



UNIVERSITY
of VIRGINIA

NATIONAL SECURITY
DATA AND POLICY
INSTITUTE

**The Second-Order Effects of the Degradation of Iran's Axis of Resistance:
Implications for U.S. National Security**

Jane McGuiggin

July 15, 2026

Executive Summary

Beginning in 2023, after the October 7th attacks, Israel and the United States have led a joint effort to degrade Iran's "Axis of Resistance," which has been largely successful in terms of military destruction. However, it is imperative that the United States accounts for the second-order effects of the degradation of the Axis of Resistance for national security purposes. This paper brings two potential outcomes of the degradation of the Axis that would be threatening to the U.S. to light: 1) the resurgence of Sunni jihadist organizations as a result of security vacuums and 2) the further decentralization of Iran's proxy network. This paper also provides the most significant lessons learned from previous U.S. counterterrorism efforts that must be considered in the case of addressing the second-order effects of the degradation of the Axis, which include the importance of multilateral cooperation, local partners, and expanding beyond decapitation alone as a leading counterterrorism strategy.

Problem Statement

While the degradation of Iran's Axis of Resistance has reduced Tehran's regional influence, it has also created conditions that may undermine long-term United States security interests. The erosion of Iran's proxy network increases the risk of Sunni jihadist resurgence due to security vacuums and further decentralization of proxy groups. Without policies that address these second-order effects, tactical successes against Iran could produce new threats to U.S. interests at home and abroad.

Background

The Axis of Resistance is Iran's network of state and non-state proxy groups across the Middle East, which, aside from Iran, include Hezbollah, the Houthis, pro-Iranian factions of the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Hamas. The Assad regime in Syria previously served as a state partner within the Axis of Resistance; however, following its loss of power, the Assad regime is no longer considered an active member.ⁱ These groups serve as the foundation of Iran's asymmetric defense strategy by projecting Iranian influence throughout the region and enabling Tehran to challenge its adversaries without engaging in direct military conflict.ⁱⁱ A common thread between the members of the Axis is the shared Shiite identity, which applies to all actors but Hamas and the PIJ, as both are Sunni groups. These actors also pursue their own domestic political and security objectives, resulting in differing degrees of allegiance to both Iran and their home state. Axis members' shared interests include barring American influence in the Middle East, destroying the State of Israel, and supporting the Palestinian resistance.ⁱⁱⁱ

The asymmetric nature of this dynamic has changed in recent years, with notable shifts in strategy following the 12-Day War in 2025; unlike previous conflicts, the 12-Day War saw Iran engage in direct military confrontation with Israel rather than relying primarily on its network of proxy groups.^{iv} This trend of direct battle continued in the 2026 U.S.-Israel War on Iran. Israeli

and U.S. attacks on the Axis from the aftermath of the October 7th attacks in 2023 to the present day have significantly damaged the proxy groups that Iran traditionally relies on, creating substantial damage to the networks' military abilities and eliminating high-ranking leaders.^v It is important to note that while the Axis is damaged, it is not fully eradicated.

While Iran had previously demonstrated a gradual shift away from its asymmetric defense approach, the U.S.-Israel War on Iran marked a notable turning point, as Tehran followed through with leveraging the Strait of Hormuz as a defensive instrument; Iran has threatened to disrupt the Strait before, yet this is the first time Iran has completely closed the Strait.^{vi} The closure of the Strait of Hormuz reflects a broader shift toward direct deterrence, suggesting that Iran is increasingly willing to leverage its own capabilities rather than relying on proxy networks to coerce adversaries.

The Middle East has long been a region of relevance for the United States due to its influence on global energy markets, international trade routes, and the security of key U.S. allies. Beyond these traditional concerns, instability in the region has repeatedly created opportunities for terrorist organizations to threaten U.S. interests abroad and, in some cases, inspire or direct attacks beyond the Middle East. Iran and its network of proxies have similarly maintained a strong anti-U.S. stance, targeting American personnel, assets, and interests throughout the region. As the United States continues to shape its approach toward Iran and its partners, understanding the potential consequences of the degradation of the Axis of Resistance is increasingly relevant to U.S. national security.

Analysis

While the degradation of Iran's proxy network represents a significant strategic achievement, weakening these groups does not eliminate the underlying security challenges they leave behind. Outlined are two of the potential outcomes that bring the highest risk to the United States, based on previous U.S. counterterrorism efforts, as well as tracking the patterned behavior of terrorist organizations.

A. Security Vacuums and Sunni Jihadist Opportunities

As prominent proxy groups in the Axis of Resistance's capabilities erode, specifically Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, the areas in which said groups govern may lead to destabilization. Hezbollah has developed extensive social-service networks that provide healthcare, education, welfare assistance, and reconstruction support in Lebanon's Shi'a communities, while the Houthis have assumed many functions of governance in northern Yemen.^{vii} The implications of the degradation of these groups, which hold a strong stake in their states' governance, could be destabilizing without a capable replacement. Such implications include deepening humanitarian hardship, undermining civilian confidence in the Lebanese government, and providing opportunities for competing militant or criminal organizations to expand their influence.

Sunni jihadist organizations, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), have historically capitalized on destabilized states. In 2021, the Houthis' offensive against Marib demonstrated how conflict among competing armed actors can create opportunities for rival extremist organizations. As the Houthis focused resources on capturing the city, al-Qaeda's Arabian Peninsula branch (AQAP) exploited emerging security gaps to strengthen its foothold.^{viii} Furthermore, current efforts to contain ISIS in Syria are failing due to the chaotic transition of governance, which allowed for ISIS to reclaim a presence.^{ix} Terrorist organizations often compete for territorial control, resources, and local influence. As Shi'a-aligned armed groups weaken, Sunni extremist organizations may view the resulting security gaps as opportunities to expand their presence and challenge for influence in previously contested areas.

It is also important to designate the difference between Shi'a and Sunni jihadist terrorist groups, as the distinction is relevant to U.S. national security strategy. While Shi'a groups strongly oppose Western influence in the region, most groups' primary focus remains on the Middle East.^x Sunni jihadists, however, have an objective to form a global caliphate and widely view the U.S. as the far enemy that they hope to ultimately destroy.^{xi} If Sunni jihadists can fill any security vacuum, the U.S. is at risk for not only attacks abroad but on U.S. soil. While Sunni jihadist groups currently still operate, they do so under pressured conditions under Shi'a rule, which limits their capabilities.^{xii} Sunni jihadist control over a nation would mean these groups may generate revenue, run formal training camps rather than covert training, project governance that gives them legitimacy, attract foreign fighters, and further plan and resource external operations.^{xiii} Each of these scenarios poses a serious threat to U.S. national security, as all would enable Sunni jihadist groups to expand their organizational capacity and increase the likelihood of an attack on the U.S. homeland.

B. Further Decentralization of Iran's Proxy Network

In the case of a degraded Axis of Resistance and Iran's shift toward a direct defense strategy, the question of what will happen to the remnants of the Axis arises. Experts warn that the Axis of Resistance may never fully disappear.^{xiv} In fact, some argue that the Axis has evolved from a centralized, Iran-dependent network into a complex adaptive ecosystem that is not reliant on Iran.^{xv} Despite significant damage to military abilities, these groups are embedded in local political systems, making it difficult to eliminate the groups' presence solely through military means.^{xvi}

Iran's apparent shift toward direct deterrence may be independent of the Axis's degradation rather than a direct consequence of it. Regardless of the cause, however, the strain of sustained losses and Tehran's own preoccupation with self-preservation reduces the resources and coordination available to proxy groups. It is the reduced support creating conditions for further decentralization rather than a deliberate strategic abandonment.

The heightened decentralization poses a significant national security concern for the United States; as authority becomes increasingly decentralized, efforts to degrade Iranian leadership may have diminishing effects on affiliated groups, given how these organizations are not as reliant on Iran and have their own political systems.^{xvii} Consequently, the United States may face not only Iran but also a broader ecosystem of autonomous nonstate actors that can pursue their own objectives.^{xviii} Degrading Iranian command-and-control or logistical networks may not prevent continued operations, as these groups also have their own leaders and communication systems.^{xix} Dispersed decision-making among the groups complicates intelligence collection, attribution, and counterterrorism.^{xx}

Lessons Learned and Policy Implications for the U.S.

Understanding the second-order effects of how other proxy groups have responded to military degradation provides useful policy lessons for U.S. national security.

Lesson 1: The United States must uphold strong multilateral counterterrorism efforts.

The Defeat-ISIS Coalition (D-ISIS), formally established in 2014, was an 85-member international partnership formed in response to ISIS's rapid territorial expansion across Iraq and Syria.^{xxi} The coalition coordinated military operations, intelligence sharing, and counter-financing efforts across member states, and has been credited with the defeat of ISIS's self-proclaimed caliphate by 2019. In the years following the D-ISIS Coalition, the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism released remarks on the lessons learned about counterterrorism for future threats. Timothy Alan Betts, Acting Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Acting Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, emphasized the importance of using partnerships in counterterrorism, designating partnerships as one of the key principles that the Bureau of Counterterrorism follows.^{xxii} For example, five countries joined an Italian-led initiative to train approximately 7,000 Iraqi police officers, while the United Nations Development Program worked directly alongside Iraqi forces to implement more than 350 projects between the coalition's inception and 2017.^{xxiii} The U.S. cannot fill every gap itself. Allied partners are necessary to prevent Sunni jihadist groups from exploiting any security vacuum in the case of the degradation of the Axis of Resistance.

Lesson 2: The United States should support locally led security initiatives in affected countries.

The United States must partner with local forces as they provide invaluable information ranging from cultural knowledge to human intelligence. Integrating local forces into counterinsurgency efforts also facilitates a smoother transition when U.S. and allied forces eventually withdraw, ensuring that local security partners are properly trained and equipped to sustain the fight independently. Local actors also provide legitimacy with citizens as a local group that people can trust; locals may be hesitant to trust the United States, therefore, incorporating local actors may help gain population trust. General George W. Casey Jr., former Chief of Staff of the United

States Army and Commanding General of Multi-National Force Iraq, underscored this point, noting that “every successful counterinsurgency had a capable indigenous partner” and that “the outside force would never succeed alone.”^{xxiv} Without capable local partners to hold territory and deny safe havens, external counterterrorism pressure alone will prove insufficient.

Lesson 3: The United States should not rely on the decapitation of organization leaders alone.

The third of the most profound lessons that the U.S. should consider from its own history is that decapitation of leaders alone is not enough to deter these organizations. In the early stages of the Global War on Terror, U.S. forces successfully expelled al-Qaeda from Afghanistan and eliminated much of its senior leadership, yet the assumption that the organization had been effectively dismantled was a grave miscalculation. Although the United States successfully eliminated many senior al-Qaeda leaders, the organization adapted and reconstituted over time as U.S. counterterrorism attention shifted, illustrating the limitations of relying solely on targeted strikes.^{xxv} While the decapitation of senior leaders is still a feat for the United States, these actions were not enough to stop al-Qaeda operation; even if leaders were no longer directing attacks, the deaths alone could result in an increase of recruitment or martyrs in their honor. Additionally, when Osama bin Laden was killed, al-Qaeda had already decentralized to the point where no single leader was indispensable to the network’s survival. Power, financing, and operational authority had been diffused across regional affiliates, meaning the organization was structurally capable of absorbing leadership losses and continuing to function.^{xxvi} It is imperative that the United States take away from its past failures and not solely rely on decapitation.

Looking Forward

As the Axis of Resistance continues to erode and Iran pivots toward direct deterrence, the United States stands at a critical inflection point. By applying the lessons of two decades of counterterrorism, the United States can work to ensure that the degradation of the Axis of Resistance translates into durable regional stability rather than the emergence of a more unpredictable and dangerous threat landscape. Ultimately, proactive engagement abroad remains the most effective means of safeguarding United States soil.

-
- ⁱ Associated Press, “Analysis: Collapse of Syria’s Assad Is a Blow to Iran’s ‘Axis of Resistance,’” *Associated Press*, December 9, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/iran-mideast-proxy-forces-syria-analysis-c853bf613a6d6af7f6aa99b2e60984f8>.
- ⁱⁱ Noah Rudin, *The Axis of Resistance*, Backgrounder (Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, December 3, 2025), <https://mei.edu/backgrounder/axis-of-resistance/>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ^{iv} Renad Mansour and Hamzeh Hadad, “As War with Iran Rages, the Axis of Resistance Is in Survival Mode,” *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2025, <https://warontherocks.com/as-war-with-iran-rages-the-axis-of-resistance-is-in-survival-mode/>.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Associated Press, “The Strait of Hormuz Has a Long History of Disruption,” *WTOP News*, March 19, 2026, <https://wtop.com/national/2026/03/the-strait-of-hormuz-has-been-disrupted-before-a-look-at-past-moments-that-threatened-oil-flows/>.
- ^{vii} Melani Cammett and Sukriti Issar, “Bricks and Mortar Clientelism: Sectarianism and the Logics of Welfare Allocation in Lebanon,” *World Politics* 62, no. 3 (2010): 381–421, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4029429/>.
- ^{viii} “Al-Qaeda Exploiting Security Vacuum Created by Houthi Escalation,” *The Arab Weekly*, June 18, 2021, <https://the arabweekly.com/al-qaeda-exploiting-security-vacuum-created-houthi-escalation>.
- ^{ix} Kelly Kassis, “Islamic State Containment Is Collapsing in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, March 19, 2026, <https://warontherocks.com/islamic-state-containment-is-collapsing-in-syria/>.
- ^x Thomas F. Lynch III, “Sunni and Shi’a Terrorism: Differences That Matter,” *Brookings Institution*, December 29, 2008, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/sunni-and-shi-a-terrorism-differences-that-matter/>.
- ^{xi} Ibid.
- ^{xii} Jane Arraf, “This Iran-backed Militia Helped Save Iraq from ISIS. Now Washington Wants Them to Disband,” *PBS NewsHour*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/this-iran-backed-militia-helped-save-iraq-from-isis-now-washington-wants-them-to-disband>.
- ^{xiii} Inmaculada Marrero Rocha and Javier Ruipérez Canales, “From Financing Needs to Criminal Terrorism: The Role of Terrorist Financing in Crime-Terror Relations,” *Oñati Socio-Legal Series* 12, no. 4 (2022): 762–789, <https://doi.org/10.35295/OSLS.IISL/0000-0000-0000-1266>.
- ^{xiv} Mansour, “Evolution under Fire.”
- ^{xv} Peter Salisbury et al., *Beyond the Axis* (New York: Century International and The Century Foundation, 2026), https://production-tcf.imgix.net/app/uploads/2026/06/18141834/Beyond_the_Axis_2026.pdf.
- ^{xvi} Veena Ali-Khan and Thanassis Cambanis, *Down but Not Out: Reassessing the Axis of Resistance* (New York: The Century Foundation, March 19, 2025), <https://tcf.org/content/report/down-but-not-out-reassessing-the-axis-of-resistance/>.
- ^{xvii} Ibid.
- ^{xviii} Salisbury, *Beyond the Axis*.
- ^{xix} Ibid.
- ^{xx} Ibid.
- ^{xxi} Timothy Alan Betts, “Counterterrorism Lessons Learned to Face Future Threats,” remarks at the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism Summit, Herzliya, Israel, U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism, September 11, 2024, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/counterterrorism-lessons-learned-to-face-future-threats/>.
- ^{xxii} Ibid.
- ^{xxiii} U.S. Department of State, *The Global Coalition Working to Defeat ISIS*, archived website, accessed July 14, 2026, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-global-coalition-working-to-defeat-isis/>.
- ^{xxiv} George William Casey Jr., interview by Jane McGuiggin, April 2026.
- ^{xxv} Bruce Riedel, “Al Qaeda Strikes Back,” *Brookings Institution*, May 1, 2007, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/al-qaeda-strikes-back/>.
- ^{xxvi} Ibid.