America Needs a Decisive Israeli Victory

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 25.10.2023

The outcome of the Gaza war will determine who dominates the Middle East in America's great power competition with China and Russia. A decisive Israeli victory will pave the way for a strengthened pro-American alliance of the Jewish state and the Gulf Arab monarchies. Anything less will spell the loss of American influence in this key region. For America to prevail, Israel's victory must be overwhelmingly decisive, impressive if not shocking, and leave the region permanently changed.

On October 7, Israel suffered a devastating and unprecedented attack, resulting in a catastrophic loss of civilian life. Israel's image as a strong country, as a reliable military power, and as an intelligence leader, have endured an equally shocking blow—one with far-reaching and unavoidable consequences. The eyes of the entire region, friends and foes alike, are now on Israel to see what its response will be, and the nature of that response will determine their approach to the Jewish state for years to come. Will Israel prove itself to be a powerhouse that was momentarily caught with its guard down, or a country too hesitant and lacking in determination to survive in the jungle that is the Middle East.

It's not only Israel's image which has been badly damaged by the shocking intelligence and operational failures of October 7. Allies and friends of America, no less than its enemies, are waiting to see what the United States will do now that its closest partner in the region has been brutally attacked and humiliated. America is being tested no less than Israel; the outcome will determine whether regional states will ally with America or with China and Russia. In other words, the Gaza war will determine whether the American-led order in the Middle East is still sustainable, or rather a relic of a historical period whose time has passed.

Since the end of World War II, the American-led order has rested, fundamentally, on the credibility of the claim that the United States will use its power to underwrite the security of its formal treaty allies in Western Europe and East Asia and its informal allies in the Middle East. And even though Israel has never and does not seek American forces to fight on its behalf, nor does it seek formal

security guarantees from the U.S., the credibility of American security commitments around the world is currently on the line.

In the Middle East, the Saudis are already flirting with China as an alternative superpower with strategic influence. If the U.S. fails to support Israel and instead tries to restrain it, why should Saudi Arabia, a country that enjoys far less support among the American people or in Congress than Israel does, expect any significant U.S. assistance in a future confrontation with Iran and its proxies?

The power equation of the current conflict in Gaza is therefore the same for both Israel and the United States: Israel needs a decisive victory, and the U.S. needs a decisive Israeli victory. But what does decisive mean? Israel is currently deep in the red. In order to rehabilitate itself, Israel's response must go well beyond merely responding to the Hamas attack. It must demonstrate its power to eliminate its foes and ensure the physical security of its people by creating new realities on the ground that will resonate throughout the region.

The strategic concept by which Israel has related to Gaza since Hamas took over the Strip in 2007 and began waging war against Israel has obviously failed. The total destruction of the Hamas regime in Gaza is obviously necessary. And make no mistake, achieving any version of this goal will come at a devastating cost to the Gazan population.

Contrary to often well-meaning protests in the West, there is no easy line between Hamas and the population of Gaza. In reality, Hamas was elected by Gazans in 2006; if elections were held today, it would win again by even larger margins. The death and destruction that is about to be unleashed on Gaza is necessary to defeat the regime, and only Hamas and its Gazan supporters are to blame.

But if Israel's response is limited to simply devastating Hamas and the territory in which it has firmly implanted itself, the stain of the successful surprise attack will continue to haunt us. The whole world saw the extent of Israel's vulnerability on October 7. The governments and peoples of the region who hate us will be eager to repeat the large-scale atrocities they have been witnessing on television and social media for weeks—this time, on an even greater scale.

If Israel has learned anything from the events of the past two weeks, it must be that it is absolutely unacceptable to allow a terror-state that calls for your destruction to establish itself on your border. Period. The idea that the monster at

the door can be endlessly deterred through occasional skirmishing and superior weaponry has been tried and found sorely wanting. Israel must therefore take this moment to fundamentally change the situation in which it is held hostage by not one but two genocidal terror states, Hamas and Hezbollah—the sole purpose for whose existence is to destroy Israel.

Israel's conflict with Hezbollah is inevitable. This Iranian proxy has been preparing itself to commit mass murder inside our country since Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000, and in a more sophisticated way since the Second Lebanon War in 2006. Its vast missile arsenal has been built for one reason only, and that is to kill thousands or tens of thousands of Israelis. It waits only for the right moment.

What Hamas was able to do last week is mild compared to what Hezbollah has been preparing to do since 2006. The question is not whether this conflict happens. It is simply whether we will allow Hezbollah to initiate the conflict on its terms and on its timeline, or if we will make the decision that this current war will not end without the destruction of the Hezbollah threat, on Israel's terms and on Israel's timeline.

But make no mistake, our fight is finally not only with Hamas or Hezbollah. It is with Iran. The Persians play chess, and in the regional power game, Hamas is a pawn, Hezbollah is a rook, and Iran is queen. Iran is the regional actor calling the shots, and Iran is the actor who must finish this war having suffered a clear strategic loss to its regional position and assets. Otherwise, Iran and its patrons and allies win, and the U.S. and Israel lose.

The strategic goal of the Islamic Republic is to establish itself as the dominant power from Tehran to Tel Aviv, and from Mashhad to Mecca; to establish the "Shiite crescent" and ultimately to wrest the holy cities of Islam from Saudi-Sunni control. Israel has been the central force standing in the way of this vision, and Israel's very existence has been the target of Iran's genocidal ambitions since the 1979 revolution.

In the broader regional context, an Iranian-dominated Middle East means a Russian-and-Chinese-dominated Middle East. Iran has had complex relations with both Russia and China for many years. However, in the past few years, complexity has given way to clarity. Despite Chinese and Russian hesitations over Iran's

Islamist worldview, both countries have strengthened their strategic ties with the Islamic Republic. A win for Tehran in the Middle East is therefore a win for Moscow and Beijing on the global chess board.

It is therefore a strategic imperative for both Washington and Jerusalem that the Gaza war ends with a blow to Iran's positions. Hezbollah is the Iranian front line, but the IRGC forces in Syria and Iraq are the most obvious direct targets. An attack on Iran's nuclear facilities, so long planned for, should be on the table as soon as Hezbollah has been neutralized. Devastating Hamas and Hezbollah and exacting a major price from Iran for the behavior of its proxies will come at a tremendous cost to Israel, but an even greater cost to its enemies. It is the only sufficient end to this war that can turn around what is currently a strategic disaster that threatens both America and Israel.

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