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NATIONAL SECURITY POLICY BRIEF

The Second-Order Effects of Degrading Iran's Axis of Resistance

Implications for U.S. National Security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

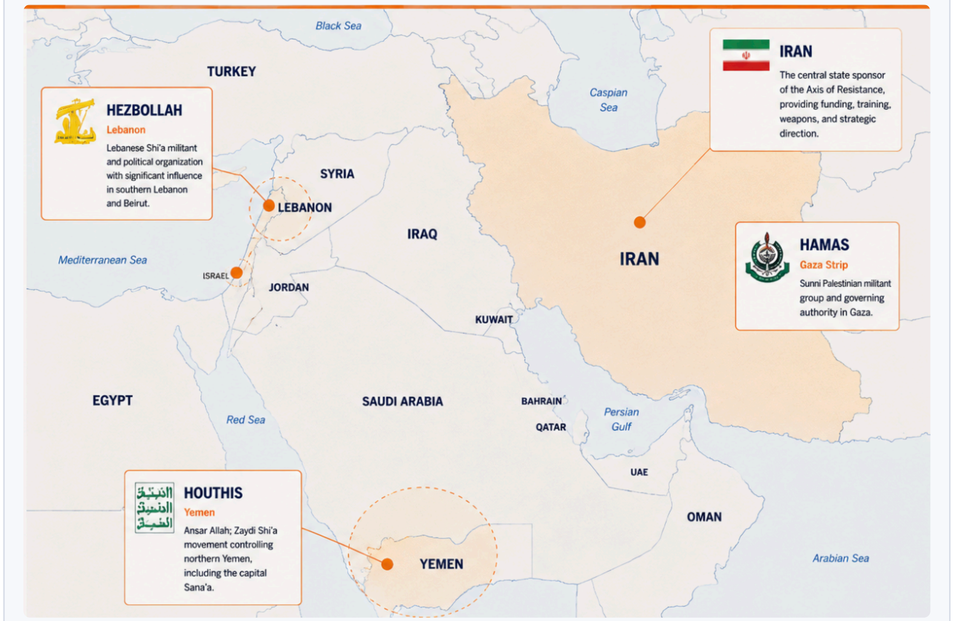
Since the October 7th attacks in 2023, a joint U.S.–Israeli effort has largely succeeded in militarily degrading Iran's "Axis of Resistance." Yet tactical success carries second-order risks. This brief identifies two threats to U.S. security — the resurgence of Sunni jihadist organizations within emerging security vacuums, and the further fragmentation of Iran's proxy network — and draws three lessons from two decades of counterterrorism.

Read the full paper
Scan for the complete brief, sources & citations.

Jane McGuiggin · National Security Policy Center · University of Virginia · July 15, 2026

BACKGROUND

Iran's Axis of Resistance is a network of state and non-state actors — including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Hamas in Gaza — that serves as the foundation of Tehran's asymmetric strategy for projecting regional influence while avoiding direct military confrontation. Following the October 7, 2023 attacks, sustained Israeli and U.S. operations significantly degraded the military capabilities and leadership of these groups, while the fall of the Assad regime further weakened the network. At the same time, Iran has increasingly demonstrated a willingness to rely on direct deterrence, signaling a potential shift away from dependence on proxy warfare. These developments raise important questions about the long-term security consequences of a weakened — but not eliminated — Axis of Resistance.



PROBLEM STATEMENT

Degrading the Axis has reduced Tehran's regional influence, but the resulting fragmented networks and security vacuums raise the risk of Sunni jihadist resurgence and proxy decentralization. Without policy that addresses these effects, tactical wins could generate new threats to U.S. interests at home and abroad.

Two Second-Order Risks

A Security Vacuums & Jihadist Opportunity

As **Hezbollah** (Lebanon) and the **Houthis** (Yemen) erode, the governance and services they provide may collapse without capable replacement. Sunni jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS historically exploit destabilized states — as AQAP did during the 2021 Houthi offensive on Marib, and as ISIS is doing amid Syria's chaotic transition.

B Fragmentation of the Proxy Network

A degraded Axis may never fully disappear. Analysts warn it has evolved into an **adaptive ecosystem** embedded in local politics. As authority decentralizes, pressure on Iranian leadership yields diminishing effects — leaving autonomous nonstate actors that complicate intelligence, attribution, and counterterrorism.

Three Lessons Learned

1
Utilize multilateral coalitions for counterterrorism

The 85-member **Defeat-ISIS Coalition** (2014) coordinated military, intelligence, and counter-financing efforts and helped end ISIS's caliphate by 2019. The U.S. cannot fill every gap alone.

2
Support locally-led security

Local forces provide geographic knowledge, human intelligence, and legitimacy. As Gen. Casey Jr. noted, "every successful counterinsurgency had a capable indigenous partner."

3
Move beyond decapitation

Early GWOT success against al-Qaeda's leadership bred miscalculation; it reconstituted across affiliates. Killing bin Laden was symbolic, not decisive against a diffused network.

LOOKING FORWARD

As the Axis erodes and Iran pivots to direct deterrence, the U.S. stands at an inflection point. Applying two decades of counterterrorism lessons can turn degradation into durable regional stability. **Proactive engagement abroad remains the most effective safeguard of U.S. soil.**