



## **The Axis of Resistance – Iran's Surge to the Mediterranean**

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### **Executive Summary**

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- \* The greater Middle East, including the Persian Gulf, crossed a profound threshold in mid-September 2019.
- \* Most important was the emphasis Khamenei put, on 11 September, on the Axis of Resistance - particularly the surge to the Mediterranean, the consolidation of the on-land access to the Mediterranean, and the tight control of the shipping choke points in the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb.
- \* The 14 September strike on Saudi oil installations was conducted by the Houthis under Iranian command and with Khamenei's personal permission. Iran intends to escalate and expand any US retaliation to a regional war.
- \* Tehran is convinced that the US is capitulating and withdrawing from the greater Middle East, starting with the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Syria. To expedite the withdrawal, Tehran escalates the surge of Iran and the Resistance Forces against Israel and the US. The die is cast. Iran is winning the quest for regional power.

### **About ISPSW**

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## Analysis

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The greater Middle East, including the Persian Gulf, crossed a profound threshold in mid-September 2019. However, the most important historic milestone was not the destruction of the Saudi oil installations on 14 September. Rather, it was a quiet Ashura ceremony held in the Imam Khomeini Hussainia in Tehran on 11 September. Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei led the mourning ceremony for the Martyrs of the Tragedy of Karbala on the Day of Ashura. To Khamenei's left, sitting on cushions on the ground were, in order of proximity to Khamenei, Hojjat al-Islam Sayyed Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shiite-Iraqi leader known as "nationalist" and far from being Tehran's protégé, and then, Qods Force Commander Major General Qassem Soleimani and the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Major General Hossein Salami. Significantly, it was Soleimani who invited Sadr and organized his visit, as well as convinced Khamenei to give him the honor. At the meeting, Khamenei had animated discussions with the three and showed them far more attention than to all other dignitaries in attendance. Significantly, Iranian President Hassan Rohani did not attend the ceremony.

The pro-Khamenei *Kayhan* newspaper emphasized the significance of Sadr's presence and called the event "the return of the prodigal!" The true meaning of Sadr's presence is in reflecting the new relationship between Tehran and Karbala (that is more important than Baghdad). "The message was loud and clear. ... It means both the neighbors share identical views on the peace, security, stability, and independence of the entire region, which should be cleared of all vestiges of terrorism, including the illegal presence of CENTCOM terrorists." Special attention should be paid to Sadr's own role, *Kayhan* explained. "Sadr, whom the western and Arab media had portrayed as a prodigal, ready to sacrifice Iraq's independence by drifting away from his roots for a few favors from the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms and his former enemy, the US, has made all calculations go awry by visiting Iran at the right time and choosing the Ashura occasion to announce his unity with the Resistance Front." As a result of the Tehran visit and audience with Khamenei, "the Resistance Forces consider Sayyed Muqtada Sadr among the pillars of the regional movement against American imperialism, Zionism and Arab reactionaries, side by side with HizbAllah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and AnsarAllah Leader Sayyed Abdul-Malik Badreddin al-Houthi. No wonder, Trump, Netanyahu and the Saudis are already beginning to see their dreams of dominating the region turning into nightmares."

The coverage of the Ashura meeting in Iranian media focused on the emphasis Khamenei gave to the Axis of Resistance - particularly the surge to the Mediterranean, the consolidation of the on-land access to the Mediterranean, and the tight control of the shipping choke points in the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandeb. Khamenei stressed the great importance and centrality of the Axis of Resistance in the regional strategy of Iran and its proxies. "The Axis of Resistance is on the rise while the enemy is falling," Khamenei stated according to several Iranian newspapers.

Although the ceremony of 11 September is the formal turning point, the key tenets were first introduced on the 9th by the HizbAllah's Nasrallah. He sent a special message to Khamenei on account of the Ashura commemoration in which Nasrallah emphasized the gravity of the current situation and the unique historic leadership of Khamenei. "Today, we are in the middle of a big battle and our camp is being besieged by the US and Israel and their tools. The leader of this camp is Imam Ali Khamenei and the center of this camp is the Islamic Republic of Iran," Nasrallah wrote. "This is our camp, and this is our Imam, our Leader, and [the] Hussein of this era. In this battle there is no place for neutrality. You are either with Hussein or you are with Yazid. The battle is renewed and so is the confrontation [with implacable foes]." Nasrallah vowed that the



HizbAllah and all other Shiite allies are ready to sacrifice themselves for the Shiite cause as led by Khamenei. "By Allah, o master and leader, if we are to be killed, all of us... we shall never leave you o son of Hussein," Nasrallah wrote. Nasrallah reiterated the Iranian doctrine of a single Iran-centric confrontation in the region. "Any war on Iran will ignite the region and destroy countries and people," he stressed. "It will be a war against the entire Axis of Resistance. We will not be neutral in the battle between right and wrong. This war will be the end of Israel and the American hegemony and presence in the region."

On 12 September, General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force, told commanders that Iran has always been ready for a "fully fledged" war with the US and its allies. Hajizadeh described the Iranian preparations (as translated by MEMRI): "In addition to the US bases in various regions like Afghanistan, Iraq, Kuwait, the Emirates, and Qatar, we have targeted all naval vessels up to a distance of 2,000 kilometers, and we are constantly monitoring them. They think that they are out of our firing range if they go out to a distance of 400 kilometers. Wherever they are, it only takes one spark for us to hit their vessels, their airbases, and their troops." There is a new strategic posture dictating that "America has to pick up and leave this region. The Iran of today is not the Iran of 30 years ago. Iran is powerful. There was a time when an aircraft could fly to the center of the country ... but today is very different. Today, we are powerful, and our response will be very powerful and crushing."

Hajizadeh emphasized that Iran's allies are all integral components of a single system. "If [these allies] are being attacked in Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen by enemies that are being supported by America and European countries, it is our duty to support them to the best of our ability and to stand with the resistance. We will definitely help Palestine, Lebanon, and Yemen." US sanctions will fail to change Iran's resolve. "Yes, blockades and limitations exist, but we will support them and stand with the Resistance Front at all costs. We will defend the oppressed, and they have now become a coalition. It's not like in the past, when they were alone. We used to be alone, and some of these smaller groups used to be alone, but today we are all a coalition standing next to each other. The US can no longer do something here and see no consequences in Lebanon. We are definitely interrelated, and we are standing next to each other. The era of hit-and-run is over. We will not allow [the US and allies] to oppress us. We have stood and we continue to stand united against America."

On 14 September, a video of Soleimani was posted to an IRGC Twitter account. In the video (located and translated by MEMRI), Soleimani highlighted the unprecedented spread and rise of the Iran-led Resistance Front - the regional Shiite alliance. "We are the nation of martyrdom. We are the nation of Imam Hussein. Ask! We have already overcome difficult events. Since the beginning of the Revolution, our victories in all fronts were guaranteed by adherence to Imam Hussein's culture, and we have won many victories as a result of this path. This Front is founded on the reliance on Imam Hussein, the Prophet's family, and the Imams and their companions. Today, you can witness it being reborn every day. Yesterday, [the Resistance Front] had a branch only in Iran. Today, it has branches in many [locations] as a result of this reliance. Today, AnsarAllah in Yemen are following the path of Imam Hussein and his household. Today, the [Iraqi] PMU is also getting inspiration and the power of resistance from this valuable position."

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The September 14 pre-dawn strike on two major oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia had a huge effect on the regional and global oil system. The strike eliminated a major element of Saudi oil production and delivery - cutting the output by 5.7 million barrels per day, or above 50% of Saudi exports for



many months to come. Far more important, the strike created new long-term dependency on Iranian and Shiite-Iraqi oil - the only two sources of oil in the greater Middle East that are not threatened by the Houthis and their allies. Furthermore, the strike demonstrated to all the vulnerability of the US allies in the Persian Gulf to Iranian and Iran-Proxy strikes.

According to Iranian and Houthi sources, the raiding force was comprised of 12 drones/cruise missiles, all from the Qasef family that were launched from the Sanaa area in Yemen, and at least 20 drones that were launched "from nearby", most likely Iran-held island(s) and/or barges, and provided intelligence coverage, last minute reconnaissance, jamming, decoys and diversion (including strikes on secondary objectives). According to the Iranian and Houthi sources, 10 of the Qasef 3 drone/cruise missiles hit their targets. A few Saeghe stealth drones launched Sadid-345 glide bombs against additional 6-8 targets. Satellite damage assessment confirms this statement.

On 19 September, Houthi Brigadier General Yahya Saree provided a detailed description of the strike. Three types of strike drones/cruise missiles were used for the attack - the Qasef 3 combat drones, the long-endurance Sammad-3 drones (both with operational range of 1,500-1,700 kms) and "newly-developed drones equipped with jet engines." This missile is actually a derivative of Iran's Quds-1 cruise missile. Saree explained that "the attacks were launched from three locations. Qasef 3 drones were launched from one site, Sammad 3 drones from a second and a new jet-powered drones from a third." The Sammad-3 drones "carried four precise bombs per strike." As well, numerous "other drones" were also "used to confuse the enemy so the main combat drones could hide in their shadow without being detected, and signal jamming devices effectively disabled the enemy's air missile defense systems." Consequently, the strike drones "could reach their targets" undetected and unmolested by the Saudi air defense. "The destruction of the targeted facilities is far greater than what has been announced," Saree concluded.

According to Saudi sources, citing US intelligence, most or all of the drones took off from Iranian bases in Khuzestan, and overflew southern Iraq and Kuwait. However, satellite pictures show that most of the key targets were hit on their west side - the most logical direction had the cruise missiles come from Yemen. The Saudis claim on the basis of recovered debris that at least "18 delta-winged UAVs and 7 cruise missiles" as well as "multiple smaller drones" were launched by the Iranians. The Saudis now claim that they have identified a total of at least 17 points of impact in Abqaiq and Khurais. Most of the drones and missiles that impacted were "precision-guided munitions" that had highly accurate "GPS guidance".

The debris suggest that the main strike drones/cruise missiles were of either the Iranian Ababil-T or the Houthi Qasef 3 (itself derived from the Ababil-T) that have a range of about 2,000 km. Other drones involved in the strike were the armed version of the delta-shaped Iranian Saeghe or Houthi Sammad-3 stealth drones that carry miniature, precision-guided Sadid-345 glide bombs (including incendiary munitions) and have the range of over 1,000 km. There are unconfirmed reports that the Iranians also launched from Khuzestan a few jet-propelled Soumar cruise missiles that inflicted the main damage. There is no forensic evidence to the use of the Soumars and the main reason for the assertion is the conviction of US intelligence that the Ababil-T/Qasef 3 warheads "could not have" caused such heavy damage. The US assertion that the drones/cruise missiles must have been launched from Iran is based mainly on the claim that the Houthis are not known by US intelligence to have advanced versions of the Ababil-T or the comparable Qasef 3 derivative. Simply put, there is no concrete evidence that the main strike drones/cruise missiles were launched from Iran. It is plausible the strike drones/cruise missiles were indeed launched from Yemen as claimed by Iran and the Houthis.



Throughout, the Saudi Arabian air defense system - using the best US and Western systems money can buy - proved to be blind, paralyzed and utterly inept. This - even though the Saudi air defense was up-graded and boosted after the 14 May drone strikes on the East-West pipeline near the central town of al-Duwadimi. Like the strike of 14 May - the 14 September strike also caught Riyadh and Washington by complete surprise.

Although Iranian media attributes these and earlier strikes on Saudi Arabia to the Houthi AnsarAllah forces - official Tehran has never denied the complete control Iran exercises over the AnsarAllah and other proxy forces. One of the most explicit statements to this effect was made on 6 August 2018 in the aftermath of a Houthi attack on two Saudi tankers in the Red Sea. In a conversation with Fars News (as located and translated by MEMRI), IRGC Brigadier General Naser Shabani put the strike in the context of Iran's overall relations with proxy forces. "We told the Yemenis to attack the two Saudi tankers, and they attacked. HizbAllah in Lebanon and AnsarAllah in Yemen are our homeland depth. The enemy is so vulnerable that we can entangle it from across the border." Under Soleimani, Iran's system of proxies has markedly improved and Iran's direct control tightened. Given the immense strategic significance of the strike on Saudi Arabia - the operation was under Soleimani's direct command. In turn Soleimani had received personal approval for the strike from Khamenei.

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Presently, Tehran is convinced that the US is capitulating and withdrawing from the greater Middle East, starting with the Persian Gulf, Iraq and Syria. What's left for Tehran to do in the near-term is "help" convince Washington it is best to expedite the withdrawal. Tehran is convinced that the best approach is by convincing the US of the futility in attempting to confront and contain Iran, and by dangling in front of the Trump White House the lure of concluding a deal with Iran so that the US withdrawal will seem to be part of a great success.

On 15 September, official Tehran began reacting to the reverberations of the strike on Abqaiq and Khurais, and particularly the initial US suggestions of a possible retaliation against Iran. Tehran did so indirectly by reiterating Iran's resolve to retaliate had the US struck Iran after the downing of the US drone back in June. Several Iranian generals claimed that during the US forewarning of the then post-drone retaliation - Tehran threatened to hit three major US bases in the region. Consequently, the Iranian generals insist, Washington canceled the retaliatory strike for fear of cycles of escalation that the US would ultimately lose.

Most explicit and detailed was a lecture delivered by the Commander of the IRGC Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh. Iran was ready for a regional war. "Had the Americans shown a reaction, even if in the form of an attack on an empty and derelict land of ours, the we would have responded to them and if they had continued with a second reaction, then a war would have started." Hajizadeh stated that, as ordered by Tehran, the entire Iranian forces were on alert to deliver the major retaliatory strikes against the cornerstones of the US presence in the Middle East. "Specifically, al-Udeid base (the US base in Qatar), al-Dhafra airbase (the US base in the UAE) and a US warship in the Sea of Oman had been picked as targets to be attacked in case of a US reaction." Hajizadeh stressed that the Iranian forces were also ready to further expand and escalate the confrontation into a major war. "In addition to US bases in the region, we have all their vessels, including aircraft carriers and warships, under fire of our missiles to a radius of 2,000 kilometers, and [we] are constantly monitoring them."



Meanwhile, Iranian generals also reminded that back in early July, Iran formally adopted the strategy of deep attack and increased the pertinent arsenal of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. On 9 July, the IRGC Chief Commander Major General Hossein Salami addressed a meeting of commanders and officials of the IRGC Ground Force. He reiterated that Iran “is today strong enough to defeat the enemies in any war on the ground against the Islamic Republic.” The Commander of the IRGC’s Ground Force Brigadier General Mohammad Pakpour elaborated on the “new strategies for assault on the enemy” called the “deep-attack doctrine”. The new doctrine focuses on drone and missile strikes, Pakpour explained. “The IRGC Ground Force’s drone and missile power has grown considerably compared to the past, and this will boost our power in battles.” This new build-up and assertiveness have transformed profoundly the regional posture of both Iran and its enemies. “The Islamic Republic of Iran has turned into a credible regional power and it is intolerable for the US. Targeting an enemy drone that happened recently changed the conditions in favor of the Islamic Republic,” Pakpour concluded. On 14 July, the Commander of the Iranian Army Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi further elaborated on the new doctrine in a lecture to officers. “We have never been the initiator of any war and will never be; however, we are not relying solely on defense; in the early stage of the enemy’s attack, we will defend, but our offensive power and our ability to strike the enemy is devastating and will make enemies regret [starting a war].”

Hence, claim Iranian generals and senior politicians, the US wouldn’t dare to start a war with Iran. On 15 September, Mojtaba Zonnour, the powerful Chairman of the parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, disclosed what he claimed to be what Iranian Intelligence knows about the White House deliberations in the aftermath of the shooting down of the US drone. He claimed that “US President Donald Trump revised his decision to respond to Iran’s downing of an American spy drone in June after he was handed an assessment of Tehran’s power to react.” “The Americans reached this assessment after destruction of their drone that in case of military reaction to the move [the shooting down of the drone], they will sustain 15,000 [casualties] and then a war of attrition would break out and Trump was, hence, forced to avoid any military action against Iran after the assessment of Iran behavior,” Zonnour elaborated. This analysis and assessment are relevant to the current crisis.

Addressing a meeting with senior commanders on the 15th, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, also related to the precedent set by the US reaction to the downing of the US drone. “The day when the drone was downed, the US president was on the brink of a decision [to attack Iran] and the biggest lie was that they did not do it to prevent the death of 100 people, while the decision was the result of intelligence assessment of the US Army and after they briefed the US president about the outcomes of their attack and about Iran’s missile response, in islands, in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz and the regional states where Iran’s arms are deployed. ... They sat with him [Trump] in two 2 to 3-hour sessions and explained to him that he cannot attack Iran.” Bagheri stated that Trump’s advisors should know that should they use force after the strike on Saudi Arabia - the Iranian reaction will be even more fierce.

Tehran also took formal diplomatic steps in order to dissuade the US from striking Iran. On 16 September, Iran issued “a sober warning” to the US through the Swiss embassy. Tehran denied any involvement in the attack on Saudi Arabia. Any US “retaliation” against Iran “will be met with an immediate response.” The message further warned that “if any attack is launched against Iran, the Islamic Republic’s reaction will be rapid and crushing and will likely target more extensive areas than the source of the act of aggression.”



Starting 18 September, Iranian senior officials became even more explicit in warning the US against retaliation. Ali Shamkhani, the Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, dismissed all allegations of Iranian involvement in the attacks on the Saudi oil installations, and warned of "a crushing and powerful response" to any retaliatory aggression. Shamkhani noted that "Iran monitors, with full preparedness, any intention and move for the purpose of aggression against the country or the interests of the Islamic Republic and will give a decisive and all-out response to possible mischiefs in the harshest way which can surprise the aggressors."

On 19 September, Major General Salami raised the ante. "We do not fear our enemies - large and small - and have overcome such worries and the enemy is well aware of this. Today, we have become so powerful that they are forced to connect any incident with us through making false claims." Deputy Coordinator of the Iranian Armed Forces, Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, reiterated that the US and its allies do not dare face Iran because they are aware of its power. "The enemy is still present but doesn't dare face a powerful country; our Armed Forces enjoy full readiness. The enemy knows that the Iranian nation backs the Armed Forces and that [the] people and [the] Leader are united." Because the US cannot confront Iran directly - it resorts to covert actions and conspiracies. "Today, they are busy designing different conspiracies with different approaches, but they have always failed." Sayyari stressed Iran's enduring posture. "Today, the Islamic Iran is a regional power. We are a great missile power and despite all pressures and sanctions, we could manufacture aircraft."

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Practically, however, Iran's focus remains on the strategic-regional priority - consolidating the on-land access to the Mediterranean via Iraq and Syria that is the primary goal of the Resistance Front. Toward this end, Soleimani and a group of aides arrived in Baghdad on 16 September. He first met with Iran's closest ally - former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. They discussed enhancing the Iranian dominance over Shiite Iraq in case of a major crisis in lieu of the new role of Sadr. Soleimani then met with the key senior commanders of the Hashd al-Shaabi and their main elements - Hadi al-Amiri, Falah al-Fayyad and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. They went over the preparedness of the Iraqi forces to implement their allotted tasks in Soleimani's war plans - namely, to attack and destroy the US forces in Iraq and Syria (mainly the al-Tanf area). If possible, the Hashd al-Shaabi will also launch missiles and raids against Israel and in support of the Shiite onslaught throughout the Shiite-populated Eastern Arabia. The Iraqi commanders assured Soleimani that the Hashd al-Shaabi were capable of carrying out all their missions despite the repeated Israeli bombings of their key installations in both western Iraq and eastern Syria.

Indeed, despite the on-going Israeli bombings, the on-land access to the Mediterranean is rapidly consolidated and new installations are being built. Tehran, Baghdad and Damascus have already committed to building in the near future railroad tracks and pipelines from Iran to the shores of the Mediterranean. The best Israel can do under these circumstances is slow down the pace and raise the price of the surge. The US has all but ended any attempt to prevent the surge of Iran. Hence, Tehran pays more attention to striking Israel in case of a major regional conflagration. Back on 7 September, Major General Abdolrahim Mousavi clarified the centrality of confronting Israel in case of a war with the US. "Everyone will witness the demise of the Zionist regime. That day is not far away," Mousavi noted. "The Resistance Front will overthrow America and the imperialist regime." Mousavi reiterated Iran's intent to escalate and expand any conflict regardless of their foes' intent. "The enemies are well aware that any tension and insecurity in the region will place them in the most insecure



situation.” Hence, Iranian senior officials and commanders keep warning Israel of Iran’s capabilities and resolve even when world attention is on Saudi Arabia.

Significantly, Iranian and Arab senior officials (including pro-US) interpret the proposed US-Israeli defense agreement as a reflection of US weakness. Rather than join Israel in attacking Iran as long advocated by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump is now promising Israel protective umbrella in case of an Iranian attack. For Tehran, this analysis reinforces the conviction that the US is not interested in attacking Iran. Hence, Tehran keeps focusing on furthering the offensive surge of the Qods Force and their Axis of Resistance proxies rather than dealing with a possible US retaliation.

The Arab World sees and seethes - giving up on the US and its guarantees. Arab leaders are desperate to strike deals with Iran that will ameliorate the threats to their survival. As well, these Arab leaders seek Chinese and Russian umbrellas - all the more so since Iran has recently concluded long-term strategic agreements with China. Iran is emboldened and returns to threatening a major regional war with Israel and the US should they try to block the ascent of Iran and the Axis of Resistance. Considering that Iranian population will only embrace a Persian chauvinist regime as a substitute to the Mullahs’ regime (that is increasingly in trouble over the socio-economic problems but far from being endangered by them) - the specter of regime change serving the interests of the West no longer exists. And so, for all the Arab, and, for that matter Trump’s, bluster - the die is cast. Thus, Iran is winning the quest for regional power.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.





### About the Author of this Issue

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Yossef Bodansky has been the Director of Research at the International Strategic Studies Association [ISSA], as well as a Senior Editor for the *Defense & Foreign Affairs* group of publications, since 1983. He was the Director of the Congressional Task Force on Terrorism and Unconventional Warfare at the U.S. House of Representatives between 1988 and 2004, and stayed on as a special adviser to Congress till January 2009. In the mid-1980s, he acted as a senior consultant for the U.S. Department of Defense and the Department of State.

He is the author of eleven books – including *Bin Laden: The Man Who Declared War on America* (New York Times No. 1 Bestseller & Washington Post No. 1 Bestseller), *The Secret History of the Iraq War* (New York Times Bestseller & Foreign Affairs Magazine Bestseller), and *Chechen Jihad: Al Qaeda's Training Ground and the Next Wave of Terror* – and hundreds of articles, book chapters and Congressional reports.

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