

MP-IDSA

Issue Brief

Iran's Strategic Recalibration Amid Geopolitical Shifts in West Asia

Deepika Saraswat

December 26, 2024

S*ummary*

The Pezeshkian administration's intensive diplomatic efforts targeting neighbours in the Persian Gulf as well as countries such as Jordan and Egypt, which are key US allies and have peace treaties with Israel, are aimed at avoiding an undeclared coalition of regional countries in support of Israel's aggressive position on Iran.

In recent months, a series of developments have dealt a severe blow to Iran’s security strategy of forward defence. The Israel–Hezbollah war has resulted in the death and destruction of much of the leadership and firepower of the Iranian-backed group. The rebel offensive in Syria which came on the heels of Hezbollah–Israel ceasefire has culminated in the ouster of the only state ally of the Islamic Republic.

Over the decades, Iran used its religio-political ideology of Islamic Revolution to align with regional actors opposed to the US’ regional presence and Israel. To realise its twin geopolitical aims of countering the US and Israeli threats to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities and to project power across the region, Iran backed Hezbollah, pursued a costly policy of supporting Bashar Al-Assad in civil war in Syria and fostered greater coordination within different actors that constituted the ‘Axis-of-resistance’.

However, Israel, with backing from the United States, has leveraged its superior technological and intelligence capabilities to degrade the capabilities of Iran’s allies. More importantly, Israel focused on challenging Iran’s strategy of deterrence through proxies, by taking the fight to Iran. Faced with geostrategic setbacks, a militarily assertive Israel and the incoming Trump presidency, Iran has now prioritised diplomacy with both regional countries and the West.

The IDF’s Momentum Plan

With the onset of the Hamas–Israel war in October 2023, Hezbollah had followed a calculated strategy of gradual and limited escalation that stopped short of engaging in an open war with a conventionally superior Israel. As part of the ‘unity of fronts’ strategy of the Iranian-backed ‘Axis-of-resistance’, Hezbollah’s aim was to entangle Israel in a war of attrition on its northern front, while the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) was fighting Hamas on the southern front. It was hoped that Hezbollah’s extensive drone and missile arsenal, precision strike capabilities and readiness to engage in reciprocal action would deter Israel from seeking a full-blown war in Lebanon.

However, the IDF, drawing on the lessons of the 2006 war with Hezbollah, which resulted in major Israeli casualties while failing to seriously weaken Hezbollah, had reworked its force design and operational concept of victory under the multi-year ‘Momentum plan’ implemented in January 2020.¹ Under the plan, the IDF revised its operational concept of decisive victory as destruction of the maximum number of enemy capabilities in the shortest period and with the smallest possible number of casualties for the IDF.

¹ Yaakov Lappin, [“The IDF’s Momentum Plan Aims to Create a New Type of War Machine”](#), BESA, 22 March 2020.

Given the risk that Hezbollah's strike capabilities pose to Israel, time was deemed to be most critical in the Israeli military campaign in Lebanon. Israel used its advances of the fourth industrial revolution technologies to design a multidomain force simultaneously operating cyber, electronic warfare, air, sensors, information processing, strike, and ground elements on the tactical level, under one command framework and towards one defined mission.² It carried out a sustained campaign of airstrikes in densely populated suburbs of Beirut and Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon and eastern Beqaa Valley.

These strikes targeted several high-level leaders including Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s weapons arsenals, launching sites and strategic crossings along the Lebanon–Syria border. In face of a rapid escalation by Israel, Hezbollah was unable to sustain its military operations, especially its turn to conventional military tactics, where it was launching missiles and drones into Israel in order to maintain deterrence as Israel struck at thousands of Hezbollah targets across Lebanon.

Iran’s lack of direct support for Hezbollah during the conflict was entirely in keeping with its forward defence strategy. For Iran, its allies in the ‘axis-of-resistance’, especially the forward strike capability of the Hezbollah, served the limited purpose of deterrence against Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities and future Israeli adventurism in South Lebanon. Neither Hamas nor Hezbollah were not to be sacrificed by getting involved in a full-blown conflict with Israel, let alone dragging Iran into a direct conflict with Israel to defend them.

Iran’s second missile barrage into Israel on 1 October 2024, which was stated to be a reprisal against the killing of Nasrallah and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, failed to reverse Israeli escalation in Lebanon and underscored Iran’s dilemma of restoring deterrence against Israel without provoking an all-out war. The barrage of approximately 185 ballistic missiles was intended to overwhelm the Israeli air defences and was aimed at three military bases in the Tel Aviv area. Though it was launched with limited warning, Israel air defence units and the US naval destroyers intercepted the majority of the projectiles. Israel responded by targeting some 20 military targets in Iran including missile production facilities and air defence systems, which gives Israel broader aerial freedom of operation in Iran.

The 60-day ceasefire deal between Hezbollah and Israel, brokered by the US and supported by France, came into effect on 27 November. By reaching a ceasefire with Israel before the fighting stopped in Gaza, Hezbollah accepted delinking the Lebanon front from Gaza, a major setback for the ‘unity of fronts’ strategy of the resistance

² Eran Ortal, [“Going on the Attack: The Theoretical Foundation of the Israel Defense Forces’ Momentum Plan”](#), Dado Center, 1 October 2020.

axis. The ceasefire also had ripple effects in Syria, where Turkish-backed Jihadists led by Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham (HTS), a former Al-Qaeda affiliate, launched military operations from their stronghold Idlib after a gap of four years.

As the Syrian army faltered in the face of the blitz, rebels seized control of Syria’s second-largest city Aleppo by 1 December. The same day, Israeli media reported that the Israeli Air Force had intercepted an Iranian cargo plane en route to Syria and forced it to turn back, suspecting it of carrying weapons meant for Hezbollah. Hezbollah sent a small number of “supervising forces” to help prevent anti-government fighters from seizing the strategic city of Homs, which is located along the M5 highway connecting Damascus with Hama and Aleppo.

After Hezbollah’s deployment turned out to be far smaller, it decided to evacuate the country through Al-Qusayr town in Homs from which they had entered Syria in the spring of 2013 and had recaptured it from rebels. The evacuating Hezbollah convoy of several dozen armoured vehicles was bombed by Israel. In a nutshell, Iran faced operational constraints in supporting the Assad government due to weakening of Hezbollah and Israeli air superiority in Syria and Lebanon, as underscored by repeated Israeli bombings of runways in both Aleppo and Damascus and threats against Iranian flights.

Iran’s Strategic Recalibration

With the weakening of Hezbollah and the fall of Assad government in Syria, Iran’s strategic presence in the Levant has diminished significantly. Through Iraq and Syria, Iran had established an overland corridor to Lebanon, which constituted the “logistical backbone of the axis of resistance”.³ Iran’s supply lines to its ally Hezbollah will now have to rely on air and sea routes vulnerable to Israeli operations. Notably, Iranian leaders have stopped short of openly criticising Turkey for backing the rebel offensive in Syria. Tehran is also using its ties with Qatar and Turkey to remain involved in multilateral consultations advocating an inclusive political establishment in Syria.

Iran was party to the meeting convened in Doha on 7 December involving Foreign Ministers of several Arab countries and Astana process, namely Russia, Turkey, Iran, which agreed on launching a comprehensive political process and cessation of military operations in Syria. Even as the United States and European Union are keen to exclude Iran and Russia from Syria, Iran seems to be taking a pragmatic approach in engaging new authorities in Syria. Iran’s ambassador to Syria, Hossein Akbari

³ Kian Sharifi, “[Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance’: Different Groups, Same Goals](#)”, RFERL, 19 February 2024.

recently stated in an interview that “with assurances of security from all involved parties”, Iran plans to restart its consulate activities soon. However, Iran’s overtures in Syria may face additional challenge if the ascendant forces in Syria were to engage in reprisal attacks and sectarian violence against individuals linked with Iran and Assad regime.

Iran has also taken the lead in denouncing Israeli air campaign targeting military sites across Syria and Israeli military’s advance into the buffer zone separating Israeli-occupied Golan Heights from the rest of Syria. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, while blaming the overthrow of Assad as a “joint American and Zionist plot” only indirectly mentioned Turkey, stated that the parts of Syria occupied by the US and Israel will be liberated by Syrian youth. Khamenei’s views were echoed by the chief commander of the IRGC Major General Hossein Salami, who said that foreign powers are today tearing apart Syria like "hungry wolves", with the Zionists operating in the south and others in the north and east of the country and that the Syrian youths will eventually liberate their country. Given that countering the US military presence and Israel has been at the core of Iran’s resistance oriented religio-political ideology, Tehran may look for an opening with Syrian forces seeking support push-back against US military presence and Israeli occupation of internationally recognised Syrian territory.

Iran’s geopolitical setback in the Levant has come at a time when Israel and Iran have engaged in a direct exchange of fire. Only days after rebels took over Damascus, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a video message aimed at the people of Iran said that the Iranian axis was crumbling due to a “chain reaction” set off by Israel, and expressed his hope that Iran can “be free”.⁴ Israeli military officials also believe that weakening of Iran's regional allies provides Israel with an opportunity to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, especially as Iran may consider developing a nuclear weapon to replace its deterrence.

At a time when Israel has asserted its military dominance by battering Iran’s allies in Lebanon and Gaza and the incoming Trump Administration is indicating renewed pressure campaign against Iran, Iran’s Supreme Leader Khamenei, who had rejected any negotiations with Donald Trump during his previous presidential term, has favoured Pezeshkian government’s push for diplomacy with both regional countries and the West.

Over the last year, Iran has engaged in intensive diplomacy with its neighbours in the Persian Gulf and wider region to mobilise support for ceasefire in Gaza and a united Islamic voice against Israel. Iran’s two missile strikes into Israel, framed by

⁴ Amy Shapiro, [“In Message to Iranians, PM Says Islamic Republic’s Axis is Crumbling Due to Chain Reaction Set Off by Israel”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 12 December 2024.

Iran as an operational response to Israel’s targeting of Iran’s consulate in Damascus and killing of Hamas leader in Tehran, were seen by Iran’s neighbours as provocations that may drag the entire region into a war.⁵ The sheer number of regional countries that participated in the Israeli air defence against Iranian aerial attack in April left little doubt in Tehran that any overt escalation by Iran ran the risk of driving its Gulf neighbours closer to Israel.

The multiple regional tours by Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and his predecessor Hossein Amir Abdollahian have relayed the message that Iran does not seek expansion of conflict and assuage their concerns about Iran’s show of power and resolve by linking Iran’s strikes against Israel to the war in Gaza.⁶ Tehran has also sought assurances that regional countries will not allow their territory and airspace to be used in hostile action against Iran by Israel and the United States.

Faced with a complex security environment, key officials in Pezeshkian’s cabinet such as Vice President for Strategic Affairs Javad Zarif and Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, who had negotiated the nuclear agreement with the West, have made a renewed pitch for constructive engagement with the West on nuclear and regional issues.⁷ The conservatives and the IRGC who had earlier mounted ideologically-driven opposition to the engagement with the US and favoured a security-focused approach in the region, are far more weakened politically after the recent geopolitical setbacks.

At the regional level, Tehran is seeking institutionalised collaboration with its Persian Gulf neighbours, to address conflicts through dispute resolution mechanisms, thus reducing regional countries’ security reliance on the United States. Iran’s hope is that its Gulf neighbours, focused on ambitious programmes of economic diversification and modernisation, will seek to avoid a repeat of regional insecurity that followed Trump’s withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal and counsel him against intensifying ‘maximum pressure’ on Iran.

Pezeshkian's visit to Egypt, the first such visit by an Iranian president in 11 years to participate in the D-8 meeting, underscored the urgency of regional diplomacy for Tehran at the current juncture. Notably, the D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, also a platform for Islamic solidarity among its eight members, was founded at the initiative of first Islamist Prime Minister of Turkey, Necmettin Erbakan. On the side-lines, Pezeshkian met Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip

⁵ Mohammad Javad Shariati, “[The Most Prominent Analytical Opinions Regarding the Conflict Between Iran and the Zionist Regime](#)”, Institute for Political and International Studies, 5 May 2024.

⁶ “[Iranian Press Review: Critics Question Foreign Minister's Strategy in Tour of the Region](#)”, *Middle East Eye*, 17 October 2024.

⁷ Mohammad Javad Zarif, “[How Iran Sees the Path to Peace](#)”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2 December 2024.

Erdogan, where he emphasised the need for maintaining Syria's territorial integrity and criticised Israeli airstrikes in Syria, indicating that Ankara and Tehran may still have convergent views in Syria, namely their opposition to Kurdish autonomy and the US backing of Kurds and Israeli air raids in Syria.⁸ Iran has also backed inclusion of Azerbaijan, a key Turkish ally, into the D-8. Pezeshkian’s talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi focused on the need for diffusing regional tensions and avoiding escalation.⁹

As Israel carried out military operations to destroy the fighting capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah and rebels mounted an offensive in Syria, Iran has resisted temptations of direct military interventions in favour of its beleaguered allies. Instead, in an approach resembling ‘Iran first’, Iran’s actions have been focused on deterring direct Israeli provocations against Iran. Iranian leaders have also insisted on the autonomy of the actors comprising the resistance axis, which arguably share a religio-political commitment to the Palestinian issue. The Pezeshkian administration’s intensive diplomatic efforts targeting neighbours in the Persian Gulf as well as countries such as Jordan and Egypt, which are key US allies and have peace treaties with Israel, are aimed at avoiding an undeclared coalition of regional countries in support of Israel’s aggressive position on Iran.

⁸ [“Syria’s Territorial Integrity Must be Preserved”](#), *Mehrnews*, 20 December 2024.

⁹ [“El-Sisi Discusses Regional Developments with Iranian President Pezeshkian on D-8 Summit Sidelines”](#), *Ahram Online*, 19 December 2024.

About the Author



Dr. Deepika Saraswat is Associate Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses is a non-partisan, autonomous body dedicated to objective research and policy relevant studies on all aspects of defence and security. Its mission is to promote national and international security through the generation and dissemination of knowledge on defence and security-related issues.

Disclaimer: Views expressed in Manohar Parrikar IDSA's publications and on its website are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Manohar Parrikar IDSA or the Government of India.

© Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) 2024