Has Iran suffered a strategic misfire?

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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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[4] “[…] Radwan unit, Hezbollah’s special unit, whose main mission is to infiltrate into Israeli territory, conquer Israeli territories and settlements in the Galilee” in Tal Beeri, “The Radwan Unit (Radwan Force – Unit 125),” Alma

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[7] Shaan Shaikh (“Iranian Missiles in Iraq”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C.,

December 2019, https://missilethreat.csis.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/191211_IranianMissilesIraq.pdf)

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ago, in 2019. A more detailed report “Iran's Missiles: Transfer to Proxies,” (Andrew Hanna, 2021) was issued by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP). According to monitoring by the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism

Information Center, over the years 2021-2022 Kataib Hezbollah issued recurring threats to use long range precision

weapons against Israel https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/kataib-hezbollah-a-dominant-iraqi-pro-iranian-militia/

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