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## **The Future of Iran's Axis of Resistance in Syria and Lebanon**

*By Huzeir Ezekiel Dzulhisham*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*The war between Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah transformed the Middle East's balance of power, in particular, weakening Iran's influence in Syria and Lebanon. What is the future of Iran's Axis of Resistance, and can Iran rebuild its influence in the Levant?*

### **COMMENTARY**

The recent conflict between Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah transformed the Middle East's balance of power. It brought about the rise of new groups such as Syria's Hayat Tahrir al-Shams (HTS) and leaders such as Lebanese President Joseph Aoun while degrading the power of Iran, for long the leader of the Axis of Resistance (AOR) – a network of militant groups that includes Hamas, Hezbollah, Houthis, and the erstwhile Assad regime. What is the future for this Axis of Resistance? Can Iran rebuild the Axis and restore its influence in the Levant?

With its influence now more constrained, Iran faces difficulties rebuilding the AOR in Syria and Lebanon. This is due to two interrelated reasons. The first is the rise of new leadership in Syria and Lebanon that resists Iranian influence. The second is economic pragmatism, which draws both states towards the wealthy Gulf countries and industrialised Turkey, making them beholden to anti-Iran interests.

Thus, the Axis of Resistance is expected to be more geographically confined to Iraq and Yemen, which host surviving militias such as the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Front (PMF) and the Yemeni Houthis.

### **Iran Loses Influence in Syria and Lebanon**

The Assad regime's collapse and the weakening of Hezbollah by Israel's attacks have

created power vacuums in Syria and Lebanon. This has brought to the fore assertive new leaders more resistant to Iranian influence and more intent on securing political autonomy, thereby geographically restricting Iran's Axis of Resistance.

### *Syria*

The new HTS regime in Damascus led by interim Syrian President Ahmad al Sharaa, formerly Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, has distanced itself from Iran. In a recent interview with Syria TV, al Sharaa [proclaimed](#) that the presence of Iranian militias in Syria posed a "[strategic threat](#)" and contributed to [instability](#) in Syria and the Middle East. Al Sharaa also expressed his intent to expel Iranian-backed militias from his territory. Syria's new foreign minister, Asaad Hassan al-Shibani, [warned Iran](#) against causing instability in Syria.

Indeed, close ties with Iran could jeopardise the stability of the HTS government and create new threats. Given HTS' former status as a [terrorist group](#) and al Sharaa's [extremist](#) ties from the past, international suspicions over an HTS-Iran alliance could compel the US and its allies to convince other Syrian rebel groups, such as the [US-backed](#) Syrian Democratic Force, to remove HTS from power, to prevent a revival of the Axis of Resistance.

Moreover, close HTS relations with Iran will domestically delegitimise al Sharaa's leadership, potentially leading to internal rebellion, as al Sharaa had promised the Syrian people that his government would [not follow](#) Assad's policies, which previously made Syria an ally of Iran and the Axis.

Recognition of these dangers explains why Al Sharaa's [first state visits](#) as Syria's President were to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, where he met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan. Meanwhile, Syrian Foreign Minister al-Shibani [attended](#) the 2025 Davos World Economic Forum and a [February conference](#) in Paris on Syria's future with representatives from the G7 and Gulf states. These diplomatic moves signalled to Tehran that Syria under HTS would not be vulnerable to Iranian influence and is out of Iran's Axis of Resistance.

Al Sharaa's uncooperative stance against Iran was also observed in security campaigns to [close](#) the routes through Syria used by Iran to arm and fund Hezbollah and Hamas. These campaigns have led to [clashes](#) along the Lebanon-Syria border. Hezbollah leader Naim Qassem [acknowledged](#) that his forces lost a key supply route through Syria from Iran after the collapse of the Assad regime. Tehran is aware of Al Sharaa's hostile efforts, putting forth an article in the *Tehran Times* criticising Al Sharaa for his "[submission to Israeli aggression](#)".

### *Lebanon*

The recent appointment of General Joseph Aoun as Lebanon's President and Nawaf Salam as Prime Minister has sidelined Hezbollah and Iranian influence in Lebanon's government. Hezbollah initially did not endorse [Aoun and Salam](#), and both have closer ties with the West. Aoun was reportedly [America's preferred](#) candidate for the Lebanese presidency, having previously collaborated with the US military. As for Salam, he was an International Court of Justice judge.

The new Lebanese cabinet further sidelines Hezbollah and Iranian influence. It includes [new US-educated ministers](#) and former United Nations personnel and excludes Hezbollah-linked candidates for the first time in decades. Hezbollah reportedly approved only [five of the 24](#) new ministers.

These political developments in Lebanon have hardened stances towards Hezbollah. Aoun's [inaugural address](#) as President emphasised that the Lebanese Army must monopolise weapons use. At the same time, proclamations of sovereignty indirectly signalled his aim to end Hezbollah's influence in Lebanon.

Unprecedentedly, in January 2025, an [Iranian plane](#) was stopped and searched in Beirut, while an [Iranian diplomat](#) was detained and searched despite possessing diplomatic immunity, as Lebanese authorities were alerted that funds for Hezbollah were being smuggled. This led to a [complete Lebanese](#) suspension on flights to and from Iran from February onward. These incidents may set a new precedent, making Iran's ability to rebuild Hezbollah more difficult.

## **Economic Pragmatism**

Syria and Lebanon's need for funds and investment has forced them to turn to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both of which have [ambitions](#) to consolidate regional influence. They seek to prevent a revived Axis of Resistance that threatens their stability. This complicates the revival of the Axis and constrains Iranian influence in the Levant.

Financial aid can be conditioned on the restriction of Iranian influence and disarming of Iranian-backed Axis militias. This has happened before. In 2016, a diplomatic row led to Saudi Arabia [cancelling all investments](#) in Lebanon because of perceptions that then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri and President Michael Aoun (no relation to Joseph Aoun) were too close to Hezbollah and Iran.

It should be noted that Iran's sanctioned status and [economic fragility](#) hamper its ability to reassert influence in Syria and Lebanon. For both states, proximity to Iran could worsen their economic circumstances by making them targets for international sanctions.

Conversely, the Gulf States and Turkey allow Syria and Lebanon access to international markets and much-needed industrial expertise that are the foundations for sustainable economic development. Economic leverage gives the Gulf and Turkey opportunities to wield unparalleled influence over the Levant.

### *Syria*

President al Sharaa's most pressing concern is to rebuild Syria's economy. Before Assad's downfall, [Syria](#) had 69 per cent poverty and 93 per cent hyperinflation, while the Syrian Pound depreciated 141 per cent against the US Dollar. A crippled economy also exacerbates the problem of migration which hollows out Syrian society.

These economic problems explain why al Sharaa's first presidential trips were to Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the region's wealthiest and most industrialised countries. Strategically closer economic links to Saudi Arabia, a close US partner, and Turkey, a

NATO member, could hasten the removal of international sanctions on Syria, which have [remained](#) in place despite the Assad regime's demise.

### *Lebanon*

Lebanon has faced a [protracted economic crisis](#) since 2019. The Lebanese government defaulted on government debt in 2020. Worse still, [unsustainable currency manipulation](#) since 1997 led to the devaluation of the Lebanese Pound, which now holds less than 10 per cent of its value. Ensuing hyperinflation and the collapse of public services have forced [80 per cent](#) of Lebanese into poverty.

Like Syria, economic circumstances force Lebanese leaders to turn to the Gulf. This explains why Joseph Aoun's first [planned state visit](#) is to Saudi Arabia, which has historically been Lebanon's economic benefactor, granting financial aid that kept it afloat. It was also reported that Saudi financial aid to Lebanon was [conditioned](#) on the appointment of Aoun, its preferred candidate, as President.

### **What Happens Next?**

While it remains to be seen if Iran will completely lose influence in Syria and Lebanon, current developments in Damascus and Beirut do not bode well for the Axis of Resistance and Iranian regional influence. If these trends continue, the AOR will be more geographically constrained, being limited to Iraq and Yemen, where the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Front and the Yemeni Houthis are based.

Rationally, Tehran would now seek to consolidate its influence and control over surviving elements of the AOR. This explains why Tehran has made overtures towards Iraq. On February 7th, 2025, Iranian Vice-President for Strategic Affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, [visited](#) Iraq and met with the Iraqi President to discuss "Tehran's commitment to defending Iraq's national interests against external threats".

However, strategic openings exist for Iran to reassert itself in Syria and Lebanon. An unresolved and increasingly contentious issue for al Sharaa is the [complete disarmament](#) and unification of all Syrian rebel groups under his government. Tehran could influence some of these groups to rebel, especially if al Sharaa's hostility towards Iran increases.

In Lebanon, the Aoun government may encounter difficulties trying to sideline Hezbollah and its Shia-Muslim support base completely. Lebanon's distinctive [power-sharing structure](#), which calls for a Shia Speaker of Parliament, combined with the sizable [32 per cent](#) Lebanese Shia population, that makes up [a third of](#) Lebanon's national army, would make it difficult for the Aoun government to eliminate Hezbollah and, by extension, Iranian influence from Lebanon.

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