

## THE COST OF COMMITMENT: UNDERSTANDING THE IRAN'S INTERVENTION IN THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR (2023-2024)

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### **Abstract**

Using the concept of commitment trap, this article makes the argument that Iran's indirect war support to the Palestinian Hamas militant group in Gaza during the Israel-Hamas war in 2023-2024 should be explained primarily based on the Islamic Republic's public commitment to Palestinian armed struggle against Israel. This article explains that the need to avoid the costs of abandoning its commitment to support Palestinian armed struggle compelled Iran to provide military support to Palestinian militant forces in Gaza through using its Lebanese proxy group of Hezbollah group to attack Israel from Lebanon despite the Hezbollah's lack of preparedness to engage in a war with Israel. Thus, the defeat of Hezbollah in the resultant war with Israel weakened the Iran's own military defense in Syria against Syrian armed opposition. As a result of this power shift, the HTS-led armed opposition succeeded in overthrowing the Iran-backed Assad government in a short war which also ended the Iran's military-political influence in the country.

**Keywords:** *Commitment Trap, Hamas, Hezbollah, HTS, Iran, Israel, Palestine, Syria.*

### **Introduction**

When Israel launched a full-scale retaliatory military offense into the Gaza Strip against the Palestinian Hamas militant group following the Hamas's complex attack on civilian and military targets in Israel, Iran found itself in the face of the possibility of becoming party to a conflict it was not really prepared to join. For decades, the Islamic Republic had been asserting its opposition to any negotiated settlement to the Palestinian-Israel conflict and advocated, instead, armed struggle to destroy the Jewish state. In this manner, the Islamic Republic bound itself with unconditional, maximalist commitment to an enduring conflict, challenging the dominant approach advocated by other states for ending the conflict politically through two-state arrangement.

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Per its commitment to Palestinian armed struggle, Iran has been trying to enable Palestinian militant groups in Palestinian territory, through training, funding, and arming, to wage and sustain armed struggle against Israel, without directly involving it. As a result of this undertaking, a close relationship began to develop between the Islamic Republic and Palestinian Islamist groups, primarily Hamas, which shared the Iran's maximalist objective of wiping out Israel off the map of the region. For Iran, supporting Palestinian armed struggle to defeat the Jewish state and recover the territory to the Muslim Palestinian became a matter of fulfilling of an Islamic religious duty, whereas the Palestinian resistance found in the Islamic Republic as largely the only major provider of political-military support in the fight against the much superior army.

In view of this public commitment, when Israel started its full-scale offense on the Hamas-held Gaza with the declared aim of destroying Palestinian militants, the Islamic Republic found itself compelled to intervene in the conflict indirectly through employing its loyal forces of the Lebanese militant organization of Hezbollah by opening a frontline against Israel from Lebanon. In the course of the ensued escalatory war between Iran-linked Hezbollah and Israel, the Lebanese militant group suffered massive military blows, losing its top leadership and much of its capabilities.

The Iran's risky decision to involve its Lebanese proxy group in the war resulted in a strategic disaster its regional interest as the Hezbollah's military defeat in Lebanon produced wider regional military reverberation. Hezbollah had effectively been working as Iran's major ground force in the civil war-torn Syria since 2011. In Syria, it was providing protection for the Syrian Assad government against the Syrian insurgency and, thereby, securing the Iran's military-political foothold which had been established and growing in the shadow of the much enfeebled Assad government. Now, the defeat in the war with Israel left Hezbollah no longer able to provide the same level of reinforcing fighting capabilities on behalf of Iran in Syria. The consequence was the change of the balance of force in favor of Syrian insurgent groups led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). In view of this opportunity, in early December 2024, a day after the cessation of the Israel-Hezbollah war, Syrian rebel groups successfully resumed attacks on the Syrian army and its ally forces. Largely abandoned by its military allies on the ground, the government forces quickly collapsed. Few days later, the HTS-led insurgent movement toppled the Assad government and, with it, removed the Iranian presence from the country.

In view of the introduction above, I argue that the concept of commitment trap can be applied to explain the Iran's decision to join Israel-Hamas War through its Lebanese proxy group in support of the Palestinian group. As will be discussed below, commitment trap grows out of the pressure, generated by domestic as well as external considerations, on the committed party to act on its prior pledge even though the fulfilling of the commitment no longer serves, or even endangers, the state power interests under the circumstance. To put it in other words, when a commitment becomes a trap, it means its fulfillment involves the level of sacrifice or risk not envisaged when the commitment was first made. Nevertheless, it still feels compelled to act on it.

The rest of this article proceeds as follow. The following section develops the arguments by drawing on the relevant literature. The second section will discuss the declaratory and ideological root of the Iran's commitment to the armed struggle by the Palestinians against Israel will be discussed. Third section addresses the Iran's intervention through its proxy forces of Hezbollah in the Hamas-Israel war following the start of the Israel retaliatory offense into the Gaza Strip in October 2023 and the consequences of the intervention to the Iran's regional power position. The last section examines two possible alternative explanations to the commitment trap explanation. In the conclusion, few final remarks are presented.

### **Research Statement**

In this article, I use the concept of commitment trap<sup>1</sup> to explain the Iran's decision to intervene through its proxy forces of Hezbollah in the Hamas-Israel war following the start of the Israel retaliatory offense into the Palestinian Gaza Strip in October 2023. Before proceeding further into the analysis, some definitions are in order. To begin with, for the purpose of this article, commitment is defined broadly as a public pledge of providing protection or support for an external party in the context of conflict; that is, commitment by a party (commitment giver) to helping a party to a dispute (the recipient of the commitment) against the other party to the dispute (the target of the commitment). Accordingly, commitment is an act of self-binding to certain political-strategic position. Perhaps the Thomas Schelling's rather analogical illustration captures the essence of commitment when he compares it to "getting yourself where you cannot retreat" (Schelling 1966, 49). Hence, commitment trap.

Commitment trap suggests that whereas initiating commitment is typically a voluntary act, fulfilling commitment assumes an obligatory quality. Commitment as a trap refers to a situation in which a state (the commitment provider) feels compelled to act on its prior commitment even though fulfilling the commitment may no longer serve its interests (security or power) any longer or it may even poses risk to those interests. Commitment trap implies that the situation under which the commitment has to be acted on has evolved unfavorably from the situation under which the commitment was initiated. The commitment giver may be now in a weaker or vulnerable military position than before and the target of the commitment is now in a more stronger military position than before; or even the recipient of the commitment is now no longer of a high political or military value for the commitment giver compared to the risk involved in defending it or protecting it. Accordingly, by following through with its commitment, usually after the failure of deterrence, the committed party runs the risk of becoming a party to a costly conflict or fighting a war under unfavorable balance of force; yet, backing doing from the commitment (undoing the commitment following the failure of deterrence) also incurs cost.

In the literature, two disparate types of costs are discussed: political audience cost and international reputation cost. Therefore, the desire to avoid the political audience cost as well as to maintain international reputation serves as compelling causes for

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of commitment trap was first articulated by Douglas Macdonald in his study of the US foreign policy toward its allies in the Third World (Macdonald 1992).

fulfilling public commitments. Political audience cost refers to incurring political punishments to the state rulers by domestic individuals and groups for reneging on foreign policy commitments, especially in the face of crisis escalation. In a seminal work, James Fearon developed this concept to explain why leaders in democratic countries find it hard to back down from their commitments (promise or threat). “Backing down after making a show of force is often most immediately costly for a leader because it gives domestic political opponents an opportunity to deplore the international loss of credibility, face, or honor,” Fearon concludes (Fearon 1994, 581). On this account, the fear of losing office (voters support) gives leaders in democracies incentive to comply with their prior commitments. The domestic audience cost has also been applied to non-democratic systems. The argument here is that even in autocratic states backing down from international commitments may put the leader in the danger of overthrowing from power by domestic political interest groups, especially if the groups on whose support the leader depends have means and motives to take collective action (Weeks 2008). Thus, whether in democracies or autocracies, reneging on international commitments endangers the legitimacy of the leadership at home since it will be seen as weak by political domestic audience, and, therefore, it loses its domestic support to stay in power.

Although these and other works on political audience cost thesis locate the audience (whether voters or political interest groups) within state boundaries, the political audience of a national regime or leader can extend beyond the state boundaries. To put it in other words, it could sometimes be the case that the individuals or groups whose opinions and sentiments are important for sustaining the legitimacy and strength of a state regime may be transnational. In that sense, the space of political interest of the state regime transcends the boundaries of its geographic space into neighboring states, using certain cultural or ideological means of connection. This is typically the case when the state in question seeks to build transnational networks of political influence and allegiance beyond its own national boundaries; those supra-state networks tend to become political audience of the state regime. In such cases, not just its national population but also those transnational groups also become political audience of the state regime. Under this circumstance, the leadership of the regime tends to feel obliged to factor the satisfying of the expectations of those transnational supporters beside the national population into complying with its international commitments. Although transnational political audience may not figure the same weight in the decision-making as the national political audience, for a regime with transnational political ambitions, the transnational audience can still be an important consideration, not only for strengthening its external influence but also for maintaining its domestic legitimacy.

The case in point is the Middle East, Iran’s regional neighborhood. There is a consensus in the literature on Middle East politics that the region is uniquely characterized by the existence of shared ancestral and cultural ties that spread across state boundaries and challenge the state authority for identity and legitimacy (Ayubi 1995; Halliday 2005; Buzan and Waever 2003; Noble et al. 2008; Hinnebusch 2014). According to these scholars, out of these transborder cultural bonds and communal ties, there exists a transnational space for political influence and audienceship in the Middle

East region. The two main manifestations of these regional linkages have been pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism. These two linkages have traditionally provided opportunities for states with pan-Arabist or pan-Islamist ambitions to advance their influence regionally. During 1950s-1960s Egypt under Gamal Abdul-Nasser used pan-Arab nationalism effectively to project its influence throughout the Arab world. Iran itself launched its own transnational bid since the rise of Shia clergy under Imam Khomeini to power following the 1979 Revolution. Using pan-Islamic claim, namely Shiism, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been a major penetrator of state boundaries, seeking to access the domestic populations of states in the region through using its religious and sectarian appeals. In the process, it has cultivated networks of political loyal groups among the Muslim populations generally and particularly Shia communities of those countries. As will be discussed below, its commitment policy to support struggle against Israel and Western powers in the region has been the Iran's key rallying call the Muslim Middle East with considerable success.

International reputation serves as another reason for upholding foreign policy commitments. It has basically become an axiom in international relations that states, small and big, care about their reputation: reputation for resolve (Mercer 1996). What relates commitment to reputation is that by making public commitments, the state creates expectations in other states that it will take certain action in accordance of its pledge. More precisely, when a state makes commitment to support or defend a party in conflict, it is expected internationally to act when the party comes under threat. In this manner, acting on its commitment becomes the measure of the state's ability to save its international reputation for resolve. Since perception (true or not) is a critical consideration in foreign policy making (Jervis 1976), the failure to maintain resolve now tends to undermine the credibility and deterrence posture of the state in the future. Because of this enduring nature of political perceptions, any impression of irresoluteness can prove to be particularly dangerous for a state already in rivalry relationships with other states. Therefore, such a state finds more reason to stand firm on its commitments now in order to impress its adversaries in the future.

To summarize, in view of the above theoretical literature, this article makes the argument that the case of Iran's military intervention through its proxy group of the Lebanese Hezbollah in the Hamas-Israel war in 2023-2024 in support of the Palestinian militant group should be explained in term of the Islamic Republic's long-standing commitment to support Palestinian armed struggle against Israel. It further argues that although it had been deeply preoccupied in the Syrian civil war, the Islamic Republic still followed through with its Palestinian commitment. The explanation for this Iran's war intervention, this article argues, can be found in its concern to avoid political audience cost and international reputation weakening. It is hard to determine which one of these two considerations was more influential; therefore, this article suffices with making the general theoretical statement that played a magnitude of influence on the Iran's decision-making to intervene.

### **Iran's Commitment to Palestinian Armed Struggle**

Since commitment making primarily takes the form of verbal statements, it may be necessary to provide a short survey of the official discourse of the Iranian leadership in

order to determine the origin and nature of the Iran's commitment to Palestinian armed conflict with Israel. The origin of the Iran's commitment dates back to the early days of the rise of the Iranian Shia clergy to power in Tehran under Imam Ayatollah Khomeini on the back of the popular revolution of 1979, which ended the monarchical rule of Muhamad Reza Shah and turned the country into theocracy on the basis of the Shia Islamic theological system of *vilāyat-i faqī* (the rule of Islamic jurisprudence). Designating itself as the true Islamic state, Iran declared its principled commitment to the cause of armed struggle of the Muslim Palestinians to recover the Islam's second holiest land from the Jewish state of Israel. In this sense, supporting Palestinian armed struggle against Israel basically assumed an article of faith in the political lexicon of the Islamic Republic.

Proclaimed by Imam Khomeini, the Iran's commitment to the Palestinian conflict assumed an uncompromising stance. It made the eradication of the Jewish state as "a cancerous cell in the body of the Muslim world" as its ultimate goal in order to end the question of Palestine conflict. From this stand point, it rejected any compromised solution to the conflict. For example, when Arab countries proposed Land-For-Peace Initiative with Israel in 1980s, which would have seen Israel withdrawn from occupied Arab lands to the pre-1967 war borders in return for Arab recognition,<sup>2</sup> the Islamic Republic categorically denounced it. Khomeini declared, "If the advantage of this (peace initiative) is the article that calls for Israeli withdrawal from certain lands it occupied during this or that war, then it is dangerous because it means that Israel will only return some of the lands it has usurped while still keep the rest of it... This ugly project should be resisted and defeated..." (Wazārat al-Irshād al-Islāmya 1981, 154-156). Instead, Khomeini called on all Muslims to "make the liberation of the Holy Quds and Palestine from the US-backed Zionist desecrating occupation their priority" (Wazārat al-Irshād al-Islāmya 1981, 62).

This Khomeini's commitment to Palestinian armed struggle against Israel was inherited by his successor, Ali Khamenei. Following his predecessor, the new supreme leader asserted, "There is no other way before the Palestinian people except armed struggle which should be carried out both inside of the occupied land and abroad" (Dār al-Welāyah 1996). Therefore, it was only natural that the Islamic Republic continued to oppose the two-state solution. "Our call is for the liberation of all Palestine, not just a part of Palestine. Any project that aims to divide the land of Palestine is unacceptable. The two-state solution... is nothing but the submission to the will of the Zionists... Any practical project should be based on one principle: all Palestine land is for all the Palestinian people. Palestine is Palestine from the river to the sea," Imam Khamenei reassured (Dār al-Welāyah 2011).

Yet, despite this maximalist commitment to Palestinian armed struggle, Iran never expressed its willingness to engage in or support for full-scale wars with Israel. Given the clear-cut state of imbalance of force in favor of the enemy, the Islamic Republic has not been advocating waging full-scale war as a mode of conducting the struggle against the Jewish state. The history of the Egypt-Syria-Jordan conflict between 1950s-1970s

<sup>2</sup> The Land-for-Peace Initiative was first proposed by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdul-Aziz during a summit of the Arab League in 1981. A year later, it was adopted by the League and, thereby, became the official position of the Arab states on the Palestine question.

with Israel had proved the futility, or even fatal drawbacks, of conventional war with Israel.

Instead, the Islamic Republic preferred a prolonged struggle through waging small scale periodic attacks with limited targets. This armed mission was to be carried out by Palestinians groups themselves, albeit with enabling support from Iran itself. The Iranian leadership thought, or hoped, that the cumulative impact of such protracted struggle would bring down Israel or force it to surrender. In defending this approach, the Iranian supreme leader stated, “Since its outset, this cancerous tumor (Israel) grew in stages until it reached its current size. In the same way, its treatment similarly needs to be in stages. To the present day, various rounds of successive uprisings and resistant activities have been able to achieve important tactical objectives in the process of achieving the (end) goal of liberating the whole land of Palestine” (Dār al-Welāyah 2019). According to this vision, time is on the side of the armed struggle and, therefore, the priority now is to sustain the struggle, not necessarily pressing onto accomplish its ultimate goal through all-out wars, as some Arab states did during 1950s and 1960s. For example, on one occasion the Iranian leader responded to the critics of the approach of armed struggle by saying, “True, the Resistance has not been able to reach its ultimate goal which is the liberation of all Palestine; nevertheless, it has been able to keep the Palestinian question alive... The main achievement of the Resistance is that it has forced a war of attrition on the enemy” (Dār al-Welāyah 2019). Beyond rhetoric, Iran also began covertly or openly providing Palestinian armed groups with military assistance such as training, funding and arming through various channels.

In this manner, for decades the Islamic Republic publicized and promoted its commitment to supporting Palestinian armed struggle. Under this banner, it constantly pressed to extend its regional power reach, even justifying its interventions one way or another in the name of fulfilling that commitment. In fact, Imam Khamenei justified his country’s much controversial military intervention in the Syrian civil war in 2011 on the same ground when he declared, “The Islamic Republic of Iran will defend Syria due to its support for the Resistance Front” (The Office of the Supreme Leader 2022). By supporting anti-Israeli armed struggle, the Islamic Republic secured for itself a leading popularity position among the Muslim masses in the region. Accordingly to a public poll conducted in Arab countries in 2008, following the month-long Hezbollah-Israel war of summer 2006 which concluded in the prisoner exchanges in August 2008, most of the participants supported the Iran’s nuclear program and opposed Western pressure and sanctions on it (Shibley Telhami 2008). Equally telling, according to the same polls, the leader of the Iran-linked Hezbollah Hassan Nasrallah, the Iran-allied Syrian Bashar al-Assad, and the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came out as the most popular leaders in the Arab World, respectively. This Iran’s regional popularity came as direct political returns of its public commitment to Palestinian armed struggle, a popular cause in the Muslim Middle East.

But also, this commitment also came at an international price for the Islamic Republic. First and foremost, the Islamic Republic made itself a disputant in the Palestine-Israel conflict, locking itself in an enduring strategic rivalry with Israel. Seeing it as an existential threat to its being, the Jewish state has been investing a great political and military deal in order to contain the Iran’s military capabilities and power

reach. Moreover, the Iran's commitment to support Palestinian armed struggle and its accompanying regional interventionist behavior in the region has been antagonized Western powers, particularly the U.S., making the Islamic Republic a target of crippling economic sanctions and other punitive measures. As a result, an enduring power struggle, or what Inis L. Claude (1989) would call "competitive manipulation of power relationships," developed between Iran on one side and Israel and the U.S.-led Western world on the other.

### **The Hamas-Israel War as a Test for the Iran's Commitment**

Before discussing Iran's act to fulfill its commitment to support Palestinian armed struggle following the breakout of the Hamas-Israel war in October 2023, it might be necessary to give an account of the Iran's military involvement in Syria over the past previous decade or so. The Iranian intervention in Syrian occurred following the breakout of civil war there after the escalation of the country's Sunni mass uprising into armed insurgency against the Shia minority-based government of al-Assad summer 2011. Gradually, with the deployment of its loyal forces of the Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran was able to save the Assad government by pushing back rebel groups to the north of the country of Idlib province. Then, under the shadow of the war-exhausted Assad government, it carved out its own zone of military control with extensive economic and cultural influence under the protection of Hezbollah militant forces. In this manner, in the trajectory of the Syrian civil war, Hezbollah militants became the Iran's major boots on the ground, fighting under the command of officers from its Revolutionary Guards for securing the Islamic Republic's expanding interests there: protecting the much weakened Assad government and maintaining the Iran's newfound influence in the country to grow and consolidate. On this account, when the Hamas-Israel war broke out in October 2023, Iran and its loyal force of Hezbollah were effectively in extensive military entanglement in the Syrian conflict.

Militarily, therefore, Iran or its Lebanese proxy group of Hezbollah was not quite free now, at least not like 2006-2008, to start another conflict against Israel. True, the Syrian conflict had been dormant since 2020; yet, Syrian insurgency led by the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and backed Türkiye had survived. Nevertheless, in spite of its military occupation in Syria, Iran decided to act on its commitment to Palestinian armed struggle by supporting the Hamas-led defense in Gaza against the Israeli retaliatory war. Toward that end, as the Israeli government vowed to turn the Hamas-run Gaza "into rubble" (Israeli Government 2023), the Iranian leadership tried to deter Israel through verbal threats and warnings. For example, the supreme leader warned, "if the Zionist entity continues its crimes, nobody will be able to stop the Muslims and the Resistance forces" from attacking Israel (Tasnim News Agency 2023). This verbal threat became the Iran's main declaratory theme toward the Hamas-Israel war in Gaza. During his regional tour, Iranian foreign minister aired the same veiled threat, warning about "the opening of new frontline" if Israel continued its offense into Gaza (Athr Press 2023).

Soon, in an apparent attempt to reinforce the Iran's verbal threats with action, the Lebanese Hezbollah started conducting sporadic shooting of rockets into Israeli territory from its home base in southern Lebanon. The objective of the Hezbollah's

military involvement was meant to be limited. “We had to involve (in the war) with providing a limited support and see what will happen,” the head the organization later disclosed (al-Mayadeen 2025). The Hezbollah’s intervention aimed to relief some military pressure on the besieged Hamas fighters inside the Gaza Strip by forcing Israel into splitting its army along two separate frontlines which would have the militant organization reinforced its “resistance legitimacy” without provoking an all-out war with the Jewish state. The Iran-linked Lebanese group was not ready for a total war. “The consequence of the total war was predictable. It required prior preparation, and this was not there,” the head of the organization later recognized (al-Mayadeen 2025).

As it is usually the case, however, once a war starts, it is hard to prevent it from escalating, and the provoked party often does escalate it with seeing advantage. Thus, capitalizing on its national rally for war and the Hezbollah’s unprovoked rocket firing as well as the newfound support from Western powers, Israel decided to take control of the trajectory of the skirmishes with its Lebanese archenemy by going for a full-scale war. As a result, in the course of several months, from southern Lebanon to southern and eastern Syria, Hezbollah’s bases, centers, commanders, communications, and operational routes became open targets of Israeli bombing. Ultimately, the Hezbollah suffered a debilitating military destruction. According to some sources, by the time the ceasefire was announced in late November 2024 its casualties stood at four thousands, larger than its losses in the summer 2006 war by more than tenfold (Bassam, Perry and Gebeily 2024). Still more consequential, the group lost two secretary generals within the space of a week including its charismatic General Secretary Hassan Nasrullah, in addition to many of its top military figures. The human and material losses, combined with the security breaching of its communication system which came to be known as Pager Explosions, caused deep operational disarray and political demoralization to the Iran-linked militant group.

The military consequences of the Hezbollah’s defeat quickly transpired in the neighboring Syria. As discussed previously, in view of the vital combat role in protecting the Iran’s military interests in Syria, including reinforcing the defense of the Syrian army, the outcome of the Israel-Hezbollah war constituted an auspicious moment for Syrian rebel groups. Due to the covert nature of its military moves, it is hard to tell how much combat-ready forces Hezbollah still had in Syria by the time its ceasefire with Israel took effect in late November. Still, it stands to reason to estimate that by that time it had pulled most of its fighting forces back into Lebanon, either to deploy them to the frontlines in southern Lebanese border against the invading Israeli army or to protect them from Israeli relentless air raids in the more open terrains of Syria.

Clearly, the HTS had a good measure of the remaining strength of their Lebanese enemy even before the dust of the war settled. Not wanting to give the Iran-linked group time to regain strength, the HTS led groups to re-launch attacks on the Syrian army on the same day the Israel-Hezbollah war ceasefire took effect – in an obvious exploitation of the auspiciousness of the new favorable balance of force. Thus, the four-year-frozen conflict suddenly rekindled. Evidently, the Iran government still believed that its ally government in Damascus was salvageable when it made what was tantamount to a last ditch effort to save the Assad government by dispatching

‘supervising forces’ from Lebanon to help halting the advance of rebel groups (Bassam, al-Khalidi and Hafezi 2024). However, the move proved too late too little. Within the span of few days, Damascus fell to the control of the HTS and the ruling family of al-Assad fled the country. With the fall of its ally government, Iran and its linked forces found no recourse but to pull their remaining forces out Syria.

In this manner, by acting on its commitment to the Palestinian conflict, the Islamic Republic paid at a heavy price in terms of power interests. The defeat caused irreversible setbacks to the Iran’s regional power. The fall of the Syrian state into the hands of Sunni Islamist groups represented a strategic earthquake to the Shia Iran. For decades, Syria had been helping Iran’s regional strategy in at least two ways: First, Syria had remained the Iran’s only ally state in the Arab world, supporting politically Iran’s positions on various regional and international issues.. Additionally, Syria had been serving as the main operational conduit for Iran to reach its proxy militant organization of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Without Syrian cooperation, the Iran’s political influence in Lebanon could not have been possibly with such degree of success. Lastly, since 2011 when the Assad government lost its control over much of its territory, Iran had found in the Syrian territory a vital space to expand its regional influence. With the takeover of the Sunni HTS group, Syria for the first time in over four decades is no longer an ally state or a power foothold of Iran.

### **Commitment Trap and Alternative Explanations**

This section attempts to discuss alternative explanations to commitment trap-based explanation of the Iran’s intervention in the Hamas-Israel war in support of the Palestinian armed group in Gaza. There are two possible alternative explanations. First, Iran itself ordered the attack on Israel; the other one is that the Palestinian Hamas was also a proxy force of Iran similar to the Lebanese Hezbollah and, therefore, its act of deploying Hezbollah to help Hamas was simply motivated by immediate power interests, not fulfilling a prior public commitment. These two explanations deserve some attention as alternatives to the commitment trap explanation.

To begin with, following the Hamas’s attack on Israeli military and civilian targets that triggered the Israel full-scale offense into the Gaza Strip, fingers were pointed to the Iranian leadership as the instigator of the attack, especially by Israeli officials. However, that charge was neither backed up by the Iran’s position following the attacks nor its traditional modus operandi for the conflict. As mentioned previously, Iran advocated long-term struggle by using periodic attacks of limited targets was a method to sustain the armed struggle against Israel, rather than waging large-scale operations or extensive targeting. The first sign of Iran’s discontent with the Hamas’s broad, complex attacks on Israel, which targeted not only military but also civilian positions, became evident during a visit by a Hamas delegate to Tehran following the start of the Israeli offense. According to media reports, Iranian officials declined the request by the Hamas’s visiting officials for help, informing them, “we will not enter the war on your behalf,” protesting that the Palestinian group did not consult the Iranian leadership on the plan of the operation or provide it advance notice (Hafezi, Bassam and Mohammed 2023). The early public speculations about the lack of communication or coordination by the Palestinian Hamas with Iranian officials on its

October 7<sup>th</sup> attack were later confirmed by statements from both Iranian and Hezbollah sources. For instance, in a revelation about his country's initial reaction to the news of the attack, the head of the Quds Force, the Iran's paramilitary unit in charge of covert military operations in the region, declared that with the breaking of the news of the event, "I began to consider a way to discuss the matter with Said Hassan Nasrallah (then the secretary general of Hezbollah) as to what we should or shouldn't do (in response to the unfolding conflict)," indicating that neither his country nor its Lebanese proxy force possessed advance knowledge about the Hamas's decision of attacking Israel (Tasnim News Agency 2025). This Iran's account of the event further confirmed that of the Hezbollah's leadership, mentioned above, which acknowledged that the Iran-linked group in Lebanon was basically at loss concerning "what the best course of action was to be taken" by way of providing fighting assistance for Palestinian militants in Gaza since it had no sufficient preparations for such an undertaking (al-Mayadeen 2025).

The Hamas's decline to consult Iranian or Hezbollah leadership on its attack could not have been by accident. The Hamas leadership might have calculated that the Islamic Republic would never approve of such large-scale attacks on both Israeli civilian and military positions. The Iran's unstated worry has been that any unlimited attack would destined to provoke Israel to respond with a full-scale war against the Palestinian armed resistance which endanger the very existence of Palestinian armed groups given the state of massive imbalance of force in favor of the Jewish state. The danger is that such a large military attack on Israel would ultimately force Iran to intervene directly or indirectly to save the movement from annihilation. Above all, the Hamas leadership seemed to have felt confident that Iran, given its prior commitment, would have no choice but to provide military support directly or indirectly should Israel waged a full-scale war, something that Iran had long tried to avoid.

The other alternative explanation is that the Palestinian Hamas was, like the Lebanese Hezbollah, was or is an arm of the Iranian regional power; therefore, the Iranian intervention through Hezbollah in the Hamas-Israel war on the side of Hamas was driven by immediate power interests, not long-standing political commitment per se. However, a short comparison between the Shia Hezbollah and the Sunni Hamas refutes this explanation. To make this comparison, a brief exploration of the history of the Iran-Hezbollah and the Iran-Hamas relations is warranted. To begin with, the origin of Hezbollah (the Party of God) dates back to early 1980s when Iran through dispatching teams of Islamic revolutionary operatives into then the civil war-engulfed Lebanon. The mission was aimed to recruit and organize a fighting force from the local Shia community with the primary purpose of fighting the invading Israeli army as well as to give the Lebanese Shia an Islamic voice, albeit along the line of the Iranian Shia theological ideology. Out of this operation, the militant Islamic organization of Hezbollah was born. Outliving the initial goal of its formation, Hezbollah, with Iran's constant military and financial aids as well as political leverage, developed virtually into an army without state within Lebanon, surviving attempts at disarmed by the Syrian military authority in Lebanon thank to Iran's pressure (Ali 2023,103, 110,122). Formed and sustained by Iran, the Lebanese militant organization grew to become the

Iran's principal regional proxy force, conducting various Iranian interests-mandated security and military activities in the region and beyond.

In Syria, the Hezbollah's role in the Iran's regional strategy reached its peak, as suggested previously. There, the militant organization reinforced the Iran's strategy on the country's conflict from the very beginning, both politically and militarily. Publicly, its leadership charged the Syrian rebellion of being a foreign plot, vowing to stand with the Assad government to defeat it. Considering Assad's Syria "the backbone of the Resistance," then the head of the Lebanese Hezbollah vowed that his armed group was not to stand by but to fight on the side of pro-Assad forces against the Syrian armed rebellion until achieving victory (Alalam News Network 2013). Taking this political stance, the group poured thousands of its fighters into the Syrian conflagration to reinforce the fighting position of the Assad government army against the Sunni rebellion. In the process, the Lebanese militant group effectively became the Iran's ground force there, defending the Iran's newly founded military and political foothold to the end. In short, the Iran-Hezbollah relationship grew into something well resembling a proxy-patron relationship.

This is quite contrary to the nature of the Iran-Hamas relationship. The Palestinian Hamas was not found by Iran and has not been an Iran's regional military arm; therefore, it never constituted a military power asset for Iran as the Lebanese organization has been. Rather, the alliance between the two, asymmetrical as it has been, was primarily, if not exclusively, centered on their mutual commitment to fight Israel (Alalam News Network 2016). Also, broadly speaking, both Hamas and Iran belong to the same universe of political Islam. However, Hamas, a Sunni Islamist movement with link to the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood Movement, does not subscribe to the Shia theological ideology as Hezbollah does, to say the least. The ideological-theological differences between Hamas and Iran came to the open drastically in the Syrian civil war. In that particularly critical instance, Hamas did not hesitate much to throw its political support behind its sectarian brethren of Syrian rebels, to dismay the Iranian leadership. "I bless the heroic Syrian people who are struggling for freedom, democracy, and reform," declared the head of the Hamas government in Gaza (Al Arabiya Network 2012). Moreover, when Iran asked the group to back its position on Syria, its reply was "Iran's position has become unfriendly; it has to revise its pro-Syrian regime stance if it wants to avoid antagonizing the Arab public (al-Jazeera 2012). By rejecting Iran's position on the Syrian conflict, Hamas contributed to the weakening of the public credibility of the Islamic Republic in the eyes of the Arab Middle East during the most intense era of Sunni-Shia sectarian polarization in the modern time, fostering the view prevalent in the Sunni world that Iran was a sectarian force aiming to subject the Sunnis to its dominion.

### **Conclusion and discussion**

Using the concept of commitment trap, this article made the argument that the Iran's indirect war support to the Palestinian Hamas forces in Gaza during the Israel-Hamas war in 2023-2024 should be explained primarily in terms of the Islamic Republic's long-standing commitment to support Palestinian armed struggle against Israel. Drawing on relevant theoretical literature and empirical data analysis, this article

argued that the need to avoid political audience cost and international reputational damage compelled the Islamic Republic to act upon its Palestine commitment by using its Lebanese proxy forces of Hezbollah to attack Israel from Lebanon during the Israel-Hamas war following the Hamas's October 2023 attack on Israel. However, the Iran's proxy group was not prepared for an all-out war, not least because it was preoccupied in the Syrian conflict. Thus, the Iran's ultimate decision to order Hezbollah to intervene in the Israel-Hamas war ended with a debilitating defeat to the Lebanese militant group, weakened the defense of its own Hezbollah-protected military position in Syria in favor of the Syrian armed opposition, and enabled the HTS-led Syrian opposition to overthrow the Iran-backed Assad government in a short war and end of the Iran's own power base in the country.

In advancing this argument, this article tried to refute other possible alternative explanations that Iran itself ordered Palestinian armed groups to wage the attack, or that Iran's support to the Palestinian Hamas was driven by power interests since the group was/is another arm of the Iran's regional power similar to the Lebanese Hezbollah – the Iran's principal ideological-military arm in the region. Thus, the conclusion drawn is that neither did Iran order the Hamas's October 2023 attack nor was its decision to provide war support through its Lebanese proxy organization of Hezbollah to the Palestinian Hamas in the subsequent Israel-Hamas war motivated by power interests. Rather, the Iran's war intervention can best be understood as produced by the Islamic Republic being trapped in its own long-standing commitment to Palestinian armed struggle. The commitment became a trap because Iran found itself between two opposing forces: its long-standing commitment to support Palestinian armed struggle on the one hand, and its own or its Lebanese proxy group's lack of willingness or preparation to engage in war with Israel in fulfilling of the commitment on the other hand. Ultimately, the Islamic Republic decided to go ahead with its commitment, even if indirectly through sending its Lebanese proxy group to war with Israel, in order to avoid political audience cost and international reputation damage – the possible prices of abandoning foreign policy commitments.

Finally, it has to be recognized that the final account of this recent event may not be possible before the currently classified information (minutes of official and unofficial correspondences and meetings) become accessible to the public. However, the currently available, largely indirect and secondary, data lend clear support for the main argument of the article.

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### **Conflict of interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

### **Ethical standards**

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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