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Iran's subtle geopolitical calculations

Iran is accused of being involved in the Hamas attack. But is Tehran really interested in escalating the conflict?

Needless to say, Hamas' murderous attack on Israel on 7 October was a cause for celebration for the Iranian regime: the geopolitical and ideological arch-enemy was humiliated like never before, which a regime-owned newspaper celebrated with a count-up of the death toll in order to hail the one thousandth 'Zionist victim'. It is clear that Tehran was, at least indirectly, involved in the attack — after all, the regime supports Hamas with money, weapons and training. But did Tehran's involvement go beyond this? And is the situation, as often interpreted in the West, only a cause for celebration for the Islamic Republic or does it possibly also harbour any risks?

A strategic advantage

Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei welcomed the attack as the 'work of the Palestinians', thereby semantically limiting Iran's involvement to a background role, as Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah ('100 per cent Palestinian') did a few weeks later. Neither Israel nor the US have been able to present evidence of Iran's direct involvement so far. Iranian officials have repeatedly emphasised in recent weeks that they had no prior knowledge of the Hamas attack. According to media reports, this is also believed by the US intelligence services.

A Reuters news agency report even goes so far as to claim that Tehran was surprised by the attack and that not even the Hezbollah posts close to the border in the south of Lebanon were on alert. In the beginning of November, Khamenei clarified to Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas politburo chief, that Hamas could not expect Iran to intervene more forcefully since they had not been informed of the attack on 7 October in advance. He had also urged Haniyeh to silence those voices in his own ranks who were calling loudly for a more intensive Iranian involvement. Hamas rejects this report as false.

Iran has never abandoned

Strategically, Hamas' attack on Israel has strengthened Iran in two aspects in particular.

its goal of destroying Israel in favour of a Palestinian state.

The planned rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Benjamin Netanyahu's prestigious foreign policy project, is on hold for the time being. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman knows that his population, which is already extremely critical of Israel, just like that of other Arab countries, is watching Israel's brutal warfare, in which, according to various media reports, the Palestinian population in Gaza is to be thinned out to a minimal level. Perhaps they, too, can think of more profitable things to do, than negotiate a rapprochement with the far-right forces around Netanyahu, who constantly speak of ethnic cleansing and are despised on the streets of the region.

Iran, on the other hand, which has never abandoned its goal of destroying Israel in favour of a Palestinian state, can now present itself, even more credibly than before, as the unwavering champion of the Palestinian cause. Consequently, the Iranian regime intensifies its relations with the countries of the Global South and circumvents Western efforts to isolate them. The recent pictures of released Palestinian prisoners (many of them women and minors held without trial in so-called 'administrative detention') may also have reinforced the impression that it is the actions of Hamas and its supporters that can extract painful concessions from the powerful opponent Israel and perhaps even initiate a political process again — far more than the normalisation faction has achieved for them in the eyes of the Palestinians.

Contrary, Iran has also sent clear signals of wanting to reduce tensions in recent months. In a larger conflict, the détente, negotiated by China with Saudi Arabia in March of this year, could be under threat. Recently Iran has also held talks with Bahrain, Sudan and Egypt. In its search for new (and old) partners in the grip of Western sanctions, the country has a lot to lose if it does not carefully nurture the ties it has just forged.

Autonomy, different goals and political realities

Furthermore, the analysis of the cooperation of the so-called 'axis of resistance' – which spans from Tehran via Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, the Lebanese south to groups in the Palestinian territories and the Houthis in Yemen – does not reflect reality. The allies are an association of very different, in some cases considerably autonomous actors and

groups, that are willing to cooperate with Tehran in varying degrees, often with different goals in mind. It is certain, however, that they will not wait for a signal from the Iranian capital for every one of their actions.

Instead, a coherent alliance network has emerged that combines independent action with strategic coordination to strengthen the collective nature of the axis. Its members have established a flexible command network that allows for a dynamic distribution of tasks — and which is currently used to maintain Hamas' military capabilities while avoiding a direct confrontation with the United States. For this reason, Hamas is still able to strike Israel with rockets from the Gaza Strip on a daily basis, even 60 days after the Israeli army began its extensive bombardment. The simple but erroneous assumption that it is exclusively the blind hatred against the 'Zionist enemy' driving these groups to act completely ignores the fact that they are pursuing their own regional political interests just as much as other players on the geostrategic stage.

Viewing all militias as controlled subordinates of the Islamic Republic, i.e. as mere puppets of the string-pullers in Tehran, creates numerous blind spots.

This applies first and foremost to Hamas: while the Iranian regime kept Bashar al-Assad in power during the Syrian civil war, Hamas, which has its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood, worked to overthrow the dictator. It was only when Hamas and Syria resumed relations in the fall of 2022 that the relationship with Tehran deepened again. It is highly unlikely that this relationship has now become so strong, in such a short span of time, that Iran could exert direct influence on the Hamas leadership and give it instructions.

Viewing all militias as controlled subordinates of the Islamic Republic, i.e. as mere puppets of the string-pullers in Tehran, creates numerous blind spots. The reason for this is that some of them are political leaders who run ministries and hold political positions in their countries. They have become business players and economic factors and consequently, in order to maintain or expand their hold on power, they have to take domestic political, societal and social aspects into account. Overlooking this aspect has frequently resulted in a misinterpretation of their actual characteristics.

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Hezbollah – more directly controlled by Tehran than Hamas, but not completely – is also likely to bring its own considerations to the talks with representatives of the Iranian Revolutionary

escalation of the conflict.

Guards, possibly in the joint command centre in Beirut. They know that a majority of Lebanese, in the midst of the country's worst economic crisis and only three years after the destructive port explosion in Beirut, do not want a war. They also know that after years of mismanagement, corruption and international sanctions, the Iranian state household is too small to finance the reconstruction of Beirut.

The Islamic Republic itself must also perform an internal balancing act after a year of violent political unrest: many critics of the Iranian establishment have long spoken out against the financial and political support of foreign organisations, most recently the prominent reformist and former president Mohammad Khatami, as the country itself is currently in an economic crisis.

Beyond ideology

There are many indicators that Tehran is probably not interested in an escalation of the conflict. Leading regime representatives have repeatedly emphasised this in recent weeks. The Islamic Republic has also always avoided a direct confrontation with Israel and the US — but this could still happen if it were to lead Hezbollah, probably the best-equipped militia in the world, into battle. A militia that also serves as a deterrent against a major Israeli attack on Iranian territory and which it will hardly be prepared to sacrifice for Hamas.

However, the danger has not been averted: Tehran's actions will continue to depend on those of the Israeli army in the Gaza Strip. If Israel is indeed on the verge of crushing Hamas militarily, Iran could increase its efforts in order to prevent Israel from shifting its focus completely to the North in the future.

Iran has undoubtedly achieved a strategic success: with the 'axis of resistance', it has succeeded in building a military alliance that positions itself as a counterweight to Israeli and American power in the Middle East — and mobilise on several fronts simultaneously. It can indeed hurt the Jewish state. A war between Hezbollah and Israel would look very different today than back in 2006. The militia had already increased its rocket arsenal more than tenfold in 2016 and gained valuable combat experience through the war in Syria alongside the Assad regime and against IS.

The West will have to understand these different dynamics and logics and overcome the assumption that ideological players cannot be geostrategic players.

Lessons have been learned from past mistakes, strategy has long since replaced blind ideology and patience and affect control have been recognised as valuable virtues. With its tactics of attrition – with missiles from Yemen, attacks on US positions in Iraq and Syria, the stationing of Iranian Revolutionary Guards on Syrian territory and their jewel, Hezbollah – Tehran is sending the message that Israel should not feel safe on any of its borders. Iran is not looking for a short-term tactical advantage but is playing the *long game*.

The axis is ready. Ready to hold back if it serves the cause, and equally ready to strike if necessary. The West will have to understand these different dynamics and logics and overcome the assumption that ideological players cannot be geostrategic players.



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