

Need to focus on crushing Hamas

written by David M. Weinberg | 15.12.2023

Humanitarian concerns, both for the one hundred or so Israeli civilians still held hostage by Hamas and for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian civilians held hostage by Hamas, must be secondary.

Gaza's lesson for Judea and Samaria

written by Noa Lazimi | 15.12.2023

Israel must maintain full security control and its civilian communities in this strategically critical territory.

America wants to help - but it is undermining the war effort

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 15.12.2023

The practical way to ensure a quick and effective military operation with minimal risk to the uninvolved population is to temporarily relocate this population outside the combat zones.

The Gaza war is only a part of Iran's grand plan

written by Joseph Rozen | 15.12.2023

During a UN Security Council meeting on the 24th of October, the secretary general, Antonio Guterres, said that Hamas' October 7th attacks on Israel "did not happen in a vacuum". He was not wrong - Hamas' attacks were planned and executed with the close assistance of Iran, which continues to arm, guide, finance, and activate its proxies in the Middle East.

The Israel-Gaza war has repercussions on the international fight against Iran and its other accomplices. Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Syria, Iraq, and recently in Sudan, are all Iranian agents of chaos and terror, who serve Iran's interests - to create a Shia-dominate strip stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea to shift the leadership of the Muslim world from Sunni countries to Iran, end the US presence in the Middle East and destroy Israel. Besides Iranian direct support, the use of these proxies would not have been effective without an envelope-supporting system of private entities, with the ability to enable money transfers, technologies, communications, etc.

The current situation in the Middle East provides an opportunity to increase global efforts to stop Iran's malign behavior, not only by sanctioning Iran and its proxies but also use complementary measures to sanctions and target private companies which assist Iran in executing terror activities.

The Military Sphere

After the fog of October 7th atrocities faded away, the Israeli defense forces were able to recover Iranian-produced weapons used by Hamas during the October 7th attack. The Foundation For Defense of Democracies (FDD) reported that 60mm mortar rounds with Iranian-made AZ111 mortar round fuses and M112 demolition charges were used by Hamas in the attack. Evidence shows that these components were produced in Iran and appear in a catalogue of the Defense Industries organization, an Iranian company that is affiliated with the Ministry of Defense of Iran. The M112 explosives recovered were identical to those intercepted by US-led operations in Yemen and Bahrain to stop smugglers.

In addition to these familiar weapons, the IDF has also recovered new Iranian-made warheads for Rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPG) that were not seen before. In the new warhead, the first charge is designed to penetrate light armoured vehicles and the second charge is thermobaric, aimed at burning the target.

The latest launching of drones and cruise missiles by the Houthis in Yemen towards Israel demonstrated more Iranian weapons variety. Since November last year, the US Navy seized many weapons and munitions en route to Yemen, in the area of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. These included explosives, ammunition, weapons and missiles, which are in the use of Hamas and other proxies as well.

Iran's creativity goes as far as its cruelty in its efforts to maintain a flow of arms to Iranian proxies in the region. Following the devastating earthquakes that hit Syria in February 2023, the IRGC used humanitarian assistance as camouflage to transfer weapons and crucial components to assist with Hezbollah's efforts to turn their rockets more accurate. Recently, Syria accused Israel of launching simultaneous missile attacks against its airports, probably to stop the already known route of weapons transfer from Iran to Syria and further to Hezbollah. After the destruction of these airports, Russia hurried to allow Iranian flights to use the "Khmeimim" air base in Syria. This is happening while Hezbollah and Shia militias in Syria have been targeting Israel with rockets since October 7th.

The technological efforts

Alongside supplying weapons to terrorist organizations, Iran is also very active in the technological sphere, which is crucial for securing funds for terrorism, surveillance, and supporting other terror-related activities inside and outside Iran.

ArianTel, an Iranian wireless communications services provider was pivotal to Iran's efforts to create a large-scale surveillance network. According to Citizen Lab, a cybersecurity NGO based in Canada, the surveillance and censorship capabilities resulting from this level of integration with mobile service providers cannot be understated.

Prime example for this is MTN Group. MTN entered the Iranian telecom sector in 2005 and launched its services in Iran a year later using a subsidiary named Irancell, a front company of the IRGC, in which MTN owns a 49% stake, the other

51% owned by the Iranian Electronic Development Company. Since then, MTN has been closely involved with ArianTel, as part of its joint venture with the Iranian government. MTN and Irancell, provided multiple Access Points and Roaming agreements, granting ArianTel explicit access to their cellular networks. This allowed ArianTel and the Iranian government to carry out surveillance operations on dissidents and critics within Iran.

MTN group openly and knowingly conducted business with the IRGC and ArianTel despite international sanctions against them. In April 2023, ArianTel was sanctioned by the European Union, for contributing to the telecommunications surveillance architecture mapped out by the Iranian government to quash dissent and critical voices in Iran. In 2020, a year after IRGC was officially designated as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) MTN released a statement saying that it would continue its business as usual.

MTN made conscious decisions to engage in misconduct while violating sanctions, and effectively supporting and facilitating Iran's terrorism. But the use of telecommunication systems does not stop at surveillance and suppressing dissent at home, rather it is used to advance Tehran's international aspirations as well, supporting Iran's proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen.

This activity is at the core of the US district court in New York's high-stakes anti-terrorism act lawsuit against MTN Group. In addition to its direct engagement with the IRGC, the lawsuit revealed the group's violations of the Anti-Terrorism Act by paying protection money of more than \$100M to al-Qaeda and the Taliban so they wouldn't target its cellular towers, and they deactivated the towers at night, preventing US intelligence operations.

Another dimension of concern is MTN's decades-long association with Hezbollah, a designated terrorist organization and a proxy of Iran. This relationship involved providing equipment that Hezbollah used as detonators and for tracking their adversaries. This history of supporting and enabling terror activity might indicate that other proxies of Iran, such as Hamas were also benefiting from MTN's services.

There is evidence that Hamas' brutal attacks against Israel, were accompanied by cyberattacks conducted by a group linked to Iran. The attacks were aimed at stealing, publishing, and deleting sensitive information such as personal data and

intellectual property from educational institutions and tech companies. These attacks began in January 2023 but were intensified following the October 7th attacks.

NYT reported that Iranian hackers were waging an espionage campaign targeting rivals across the Middle East, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The cyberattacks are linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. According to Israeli cybersecurity officials, 15 groups of hackers, such as "agonizing serpents" and "LionTail", affiliated directly or as a proxy, with the IRGC and Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, are responsible for the attacks. During this campaign, there were also attempts by groups affiliated with Hamas and Hezbollah to hack CCTV cameras in Israel.

It's time to stop Iran

As shown above, Iran's terror network is broad, and it also serves as a distraction from its efforts to cross the nuclear threshold and reach a nuclear military capability. Following Iran's involvement in Hamas' attacks against Israel and the continuous support of other proxies in the Middle East, the international community must step up joint efforts to stop both Iran and its accomplices.

The most common measure against Iran is sanctions, mainly in relation to the nuclear program. While sanctions took a toll on Iran's economy, the shadow financial network provided it a lifeline. This year, the US imposed new and broader sanctions on a "shadow banking" network of 39 entities across multiple jurisdictions, including those registered in China, Türkiye, and UAE. These sanctions are targeting Iranian front companies abroad that have generated tens of billions of dollars for the Iranian regime.

One of Iran's ways to bypass sanctions is the use of cryptocurrencies, which Tehran legalized in 2019. Around 4.5% of global bitcoin mining is done in Iran. International compliance regulations, including those issued by the FATF (Financial Action Task Force), have made it more difficult to use cryptocurrencies as a way to evade sanctions but did not entirely stop Iran.

In addition, the US decided to freeze \$6 billion that was part of a prisoner swap deal with Iran to free 5 American citizens. Due to Iran's backing of Hamas, the US reached an understanding with Qatar to prevent access of Iran to the funds. The US also imposed new sanctions on Hamas and members of IRGC for arming,

training, and providing financial assistance to the terror organization. The US Department of Treasury emphasizes Iran's role in providing financial, logistical, and operational support to Hamas.

The EU announced that it is considering imposing similar sanctions against Iran over its support of Hamas. Moreover, the big three European countries refused to lift sanctions on Iran after the 18th of October 2023, a date set by the original deal in 2015 and relates to missile capabilities of Iran.

Although there is still some pressure on Iran, the effectiveness of sanctions is debatable. The Iranian leadership is very flexible in its ways to evade sanctions, leaving the Iranians to suffer as a result of the sanctions, especially when these are focusing on financing channels. Yes, the economy plunged but that did not change the behavior and ambitions of the Iranian regime.

The current situation in the Middle East generates an opportunity and momentum to act now against Iran. This should include complementary means to sanctions, such as cyber tools, a direct credible military threat to Iran's strategic infrastructure, and dismantle of its proxies. But also, the targeting of target channels of technology transfer and financial support with direct links to IRGC. In this context, the lawsuit against MTN Group is an important step. The Iranian leadership and its accomplices must know that as long as they engage in terrorism and nuclear armament, the international community will react vigorously.

Published in The National Interest 04.12.2023

Generous humanitarian aid will only prolong the war

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 15.12.2023

It might be appropriate to adopt a more aggressive approach so as to reduce the risks to our forces, even if it runs against the wishes expressed by the White

The truce lasted long enough

written by David M. Weinberg | 15.12.2023

Repeat pauses in the war are extraordinarily dangerous on many levels.

Hamas Massacre Proves Iran is Existential Threat

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 15.12.2023

For the past two decades there has been a debate raging within Israel regarding the nature of the threat posed by a nuclear Iran. Some have argued that a nuclear-armed Iran would pose an existential threat to Israel, while others believed that it would indeed be severe, but not necessarily existential.

For many years, Benjamin Netanyahu led the 'existential threat' camp, drawing an analogy between Israel's current situation vis-a-vis Iran, to that of Europe in 1938, facing Nazi Germany. In this view, Israel stands before a fateful decision: will it act to confront its enemies on time despite the immediate costs, or will it hesitate and allow another holocaust?

Others in Israel's security establishment and political leadership rejected this analogy as wild and inappropriate to the current situation. Leading among them was Ehud Barak. Though he cooperated with Netanyahu in taking a strong stance against Iran as defense minister from 2009-2013, he consistently opposed the idea that they were dealing with an existential threat. As he relates in his 2018 autobiography:

“I was especially upset by Bibi’s increasing use of Holocaust imagery in describing the threat from Iran... We’re not in Europe in 1937. Or 1947. If it is a ‘Holocaust,’ what’s our response: to fold up and go back to the diaspora? If Iran gets a bomb, it’ll be bad. Very bad. But we’ll still be here. And we will find a way of dealing with the new reality.”

This seemingly semantic debate has very real policy implications, including the extent to which Israel should be willing to go in order to prevent Iran from crossing the nuclear threshold. If this is an existential threat, then Israel must be willing to do everything in its power to prevent it – including, if necessary, taking action that carries the risk of a broader regional war and even if it means acting in defiance of the preferences of a US administration. But if it is a major threat, but not existential, then there are limits to what Israel should be willing to do, such as not acting without at least American acquiescence; weighing the value of a strike against the price of a war with Hezbollah and direct Iranian missile strikes; and ultimately, considering that instead of a costly war, Israel might shift toward a policy of attempting to deter Iran from ever using its newfound weaponry.

The Face of Evil

The massacre of October the 7th, however, should settle this debate once and for all by clarifying for all sides what existential threat really means. Because it seems that even those who claim a nuclear Iran would constitute such a threat – Netanyahu himself included – have not taken themselves seriously enough, nor acted accordingly.

Before October 7th, we had trouble believing that the genocidal evil that we witnessed that day really existed. We may have said that it exists, we may have recited slogans saying that it exists, but we didn’t entirely understand the meaning or the significance of it. We didn’t really internalize that there are, in fact, people who would happily give their lives just so they could murder Jews; people for whom their greatest dream is to “destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day,” no matter what the cost.

Yes, we knew that this was possible in theory, as a matter of history. Certainly, in the country founded in the shadow of the ashes of the Holocaust, Israelis

remember that the Nazi's were willing to risk it all to murder just one more Jew. But with the passage of time, we forgot that this was a real thing. The clarity of the lessons learned has been eroded over time, to the point which when it became a practical issue again, we didn't really know what was required.

But now, after October 7th, we have again witnessed the face of evil. We have encountered it anew and must internalize its meaning anew. The meaning is that we can no longer claim that Iran is animated primarily by national interests, or that its threats are mere rhetoric, not to be taken seriously. We can no longer claim that Iran couldn't possibly risk the survival of the Islamist regime by undertaking a nuclear attack on Israel, or that it would never risk the destruction of entire Iranian cities that would result from an Israeli counter-attack. Rather, the meaning is that it could and it most likely would.

The Price of Error: National Annihilation

The Hamas massacre must make clear that people who are consumed by Islamist ideologies, be it the Sunni or Shiite versions, really are willing to commit collective suicide if they could only take Israel down with them. And if we do not recognize this truth and instead continue to believe that our enemies hold the same value system as we do, we will pay the price for this strategic failure, and the price is national annihilation. Because if Israel fails to see this threat with clarity and act appropriately, there will be no more politicians to apologize for the blunder and resign, and there will be no one to demand a committee of public inquiry and no one to report the findings to. This is the meaning of existential threat; it is the type of threat that forces us to choose whether to continue existing or not.

For years, Israel has wrestled with the question of where precisely is the red line beyond which decisive action is imperative. Twenty years ago, some said the very existence of clandestine uranium enrichment facilities justified action. Later, it was the accumulation of any highly enriched uranium, meaning to 20% purity. By 2012, Israel's red line was the accumulation of 250 kg of 20% enriched uranium. According the most recent IAEA reports, Iran currently has over 500 kg of 20% and an additional 128 kg and counting of uranium enriched to 60%. As of the outset of 2023, Israel's new red line has apparently become a point just short of military grade, meaning 90%. At each juncture, the question was raised: "why act now if we can continue to deter Iran from any further progress?"; "there is still

time to act before they have enough for a bomb, and then some more time before they can weaponize it.” Iran now has anywhere from a few weeks to a few months between it and an operational weapon, given a decision to break out. Perhaps this was good enough before October 7th. Today, it should be considered well beyond the red line.

Now is the time to revisit the roots of the so-called ‘Begin doctrine’. It was Menachem Begin, who lived in a generation which had not yet forgotten the reality of genocidal evil, who wrote in 1978 the following passage and applied it in practice just a few years later: “The lesson today and for the future is: First, if an enemy of the Jews comes and says that he desires, with all his heart and blood, to destroy them – do not dismiss him, do not disparage him, do not doubt him. Rather you must take his intentions with completely sincerity, and take his utterances with all the gravity they embody. Believe him. This enemy wants to destroy the Jews. You must prevent from him the power to destroy them. You must prepare yourself every day for the time of action, but you must never again say: ‘They don’t really mean it.’ ”

Published in TheTimes of Israel, November 29, 2023.

The Day After in Gaza

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 15.12.2023

Installing the Palestinian Authority in Gaza would inevitably lead to the re-emergence of a terror state.

Understanding the psyche of Hamas massacre masterminds

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 15.12.2023

Although it momentarily serves the Iranian goal, Hamas has its own interests.

Israel must keep its war machine running during the ceasefire

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 15.12.2023

Undoubtedly, Hamas would like to see the ceasefire as a turning point in the conflict.