

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

QI Panel:

What Is the Future of the Axis of Resistance?

October 30th, 2024

1:00-2:00 PM ET

Adam Weinstein 0:37

Okay, welcome everyone. We're going to give it maybe another 30 seconds for people to enter the virtual Zoom Room, but welcome to today's panel. Okay, people are still trickling in, but we're going to go ahead and start. So welcome today's to today's panel, which is, what is the future of the Axis of Resistance, and it's hosted by the Quincy Institute, of course. And if you're not familiar with the Quincy Institute, it's a restraint minded think tank based in DC that advocates for a foreign policy that's less rooted in military intervention and more focused on diplomacy and coexistence to solve our problems.

And we're joined by a really esteemed panel today, we have our own Steven Simon, who's a senior research fellow at QI and a Distinguished Fellow and visiting professor at Dartmouth College. Prior to that, he was the Robert E Wilhelm Fellow at MIT. And from 2011 to 2012 he served on the National Security Council as Senior Director for Middle Eastern and North African Affairs. And he also worked on the NSC staff from 1994 to 1999 on counterterrorism and Middle East security policy, and his most recent book, grand illusion, The Rise and Fall of American Ambition in the Middle East, was published last year. We're also joined by Narges Bajoghli, who's an assistant professor of Middle East Studies at SAIS at Johns Hopkins, and an award winning anthropologist, scholar and filmmaker. Her book Iran reframed anxieties of power in the Islamic Republic, received the 2020 Margaret Mead Award and the 2020 Choice Award for outstanding academic books and the 2021 silver civil silver, silver medal and independent publisher Book Awards. She also directed the documentary The skin that burns, and she's written in major publications like The New York Times and Foreign Affairs. Nir Rosen is a writer, researcher, filmmaker and consultant to humanitarian organizations, and has worked in the Middle East since 2003 between 2003 and 2011 he spent most of his time in Iraq and Lebanon, and since 2011 he has divided his time between Syria, Iraq and Lebanon. He's also worked other places like Somalia, Kenya, Congo, Egypt, Palestine, Yemen, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Mexico. And that's not even the full list. He has authored two books, the triumph of the martyrs, a reporter's journey into occupied Iraq and aftermath following the bloodshed of America's wars in the Muslim world, and he has worked on several documentary films about Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. And I'm the Deputy Director of the Middle East program here at Qi, and I'll be the moderator.

So today we're going to talk about the Axis of Resistance, and we'll get into what that means in a minute, but it's a term that's been thrown around a lot in the last year, since the October 7 attacks. And if I can be blunt, a lot of people talk about the Axis of Resistance and its members, like Hezbollah, the Houthis, some of the Iran aligned militias in Iraq, and a lot of people don't

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

know what the hell they're talking about. So the great thing about today's panel is that we have three people who have spent years of their life studying groups within the Axis of Resistance and engaging directly with the members of the Axis of Resistance. So I think that's what makes today's panel special. And I'm going to start with the question, what is the Axis of Resistance? And maybe Nir you can be the first to answer that.

Nir Rosen 4:29

So it's a sociopolitical phenomenon that unites different countries and movements, state and non state actors into one block that's loosely led by Iran, its military commander, the axis military commander had been Hassan Nasrallah, who was killed a few weeks ago. It's kind of a transnational identity and coalition that seeks greater sovereign. And autonomy for countries in the region and opposes us hegemony, which includes Israel, both as an occupier and as the way they would perceive it, as sort of the tip of the spear of over a century of Western colonialism and imperialism in the Middle East. And obviously it unites Iran and Iraq, or parts of Iraq Syria, or now just parts of Syria, but the government held area certainly Lebanese Hezbollah and some smaller actors in Lebanon, Hamas and the Houthis.

Adam Weinstein 5:43

And Steven, how do you think the US government views the Axis of Resistance like, what what is it? Is the Axis of Resistance something that's real to the US government? Or is it just a term that's thrown around?

Steven Simon 5:57

I think it's, it's probably viewed as as as a power block you have with a spoken and hub kind of arrangement structure, the hub would be Iran. Iran has mobilized a number of local movements, principally whose objectives overlap with Iran's regionally, you know, for the purposes of, you know, power projection. And you know they, they are, they function as as a block. Now, you know, the United States must acknowledge the the ideological component to this. In fact, I'm sure they do. They study it closely and so forth, but, but mostly they view it in realist terms, which is to say a larger power mobilizing groups that can be useful to its purposes of power projection in the region.

Adam Weinstein 7:11

Okay? And so the audience knows, by the way, you can submit questions in the Q and A box, and we'll get to them throughout the presentation, when, when convenient, and if they're relevant. So please don't hesitate to submit questions.

Nir Rosen 7:27

Maybe small point one sentence, just to add it to what I said. If I can sure this, the access was more virtual than than real, until, say, the Arab Spring, the Arab uprising period, when it got much closer, thanks to much closer participation of Iraqis and Iranians and Lebanese and even

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Yemenis and others in the wars against Jabhat Al Nusra and ISIS in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and then the support that Iran, Lebanese and even Iraqis gave to the Houthis against Yemen, so a theoretical Alliance became much more experienced working together and achieving real victories in Lebanon and Syria and Iraq and Yemen, which is why what's happening Now is all the more shocking to the senses.

Adam Weinstein 8:23

But I've also heard and read that in some ways. I mean, there's this rumors that because Lebanese Hezbollah was so active in Syria, this is what allowed them to become a little sloppier and become infiltrated and and allow for for assassinations such as Hassan nasrallas. I don't know if that's true or not, but do you think there was, in some Do you think in some ways, the axis got too big for its shoes?

Nir Rosen 8:47

It's it's true that it expanded greatly, and Hezbollah and other actors could not be as covert in Syria as they had been when they were more underground movements. But they believe, and many of the communities in the region believe that were not for that intervention in Syria, then Damascus and much of Syria would have fallen to Jabhat Al Nusra or ISIS, something which would have swept into Lebanon. And indeed, there were battles on the Lebanese border and inside Lebanon as well. And you would have had a contiguous territory, basically from Eastern Lebanon all the way to Western Baghdad, controlled by something like Jabhat Al Nusra or ISIS. So it was immensely popular with much of the region's population. Obviously, it also alienated those people who supported some of the movements in Syria. It did create more exposure. Hezbollah had to increase its recruitment. There were more groups involved, so you're able to track leaders and funerals and logistics, which probably helped their enemies spy on them. But I think ultimately, it was Israel's ability to spy on Lebanon from above and below for 20 years using the world's most advanced technology a very small piece of territory that's right on your border, and they were able to identify basically every house in Lebanon who lives in it and who lives under it. So it would have happened even without the war on Syria.

Adam Weinstein 10:22

Narges, you've spent years studying the IRGC and doing field work, field research in Iran. And, you know, in in Washington, people often think about the Axis of Resistance and its various groups as being, you know, Iran is the puppet master. And if it wasn't for Iran, none of these these groups would exist, or even if they did exist, they wouldn't be able to do what they do as well as they do it. But you know, how does the IRGC and and even the Supreme Leader view the Axis of Resistance? And I you're coming at it from an anthropological lens. How important is ideology to it versus real politic calculations of, you know, power projection and things like that this.

Narges Bajoghli 11:09

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

So Iran began to really formalize this idea of even though it wasn't yet called an Axis of Resistance, but post US invasion of Iraq as the form of forward defense, which is sort of the terminology that they were using at that time, because, as Rumsfeld and others would say, then, you know, boys go to Baghdad, real men go to Tehran. And sort of this idea was that Iran was going to be after Iraq. So from the IRGC perspective, and especially the reports force, which is their extraterritorial force for some, Soleimani being at the forefront of it. At that time, they began to expand out and sort of start to create their alliances in Iraq. They had already obviously been instrumental in helping to establish Hezbollah in Lebanon. These different forces in those first few years where their ideology mattered a bit more than it does today. Today, all of these different groups that are sort of aligned with the Axis of Resistance have very real local reasons for not only their existence, but also drawing upon their local populations and fighting in both what near said, in particular, fighting against forces in their local populations and in their territories. For example, you know, Hamas ended up distancing itself from the Axis of Resistance during the war in Syria because it came out against Assad and then folded itself back into the Axis of Resistance. And I think that's where you can see a lot of the flexibility, and more so the pragmatism of the access of resistance.

I think it's really short sighted to think of this as an ideological Alliance. The ideology that, if you can pinpoint it, that runs through these different groups is working against the Western hegemony in the region, and that is something that ties these different groups together. Now they the the idea of them all sort of putting forward an Iranian Revolutionary or Iranian Shia kind of ideological perspective really doesn't carry much, much weight and water anymore. That's not how these groups function. That's not how they coordinate with one another, that ideological purity is not a part of this access. Instead, as Stephen was saying, it's much more of a military block at this stage, and Israel and the United States are sort of seen, and then the various groups that they either support in the region and so forth, are seen as sort of being on the front lines of what this access fights against.

Adam Weinstein 13:51

And Narges, I have a follow up, you know, we sometimes hear in the US, okay, ordinary Iranians are fed up with the axis. They, you know, they, they're nationalistic, and they think, why is Iran isolating itself to support Palestinians or Syrians or anyone else Iran, Iran's government should be about Iran? Is that sentiment real? Is it exaggerated? Is it something in between?

Narges Bajoghli 14:18

The sentiment is real, but it is also in constant, in constant flow. So let me, let me explain this a little bit. First of all, the IRGC began to rebrand itself as a nationalist organization, very, very heavily in the early 2000s and especially after when the fighting in Syria increased, and you saw the ISIS coming very close to Iran's borders. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard and the forces around it in Iran began to rebrand themselves as not just and a force that is there to protect the Islamic Republic, but as a force that's there to protect Iran, as. The Nation. Okay, so there's that component of it now, because the Islamic Republic has increased its its sort of power in the

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

region, but its Achilles heel has always been its domestic population. And sort of it's this society internally. And there have been moments and ups and downs in this sort of relationship with its domestic population. And there, when we do have protests that take place in Iran, which tend to be quite frequent, you do hear chants, especially in the past years, about, don't stop sending the money to Gods and Lebanon. You know what you need to care about Iran.

And however, in this past 12 months, since October 7, Iranians inside Iran have been consuming the images that people around the world have been consuming of what's been happening in Gaza in particular, and then now in Lebanon, the understanding of the geopolitics of the region has shifted quite a bit in Iran, so that you know, when you're living in a system where the governing establishment is always talking about Israel as your enemy, and you are fed up with a lot of the domestic policies, people began to view some of that rhetoric as being propaganda and not real. And the exaggeration of the Islamic Republic these past 12 months has begun to really shift that idea in Iran, the those who are in opposition to the Islamic Republic, and especially sort of on the pro Israel side, thought that with, you know, Israel attacking military sites in Iran a few days ago, for example, that that would lead to Iranians rising up those who are opposed to the Islamic Republic, and sort of either pouring into the streets or causing some kind of chaos, and that didn't happen.

And one of the reasons that didn't happen is because the revolution in Iran, as well as just in general, contemporary Iranian history, there's been two thorough lines throughout it. One is national sovereignty, and the other is independence, vis a vis the different great powers in the region. Any type of foreign intervention creates a rallying around flag phenomenon in Iran. Iran is a deeply nationalistic country. So even when people are fed up, and this is one of the things that I was observing quite closely, in the last few days, you had activists who have been against the Islamic Republic, who in the past few days have been putting up Iranian flags and in all of their bios saying, Thank God for these, the military for protecting Iran's borders against this kind of attack. So yes, they are angry and fed up, but at the same time, the idea that they would support foreign intervention, especially by a power that has been conducting genocide in the way that it has right. Things are much more complicated than just a black and white picture of what happens.

Nir Rosen 17:52

We saw this in April as well. There was a massive Iranian support for the retaliation, and just from my own observations, the death of customs for their money, Iranians rallied around that so that it does seem to be a deeply divided population when it comes to the nature of the Iranian system, but one that still there's a lot, very large part of the population which very much supports the revolution regarding what it's doing, and overwhelming support, it seems when Iran asserts its sovereignty.

Narges Bajoghli 18:24

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't say that there's a huge amount of support for the Revolutionary Guard. I would say that there's a huge amount of support for keeping the sovereignty of Iran intact. And so that's when, and because, again, in these moments, the Revolutionary Guard is able to say, we are keeping Iran safe, right? It takes away ideas of ideology, and it's talking about the nation state. That's when you have unity on these issues.

Adam Weinstein 18:50

I've even noticed on, you know, Sunni, even sort of more radical Sunni, social media, the sort of admiration for Iran, because at least Iran is willing to take it to Israel. And so I wonder how much of a boon for the Islamic Republic's legitimacy, both within Iran and in the Muslim world, so to speak, it's its stance on Israel. Post October 7 has been, I mean, has it been sort of a as much trouble as it's caused them? Has it been a gift, in a way as well.

Nir Rosen 19:22

Anecdotally, having observed several different countries in the region since October 7, I think we can say that 20 years of increased Sunni Shia strife that had resulted from the US invasion of Iraq and the promotion was idea of moderate Sunnis, and then the Sunni Shia civil war and al Qaeda and ISIS and Shia militias, which spread into Syria and Lebanon and much of the region. The October 8 intervention, first by Hezbollah, and then followed by other actors that are either Shia or Zaidi, did a lot to bring Sunnis and Shias together. Um. And if 2003 created the Sunni Shia identity, in a way, then October 8 and what followed recreated an Arab and Muslim identity. And I can tell you, observing countries with the population tended to be the Sunni. Members of the population tended to be quite hostile to Shias, Jordan, parts of Lebanon that changed significantly because to be simplistic, Palestine is the Sunni cause par excellence, Al Aqsa in particular. And who are the countries that are engaged in what is perceived to be a just war, sort of asserting a Muslim right to protect it's not any Sunni actor. It's the Houthis and Iraqi Shias and Lebanese Shias and Iranians, quite obviously selflessly, from a point of view of people in the region and dying in the process. So suffering a lot for it, especially once the war escalated against Lebanon. So this has done a lot, and you now have Shia and Sunni martyrs that are also uniting peoples of the region between Hassan Nasrallah and Yahya Al-Sinwar.

Adam Weinstein 21:16

Let's step back in time for a minute, because before we focus a little more on the conflict with Israel. You know, there was a time when the interests of the the Axis of Resistance in the US were sort of, let's not stay totally aligned, but in parallel with one another. And that was when, as near pointed out, japat al Nusra and ISIS was, you know, conquering significant territory. I mean, ISIS had taken over Ramadi and Fallujah and and Mosul, and there was a belief that they might actually be able to enter Baghdad, and that's why Ayatollah Sistani issued his fatwa that raised the PMF. But many of those militias, of course, pre existed before that. But you know, you would see photos in Mosul, of us advisors right next to hashtag flags, and so these Iran aligned militias and US special forces and folks like that were really fighting, not not side by side, but they, they

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

were fighting the same battle, right? And I wonder was, was there a missed opportunity there to sort of de escalate this relationship and say, Hey, we got, we got some common enemies here, and maybe, maybe we can have a more normal relationship. We we might not be partners, but things can be less hostile than they were. Was there a missed opportunity there? Or was it always going to be that, once ISIS was defeated, things would go back to being hostile? What do you think?

Steven Simon 22:51

Yeah, there was an opportunity missed, but it was so theoretical, it's difficult really to relate to. You know, the the facts on the ground at the time, because both the Iran and and the United States shared an enemy, but it this was not a case where the enemy of my enemy was my friend. Because, you know, the the the two anti ISIS belligerents were looking to preserve a different sort of Iraq. And the United States wanted to protect an investment that it had made in Iraq and and preserve Iraq at least, at the very least, as a frenemy, you know, a combination of friend and enemy of a kind, and and compete with Iran for influence within the Iraqi state. So I think the rivalry that you know pre existed between Iran and the United States would have prevented any subsequent rapprochement, because both, both states had been involved in, you know, in killing ISIS, you know, fighters.

Nir Rosen 24:14

There would have been a lot less tension. And just having observed this, the transition from 2017 Obama to Trump. So under Obama, you had some kind of a rapprochement with the JCPOA and very little tension in Iraq. So as Adam said, you had PMF and Iraqi resistance factions, and the Americans eyeing each other with suspicion, but sometimes even co located, and there were no problems. The problems really arose almost one, maybe one year into Trump, the 2000 May, 2018 Iraqi elections. Trump obviously became much more with administration. It was implementing maximum pressure, much more, including in Iraq. And when the. Uh, when Sunnis and Shias were allied to remove Hyderabad, the Trump administration basically went nuts and started sanctioning various Iraqi politicians, including Sunni and Christian ones. And it led to this whole escalation, which ultimately culminated in the assassination of customs money and Abu Marti Mohandas, uh, had perhaps a different administration, even a hawkish Clinton administration, I don't think we would have seen such a traumatic escalation that led to a direct military conflict between Iraqi Shias and the Americans once again.

Adam Weinstein 25:32

So Qasem Soleimani. I mean, I'm sure most of the audience knows this, but for those who don't, headed the COVID force, and he had a sort of, in some ways, a cult following in the region, but he certainly had a lot of legitimacy among these different actors. And he spoke Arabic quite well, better than his successor. And he was always out on the front line, meeting with people, and he was within the resistance network, well respected. Do you, you know, without making an

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

assessment of Qassem Soleimani himself, uh, from a US perspective, in terms of dealing with the Axis of Resistance, was it a mistake to to eliminate, to kill Qassem Soleimani near? What do you think? And then maybe we'll go to Steven.

Nir Rosen 26:20

What are US interests here? If I look at the US, as I would tend to do, imperialist power bent on asserting its imposing hegemony on and subjugating the people of the Middle East, then killing prominent leaders of the organizations that are working to rest greater independence from the West, makes a lot of sense, and the price might seem to be relatively little, at least it did at the time. You did create a martyr and a hero. You didn't United 10s of millions of Shias against you. You ended up losing your ability to stay in Iraq the way you wanted your Iraqi Shias, where they would expel the US and as a gradual process of at least reducing US presence. But given the way I see, what are US interests in the region, I can see why it would have been in their their interests to do that. Although I don't believe that he was a threat to the US to the US Embassy. There were various silly accusations I made at the time. It depends on what you define us interest as. Maybe Steven can answer better than I.

Adam Weinstein 27:42

What I'm really getting at here is that Qassem Soleimani had an ability to speak for the resistance in a way that Khanyi doesn't and and perhaps have influence over the independent actors in a more sort of

Nir Rosen 27:55

There it did lead to interesting phenomena, the in the sense many actors lost a father and had to become far more independent. And in fact, when Soleimani took over, he made it clear that there wouldn't be the same amount of micromanaging. And so you did see greater clashes between Iraqi actors and the US. Certainly, Americans died thanks to that assassination that wouldn't have otherwise died. So if one thinks about it from that point of view, if an American official cares about having caused the deaths of American service men and women, that wouldn't have happened had they not killed him, you would have had a transition that was already taking place in Iraq. The PMF and the so called Shia militias were moving the direction of becoming a more professionalized force, less politicized, just one more security apparatus, perhaps a bit less corrupt and more ideological than the other ones. That process was halted by the killing, also of Abu Mahdi and Mohandas, the Iraqi, leader of those factions. It also elevated Hassan Nasrallah to the the position of the commander of the Axis of Resistance, which could be seen as a good thing or a bad thing, depending on where your interest and ideologies lie. He was certainly viewed as a pragmatist, the reasonable person offering concessions, encouraging moderation and restraint. So we, I mean, we're in the process of a decades long conflict now that the results of which will not be clear, but you did create a lot of enemies that you wouldn't have otherwise created by killing people that are revered by tens of millions.

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Adam Weinstein 29:39

Steven, what do you think, mistake or not?

Steven Simon

Well, I think it was sort of a an anomaly. I mean, the the Trump administration had come in saying that with an executive order actually that specified that it was going to and. Back to destroy the the IRGC and and to disable the PMF in in in Iraq, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and they never really did anything. They did sanction additional individuals, but I think, you know, they would have been sanctioned anyway, regardless of who the administration was. And it really it wasn't until the very end of of the of the Trump administration, where they were searching for something to do, to perhaps escalate in Iraq, or at least, at least make it clear that the United States, under Trump, you know, had a serious residual interest in events in Iraq, and they did have Intel that, they say, you know, indicated that there were, that there was going to be a damaging strike against the United States, and that it was orchestrated by by Soleimani. But but the options presented to to Trump at the time were fairly broad, and killing Soleimani was one option among a number of them, and and this, this particular option was not situated so as to attract attention as the best of all options that was it was framed as one of the more extreme options that was meant to be on that piece of paper so as To heard the President in the direction of more moderate options.

And I think, you know, there was some surprise when, when Trump, when President Trump, said, Well, I'll take option C, and let's kill Soleimani. I think he was really very attracted to that idea for, I don't know, maybe psychological reasons. I don't know. I'm not I'm not a psychiatrist. But whatever he that was the option he chose in the United States. Followed through with it. It was an it from an American perspective, it was a supremely risky option, because it was bound to elicit retribution, some kind of retaliation by the by the Iranian, by the Iranian government. And it was just lucky for the United States that that the Iranian retaliation proved to be ineffective. But that was just, that was just luck, because if it had been more effective than the United States, would have been forced to respond, you know, more vigorously, and that could have turned into a very dangerous escalatory spiral. So, you know, in my from my perspective, it was just a, you know, a risky thing to do with very little payoff, but, but I don't think that it somehow signified an ineluctable escalation on the part of the Trump administration. You know? I don't, I don't really, I don't really buy that.

Adam Weinstein 33:13

The escalate, the retaliation you're referring to, or I think are the ballistic missile attacks on all Assad base, right? That that that didn't really produce effects.

Steven Simon 33:23

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Well there were no fatalities, and and what, what Trump said kind of an astonishingly but I think I understand why he did. I mean, he said, Well, you know, a couple of our guys, you know, woke up the next morning with headaches. I think that was, that was what he said when, in fact, the number of US personnel suffered serious cranial trauma as a result of those destination detonations. So, you know, it wasn't, it wasn't real joke, but he was able to say that the Iranians hadn't succeeded in in drawing blood and really killing Americans in their in their response to the US. assassination of Soleimani.

Nir Rosen 34:12

It led to more daring attacks on the UAE by Yemenis and Iraqis on Saudi Arabia, by Yemenis and Iraqis and a determination, as expressed by the Iranian leadership, to get rid of the US presence in West Asia. They haven't fully done that, obviously, but they did succeed in changing the policy of the UAE when it came to Iraq and Saudi Arabia when it came to Yemen, and weakening the trust of certain American allies in the US ability to protect them. This is a process which is continuing now. Depending on how the current war culminates, you're likely to see even less of. A an American presence in the region. Obviously, the US Embassy in Baghdad basically shut down, and it became almost taboo or embarrassing for Iraqis to go to the embassy to have meetings. So it definitely it damaged the US. But it wasn't exactly the death blow to the American presence in the Middle East. We might be living that now.

Steven Simon 35:23

Yeah, the connections that you're drawing to the Yemeni strikes, you know, against the UAE and Saudi Arabia during that period strike those connections strike me as being really far fetched, you know, if not imagined, but, but perhaps, perhaps, well.

Adam Weinstein 35:47

The next question is for Narges, and it's actually a question from the chat. You know, I we've been talking about Qassem Soleimani, because that was the first really shocking loss that Iran has but but now they've lost Qassem Soleimani, Hassan Nasrallah has has been assassinated. Ishmael khania was assassinated inside Tehran, which must be embarrassing. It would almost be like assassinating someone on Capitol Hill and and they've lost IRGC commanders. How is? How is? First of all, how is the Iranian state viewing this? And secondly, the question from the chat is, are these proxies still viable for Iran's deterrence vis a vis Israel, given their their weakened state, and if they can't use these proxies or these direct strikes on Israel a viable means of deterrence. So I guess we'll go to Narges first for that, and then maybe Steven, you can add your insights

Narges Bajoghli 36:49

Sure. So you know the let me pull this into the previous discussion that was happening over the assassination of Soleimani. The assassination of Soleimani was happening during a time of

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

maximum pressure policies from the Trump administration, which was not only just sanction policies, but also like these kinds of direct attacks and assassinations, as well as covert operations, overt operations and many else. One of the things that this did was that it forced a lot of these different groups to further make their uh, economic ties a lot more nimble, because they were coming under all of these different kinds of sanctions. It also by pushing nastrola to the forefront of the Axis of Resistance. Um, meant that there started to be much closer, especially in his ability to communicate, and that the type of charisma that he had, an ability to sort of deepen their messaging within Arab populations.

And then thirdly, and I think very importantly, is from that moment onwards, they began to really ramp up their media operations across the region in multiple languages. They already had this going on, but it really began to ramp up much more because they realized that they were in an extremely serious fight that was starting that was becoming more and more sort of direct against Iran now, with the most recent assassinations that have happened in the region, I think this idea that Iran might reconsider the access, I think Those are not, I think those are sort of it's wrong to think in those ways. Iran has invested in this access for decades and decades and decades. It is known that Israel and the United States one of the ways in which they fight in the region. As they take out leaders, they assassinate leaders. But every time that they have, especially with these different groups across the region, not only are they able to sort of replenish their leadership, but also the ways in which all of these groups are set up in very horizontal ways. Means that and in with asymmetrical warfare, sort of built into not only their identities and also the ways in which they interact with on the battlefield, but also the ways in which they interact with one another. Means that your bench is a lot deeper than sort of a vertical military apparatus.

So I think Israel is attempting to make this access costly for Iran. But Iran is, you know this idea that it's going to give up on the access or sort of think about different ways. Velarity just had a interview a few days ago in which he made it very clear that for Iran, sanctions relief continues to be a primary thing, but they are going to divorce that from what is going on in the region vis a vis Israel and what is going on in the region vis a vis the access of resistance, I think they are now seeing this as something that they can continue to negotiate on, while at the same time not giving up on on the broader support that they are giving both to the access of resistance and in their direct attacks with Israel.

Steven Simon 40:02

I, I agree with Narges' analysis, basically. I mean, I think, first of all, there's, there's a lot we don't know about the situation right now pertaining to the to the axis of resistance. So, you know, definitive judgments I don't think could be made, but it's certainly true that, you know, under this kind of pressure, Iran was scarcely likely to throw up its hands and say, Oh, well, you know, I guess you know, this Axis of Resistance thing is over. You know, we've just taken too much of a beating, and we now need to focus on soccer. I don't, you know, I don't think that that was forthcoming, but, but, but there is a kind of a serious, secular, as it were, you know, issue of, well, how much is left of this Axis of Resistance such that it's capable of advancing Iran's

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

objectives, let alone their own. Hamas is destroyed basically as a military organization. It's incapable of threatening Israel. This is one of the reasons why so many people are, you know, in the center are saying, well, let's have a ceasefire, because it at this stage. You know, Hamas is, is, is probably incapable of reconstituting such that it can threaten Israeli security for the foreseeable future, Hezbollah has been very badly wounded. I don't know any analysts who dispute that. They took a serious beating, both horizontally and vertically, horizontally in terms of the pager attacks and vertically, you know, owing to the assassination of Nasrallah and Safiya Dean and you know, and others in their hierarchy, I don't know how accurate the latest Israeli assessments are of The destruction that even inflicted on Hezbollah's missile inventories, missile and rocket inventories. But you know, they're now saying that 80% of them, 80% of those rockets and missiles have either been expended or destroyed in Israeli airstrikes.

So even if you kind of say, well, half of that is true, that's a significant weakening of Hezbollah, especially since it's not going to be able to resupply because another member of the Axis of Resistance, Syria is incapable of ensuring that Iranian weapons get across that border with Israel, you know, rather, into Lebanon to to rearm Hezbollah to replenish its its stocks. So kind of an issue, you know, there for, you know, for Hezbollah, and I don't see, I mean, these attacks against his bola were the most damaging attacks it's probably ever experienced in the, in the, in the group's history. So I think maybe we have to reserve judgment, because we don't know what it's reconstitution capacity is, and, and, and, you know, no, I guess maybe, maybe, right, they might be able to pull themselves together, you know, you know, pretty quickly and and pick up where they left off, or, or maybe not. I mean, I just, I just don't know, in part, because the attacks against it were just so unprecedented and, and as far as the Houthis are concerned, they have shown that they can reroute global shipping, which I you know, is kind of an interesting thing. Global shipping has now been rerouted to the point where it would be too costly to go back, you know, to the Red Sea and Suez Canal, those the adjustments have been made and the costs have been factored in, and, you know, there hasn't been any especially inflationary impact of it. You know, it's just the Egyptians have, you know, experienced the downside, you know, of all this, because they're losing Suez revenue and the Gulf states, you know, have to make that up for them. But have they achieved a cease fire in Gaza? Not really. So, you know, I think the Houthis, I guess, will just sort of say, well, they're still out there and they're threatening you. Know, a global interest in terms of of shipping, but, you know, the opportunity cost is, is is diminishing.

And as far as the Iranian aligned groups within Iraq, they, they seem to be focusing now on, you know, sending drones to Israel and trying to kill, you know, Israelis and not attacking Americans on the ground. I mean, they may shift again, but so, you know, and Iran itself took a terrible beating. I mean, it shown to be just infiltrated by Israeli intelligence to a profound degree, and its missile fabrication capacity is probably knocked out for a year. You know, maybe more, maybe less. You know, it's hard to say, but it's going to be difficult for them to replace. You know, the missiles that they use in rockets that they use against against Israel, and of course, they've shown themselves to be, you know, comprehensively exposed, you know, to Israeli, Israeli attacks. So, I mean, when you sort of add all this up, you sort of think, well, you know, how's the Axis of Resistance, you know, doing, you'd have to maybe give it sort of a C.

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Adam Weinstein 46:28

It's interesting because there's this debate in political science about whether decapitation of groups is effective, especially in counter terrorism. And a lot of people will say no, except this is a bit unprecedented, and that is not just leadership decapitation. It's leadership dismantling of, you know, first, second, third and fourth tier leadership and some especially in the case of Hezbollah, we have a couple questions from the chat that I think are relevant. I want to acknowledge there's a question about international law and the right of Palestinian resistance. This panel doesn't have international law experts. I assume that there is a right under international law, but with many conditions, perhaps we should have a panel about that in the future. I also want to acknowledge there's a question in the chat about what the leadership of the West Bank and Gaza is likely to look like in the future? If someone wants to answer that question as part of another answer, they can, but again, a little bit out of the scope of this this panel, although it's a very relevant question, so I wanted to acknowledge it.

There is a question that is very much within the scope of this panel, which is, what do you think is going to happen to you know, what is going to happen to Iran's nuclear program as a result of this beating the Axis of Resistance and Iran has taken. I mean, are the Iranians going to race to the bomb now? Is that the rational thing to do? So that's question one, and I would pose that to Nargis, and then Steve, if he wants to add anything. And then question two that you can think about near while they're answering is, what is the rate, what is the true raise on debt of the Iran aligned Iraqi militias? Are they just about power? Are they about accumulating resources? Are they ideologically driven and so forth? So you can answer. You can think about that question. So Nir, Narges, are the Iranians gonna race for a nuke now?

Narges Bajoghli 48:22

So, I mean, the Iranians are only about two weeks away, by most accounts, to be able to even have enough centrifuges to create one. They've been holding back on it, but popular opinion within the country itself has risen quite high, and the demand for having nuclear weapons. So it's having an effect on public opinion. It already was seen as something that was sort of a nationalist cause, but, but the race towards the bomb itself is is has gained speed in the region, or, sorry, and within the country itself, I don't think, as far as in the moments that Iran is really focused in on negotiations of sanctions relief, that they will sort of reveal that they have a bomb or that they're going to have one in a few weeks, unless things continue to escalate very directly with with Israel and potentially the United States. So it's there. They're not very far away from it, but they're using it as a political chip at the moment.

Adam Weinstein 49:24

Steven, what do you think?

Steven Simon 49:28

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

I think Narges must be right about the current circumstances being an incentive for Iran to plow ahead with this. And it's very interesting to hear of Iranian public opinion, you know, on this, on this issue, as favoring, you know, a nuclear weapons capability for Iran, if, if they were to do it. You. Um, you know, test a weapon or or announce that they that they have it, then I think there'll be a major escalation. There'll be a major escalation. The Israelis, I don't think would find that tolerable. And I think you know, the point that they made by striking Iranian targets from Iraqi airspace and and by destroying the S-300s, was that, you know, they really, they really did have the capacity not just to take out Iranian nuclear targets, but also to hit regime targets. And you know that had to have been that the tacit message behind the assassination of Nala in so, you know, I think that the Israelis would take that as an opportunity to do something that they're that at the moment. You know, they're, they're not, they're not prepared to do. They don't. They don't see it as they don't see the situation as as as as drastic enough to warrant that. But there's certainly a constituency within you know, is the Israeli decision making elite, for, you know, for for as as Narges, you know, reminded us, you know, to go downtown. You know, real men going to go into Tehran.

Adam Weinstein 51:52

Nir, you've spent years living in Iraq, dealing with different factions, from the Iran aligned militias to the Sadrists and so forth and so. One, you know, are the Iran aligned militias a monolith, or are they different? I mean, they are the militias that are most likely and have killed us, troops such as the Kitab Hezbollah attack on tower 22 and so forth. But you know how what is the raise on debt? What drives them?

Nir Rosen 51:19

As you said, it's complex, because there are different groups, and some of them are more closely aligned with the state, and others are more independent, and some of them have different ideological origins, but they tend to agree on a few basic things. They've been seeking greater Iraqi sovereignty and independence, and they want power, but they don't want power just for the sake of power. Power is also used to reduce the influence of the US, of GCC, of Sunni extremists, who, in the past, had a genocidal project. It's not just power for the sake of power. It's important to remember that they emerged from battles against Saddam and al Qaeda, the US occupation ISIS. They helped prevent the collapse of Syria. You're talking about tens of thousands of young men who are mobilized from poverty, from rural Iraq, and they were politicized over the years as part of this international struggle, and they helped liberate Iraq. Some of them felt guilty about this stigma that Iraq, the US that they'd come to power. She has to come to power, sort of on the back of American tanks. So 2003 wasn't a liberation for many of them, but 2014 to 17 was a liberation. So they couldn't be expected just go back home to their villages after helping to save the Iraq and Syria from collapse. They now want to play a role in a country that they help liberate.

There was a question about international law. Everybody knows that international law gives occupied people the right to resist, I think, given the events of the last more than a year now, i

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

Nobody cares about international law. I think anybody from Middle Eastern point of view, from now on, if anybody throws international law in their face, it's going to be very hard for them to take after what they've experienced over a year of watching their children get slaughtered and burned and their towns and cities get destroyed, with the defenders of international law looking on or supporting it.

Just going back to a previous point about decapitation, this was much more than decapitation. I don't think any guerrilla force has ever suffered such an attack the way Hezbollah did, where first and second round leaders were killed. Communications were destroyed, logistics were severely cut off, and the population, which is so essential for this movement, which it was integrated, has been entirely cleansed. I mean, basically all Shia areas have lost their populations, and towns are being destroyed one by one. Israel is going town by town in the south, blowing up the town above ground and below ground. So while the resistance in Lebanon boasts about causing a lot of pain to Israeli soul. And destroying tanks and killing soldiers. That's true. They're not making it easy. But if Israel isn't trying to occupy South Lebanon, just make it impossible or very difficult to rebuild what it took 20 years or more to build tunnels and weapons depots and all the infrastructure of the resistance there. If you go town by town and blow it up above and below, and you've cut off logistics significantly from Syria and elsewhere, then you've definitely achieved a very damaging blow, at least in the short term. So there are multiple options for how this is going to play out. We're in the beginning of something which is going to take years. This is as great a shock to the region as 1948 or 2003 but one of the options does include some kind of defeat of Israel, really weakening Hezbollah, cutting off its logistics, making it difficult for it to rebuild and rearm, making it difficult for the population of the South to come back, potentially killing the leadership of the Syrian Government, therefore severing even further links to Iraq and Iran, which are important for logistics and for production of weapons and sheltering fighters.

There are a lot of serious conversations and the US and Israel now about hitting Iran and even further and weakening it if Donald Trump wins the elections, that's also conceivable. Gaza is being entirely destroyed. The West Bank can continue to be swallowed up, and life will be made intolerable for the remaining residents. There are previous revolutionary actors in the Middle East who were defeated and subjugated. Look at Egypt and Jordan and what they are today. So this does raise questions about how effective asymmetrical warfare is. This is one option. There are other options in the end. These are the people of the region, the natives of the region, they're not just going to disappear. They resisted a secularist as leftists, without ideology, with Islam, they're going to continue seeking some kind of independence and sovereignty. And they now have new martyrs. And the whole region has now experienced over a year of watching its children, as I said, be killed, and its towns be destroyed. That's not going to leave no effect. There's a massive radicalization of the population, not along the lines of al Qaeda and ISIS, as in the past, but the population of the region is boiling new factions will emerge. I should add that while you mentioned that Iraq is attacking us. There's been a little bit of that. This can increase significantly if there is an Israeli attack on Iraq. You might see the Iraqi parliament declaring war on Israel. You might you would probably see Iraqi factions losing their restraint and losing their respect for the Prime Minister and attacking us. Targets. Lebanese is Bala has

Uncorrected Transcript: Check against Video for Quotes

made direct threats against the US government, holding the US directly responsible for the war on Palestine and Lebanon, and letting American officials know that if the US does not take steps to end that war, then us, embassy, us, military trainers, US interest in Lebanon will be attacked. The movement is going back to what it was a bit more in the 80s and 90s, you will now have tens of thousands of guys who want revenge for losing basically, their Imam, Hussein. And so it's not inconceivable that we'll see what happened in 1983 happen all over again.

Adam Weinstein 58:16

Well, you've laid out a very dismal, a dismal future, although I do think there's a chance that it could go that way, and that does seem to be the trajectory it's on right now. I'll guess, I guess I'll take moderators privilege, since we're at the top of the hour, which is that I do believe that there can be another way, especially with the new administration, if they prioritize talking to all stakeholders within the Lebanese political system, all stakeholders within the Palestinian the you know, political system putting more pressure on Israel, talking to all stakeholders in the Iraqi political system, signaling to Iran that perhaps there still is room for real negotiations and and maybe, maybe I sound ambitious, but I do think you know, the alternative that you outlined is dismal, and there is a there is a diplomatic pathway, and especially given the weakened state of thing of some of these groups that should, in theory, offer the Israeli some security assurances, but that would have to be combined with with us pressure in some ways, and also pressure on other regional actors. So I do think there is another way. And for those of you who want to see another way, please check out Q is research products and that outline that in greater detail than we were able to go to in this panel. And I wish we had another hour, but I want to thank all of you for joining us today and offering your insights that are that are based on years of spending time in the region and and talking to these groups. So thank you Steven, thank you Nir, thank you Narges.