمي أو محاولة التشكيك في مفهوم الردع لدى إسرائيل، كما تقف الدراسة على ملامح الدور الإيراني في دعم طوفان الأقصى، من خلال تفعيل ما يُسمى بـ “وحدة الساحات”، ودخول حزب الله على خط المواجهة مع إسرائيل منذ الأيام الأولى لاندلاع طوفان الأقصى، وكذلك استهداف القواعد الأمريكية في المنطقة، وتعطيل الملاحة في البحر الأحمر من خلال تهديدات الحوثيين في اليمن، بالإضافة إلى تقييم الانعكاسات المحتملة لعملية طوفان الأقصى على إيران، والتي شملت تراجع نفوذ إيران الإقليمي، وتآكل شبكة ميليشياتها في المنطقة، وتسريع وتيرة تخصيب اليورانيوم، بالإضافة إلى الاهتمام بتحديث الترسانة التسليحية لكل من الحرس والجيش الإيرانيين، واستشراف مستقبل الدور الإيراني في المنطقة العربية، من خلال تعزيز طهران علاقاتها مع دول المنطقة، وتطوير علاقاتها مع القوى الكبرى مثل روسيا والصين ومحاولة التهدئة مع واشنطن.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** إيران، طوفان الأقصى، إسرائيل، حماس