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**The Morning**

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*Iran is at the center of the current turmoil in the Middle East. To help you understand why, my colleague Alissa Rubin, who has spent years reporting from the region, takes over today's newsletter. — David Leonhardt*

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By [Alissa J. Rubin](#)

**Good morning. We're also covering Israel, tech layoffs and stingless bees.**



Tehran Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

## A more assertive Iran

Iran has emerged as the chief architect in multiple conflicts strafing the Middle East, from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf.

It trained and helped arm the Iraqi militias that killed three U.S. service members with a drone in Jordan this weekend. It supplied Hamas and Hezbollah in their clashes with Israel. It launched missiles at anti-Iranian militants inside Pakistan in response to the bombing of a local police station in December. And it has helped Houthi warriors in Yemen attack container ships in the Red Sea to protest the war in Gaza. All of which, taken together, threaten a wider war.

Why is Iran suddenly involved in so many conflicts? Today's newsletter will try to answer that question.

Since the 1979 takeover of Iran by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the country's Islamic revolutionary government has had one overriding ambition: to be the lead player

shaping the future of the Middle East. Seen another way, it wants Israel weaker and the United States gone from the region after decades of primacy.

Like Israel, Iran sees existential threats everywhere and seeks to counter them. Iran, which has a Shiite majority, has wary, if not hostile, Sunni Arab neighbors. Its archenemy, Israel, has the reach to damage Iran. And since 2003, Iran has been surrounded by U.S. troops in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Persian Gulf and more recently in Syria. The troops in Afghanistan are gone now, but the rest remain, including the ones attacked by drone on Sunday.

To achieve regional hegemony and safeguard its theocracy, Iran has responded on three fronts: military, diplomatic and economic. Those efforts have become more assertive in the past year, especially since the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas.

## **Military power**

Militarily, Iran's government wants to project strength without drawing fire on its own territory, which could jeopardize its already tenuous popular support. Its strategy has been to build up regional proxy forces so that it rarely launches attacks from its own soil.

Those forces include Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Gaza and a handful of Shiite militias in Iraq. Each has its own goals, but all are in agreement with Iran about combating Western troops in the region and diminishing Israel's standing. The United States designates each of them as a foreign terrorist organization. Since the October attack on Israel, these groups have targeted Israel's northern front, U.S. positions in Iraq and Syria, U.S. warships and international cargo ships in the Red Sea.

Israel is the region's only nuclear-armed power. But in the [past year](#), Tehran has accelerated its uranium enrichment efforts — bringing it close to creating a nuclear bomb if it wants. Iran insists it doesn't want one. But it's clear that the government sees the ability to make one as both a deterrent and a claim to pre-eminence among other Middle Eastern countries.

## **Diplomatic power**

Iran's foreign policy is designed to try to reverse its image as an isolated nation — particularly after the U.S. intensified sanctions in 2018. Even before Oct. 7, it was cultivating its Arab neighbors as well as Russia and China. Early in 2023, for the first time in decades, Iran normalized relations with Saudi Arabia, repairing a rift between the two countries in a deal brokered by China.

Iran is a vocal defender of the Palestinian national cause. It believes it draws legitimacy from the contrast with its neighbors, many of which have opened friendlier relations with Israel while Iran's proxies are still fighting it. Iran has worked since late fall alongside its neighbors — including formerly hostile Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — for a U.N. cease-fire resolution for Gaza.

## Economic survival

Economically, Iran has had far more limited success dodging U.S. sanctions, leaving many Iranians poorer and more resentful of the government. The regime faced widespread protests in 2022 and 2023 over hijab mandates, and the nation's supreme leader has been urging women to vote in upcoming elections, signaling his concern that the government has antagonized them.

Still, Iran has found ways to take advantage of a rising tide of anti-U.S. feeling among many countries. Tehran joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is led by Russia and China, and another partnership that includes Brazil and India. These deals open the door to investment and trade opportunities, although they supply few short-term economic solutions.

“There's a good case to be made that Iran is a major winner from this conflict,” said Dalia Dassa Kaye, a political scientist at the Burkle Center for International Relations at the University of California, Los Angeles. “The war is in many ways boosting Iranians' domestic, regional and global situation.”

She added, “So far, Iran has been able to gain all these benefits without paying direct costs.”

## More on the drone attack

- American forces spotted the Iraqi militants' drone before the attack but [mistook it for a U.S. aircraft](#) and did not shoot it down, officials said.
- The U.S. identified the three slain service members as [Army Reservists from Georgia](#), part of an engineering company trained to build infrastructure for the military on short notice.
- An Iranian official rebuffed accusations that Iran had ordered the strikes and said [militias acted independently](#) to oppose “any aggression and occupation.”

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