

## Strategic Alliances for a Secure, Connected, and Prosperous Region

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# Iran's Grand Strategy to Destroy Israel Is Proceeding Apace

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The logo of Iran's First International Hourglass Festival

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- According to the Iranian media and officials, the Iranian Hourglass Festival, which celebrates Israel's "imminent collapse," follows a secret "plan" launched in 2015 with the announcement by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to destroy Israel within 25 years. The strategy of uniting the Axis of Resistance fronts and proxies was devised by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Qods Force's General Qassem Soleimani.
- Iran's build-up of regional proxies was far more systematic and focused than what met the eye. While the United States and its allies were distracted by the negotiations over the nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic, Tehran was consolidating its hold over regional militias and terrorist organizations, aiming for the strategic encirclement of Israel. In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, the Biden

administration acknowledged Iran's broad support for Hamas, Hizbullah, and Houthis.

- Looking at the events from the perspective of the 2015 plan to destroy the Jewish state, the seemingly random pieces of the puzzle fall together in place to demonstrate that Iran is not only the architect of the terrorist infrastructure in the region but is also the mastermind behind any operations of significance. These operations require Iran's participation and green light in some form.
- While the October 7 attacks were in the works for some time and a war with Israel was predictable, Iran was counting on the fact that Israel's relations with Arab states were still shaky, unfocused, and lacked popular support. While the governments had not withdrawn from the Abraham Accords, every other aspect of those relations has suffered.
- Hamas was joined by the Iran-backed PIJ and the Fatah/PLO-affiliated Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade on October 7; Mahmoud Abbas's financial support for the families of the Hamas fighters killed on and after October 7 cemented the consolidation of this network under Iran's patronage.
- Almost immediately following the deadly attack, and particularly after Israel's declaration of war on Hamas, mass riots and rallies in support of Hamas sprung up all over the West. Iran's information warfare machinery was in high gear in the United States and elsewhere.

The first Iranian International Hourglass Festival, which took place in 2018, predicted<sup>1</sup> Israel's destruction by 2040. After the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attacks on Israel, the hourglass symbol is everywhere. The festival solicited art and media entries for a competition aiming to "disclose beastly and anti-human rights measures of the Zionist occupier regime." According to the Iranian media and officials, the festival, which celebrates Israel's "imminent collapse," follows a secret "plan" launched in 2015 with the announcement by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to destroy Israel within 25 years. The strategy of uniting the Axis of Resistance fronts and proxies was devised by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Qods Force's General Qassem Soleimani. At least part of the inspiration for the plan appeared to be Israel's assassination of Iran's nuclear scientists,<sup>2</sup> which threatened the regime's nuclear ambitions. In other words, the regime came to see

Israel as an immediate stumbling block that needed to be eliminated quickly, as opposed to at some point in a distant future, to proceed with the rest of its regional roadmap.

This would be a change from the view that while Tehran certainly holds genocidal intent against Israel, it dares not face off the presumed nuclear power until it is at least in the equivalent position. The plan, however, indicated that Iran will not wait to complete its nuclearization and that it has other means to destroy Israel that do not require a nuclear holocaust. The pronouncements may have seemed nothing more than wishful thinking aimed at the domestic audiences at the time, but consequent events uncovered a dogged dedication by Tehran to that cause. It turned out that the build-up of regional proxies was far more systematic and focused than what met the eye. Unlike smaller democracies like Israel, which find themselves pivoting towards tactical activity and reactionary relationships among more considerable powers or volatile Middle Eastern states, Iran, with a population of over 80,000,000 and no immediate prospects for a democratic transition and the demands of an election cycle, can well afford a long-term vision.

While the United States and its allies were distracted by the negotiations over and withdrawal from the nuclear deal with the Islamic Republic, otherwise known as the JCPOA, Tehran was consolidating its hold over regional militias and terrorist organizations, aiming for the strategic encirclement of Israel. In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, the Biden administration acknowledged Iran's broad support for Hamas, Hizbullah, and Houthis. It held it primarily responsible for the political upheaval and the proliferation of terrorism in the Middle East. Still, it found evidence directly linking Iran to the specific planning of the Simchat Torah massacre wanting. However, looking at the events from the perspective of the announced 2015 plan to destroy the Jewish state, the seemingly random pieces of the puzzle fall together in place to demonstrate that Iran is not only the architect of the terrorist infrastructure in the region but is also the mastermind behind any operations of significance. These operations all fall within the framework of the plan to destroy Israel and, therefore, require Iran's participation and green light in some form.

## **Iran Is the Mastermind**

Iran proceeded with its plan through a three-pronged approach: pursuit of normalization with Arab and Muslim majority states and expansion of its diplomatic sway and legitimacy; consolidation,

integration, and bolstering of its proxies; and the use of its information warfare operations to discredit Israel and to weaken its image and relations around the world. First, Iran took advantage of the growing isolationism inside the United States to play off the Democrat-led fixation on a deal, on the one hand, against the Republican interest in withdrawing from the Middle East on the other, to shape its image as the regional hegemon despite its poor economy and internal instability. In its own words, Iran turned the “regional hourglass upside down.”<sup>3</sup>

## How Iran turned regional hourglass upside down

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Politics



A photo montage in the *Tehran Times* shows Iran's changes in the Middle East. (*Tehran Times*)

Within two years of the Abraham Accords, Iran moved to normalize relations with several countries, including members of the Abraham Accords. From the point of view of some of those countries, this “strategic balance” is all about avoiding direct confrontation with Tehran while receiving the trade and other benefits of working with both countries. Tehran sees this expansion of diplomacy as a strategic victory. First, these relationships legitimize its image and role in the region, making future sanctions and pressure less likely. Second, these relationships undermine the concept of “MESA” or “Arab NATO,” a strategic regional defense alliance with Israel at its focal point, which makes a concerted attack less likely. Third, it undermines and weakens Israel’s relations with existing Abraham Accord states and presents obstacles to the expansion of the Abraham Accords.

Saudi Arabia is far less likely to go beyond symbolic gestures with Israel: Iran has effectively provided it with a choice between some level of uncertain protection from Iran’s hegemony for the

foreseeable future or moving closer to Israel. Riyadh was already facing substantial internal obstacles to normalization with Israel; resuming relations with Iran provided it with a way out of that dilemma without putting an end to lucrative indirect business relations with Israeli companies. Meanwhile, the UAE and Bahrain are facing a market backlash against Israel: Israeli products have been rolled back from Emirati stores, and Bahraini business people have withdrawn from deals with Israel, particularly after October 7. The expansion of these relationships is closely tied to Iran's other two approaches.

While the October 7 attacks were in the works for some time and a war with Israel was predictable, Iran was counting on the fact that the relations with Arab states were still shaky, unfocused, and lacked popular support, which means that it depended on a high level of disruption on most levels. While the governments had not withdrawn from the Abraham Accords, every other aspect of those relations has suffered. Meanwhile, as reporting by the *Wall Street Journal* has shown, Iran has exercised direct involvement in the security developments in the region. As the publication has shown, Iran officials were pushing Gaza-based movements and the Lebanese Hizbullah into direct attacks on Israel at least six months prior to the October 7 attack. Officials visiting Beirut in April 2022, around the time of the Ramadan riots and rocket attacks by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, openly called<sup>4</sup> for such measures, which indeed followed.

While Hamas had the blueprint of the attack in the works for years – and Israel's security agencies reviewed the most recent version over a year ahead of the attacks – Iran apparently was closely involved in the final planning of the stages in the weeks leading up to the final execution, including giving a final green light in Beirut just a few days<sup>5</sup> before the attack. In September, *WSJ* reported that 500 Hamas and PIJ fighters made it out from the Gaza siege into Iran for training;<sup>6</sup> in hindsight, this was in preparation for the October 7 attacks. Iran has also been systematically supplying a flow of weapons into PA-controlled territories,<sup>7</sup> mirroring its strategy in Gaza for the last few years. Iran has dedicated time, money, and effort, into turning Abbas's operatives into yet another proxy for its own ambitions.

The coup de grace came from the BBC investigation<sup>8</sup> indicating that Hamas was joined by at least four other terrorist organizations, including the Iran-backed PIJ and the Fatah/PLO affiliated Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade on October 7; Mahmoud Abbas's financial support<sup>9</sup> for the families of the Hamas fighters killed on and after October 7

cemented the consolidation of this network under Iran's patronage. The "team of rivals" approach to launching a deadly attack on Israel and drawing it into the war in Gaza would not have been possible without direct Iran involvement and coordination. Such an attack required advanced training, preparations, and the level of deception perpetrated not only by Hamas, which misled Israel and the U.S. intelligence about its intentions but by the PA, which played into the image of being engaged in a deadly rivalry with its Gaza counterparts. Abbas played up the political tension, which made the PA seem moderate by comparison, while the local terrorists prepared for the attack in the background – all with Iran's assistance.

The final red flag indicates Iran's direct hand in everything that has happened leading up to the Simchat Torah massacre and since comes by way of Iran's information warfare machinery in the United States and elsewhere. Almost immediately following the deadly attack, and particularly after Israel's declaration of war on Hamas, mass riots and rallies in support of Hamas sprung up all over the West. Week after week, they launch disorderly and often violent and mostly unlicensed demonstrations surrounding critical U.S. infrastructure, which includes bridges, roads, major shopping areas, museums, and government buildings. Most of these gatherings are sponsored by pro-Palestinian leftist and Islamist organizations. One that stands out in particular is called "Within Our Lifetime,"<sup>10</sup> which describes itself as a Palestinian-led community organization that has been building the movement for Palestine in NYC since 2015. Worth noting is that this organization features prominently the hourglass symbol as its logo, an apparent nod to the Iranian "Hourglass" plan to wipe out Israel.

Within Our Lifetime associates make no secret of their intention: they frequently chant "from the river to the sea," calling not for a two-state solution but rather for a no-state solution, erasing Israel and displacing it with Palestine. It is no coincidence that the organization was launched in 2015, the year Iran announced its plan to get rid of Israel in 25 years' time. Eight years later, Israel finds itself in a war, not only to restore deterrence shaken by the surprise attack but to reclaim international support while these Iran-backed groups are using persistence and playing the numbers game to attract attention and to overwhelm Westerners with anti-Israel messaging. Moreover, by attacking infrastructure, these groups seem to be measuring the response by the authorities – perhaps in preparation for future, more serious terrorist attacks. If the U.S. government is looking for a "smoking gun" of Iran's direct involvement in genocidal plots against Israel. It should look no further than in its own backyard in New York.

## Notes

1. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/new-iranian-festival-fetes-israels-predicted-destruction-by-2040/>
2. <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/132470/Iran-to-hold-International-Israel-Hourglass-Festival>
3. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/484458/How-Iran-turned-regional-hourglass-upside-down>
4. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-is-recruiting-militant-allies-to-launch-attacks-against-israel-c40f369f>
5. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/iran-israel-hamas-strike-planning-bbe07b25>
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