

Israel needs a high-intensity campaign strategy against Iran

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

Iran's unprecedented missile and drone attack against Israel last night is the pinnacle of a decades-long Iranian campaign that has been ongoing since the Islamic regime took power during the 1979 revolution. Over the years, Iran has gradually built a sophisticated proxy system and, with the exception of very few instances, has preferred to fight Israel via its proxies. Hiding behind them is part of Tehran's calculated strategy, which strives to distance Iran from war or any punishment for acts of terror, despite the Islamic Republic's key role in training, funding, directing, and, at times, actively dispatching its proxies.

Now, feeling obligated to restore its eroded deterrence vis-à-vis Israel following the targeted killings attributed to the latter in Damascus in early April, Iran has chosen to take a public stand and attack Israel directly using its advanced drones and missiles. This is not a comprehensive strategic shift on Iran's part. As soon as the strike ended, and before its scope had even been confirmed, Tehran clearly signaled, via its UN embassy, that it wished to end this historical event and return to normal.

Israel cannot go back to October 6. It must not allow Iran to surround it with a tightening ring of fire while making intolerable threats of a potentially nuclear nature.

However, Israel does not operate in a vacuum either and is required to coordinate its actions with the Biden administration, both by virtue of the strategic alliance forged between the two countries and in view of the implications of an Israeli assault against Iran on local US forces and interests. Tehran seems to regard the United States as the weaker player in this arena, and therefore, since the Israel-Hamas War broke out, has instructed its proxies to carry out dozens of attacks against US interests in Iraq and Syria, in an effort to make President Biden pressure Israel to stop the war. The partial US response to the lethal drone strike in early January by Iran's Iraqi proxy, Kataib Hizballah, killing 3 US troops, appears to have only partially and temporarily deterred Tehran. The United States had, once again, chosen to retaliate against the Iraqi proxy, instead of its

Iranian master.

Thus, although Quds Force Commander, Ismail Qaani, has reportedly instructed Iraqi Shiite militia groups to desist attacks against US interests, and has probably attempted to convince the Houthis in Yemen to do the same, the Iraqi militias have renewed (albeit not significantly) their assaults against US forces in Syria, while the Houthis continue to attack US sea vessels. Tehran itself, during its strike against Israel last night, threatened to attack any US forces that would help Israel in its retaliation against Iran. It is therefore clear that Iran views the United States as the weakest link and more easily pressured player.

Israel must formulate a comprehensive strategy for a high-intensity campaign against Iran, that could include peaks during which Iran would attempt to take direct action against Israel. Otherwise, Tehran would probably prefer to go back to operating via its proxies, given that direct Iranian actions against Israel would help form a regional coalition against Tehran, composed primarily of Jordan and Egypt, and supported by the United States, United Kingdom, and France (as seen in action last night). Such a coalition could shift from defensive to offensive mode since Iran is threatening to take action against any country supportive of Israel's defense efforts.

Israel appears to have certain latitude vis-à-vis Iran, despite US pressure. The Biden administration opposes broad conflict that would run the risk of regional war. At the same time, if Israel and the United States choose to restrain their response, Iran would interpret their inaction as permission to attack Israel, the United States' ally, directly, as well as other US partners in the region (to which Iran poses a threat) without paying the price for doing so. Furthermore, war breaking out between Iran and Israel still seems a long way off, allowing Israel to take action against Iran without necessarily leading the region to war. For instance, Israel could utilize the unprecedented Iranian attack to strike Iran kinetically when it is most suitable and convenient, whereas Tehran, which suffers from an acute domestic legitimacy crisis and can still collectively recall the destruction and aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), would think twice before aggravating its conflict with Israel. The cyberattack weapons that Israel has developed over the years could also serve it to repay Iran by damaging its essential infrastructure in an arena where responsibility is not unequivocally assumed by anyone.

Israel's updated security strategy should include various aspects, primary among which are: the desirable *modus operandi* vis-à-vis Iran; increased coordination with the United States on efforts to thwart the drone, missile, and terror infrastructure in Iran and the region; strengthening the IDF's force buildup so that it would tally with the challenge posed by Iran; and closing the various gaps that enable Iran to carry out cyberattacks and influence campaigns in Israel.

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Unity is more than just a naïve cliché, it's a matter of national security

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 14.04.2024

This is The Plan. All we have to do, is not cooperate with the plot and understand that unity is more than just a naïve cliché, but a matter of national security.

The Creation and Consequences of the Iranian Threat Network

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 14.04.2024

Countering Iran's influence across the region is a strategic imperative of the highest order for Israel and the US. Decisive action against Hezbollah and the Houthis is a crucial first step, while direct action against Iran is the only path to a prosperous and stable Middle East in the long term.

Biden Misinterprets Iran's Proxy Warfare

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

Iran cannot be absolved of responsibility for the terrorist actions of its clients.

The US is absolving Iran of responsibility for terrorist proxies

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

By striking only at Iranian proxy targets, Biden signals he is still seeking to "restore trust" between Washington and Tehran in order to revive the JCPOA.

Israel Must Target the "Head of the Octopus" - Iran

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

Israel must take action against Iran as part of its post-Oct. 7 updated doctrine of security. To protect its borders, Israel can no longer be content with fighting Iran's proxies, but rather must target Iran itself, in keeping with that country's critical role in the destabilization of Israel's security.

Since Oct. 7, an ongoing dispute has emerged as to the extent of Iran's

involvement in Hamas's fatal attack, with an emphasis on the question of whether Iran knew of the attack in advance and took part in planning it. Even if Tehran was not aware of the attack, its responsibility for the massacre and the horrific terror committed by Hamas is clear to all. In point of fact, Hamas would not have been able to carry out the attack without the systematic assistance it has been receiving from Tehran for decades.

Some of the information disclosed since the attack has served to reveal with greater clarity the extent of Iran's responsibility and involvement. First the heads of Hamas's military wing had been in regular contact with the heads of Iran's security apparatus, sharing with them their plans for taking actions against Israel. In an interview on Iranian media on November 8, Esmail Kowsari, currently a member of the Iranian Majles' Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, and formerly a high-ranking commander in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (among other positions, he served as head of the IRGC forces in Tehran), stressed the part taken by the head of the IRGC's Qods Force, Qasem Soleimani (who was eliminated by the U.S. in January 2020), in the planning of Hamas's attacks.

Kowsari stated that the Head of Hamas's military Wing, Mohammad Deif, had planned many of Hamas's operation in concert with Soleimani, and that accordingly, "The capability required for that operation is not a matter of a day or two, but rather goes back several years." Beyond the planning, Kowsari mentioned Tehran's responsibility for building up Hamas's force, saying that "The resistance front empowered Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and as a result Hamas carried out this operation with high capabilities." This intensive collaboration continued even after Soleimani's elimination and survived the crisis which took place in the Iran-Hamas relationship following Hamas's support of the Syrian insurgents. As may be recalled, in the first few years following the outbreak of the war in Syria, Hamas relocated its command posts from Syria to Qatar, and terrorists from its military wing even took part in the battles, fighting at the side of the rebels against Assad's forces.

Yet Hamas later changed its policy, and did so to an even greater extent once it became clear that Assad had managed to survive thanks to the support he had received from Russia and Iran. The relationship between Assad and Hamas has not been fully restored since (despite the historic meeting held in Damascus between Assad and top Hamas officials Khalil al-Hayya and Osama Hamdan in October 2022). However, it appears that the collaboration between Iran and

Hamas's military wing persisted over the years, despite Iran's attempt to undermine Hamas in Gaza, primarily by establishing a competing organization, Al-Sabireen, in 2014.

Thus, in a paper published in December, Leila Seurat, a researcher of the Palestinian sphere from the research institute "The Arab Centre for Research and Political Studies" who had demonstrated her access to Hamas by holding interviews with the heads of the organization in Gaza and Lebanon, explained that the top officials of Hamas's military wing, most notably the wing's deputy commander Marwan Issa, have over the years maintained a strong relationship with Iran, notwithstanding the damage caused to Iran-Hamas relations by the war in Syria. As part of that relationship, she notes, "Issa would regularly visit Tehran whenever he was able."

Moreover, statements issued by Tehran have also helped in better understanding its crucial contribution to the development of Hamas's tunnel system. In an interview with Iranian media in mid-November, Iranian commentator Amir Moussaoui, who is allegedly an IRGC official and is considered one of the regime's principal mouthpieces in the Arab media, recounted that Soleimani had provided Hamas with advanced technologies so that the organization could enhance its subterranean system. According to him, Hamas was able to enhance that system owing to Soleimani's direct supervision of the technological equipment provided to Hamas by the Qods Force, thanks to which Hamas successfully constructed a sophisticated subterranean system across Gaza. In this context, he explained that the Hamas terrorists constructed the tunnels to be resistant to attempts to flood them with either poisonous gases or water.

Furthermore, in early January the IDF revealed terrorism infrastructure and components for the manufacture and development of precision rockets of Hamas, carried out under Iranian guidance in Darj Tufah in the Gaza Strip. This revelation makes it clear that Iran has been smuggling advanced knowledge into the Gaza Strip, in the form of training courses provided by it to Hamas and Islamic Jihad experts in its territory (as publicly stated by the Islamic Jihad's representative in Tehran, Nasser Abu-Sharif, in an interview with the media in November 2018). The training provided in Tehran to Mohammed Zouari (who was eliminated in 2016), one of the significant founders of Hamas's UAV array, also demonstrates Iran's determination to export its knowledge to Hamas in Gaza, with the aim of supplementing the tunnel system, which has been facing certain

difficulties after El-Sisi's Egypt has been taking action against it to a certain extent.

The Iran-Hamas relationship is not one of authority, but rather a strategic partnership, in which Tehran equips Hamas with the best of technologies and weaponry available to it. As part of the new security doctrine which Israel is now called upon to formulate, Israel cannot tolerate Iran's subversive influence in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, as a complementary act to Israeli military control of the Gaza Strip and to the establishment of a thwarting array on or near the Philadelphi Route, it must take direct action against Iran. This is due to the fact that Iran forms the "head of the octopus" and the principal supplier which trains, funds, arms and equips Hamas; and past experience has shown that it will soon strive to rebuild Hamas after the war is over.

Accordingly, and in light of Iran's additional responsibility for promoting terrorism on Israel's northern border, Israel must adopt a new and current strategy as self-defense against the activity being promoted by Iran striving to destroy Israel by encircling it and subjecting it to an untenable significant threat. The purpose of that strategy will be to prevent the rise and establishment of a militia backed by Iran on Israel's borders. Within that scope, alongside its ongoing efforts in the Gaza Strip, Israel must also directly strike within Iran, against the capabilities conferred by Iran on its proxies in the region, while also taking further action against the Qods Force. Thus, it must carry out targeted strikes against Iran's UAV capabilities and missile program, on the well-founded assumption that any weaponry currently in Iranian hands will eventually come into the possession of its proxies across the region.

Concurrently with that course of action, Israel can no longer permit Hamas's continued funding by Iran. Therefore, alongside the policy of sanctions, which has proved to be ineffective in completely preventing the continued Iranian financing, Israel must cut off the financial resources used by Iran to remit the funding, including money changers used as intermediaries in Hawala transactions with changers from the Gaza Strip.

The proposed Israeli intensive action against Iran is not expected to bring about a war with Iran; first, because Tehran would fear that such war would be playing into Israel's hands since it would legitimize an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. Second, in light of the prolonged crisis of legitimacy suffered by the

Iranian regime, it is highly doubtful that it would willingly choose to enter a war which could risk its domestic survival. Third, Tehran understands that, in the scenario of a war with Israel, the U.S. would find it difficult not to intervene and would be forced to join the fray due to Israel's strategic importance for the American policy in the region and due to the shared values forming the foundation of the deeply entrenched alliance between Israel and the U.S.

The West needs to send a message to the Houthis

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

If Iran and the Houthis don't pay a heavy price for their attempt to impose a naval blockade, not only will international trade be severely jeopardized, but so will the security of the entire region.

Iran Fears Full-Scale Regional War

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

Israel should attack the Qods Force apparatus in Iran and across the region.

Tehran's regional militia network

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 14.04.2024

Iranian strategy in the Middle East has long centered on nurturing regional

proxies and partners — a so-called “Axis of Resistance” — to mount an existential threat to Israel by encircling it in a ring of fire composed of heavily armed militias arrayed along its borders. This keeps Israel busy having to defend itself on multiple fronts, thus presumably deterring it from attacking Iran. The bloody war between Israel and Hamas sparked by the latter’s Oct. 7 massacre is the first large-scale implementation of this Axis of Resistance doctrine. Whereas the legacy of the late commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, was defined by the growth of Tehran’s regional militia network, his successor’s, Esmail Ghaani’s, lasting contribution will be the network’s entry into the battlefield in a comprehensive and coordinated manner.

The Soleimani legacy

As commander of the Quds Force, Soleimani was the senior commander to whom Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, assigned the task of developing and expanding the exportation of the Islamic Revolution in the Middle East. This is the same job Khamenei had originally assigned to the Quds Force in 1989, shortly after he became supreme leader. Upon assuming office in 1998 as Quds Force commander, Soleimani began to cooperate extensively with Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, as this partnership empowered Hezbollah’s capabilities and underscored the group’s position as the spearhead of the pro-Iranian militia array in the region.

This alliance already included at the time the Badr Corps in Iraq, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the latter of which had by then escalated its attacks against the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in southern Lebanon and even began launching missiles toward Israeli territory after the 1992 assassination of its Secretary-General Abbas al-Musawi.

The Iraq War (2003-2011) was Soleimani’s next step in developing the Axis of Resistance. As part of an Iranian determination to prevent Iraq from becoming an American forward operating base that could be used to attack Iran, Soleimani played a significant role in the establishment of Jaish al-Mahdi as soon as the Iraq War broke out in 2003. During this period, he fostered Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and other groups. These militias killed and injured American troops across Iraq in cooperation with the Quds Force and Hezbollah’s Unit 3800, implementing the Iranian strategy that pushed the United States out of Iraq in 2011.

This is how Soleimani managed to turn the threat inherent in the American invasion of Iraq into an opportunity for Iran to significantly increase its foothold in the country. During this period, there was also a notable warming in ties between Iran and Hamas, especially following the meetings of the then-prime minister of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran with Khamenei and then-president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Iran reportedly provided \$250 million to Hamas in December 2006, in a move that reflected the solidifying of relations between the two parties.

Three major events in the second decade of the 2000s led to an unprecedented boom among the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. First, the Arab Spring and especially the Syrian civil war enabled Iran to increase its grip on Syria to ensure the Bashar al-Assad regime's survival. For this mission, the Quds Force formed various Shiite militias in Syria, including the Afghan Fatemiyoun and Pakistani Zeinabiyoun brigades. In addition to protecting Assad, they also fulfilled Soleimani's vision: to establish a second northern front against Israel.

Second, the ISIS crisis that broke out in 2014 increased Iraqi dependence on Iran, allowing Tehran to deepen its grip there because of the existential threat the partial occupation by ISIS posed to Iraq. In this framework, Soleimani, who became more and more visible, operated freely throughout Iraq and Syria, dominating the pro-Iranian militias and gradually developing them into a transnational Shi'a army under the leadership of Iran. This phase was critical for the development of the Axis of Resistance, providing the opportunity for its various elements to deeply acquaint themselves with each other, especially through joint participation in conferences in Tehran on topics like countering Israel.

Third, the war in Yemen became an opening for Iran to significantly expand and strengthen the Axis of Resistance, which the Quds Force exploited by arming and training the Houthis. U.S. forces assassinated Soleimani in January 2020, after he systematically grew the Axis of Resistance, which at this stage included militias that possessed advanced military capabilities and operated from a number of key territories across the Middle East, thus constituting strategic depth for Iran. Accordingly, the commander of Iran's Khatam al-Anbia Headquarters, Maj. Gen. Gholam Ali Rashid, revealed in 2021 that three months before Soleimani was eliminated, the then-Quds Force chief asserted in a security discussion in Iran that he had managed to nurture six armies outside of the country: Hezbollah in

Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, the Houthis in Yemen, Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, and militias in Syria. The management of Iran's network of proxies under Soleimani was characterized by centralization, with Soleimani playing a key role thanks to his charismatic personality and strategic military skills. He made himself ubiquitous on the battlefields of Iraq and Syria, regularly surrounding himself with Shiite fighters who admired him.

Ghaani's ascendance

Following Soleimani's death, many commentators speculated whether his successor, Esmail Ghaani, would be able to fill his shoes. After all, Ghaani did not have the same command of Arabic and lacked Soleimani's interpersonal abilities that had enabled him to manage and steer the Axis of Resistance. Ghaani came to the job with a different skill set: He had deep experience in Afghanistan, and a major part of his role as Soleimani's deputy commander was overseeing financial disbursements to elements of the Quds Force's network of foreign militias.

Ghaani also held an inferior military rank to Soleimani's — of brigadier general in the IRGC, compared to the felled Quds Force commander's rank of major general when he was eliminated. Most significantly, Soleimani had a singular connection with Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei, the commander-in-chief of Iran's Armed Forces. As the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) noted in 2019, "[H]is [Soleimani's] close relationship with Khamenei allows him to often directly advise and receive orders outside the traditional chain of command." Coupled with the existence of other more senior commanders in the IRGC, especially Commander-in-Chief Hossein Salami, who himself is a major general, this raised questions as to whether Ghaani would have the same level of standing in the Iranian system as Soleimani enjoyed.

In fact, there was a diffusion in the management of Iran's regional assets after Soleimani's demise. In addition to the IRGC's Quds Force, the IRGC's Intelligence Organization became more active. In July 2021, Hossein Taeb visited Iraq for the first time as commander of the IRGC's Intelligence Organization. Likewise, Iran's intelligence ministry increased its profile in these matters following Soleimani's demise. That is not to mention Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's own growing role as a leader of the Axis of Resistance.

The Gaza comparison

The legacies of Soleimani and Ghaani also differ. Where Soleimani presided over the growth of the Axis of Resistance, Ghaani is masterminding its coordination. A comparison of the broader Axis of Resistance's participation in Gazan conflicts spanning the tenures of Soleimani and Ghaani is instructive. During the 2006 Lebanon War between Israel and Hezbollah, there was no significant kinetic response from other members of Iran's Axis of Resistance, including Hamas. This was despite Soleimani being stationed in Beirut in the course of the hostilities.

During Israeli Operations Cast Lead (2008-09), Pillar of Defense (2012), and Protective Edge (2014), among others, sporadic attacks from Lebanon and Syria coincided with escalations in Gaza. For example, as Operation Cast Lead unfolded, three rockets were fired into northern Israel from Lebanon. Palestinian militants in Syria also fired shots at Israeli forces in January 2009. There was a similarly scattered response from the broader Axis of Resistance during Operation Pillar of Defense, with, for example, two rockets being launched from Lebanon in November 2012 (some others were disarmed by the Lebanese army). Part of this lackluster response can be attributed to Hamas' falling out with Syria's President Assad and Tehran over the civil war, which erupted in 2011.

However, after Soleimani's death, Ghaani made a concerted effort to orchestrate a more cohesive Axis of Resistance. Beginning in 2021, during Operation Guardian of the Walls, pro-Hezbollah media reported that Ghaani twice visited a joint operations room that the IRGC established for Hamas and Hezbollah. These visits featured intelligence sharing and logistics and were reminiscent of Soleimani's stay in Beirut during the 2006 Lebanon War. But Ghaani's trips overlapped with an increasing volley of rockets being fired from multiple theaters, specifically Lebanon and Syria, compared with previous Gazan conflicts during Soleimani's era. There were at least 12 rocket launches from Lebanon and Syria, coupled with provocations at the border fence. Additionally, Israel downed an Iranian drone carrying explosives that at the time was thought to have been launched from either Syria or Iraq.

Fast forward to March and April 2023: Ghaani journeyed to Syria to incite a coordinated attack among Palestinian factions on Israel in response to the latter's strikes that had killed Iranian advisers in Syria. He later traveled to Beirut, where he met with leaders from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad at the Iranian embassy, including Ismail Haniyeh, who was in Lebanon. Those meetings occurred at the same time as Palestinian militants fired the largest salvo of

rockets at Israel since the 2006 Lebanon War as a show of support amid ongoing tensions at the Temple Mount and rocket fire from Gaza.

There have also been reports of significant consultations between Iran and the Axis of Resistance in the weeks leading up to Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, massacre of over 1,200 people in Israel. In the war between Israel and Hamas that has followed, there have been regular attacks against Israeli and U.S. interests not only from Lebanon, but also in Iraq, Syria, and out of Yemen. While the Iranian leadership seeks to keep the attacks below the threshold of what would trigger an armed conflict that could pose a danger to Iran, there has nonetheless been a significant escalation in the response from the Axis of Resistance to Israel's campaign to dislodge Hamas — both qualitatively and quantitatively. Not only have the provocations increased, but their geographical origins have expanded. Since Oct. 7, there have been near-daily attacks from Lebanon on Israel; regular rocket and drone strikes against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria; and, for the first time, the Yemeni Houthis have routinely lobbed missiles and drones at the Jewish state and attacked commercial vessels in international waters. It is worth recalling that the Houthis offered mainly rhetorical and moral support, like fundraising drives, to Hamas during Operation Guardian of the Walls in 2021 — although in one case, Hamas rejected a Houthi offer to provide them with targeting information for a strike on Israel. Whereas, this time, they are mounting regular kinetic operations against it. Indeed, during the Soleimani era, the Houthis never tried entering the Gaza theater.

The Tehran-led Axis of Resistance has already racked up numerous achievements amid the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas. It has punctured the perception of Israeli invincibility and implemented a mutual defense strategy of sorts across several theaters, all without triggering a war that could endanger its Iranian patron. This record is very much a testament to Ghaani's signature, and it will be his legacy. While Soleimani birthed the architecture of the Axis of Resistance, Ghaani integrated the cause and united the fronts.

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Has Iran suffered a strategic misfire?

written by Dr. Yitzhak Klein | 14.04.2024

Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 was a considerable tactical success but a strategic failure, not only for Hamas but for the Iranian regime that funds, arms and trains Hamas. Israel now understands that the policy of temporizing with Iran's regional proxies is a mistake. Iran missed the opportunity to launch a coordinated, multi-front assault on Israel while the latter was un-mobilized and unprepared; with Israel now fully mobilized, the best opportunity for such an assault has passed, even if Hezbollah in Lebanon chooses to exploit the beginning of Israel's ground campaign against Hamas to open a new front to Israel's North.

For Israel however simply to level Gaza and eliminate Hamas would represent a "Tiktok victory," not the genuine strategic victory required to restore its prestige. For the latter kind of victory Israel must inflict severe forfeits upon Iran itself. That requirement must focus Israel's attention on Hezbollah, whose capabilities constitute the major Iranian deterrent against Israel. For Israel, *the road to Tehran must lead through Hezbollah*. Iran's strategic misfire will only have permanent strategic effects if Israel exploits to the full the opportunities it has created. The elimination of Hamas *and* of Hezbollah as a fighting force would represent a significant strategic defeat for Iran, and open the Iranian regime to further blows and strategic forfeits.

For the United States, Iran's attempt to physically eliminate the United States' most committed ally in the region ought to end the policy of appeasing Iran - bribing an aggressive, totalitarian regime to be nice. Rolling back Iranian influence and containing the Iranian regime's ambitions in the region reflect American interests as well as Israel's and the United States should continue to support Israeli action diplomatically and with resources when Israel turns its attention to Hezbollah and beyond. Ultimately it is America's interest to create a regional strategic alliance capable of rolling back and containing Iran's influence in the area while the United States makes major investments elsewhere.

1. Introduction: Hamas' Attack Upon Israel

The attack upon Israel by an Iranian-trained and -equipped Hamas terror brigade

on October 7 was a tactical success, deceiving Israeli intelligence and surprising the Israeli army (henceforth IDF). On the strategic level, however, it was a failure and may lie at the heart of a much wider Iranian strategic failure.

- Captured documents show that the purpose of the attack was to seize *and hold* a significant portion of Israel's south, penetrating 30 km to the Israeli military airbase at Hatzerim and constricting internal communications from the Tel Aviv area to Beer Sheva and points south.[1] These objectives were not achieved.
- Within 24 hours of the initial attack the attacking force disintegrated under Israeli counterstrokes, suffering extremely heavy casualties. While the attack itself was planned in exquisite detail, the forces responsible for executing it were revealed as incapable of reacting intelligently or in coordinated fashion to rapidly shifting battlefield circumstances.[2]

Even if the force from Gaza had succeeded in achieving its assigned objectives, it could not have held on to them for long in the face of the concentrated fighting power of the IDF. The entire attack made no strategic sense as an isolated incursion into Israeli territory. Had Iran's other proxy bordering on Israel, Hezbollah in Lebanon, joined the fight and aimed at analogous strategic objectives in Israel's north while showering Israel's rear areas with rockets and missiles, Israel's strategic situation would indeed have become dire. But Hezbollah did nothing in the opening hours of Hamas' assault and since then has confined itself to a few harassing pinpricks. This paper is a first-order attempt to assess the implications for the regional and global strategic balance.

2. Background: The Multi-Front Threat

Ever since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has invested considerable resources in building up threats to Israel throughout the Middle Eastern region east of the Mediterranean Sea. These include (but are not limited to):

- First and foremost, Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shi'ite militia defined as a terrorist group by the United States and Israel. During the course of the Syrian Civil War (2011-present) Hezbollah was a mainstay of the defense of the regime of Bashar Al-Assad.[3] Thousands of Hezbollah fighters acquired extensive combat experience. Hizbollah's forces now based in southern Lebanon and southwestern Syria, on the Israeli border.

Hezbollah has long planned to launch a ground offensive across Israel's northern border in a manner similar to Hamas' terrorist assault at the start of the present war.[4] In addition, Hezbollah deploys a large number of rockets and missiles, some of them precision guided, dug in and hidden in Lebanon and Syria; the IDF estimates the number of such missiles as well over 150,000.[5] These missiles, if launched against Israel's rear, could inflict major damage on Israel's civilian and military infrastructure, destroying power stations, ports and airports, and interdicting the IDF's ability to mobilize and shift forces on Israel's internal road network.

- Hamas in Gaza, disposing of thousands of missiles and thousands of armed terrorists.
- Iranian-affiliated militia groups based in Syria and Iraq.[6] These militia groups also dispose of a fair number of missiles which can reach Israeli territory, as well as drones and remotely-piloted vehicles (RPVs).[7]
- The Houthi insurgency in Yemen. This group has also been equipped with missiles, drones and RPVs by Iran, which it has used to attack cities and infrastructure targets in Saudi Arabia and which have the range to reach Israel.[8]
- Terrorist groups among Palestinians in Judaea and Samaria ("the West Bank"), motivated by Iranian propaganda[9] and armed with weapons smuggled into the area by Iran.[10] The Israeli army has conducted several significant campaigns within Palestinian cities to root out some of these groups.[11] While Palestinian terror in Judaea and Samaria appears sporadic, it has the potential to surge in time of war and to interdict vital communications routes of the IDF, while exposing Israeli nationals in Judaea and Samaria to the kind of terrorist assault Israel's communities near Gaza suffered on 7 October.
- Domestic insurgents among Arab citizens of Israel. In 2021 Arab citizens of Israel in a number of Israeli cities with mixed Jewish and Arab populations engaged in violent riots in which Jews were attacked.[12] Several Jewish and Arab citizens were killed. Propaganda promoted by Hamas played, and continues to play, a role in encouraging Arab citizens of Israel to engage in violent rebellion.[13] In time of war armed Arab citizens could seek to block major communications routes which the IDF requires in order to move its forces. Such activity, had it emerged during the current war, would have complemented Hamas' plans to interdict

Israeli communications in the region near the Gaza Strip.

An additional element of the potential of a domestic uprising within Israel is the activity of criminal groups within Israeli Arab society. For years Arab criminal gangs have engaged in drug smuggling, protection operations, and other forms of organized crime, and the volume of these activities has increased markedly in recent years. Some of these groups have connections with Hezbollah as a source of illegal drugs, funds and weapons,[14] blurring the line between criminal activity and potential insurgency in wartime to the point of invisibility.

Israel's strategy in the face of the growing multifront threat posed to it by Iranian proxies has been largely defensive. Hezbollah and Israel fought a brief war in 2006 during which Israel inflicted considerable damage on Lebanese infrastructure, and has assumed that this has caused Hezbollah to refrain from launching an attack on Israel with all its resources, ground troops and missiles. In Gaza, Israel has relied on its ability to inflict damage on Hamas' military and, to a lesser degree, civilian infrastructure to deter rather than defeat Hamas. The proliferation of crime, tinged with malignant anti-Israeli religious sentiment among Israeli Arabs, has long been neglected by Israel and Israel is only now struggling to contain and eliminate it. The incursion of Saturday 7 October is widely considered in Israel to signal the bankruptcy of Israel's deterrence strategy, not only against Hamas but in general.

Iran and Hamas have steadily improved the military potential of all these threats. Together, they represent a complex and synergistic threat, compromising Israel's ability to respond simultaneously to assaults on its borders and within its interior.

But on 7 October this threat failed to materialize.

III. Israel Forestalls the Worst of the Multi-Front Threat

In order to maximize the effect upon Israel's security, the multi-front threat needs the essential element of *surprise*: Catching Israel's extensive reserve army unmobilized and preventing its members from reaching their staging bases, taking up their weapons, and proceeding to the border. This surprise was indeed achieved on the Gaza front. However in the crucial first 36 hours after the incursion from Gaza, no other element of the multi-front threat took action against Israel. Hezbollah neither assaulted Israel's northern border nor conducted effective rocket fire against Israel's rear. No mass, coordinated

assault against Israeli military installations or communications took place in Judaea and Samaria. Arab citizens of Israel took no exceptional measures to create disturbances within Israel. By the end of the first 36 hours, Israel mobilized over 300,000 reservists.[15] Israel deployed overwhelming strength not only around Gaza but on the northern border facing Hezbollah, including armored units and ample artillery; from that point on a serious ground assault on Israel's northern defenses by Hezbollah would have been tantamount to suicide. Second-line Israeli forces deployed at numerous points within Judaea and Samaria and indeed within Israel proper. The Department of Internal Security accelerated a plan to distribute 20,000 rifles and the same number of bulletproof vests to local rapid response teams,[16] consisting of superannuated military reserve personnel – generally perfectly healthy men in their late 30s and 40s with a background of military training – and refreshing their training to deal with local terrorist threats. In less than two days Israel became an armed camp, on its borders and within its interior, with its soldiers' defensive reflexes aroused and the soldiers themselves determined not to let an enemy take them by surprise again.

The ensuing ten days have produced no essential change in the situation. Gaza is surrounded and under aerial assault. No significant violent activity has emerged among Israeli Arabs, who must sense that their Jewish neighbors now possess the means, the motives and the mental preparation to react severely to any attempt to repeat the events of 2021. In Judaea and Samaria there has been some attempt to step up terror activity, but this has been met by aggressive, preemptive incursions into Palestinian urban areas by newly reinforced IDF forces.[17]

Most interesting has been the reaction of Hezbollah, or rather its failure to react. Since the war started it has confined itself to a few harassing activities across the border with Israel, mounting neither a significant attempt at incursion into Israel nor a significant rocket assault. Indeed, since the original tactical success of 7th October, the activity of Israel's adversaries has been largely confined to nuisance attacks. Of significant Israeli military or infrastructure installations, only one has had its function compromised.[18]

Hamas' assault upon Israel was carefully prepared by the Iranians over a long period of time. Hamas' forces were trained and armed by Iran. It is now known that in meeting in Beirut earlier this month Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps gave Hamas the green light to go ahead with the attack.[19] But Iran clearly

failed to mobilize the rest of its clients to take advantage of the surprise attack and join it. Hamas attacked, shot its bolt, and nothing remains to it but to face an armed and aroused Israel - alone.

Why Iran failed to launch a coordinated attack on Israel by all its proxies is, at this writing, a matter of speculation. One theory is that Iran and Hizbullah are waiting for Israeli ground forces to become inextricably involved in a ground assault upon Gaza, upon which Hezbollah will launch an extensive rocket and missile assault upon Israel. Such an assault would make most sense, however, as an attempt to interdict Israeli forces attempting to deploy on Israel's northern border, but Hezbollah has already missed that boat. The Israelis are on their northern border in strength, mobilized, supplied, and above all alert and prepared to execute such plans as they have prepared to suppress an attack by Hezbollah, on the ground or by missile.

Another theory is that Iran's control of its proxies' decisionmaking falls far short of complete. Hezbollah may have decided that it has no appetite for a confrontation with Israel. Israeli Arabs who might have been inclined to join in a multifront assault upon Israel appear to have decided that, under present circumstances, prudence is by far the best part of valor.

4. Strategic Implications of the War: The Region

Israel's Strategic Imperative

Let us first consider the war from Israel's perspective. Hamas' attack on 7 October signaled the collapse of Israel's theory of deterrence: That a combination of limited military operations interspersed with economic blandishments could domesticate Hamas and render its assaults against Israel bearable in terms of both extent and frequency. At the same time Hamas' attack has illuminated in frightening detail the true dimensions of Iran's multiple-front buildup of combat power around Israel's borders. Had all of Iran's proxies joined Hamas' surprise attack, Israel's survival would have been far from certain.

Hamas' assault constitutes a potentially mortal blow against Israel's military prestige. To allow Hamas to survive the war is not just a matter of revenge aborted; if Israel cannot eliminate such deadly threats to its security it will be marked indelibly within the Middle East as prey. Despite the limitations we have outlined above, Iran's assault on Israel would be marked with success and its

hegemony within the region would seem to many regional observers to be practically assured.

But Israel's destruction of Hamas is only a necessary, not a sufficient, step to restore its wounded military prestige. For Hamas is only a tool used by Iran to strike a deadly blow against Israel. Whether Hamas survives or not, *Israel cannot permit Tehran to launch such violence against her and emerge unscathed.*

This consideration must focus our attention upon Hezbollah in Lebanon. Distant as Iran is from Israel, its airspace is almost completely exposed to devastating blows by Israel's air force. It has some ability to launch conventionally armed intermediate-range missiles against Israel, but Israel is better equipped than any other party in the region, with the possible exception of the United States military, to defend against such attacks. Iran's deterrent against an Israeli assault is Hezbollah, with its hundred thousand missiles or more and its proximity to Israel's borders. Hitherto this deterrent seems to have been quite effective.

Nonetheless, if it is an existential requirement of Israel's security that Hamas' assault lead to a riposte against Tehran, *Israel's road to Tehran leads through Hezbollah.*

The IDF has long maintained that it is fully prepared to deal with the threat from Hezbollah. In the light of the events of 7th October, one might be excused for taking such statements of bravado with a grain of salt. Certainly no Israeli leader has hitherto felt that it was worth putting the IDF's statements to the test. But the situation today is very different from what it was a month ago, a year ago, a decade ago.

- The IDF is readier than it has ever been to make good on its commitment, with its forces fully mobilized.
- The danger, indeed the folly, of Israel's previous strategy, of assuming that it can forever deter Iran from launching its proxies against Israel, is now clear. It would be folly to allow Iran to continue to develop Hizbollah's capacities, using no more than the methods – chiefly interdiction flights in Syrian airspace – Israel has used till now.
- Israel *has no choice* but to act against Iran. Therefore, whether Hezbollah chooses to launch an attack against Israel when Israel's ground operation against Gaza begins or whether Israel initiates its own attack against Hezbollah at a later time of its own choosing, Israel's preferred strategy

has to be to take the initiative and actively destroy the threat from Hezbollah.

Iran's Strategic Misfire

In failing to launch a coordinated, multi-front war against Israel, Iran seems to have lost its best chance to accomplish its aim of destroying Israel. The forces it deploys around Israel now confront an immensely larger, more powerful and thoroughly aroused Israeli army and nation. Iran's strategic misfire can result in the destruction of much of the regional military infrastructure it has built up patiently over many years. However, this outcome is entirely dependent on Israel exploiting to the full the advantages it has obtained by Iran's misfire, using its mobilized military power to take Hamas and Hezbollah off the board and inflicting on Iran punishment for its role in the massacre of 7th October. If Israel fails to do so Iran will be saved from the consequences of its own failure and free to create another 7th of October, this time in a more complete manner, at some time in the near to middle-term future.

The Regional Strategic Balance

The strategic balance in the region is deeply affected by the behavior of global actors, including the United States, China and Russia, and we shall discuss the relationship between the region and the United States' global interests in the next section. For the moment however let us consider the region as a self-contained strategic ecosystem.

The primary axis of confrontation in the region is between Israel and Iran. Israel added greatly to its wealth, power and prestige between 2003, the year when it began to emerge from a domestic economic crisis, and perhaps 2021, by which time Israel's status as a wealthy and significant global technological power – Israel joined the OECD club of rich countries in 2010 – was firmly established. Israel's growth during this period was an important factor in encouraging conservative Sunni Arab regimes to seek collaboration with her, some of them actually establishing relations with Israel in the framework of the Abraham Accords. Beginning in 2021, states in the region began to understand more clearly Israel's vulnerabilities: Its hesitation to act decisively against Iranian proxies or against domestic insurrectionists.

The policy of conservative Sunni regimes in the Gulf in the past few years can be described as vacillation, uncertain whether to band together with Israel against the threat of Iranian imperialism or to bandwagon with Iran as the rising regional power. The calculus of these regimes is of course affected by American policy as well, which since 2020 has been one of appeasement of Iran, a continuation of the policy of 2012-2016.

If Israel recaptures the strategic initiative, destroys the most significant elements of Iran's strategic encirclement and inflicts serious forfeits on Iran, it will do much to restore its damaged prestige. Iran's own prestige and regional power will in turn suffer a heavy blow, shifting the regional balance against it compared to the situation *ex ante*. This situation may allow Israel to continue the diminution of Iranian power in cooperation with other nations who, friendly or unfriendly, share an interest with Israel in rolling back Iran's presence in the region: Turkey, Azerbaijan, and of course the Gulf states.[20] A condition of this development is that Israel *strike while the iron is hot*: take advantage of the present relative weakening of the Iranian strategic situation now that the Israeli army and public opinion is mobilized, and resolve to take the initiative to eliminate both Hamas and Hezbollah.

As this is being written, Hezbollah has refrained from becoming deeply involved in the current war. If Hizbollah's reluctance to become involved continues, that is all to the good from Israel's perspective; it is to Israel's advantage to fight on only one front at a time. If Hezbollah does choose now to throw all its resources into an attack on Israel, then of course Israel will have to fight on two fronts simultaneously, though under much better conditions than if Hezbollah had joined Hamas in the surprise attack of 7 October. Even if Hezbollah refrains from attacking Israel, though, that does not mean that Israel enjoys the luxury of refraining for long from initiating a showdown with Hezbollah, at a time and in circumstances of Israel's choosing.

In Israel today there is much talk, if not necessarily in government circles, of the need to make an example of Hamas and of Gaza: To turn Gaza into an uninhabitable ruin and physically eliminate Hamas. Hamas has to be eliminated, and if the way to do this that is most economical of Israeli lives is to destroy every building in Gaza, then those buildings will have to be destroyed. But turning Gaza into an ugly ruin is a Tiktok victory, not a strategic victory. As far as the Iranians are concerned Hamas is a shruggable loss, and in and of itself does not represent

a significant shift in the regional strategic balance as long as Hezbollah and its strategic deterrent effect on Israel are in place. It is only once that strategic deterrent is removed, even at a high cost, that the vulnerability of Iran's position in Syria and indeed over Iran's own airspace will come into play and observers in the region and the world will note that a significant shift in the regional balance, against Iran, has taken place.

5. Global Strategic Implications

This is not the place for an exhaustive critique of American security policy since 2008. Suffice it to say that successive American administrations have displayed pathetic strategic amateurism, as if the perception of American loss of interest in one part of the globe – the Middle East in 2012-2016 and 2020-2023, Western Europe in 2017-2020 – will not affect the behavior of numerous states and the global balance of power. Nor can one pass over the folly of attempting to come to understandings with aggressive totalitarian powers until one first gives them to understand, through deeds not words, that their attempts at aggression will be resolutely rebuffed.

The previous comment is not meant to imply that the United States cannot or should not prioritise its investments, but that it cannot and should not be perceived as simply giving up on this or that region. The only sure outcome of such a policy is to invite aggression against American allies and the global economic and alliance system in which the United States has made an 80-year investment. Fundamentally, in the face of an aggressive global stance by the leading trio of aggressive totalitarian regimes, China Russia and Iran, an American policy of burden-sharing is appropriate: The United States will invest in deterrent and warfighting abilities to help nations willing to make similar investments themselves. While the response of some American allies has been dilatory – France clueless, Germany strangled by its own bureaucracy – others understand this issue very well: Poland, the Scandinavian countries, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India – and of course Israel.

The United States has neglected to maintain investment in its own military and in its global alliance system for two decades, and the result is that it will have to contend with a much higher financial and military burden in the next two decades. That is inevitable if it chooses to maintain its position as a global power. Iran's strategic stumble represents however an opportunity not only for

Israel but for the United States – *provided it is seized upon resolutely*. The policy of appeasing Iran must end. The United States must recognize that it is in its global interest that Iran's regional power be rolled back, its incipient nuclear weapons program eliminated, and other states in the region be motivated to bandwagon with the United States as against the aggressive Iranian regime. Doing so will be expensive in dollar terms, and to a lesser extent in terms of military resources, but less so than continuing the present foolish policy of appeasement.

The Biden Administration has taken two important steps in the right direction. One step is to call for providing Israel with \$14 billion in additional military aid.[21] The other is the mobilization of the United States Navy to give Iran to understand that if it intervenes in Israel's current war it will have a military confrontation with the United States to deal with.[22] Will the United States make good on this threat? Nobody knows for sure, and that includes the regime in Tehran.

A viable American policy in the region will require a long-term, consistent and resolute commitment – to the right policy rather than just to money or arms. The United States must speak with an unequivocal voice: It must insist that containing and rolling back the Iranian regime's regional influence is the only acceptable way of dealing with this aggressive, totalitarian regime. As it has begun, so it must go on, supporting Israel unequivocally, diplomatically as well as with military supplies, as it performs what is in American interests as well as its own vital interest – destroying Hezbollah and setting back the entire Iranian agenda in the region. And it must encourage the formation of an Israeli-conservative Sunni security consortium, armed and trained to maintain a blockade of Iranian expansionist ambitions, while the United States proceeds with greater and more vital investments elsewhere.

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https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180705_Williams_HezbollahMissiles_v3.pdf

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https://missilethreat.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/191211_IranianMissilesIraq.pdf)

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weapons against Israel
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