

## Resistance by Other Means Realpolitik and the Post-2023 Geopolitical Landscape

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Research Article

### Abstract

This article explores the evolving dynamics of power politics in the Middle East in the aftermath of the 2023–2025 regional upheavals, including the collapse of the Assad regime, the weakening of Iran’s regional non-state allied partners, and the increasing normalization of Israel among Arab states. Grounded in a realist framework, the paper examines Iran’s recalibration of foreign policy, the strategic fragmentation of the Palestinian movement, and the future of resistance politics in an age of shifting alliances and proxy fatigue. Arguing that ideological postures must adapt to geopolitical realities, the paper evaluates emerging models for conflict resolution and reconsiders the role of Iran as both an ideological and strategic actor. The study concludes that sustainable resistance in the post-2023 landscape must combine realism with principled sovereignty, moving beyond military confrontation toward inclusive regional diplomacy.

**Key words:** Real-politics, Geo-politics, Axis of Resistance, Islamic Republic of Iran, Comprehensive Diplomacy, West Asia

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## Resistance by Other Means: Realpolitik and the Post-2023 Geopolitical Landscape

The 2024 military offensive conducted by Turkish, American, and Israeli forces—joined by the Western-aligned Syrian group Tahrir al-Sham—ushered in a decisive transformation in the regional order of the Middle East. This coalition operation led to the collapse of the Assad regime and the strategic strongholds and capabilities of Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah across Syria and Lebanon were overshadowed by this operation. At the same time, Israel's campaign against Hezbollah, coupled with its tactical strikes on Iranian positions, expanded the conflict's reach. The June 2025 U.S.-Israeli joint airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities, launched despite the backdrop of active negotiations, demonstrated a dramatic reaffirmation of military 'solution' over diplomacy (Achcar, 2013). This episode marked not just a geopolitical rupture, but a symbolic assertion that kinetic action and deterrence are reclaiming precedence in shaping West Asian dynamics.

These recent developments reaffirm the enduring character of Realpolitik in Middle Eastern/West Asian affairs—an ethos that prioritizes state interests, balance of power, and strategic opportunism over ideological or ethical consistency. Slogans of Islamic unity, the Palestinian cause, and Pan-Arab solidarity continue to be invoked in speeches and statements but are routinely subordinated to immediate national calculations (Bellaigue, 2025). Regional actors operate within a realist framework, even as they wrap policies in symbolic or religious language. In this fluid arena, pragmatism is not the exception but the rule—though often unspoken. States leverage ideology selectively, not as guiding doctrine, but as one of several tools to serve fluctuating national priorities.

Realpolitik requires adaptability. It involves reassessing alliances, redefining threats, and occasionally compromising ideological rigidity in service of broader strategic goals. While certain values may still retain their place and importance in a country's identity – such as Islamic solidarity or the defense of Palestine – they do not necessarily determine the state's behavior in times of vulnerability or strategic opportunity.<sup>3</sup> Iran's foreign policy, which is emblematic of this combination, demonstrates how ideological consistency coexists with calculated realism. Its ideological posture—anti-imperialism, pan-Islamism, and resistance to Zionism—remains ideationally and rhetorically central. But in practice, Iranian diplomacy has long shown flexibility: pursuing negotiations with the West, cooperating tactically with adversaries like the U.S. against ISIS, and adjusting to shifting regional alliances (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2025).

Following the collapse of the Assad regime, Tehran finds itself forced to reassess its influence in the Levant and redefine the operational scope of the “axis of resistance” it supports. If the first two decades of the 21st century were marked by Iran's regional expansion—in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen—the post-2023 era demands a more defensive, recalibrated posture. Iran can still support the Palestinian cause and its broader regional interests, but it must do so from a position of internal strength and external realism. The slogans of resistance will continue, but they must be backed by a

credible political economy and strategic deterrence capacity if they are to influence outcomes (Haass, 2025).

As the saying goes, Iran has no permanent friends or enemies—only interests. This axiom, often attributed to Lord Palmerston, resonates deeply in Tehran’s statecraft. The memory of the 1980 Iraqi invasion, backed by most Arab states and the West, still defines much of Iran’s threat perception. That betrayal underscored how sectarian and ideological bonds could quickly dissolve in the face of realpolitik interests. Today, a similar realignment is underway. Several Sunni-majority Gulf states increasingly see Iran—not Israel—as their primary security threat, a shift driven by fears of Iranian “proxies,” missile programs, and the spread of Shiite identity (Khalidi, 2020).

### *Strategic Reassessment and Iran’s Regional Posture*

Iran’s defense strategy has long relied on a multifaceted model combining conventional capabilities, asymmetric deterrence, and ‘non-state-agents (NSA) relationships. Rather than building overwhelming military superiority, Iran has cultivated a network of alliances and partnerships with non-state actors that extend its influence across strategic fault lines. Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, and Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq serve as force multipliers in the absence of a robust conventional military. These groups have provided Tehran with strategic depth—acting both as buffers and retaliatory instruments should Iran be attacked directly.

However, the aftermath of the twelve-day war also revealed the vulnerabilities of this model. Israel’s strikes on Hezbollah command centers and the acceleration of Gulf states-Israel military cooperation signaled that the network is increasingly vulnerable to preemptive disruption (Kirshner, 2025). Moreover, regional fatigue with prolonged proxy warfare is palpable. Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen are each facing domestic exhaustion, economic collapse, and political paralysis, partly due to their entanglement in wider regional rivalries. Iran now faces the challenge of maintaining influence without overextending itself—militarily, economically, or diplomatically.

Intelligent pragmatism based on national dignity, rather than ideological rigidity, should guide Iran’s next steps. Strategic patience, diplomatic outreach, and economic reconstruction must take precedence over open-ended confrontation. Iran’s engagement with neighbors like Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Afghanistan—states with complicated relations and overlapping interests—must be recalibrated toward conditional cooperation rather than zero-sum rivalry. This does not suggest capitulation or abandonment of core principles. Rather, it acknowledges that ideological positioning without material capacity leads to isolation and diminished leverage (Maloney, 2025).

The challenge of Iran’s foreign policy lies in striking a balance between its identity as a revolutionary state and its behavior as a pragmatic actor. While symbolic gestures—such as commemorating Quds Day or issuing statements on Palestine—remain



important for domestic legitimacy and ideological consistency, Iran must simultaneously build regional alliances rooted in economic interdependence, non-sectarian diplomacy, and mutual deterrence. The failure to do so will not only weaken Iran's external influence but may also deepen internal dissent among populations fatigued by sanctions, inflation, and geopolitical entanglements (Polilegal, 2024).

For over seventy years, Arab states and the Palestinian national movement have employed a variety of resistance strategies—armed struggle, diplomacy, pan-Arab solidarity, and legal appeals to international institutions—to challenge Israeli occupation. Yet, and bitterly, the strategic landscape has largely favored Israel. Whether in war, peace negotiations, or regional integration, Israel has emerged not only as a military and economic actor but also as a state increasingly accepted by many Arab states. The repeated failure of Arab regimes—both nationalist and monarchical—to alter this balance reflects not only Israel's superiority but also the incoherence and inconsistency of the Arab response.

The normalization agreements formalized under the Abraham Accords (2020 onward), partly reflects the abandonment of Palestine as a major axis of Arab politics. The normalization agreements formalized under the Abraham Accords (2020 onward), to some extent, indicate the abandonment of Palestine as the main axis of Arab politics. By decoupling relations with Israel from Palestinian statehood, states like the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco have signaled that geopolitical and economic interests override symbolic solidarity. This strategic shift was cemented further in the wake of the 2023–2025 regional realignments, which prioritized countering Iran over confronting Israeli expansionism. The Palestinian cause, once the emotional and ideological glue of the Arab world, has been sidelined in favor of bilateral defense pacts, intelligence sharing, and access to Israeli technology (Takeyh, 2025).

Within the Palestinian territories themselves, political fragmentation further weakens the prospects for unified resistance. The division between Hamas in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank is not merely a tactical dispute—it represents divergent ideologies, strategies, and foreign patronage networks. While the PA remains diplomatically tied to Western donors and the Oslo framework, Hamas persists in its strategy of armed resistance and ideological steadfastness, albeit under siege. This internal disunity has allowed Israel to consolidate control while deflecting pressure for meaningful negotiations. Moreover, the fragmentation has complicated Iran's efforts to present a unified "Resistance Front," as ideological and strategic contradictions emerge between its partners.

Nevertheless, the influence of political Islam in shaping the narrative of resistance remains significant. Movements like Hamas, Hezbollah, and even the Houthis embody a vision of resistance that merges religious legitimacy with nationalist objectives. Their appeal lies in their perceived authenticity, grassroots support, and refusal to compromise core demands. Beyond the Arab world, these movements continue to shape discourse

across Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, and parts of Africa, where political Islam is intertwined with postcolonial resistance and anti-imperialist sentiment.

However, the future viability of these movements depends on their ability to adapt. Ideological rigidity, absent political efficacy, risks reducing them to symbols rather than agents of change. As the geopolitical map evolves, the challenge for political Islam is to reimagine its role—not simply as opposition, but as a force capable of governance, negotiation, and strategic coalition-building.

The mass civilian casualties in Gaza since October 2023, including widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure, have raised renewed international scrutiny of Israel's military strategy and legal accountability. Human rights organizations, legal scholars, and international observers increasingly describe the occupation and settlement policies as systematic violations of international law. The refusal to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 242, and Israel's ongoing territorial expansion, further erodes the credibility of a rules-based international order in the eyes of much of the Global South. Criticism of Israeli state policy is not an act of bigotry—it is a defense of legal norms and universal principles of accountability (Tripp, 2009).

Israel's current policy trajectory—maintaining control over the occupied territories while denying full rights to millions of Palestinians—rests on a paradox. It seeks to remain both a Jewish and democratic state while controlling a non-Jewish population that is increasingly approaching parity in numbers. Demographic projections reveal a future where Jews and Palestinians will exist in near-equal numbers between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Sustaining such control without granting political rights risks codifying a permanent apartheid structure. In the long run, this strategy will generate further instability, isolation, and moral crisis within Israeli society.

The concept of a truly democratic state—one that includes Muslims, Jews, Christians, and others as equal citizens—is often dismissed as utopian. Yet it remains one of the few ethical and political pathways out of an entrenched conflict. The alternative—continuation of occupation and inequality—invites further cycles of violence. A binational or federal state model, or even a confederal framework involving both peoples with autonomy under a shared structure, is increasingly part of scholarly and grassroots discussions. Such models acknowledge the impossibility of partition without massive displacement and demographic engineering (Zare, 2019).

Should Israel continue its policies of de facto annexation and legal fragmentation, it will be forced to choose either extend equal citizenship to Palestinians or accept permanent international opprobrium as a segregationist state. The apartheid label, once controversial, is now part of mainstream legal and policy discourse, not just from activists but from former Israeli officials, UN rapporteurs, and global human rights bodies. Ignoring this reality will not preserve the status quo; it will accelerate its collapse.



Iran’s proposed solution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict—a national referendum among all residents of historic Palestine, including refugees and exiles—offers a theoretically inclusive and democratic path. Tehran’s position reflects its long-standing ideological commitment to anti-Zionism and self-determination. However, its credibility depends on the clarity, feasibility, and non-sectarian nature of this proposal. To be viable, such a referendum should include the presence of diverse Jewish communities, including those with deep historical roots in the region. Excluding Jewish populations based on origin or political identity contradicts the Islamic principles of justice and inclusion Iran claims to uphold.

The Israeli state, established in 1948, is now home to more than 10 million people, the vast majority of whom identify as Jewish. A peaceful and just future cannot ignore this demographic reality. Any meaningful resolution must accommodate the national identities of both people while ensuring equal rights, security, and sovereignty. Whether through a two-state model, a federated structure, or a binational arrangement, long-term peace hinges on political equality and mutual recognition—not dominance.

Iran’s ability to lead on this issue depends not only on political rhetoric, but also on its internal strength. Economic resilience, political reform, and a coherent diplomatic strategy provide the foundation for more credible regional influence. The Iranian resistance can no longer rely solely on “proxy” conflicts or symbolic denunciations, it must be grounded in sustainable institutions, intellectual leadership, and cross-sectarian solidarity.

Tehran’s revolutionary slogan—*Neither East, Nor West, but the Islamic Republic*—remains powerful, but it must evolve into a framework that emphasizes sovereignty, justice, and adaptability in the face of changing global dynamics. By investing in domestic development and articulating a coherent, inclusive vision for the region, Iran can resist by other means: through diplomacy, legal advocacy, and political imagination.

### **Ethical considerations**

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