

Iran's Ring of Fire Strategy in Ruins

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Weapons and other equipment which the Israeli army says belonged to the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah, and were seized by the army during its ground operation in south Lebanon, are displayed for the media in a northern Israeli military base, on Dec. 23, 2024. Jack Guez/AFP via Getty Images



By Joe Varner

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Commentary

Iran's ring of fire strategy is in tatters thanks to Hamas' war, and Iran's nuclear program is likely about to meet its Waterloo, and with it potentially, Iran's theocratic dictatorship.

Long-standing Iranian grand strategy in the Middle East has been to use a network of proxy militias to do its bidding and to keep its hands clean hoping to avoid retaliation. The Iranian doctrine involved using its proxy militias to destroy Israel in a "ring of fire" and push the U.S. out of the Middle East before it would settle accounts with its Sunni opponents. To that end, Iran armed, trained, and supported Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Syrian regime, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Iraq all with the goal of finishing off Israel. Iran used its network of regional militias to become a regional military threat in the Middle East perhaps until it could become a nuclear power to dominate the area and threaten Europe.

Oct. 7, 2023 was a disaster for Israel with 1200 people killed and more than 251 Israelis taken as hostage to Gaza, but in real terms Hamas surprise assault on Israel and the war that followed has become a strategic disaster for Iran and everyone associated with it. The Oct. 7 terrorist outrage was celebrated in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen Iraq, and most particularly Iran. But the celebration of murder, rape, torture, and animalistic fury was short-lived.

Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad that launched the attack and broke the peace on Oct. 7 have been destroyed. Their military power once a concern and threat to Israel has been obliterated. Hamas political power over the inhabitants of Gaza is gone and bandits and tribal leaders are on the rise. Any hope of a two-state solution has evaporated, and the Palestinian Authority is on Israeli life support. The United Nations and its Hamas ridden refugee agency have lost all credibility in the West. Iran's attempts to disrupt Jordan and overthrow the King Abdullah have failed.

Hezbollah once the jewel in Iran's crown in Lebanon has been devastated and degraded as a terrorist militia. Its senior leadership to its lowest leadership levels have been disrupted or killed. Some 70 to

80 percent of Hezbollah's once impressive missile and drone force have been eliminated. Its banking and weapons factories have gone up in smoke, fire, and dust at the hand of Israeli bombs and artillery. Hezbollah has been pushed back behind the Litani River and what is left is a rump of its past self.

Syria is a mess and overrun by Turkish-backed, U.S.-backed, and at least two other faction militias that have seized the country. The Assad Regime, a key Iranian ally, that allowed Iran to resupply and reinforce Hezbollah, has collapsed and the capital Damascus once an 'Iranian playground' has fallen. U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have taken over the eastern border with Iraq and are now a blocking force that prevents Iraq and Iran from playing any real military role in Syria and Lebanon. Iran like Russia is evacuating its forces from Syria leaving Hezbollah isolated and alone at the full mercy of the Israeli military. Russia has now lost its best toehold in the Middle East and lost its naval facility at Taurus and the Khmeimim Air Base.

Iran's Houthi militia in Yemen has stayed intact for now and it is a serious threat to international shipping in the Red and Arabian Seas and potentially Israel proper with its long-range missiles and drones, but it is now virtually alone. The Houthis oil and petroleum infrastructure has been obliterated by Israel. Iran's Iraqi militias remain a threat to U.S. forces in the country and Israel again with missiles and drones but any attack on Israel will come with terrible consequences for both the Houthis and Iraqi government not to mention Tehran itself.

Iran has not escaped the pain of its proxies and has been humiliated in the Middle East region. Tehran's dreams of being the dominant regional power and its credibility have evaporated. Iran has carried out two direct attacks on Israel that have failed, and Israel has followed up with attacks on Iran that have eliminated its air defenses and a key facility in its military nuclear program. The loss of the nuclear facility has created a bottleneck in Iran's nuclear program geared to produce a nuclear bomb. Right now, Iran has enough fissile nuclear material to create 12 nuclear warheads and without air defenses the bulk of its nuclear related infrastructure is in Israel's

cross hairs. With a Trump election victory in the U.S. and Republican control of the Senate and House an Israeli pre-emptive strike on Tehran's most-prized strategic assets are only a matter of weeks away.

This unraveling of Iran's "ring of fire" doctrine is not just a massive strategic setback; it is an existential crisis for Iran's theocratic leadership. Domestically, the regime faces mounting discontent and economic strain. Internationally, it is increasingly isolated, with its proxies weakened and its ambitions exposed as hollow. The Iranian regime's gamble on a network of proxy militias has left it cornered. What remains is a weakened regime struggling to maintain relevance in a rapidly shifting Middle East geostrategic environment. The theocratic dictatorship in Tehran now faces the most serious threat to its survival in decades and regime change may be in Iran's near future.

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