

SITUATION REPORT

Iran's Proxy & Partner Network Across the Middle East

As of 27 September 2026

BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT

Iran's "Axis of Resistance" has been significantly degraded but remains partially functional amid the ongoing conflict with Israel and the United States, during which Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei was killed and succeeded by his son Mojtaba Khamenei. Hezbollah in Lebanon, once Iran's flagship proxy, has been badly weakened by the 2026 Lebanon war and a June ceasefire, and has not relinquished its weapons. In Iraq, the Popular Mobilisation Forces network is fracturing, with some factions (Asaib Ahl al Haq, Kataib Imam Ali) signaling openness to disarmament while hardline elements (Kataib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba) refuse. Tehran has responded by leaning more heavily on the Yemen based Houthis, who in September 2026 seized Yemen's Red Sea coast and the Bab al Mandeb islands, gaining the ability to threaten one of the world's key shipping chokepoints, and on Iraqi militias, with reported direct Houthi Iraqi coordination against Saudi Arabia in mid 2026. Hamas retains nominal Iranian backing in Gaza but is diplomatically and militarily depleted. Iran's supply corridor to Hezbollah through Syria was severed by the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and has not been reliably restored.

OVERALL NETWORK STATUS

Iran's regional network has shifted from a unified, Hezbollah centred "forward defense" model to a more fragmented, opportunistic structure. The core logic, deniable, distributed pressure on Israel, Gulf states and US forces via non state partners, persists, but the network's most capable node (Hezbollah) is degraded, its main overland resupply route (Syria) is compromised, and Iraqi factions are split between de escalation and defiance. The Houthis have emerged as the most operationally active and increasingly autonomous partner, controlling territory and a key strait rather than simply launching missiles. Iran's own command structure is still stabilising after the loss of its Supreme Leader and senior IRGC figures.

HIGH

Degraded but adapting; risk of miscalculation elevated

HEZBOLLAH ▼ DEGRADED	IRAQI MILITIAS ↔ FRACTURED	HOUTHIS ▲ ASCENDANT	HAMAS / PIJ ▼ DEPLETED	SYRIA NETWORK ▼ DISRUPTED	BAHRAIN CELLS ↔ LOW LEVEL	TEHRAN / IRGC ↔ REORGANISING
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Network at a glance

GROUP / THEATRE	STATUS	TREND	NOTE
Hezbollah (Lebanon)	DEGRADED	▼	~40,000 to 50,000 combatants plus reservists claimed pre war; leadership ranks hollowed out; rebuilding under ceasefire terms it has not fully honored.
Iraqi militias / PMF	FRACTURED	↔	~238,000 strong PMF umbrella split between factions signaling disarmament and hardliners (Kataib Hezbollah, Nujaba) refusing.
Houthis / Ansar Allah (Yemen)	ASCENDANT	▲	Seized Red Sea coast and Bab al Mandeb islands (Sept 2026); blockading Saudi shipping; coordinating with Iraqi militias against Saudi targets.
Hamas / PIJ (Gaza, West Bank)	DEPLETED	▼	Retains nominal Iranian financial/diplomatic backing; militarily and politically weakened; internal pressure to extract more support from Tehran.
Syria based network	DISRUPTED	▼	Overland weapons corridor to Hezbollah broken by fall of Assad (Dec 2024); new Damascus authorities actively pushing back on residual Iranian presence.
Bahrain based cells	LOW LEVEL	↔	Al Ashtar Brigades and Saraya al Mukhtar retain IRGC backing; attack tempo well below 2013 to 2018 peak but groups remain designated and active.
IRGC Quds Force / Tehran command	REORGANISING	↔	New Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei installed March 2026 after Ali Khamenei's killing; senior IRGC losses during the ongoing conflict continue to affect coordination.

Tehran Command & the IRGC Quds Force

REORGANISING

Trend: Leadership transition largely complete; coordination capacity still recovering from losses sustained during the ongoing conflict

- The ongoing conflict between Iran, Israel and the United States ("Operation Epic Fury" / "Operation Rising Lion") has killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei along with senior IRGC and military officials, ending nearly four decades of his rule.
- Iran's Assembly of Experts named his son, Mojtaba Khamenei, as the new Supreme Leader in early March 2026, an unprecedented dynastic succession that remains contested by some clerical and political factions.
- The IRGC Quds Force, historically the coordinating body for Iran's regional partners (arming, training and financing Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, the Houthis and Palestinian factions), lost senior commanders during the war and has had to rebuild parts of its command chain.
- Analysts describe Iran's current approach as a deliberately "hybrid" and multi front strategy, leaning on whichever partner is best positioned (currently the Houthis and Iraqi militias) rather than a single unified axis, following Hezbollah's degradation.

WATCH Signs of internal dissent over Mojtaba Khamenei's succession; reconstitution of Quds Force command structure; any resumption of direct Iran Israel strikes.

Hezbollah (Lebanon)

DEGRADED

Trend: Reduced overt hostilities since June 2026 ceasefire; covert rearmament continuing

- Pre war assessments credited Hezbollah with roughly 40,000 to 50,000 active combatants and a further 30,000 to 50,000 reservists, with its elite Radwan Unit (~5,000 personnel) as its primary offensive force; these figures have not been fully re verified since sustained combat losses.
- The group's mid level command has been significantly hollowed out by targeted strikes, producing what regional assessments describe as a "prolonged leadership crisis."
- A June 3, 2026 ceasefire cut remote/rocket violence by roughly a third month on month, but Hezbollah has kept a persistent presence and pressure posture in southern Lebanon and is assessed as unlikely to voluntarily disarm.
- Hezbollah's arsenal is estimated at around 25,000 rockets and missiles (mostly short/medium range) plus roughly 1,000 one way attack drones and a smaller stock of precision guided munitions; rebuilding is reportedly outpacing Israeli interdiction efforts, aided by domestic production and smuggling via maritime routes and Syria.
- Iran's principal historical resupply corridor to Hezbollah, running through Syria, was severed by the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024; Hezbollah's own leadership has confirmed the loss of this route, though analysts caution alternative smuggling channels may partly substitute for it.

WATCH Ceasefire compliance/violations in southern Lebanon; evidence of successful weapons resupply; any Israeli strikes on rearmament infrastructure; Lebanese government pressure for disarmament.

Iraqi Militias / Popular Mobilisation Forces

FRACTURED

Trend: Split between de escalation and defiance; hardline factions increasingly active regionally

- The Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) umbrella nominally comprises roughly 238,000 personnel with reported annual funding around USD 3.6 billion, encompassing dozens of brigades of varying loyalty to Baghdad versus Tehran.
- A March April 2026 round of US Israeli strikes on Iran aligned Iraqi factions killed senior Kataib Hezbollah commanders (including Abu Hassan al Fariji and spokesperson Abu Ali al Askari) and produced Iraqi government casualty figures of roughly 73 PMF members, 10 army soldiers, 3 federal police and 6 civilians by early April, before an Iran US ceasefire on April 7 prompted a stand down.
- Following the ceasefire, factions have diverged: Asaib Ahl al Haq and Kataib al Imam Ali announced disarmament/withdrawal plans in June 2026, while hardline groups, Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, publicly rejected disarmament calls, citing continued US military presence in Iraq as justification.
- Hardline Iraqi militias have since been reported coordinating directly with the Houthis, including alleged joint planning of a July 2026 drone swarm attack on Saudi oil facilities, described by regional officials as an unprecedented level of operational integration between the two fronts.
- Beyond Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al Haq, other IRGC aligned factions within the PMF umbrella include the Badr Organisation (the oldest and most politically integrated of the Iran aligned factions) and Kataib Sayyid al Shuhada, both of which have historically operated alongside Kataib Hezbollah and Nujaba on attacks against US and coalition targets.

WATCH Further Kataib Hezbollah/Nujaba attacks on US forces or Gulf targets; Baghdad government moves to formally dissolve or absorb PMF factions; additional joint Houthi Iraqi operations.

Houthis / Ansar Allah (Yemen)

ASCENDANT

Trend: Sharply escalating; now the most operationally active and territorially expansionist Iran aligned actor

- In September 2026 the Houthis seized Yemen's Red Sea coastline and the strategically critical islands controlling the Bab al Mandeb strait, giving them direct physical control over one of the world's busiest shipping chokepoints for the first time.
- The group has launched more than a dozen attacks since late July 2026 on Saudi facilities and tankers, including a September strike that wounded more than 70 people; a prior Saudi Houthi ceasefire has effectively collapsed, and the Houthis have declared a blockade against Saudi linked shipping in the Red Sea.
- The Houthis have demonstrated the ability to strike targets over 700 km away and directly participated in planning a July 2026 drone swarm attack on Saudi oil infrastructure alongside Iraqi militias, evidence of deepening coordination across Iran's proxy network rather than isolated, single front action.
- Analysts assess Tehran has increasingly leaned on the Houthis (alongside Iraqi hardliners) as its most reliable forward leaning partner following Hezbollah's degradation, even as the Houthis pursue territorial and economic objectives that also serve their own domestic consolidation in Yemen.

WATCH Houthi consolidation of Bab al Mandeb control and any formal blockade enforcement; Saudi or international (including US/UK naval) response; further coordinated Houthi Iraqi militia operations; Red Sea shipping and insurance impacts.

Hamas & Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Gaza, West Bank)

DEPLETED

Trend: Militarily and politically weakened; increasingly dependent on, and demanding more from, Tehran

- Hamas has ceded formal governing control of Gaza but has not severed its relationship with Iran; Tehran has publicly reaffirmed continued support for Hamas and the wider Palestinian cause through 2026, including messaging around disarmament pressure from the US backed Gaza plan.
- Reporting indicates Hamas has pressed Iran for increased financial and diplomatic backing, reflecting the group's weakened independent capacity after sustained Israeli operations in Gaza.
- Analysts note that the broader Iran Israel war diverted Tehran's attention and resources away from Gaza during the conflict, leaving Hamas relatively under supported at a critical period even as rhetorical solidarity continued.
- Palestinian Islamic Jihad remains a smaller but active Iran aligned armed faction in Gaza and, to a lesser extent, the West Bank, generally operating in step with Hamas but retaining a more direct organisational and financial relationship with the IRGC Quds Force.

WATCH Hamas's position on disarmament under any US brokered Gaza arrangement; scale of any renewed Iranian financial support; PIJ activity independent of Hamas.

Syria Based Network

DISRUPTED

Trend: Iranian presence and transit routes substantially rolled back; contested rather than eliminated

- The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 eliminated Iran's most important overland corridor for moving weapons and personnel to Hezbollah in Lebanon; Hezbollah's own leadership has publicly confirmed the loss of this supply route.
- Syria's new authorities in Damascus have taken an actively adversarial posture toward residual Iranian networks and personnel, seeking to root out remaining IRGC linked infrastructure and militia cells left over from the Assad era.
- Some analysts caution against assuming the supply relationship is permanently severed, noting Iran's history of adapting smuggling routes (air, sea and alternative land paths) when primary corridors are cut.
- Iranian aligned militia remnants and sleeper networks are assessed to persist in pockets of Syria, though materially reduced in scale, coordination and freedom of movement compared with the pre Assad collapse period.
- Two Iran organised, foreign fighter formations, the Fatemiyoun Brigade (Afghan Shia recruits) and Zainabiyoun Brigade (Pakistani Shia recruits), had fought in Syria on Assad's behalf since the mid 2010s; both saw their presence in the country significantly reduced following the regime's collapse in December 2024, though remnants and alumni networks are assessed to persist regionally.

WATCH Evidence of restored or alternative Iran to Hezbollah smuggling routes through or around Syria; Damascus government actions against residual Iranian linked cells; any Iranian attempt to rebuild formal influence in Syria, including remobilisation of Fatemiyoun/Zainabiyoun networks.

Bahrain Based Cells

LOW LEVEL

Trend: Long term, low tempo insurgency; capability persists despite reduced attack frequency

- Al Ashtar Brigades (AAB), formed in 2013 as a splinter from an existing Bahraini Shia militia, receives weapons, materiel and explosives training from the IRGC and has drawn on Iraqi Shia militias and Lebanese Hezbollah for financial and logistical support. It primarily targets Bahraini police and security forces with IEDs and small arms, and was designated a Foreign Terrorist Organisation by the US State Department in 2018; Treasury sanctioned additional Iran based operatives and facilitators in 2024.
- Saraya al Mukhtar (Al Mukhtar Brigades), also formed in 2013, is a parallel Shia insurgent faction with alleged IRGC backing; members have publicly sworn allegiance to Khomeinism, and the group has disclosed direct ties to Iraqi pro Iran factions Kataib al Imam Ali and Saraya al Khorasani. It has carried out roughly 200 attacks in Bahrain, mostly IEDs against security forces, and has also sent fighters to Syria alongside Hezbollah. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE and the UK designated it a terrorist organisation from 2017, with the US following in 2020.
- Attack tempo for both groups has declined substantially since a 2013 to 2018 peak, but both remain active, currently designated Iran aligned threats to Bahraini internal security rather than dismantled organisations.

WATCH Any uptick in IED or small arms attacks on Bahraini security forces; further US/Gulf sanctions actions against AAB or Saraya al Mukhtar financiers; evidence of renewed direct IRGC tasking amid the wider regional escalation.

Look Ahead Assessment

NEXT 2 TO 4 WEEKS

Expect continued Houthi consolidation around the Red Sea coast and Bab al Mandeb, with a realistic possibility of further attacks on Saudi and shipping targets absent renewed international naval deterrence. Watch for additional joint Houthi Iraqi militia signaling or operations.

NEXT 1 TO 3 MONTHS

Iraqi PMF fragmentation is likely to continue, with moderate factions edging toward disarmament under Baghdad and US pressure while Kataib Hezbollah and Nujaba retain an independent strike capability against US and allied interests. Hezbollah is likely to continue quiet rearmament under ceasefire cover rather than resume large scale hostilities, absent an Israeli strike on rebuilding infrastructure.

BROADER TRAJECTORY

Tehran's post war network is smaller, less centrally coordinated and more reliant on opportunistic, semi autonomous partners (chiefly the Houthis and Iraqi hardliners) than the pre 2024 "unified axis" model. This lowers Iran's ability to orchestrate simultaneous, multi front pressure on command, but raises the risk of unplanned escalation as individual partners pursue increasingly independent agendas, particularly around Red Sea shipping and Gulf security.

PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

Organisations and personnel with exposure to Red Sea/Bab al Mandeb shipping, Gulf adjacent energy infrastructure, or US/coalition facilities in Iraq and Syria should treat the current period as one of elevated and rising risk, with the locus of danger shifting away from Lebanon/Israel and toward Yemen, the Red Sea and Iraq Gulf flashpoints.

Sources: Council on Foreign Relations, "Iran's Regional Armed Network" and Global Conflict Tracker (Yemen/Red Sea); Fortune (9 Sept 2026, Iran Hezbollah Houthis Saudi Arabia); Foundation for Defense of Democracies (14 Sept 2026, Houthi seizure of Red Sea coast and Bab al Mandeb islands); Al Jazeera (11 Sept 2026, Houthi Red Sea advance; 28 Apr 2026, Hezbollah wartime assessment); Alma Research and Education Center (Jan 2026, Hezbollah military status assessment); ACLED Middle East Overview (July 2026); Wikipedia (2026 Iran war; 2026 US Israeli conflict with pro Iranian Iraqi militias; Assassination of Ali Khamenei; Mojtaba Khamenei); Al Jazeera / NPR / Washington Post / CNN (Mar 2026, Khamenei succession reporting); Foundation for Defense of Democracies and Foreign Policy (Syria supply route reporting); Chatham House (May 2026, Gaza neglect during Iran war); Middle East Institute (Hamas post Khamenei); Times of Israel and Iran International (Hamas Iran relationship, 2026); UN press coverage (Sept 2026, Houthi Red Sea advance); ODNI Counterterrorism Guide (Aug 2026, Al Ashtar Brigades); Wikipedia (Al Mukhtar Brigades, Insurgency in Bahrain); FDD Long War Journal (Saraya al Mukhtar, Al Ashtar Brigades reporting); CFR "Iran's Regional Armed Network" map (Jan 2026, Bahrain/Iraq/Fatemiyoun Zainabiyoun note). This is an open source assessment; figures (personnel, funding, casualties) are drawn from secondary reporting and should be treated as indicative rather than precise, particularly where sources disagree.