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Iran's Approach to the Israel-Hamas War

By Amin Saikal

SYNOPSIS

For all its assertions of support for Hamas and the Palestinian cause, Tehran has so far acted more pragmatically than ideologically. It has let the on-going Gaza war damage the reputation of Israel and the United States of America.

COMMENTARY

Hamas' 7 October attacks on southern Israel confronted the Iranian Islamic government with difficult policy choices. It had laboured for years to build a regional security complex, with Hamas' inclusion, to ensure its national safety. Israel's military response to eliminate Hamas and America's show of force in support of Israel left Tehran wondering what strategy to follow.

Iran's Options

Tehran had two options from the start of the war. One was to activate its regional assets – the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Syrian Bashar al-Assad's regime, the Iraqi militias, and the Yemeni Houthis – to join the fight in aid of Hamas, which Tehran had supported as an Islamist force and part of the Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. The other was to make minimum use of these assets to underline its long-standing pro-Palestinian position and avoid any escalation that could lead it into a full-scale confrontation with Israel and the United States.

It evidently opted for the second option. After Israel announced an all-out war on Hamas, in a remark on 17 October, the Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei condemned Israel and praised Hamas' heroic actions but also made it clear that his country had nothing to do with those actions. This set the tone for Tehran's policy approach.

It did so, on an understanding that Israeli operations would result in massive civilian casualties, property destruction and a humanitarian crisis. In turn, this would peel away the initial global goodwill for Israel, pressuring its outside supporters, most importantly the US, to qualify their original full-throated support for the Jewish state by urging it to minimise civilian casualties and allow humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza.

The Israeli retaliation and staggering Palestinian casualties not only led the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to castigate Israel for subjecting the 2.3 million inhabitants of the tiny Gaza Strip to “collective punishment”. It also outraged the Arab and non-Arab Muslim peoples around the world, prompting their governments, including those that had recently normalised relations with Jerusalem, to fall in line with Iranian condemnation of Israel and its backers.

Alignment of Interests with the Arab World and the UN

Iran’s hardline President Ebrahim Raisi was provided a unique occasion to participate in the joint extraordinary summit of the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in Riyadh on 11 November to present his government’s anti-Israel and anti-US case. The summit’s condemnation of Israel, demand for an immediate ceasefire and disapproval of the US and allied support for Israel amounted for the first time in years to an alignment of Tehran’s interests with those of the Arab states and, indeed, the United Nations. The Iranian media went into overdrive with this favourable development.

Assumptions and Expectations

Meanwhile, the Iranian leadership has quietly been content to see the war last for as long as possible, as more horrifying images of human fatalities and desperation and physical destruction emanating from Gaza would only reaffirm its warnings about Israel and the US in the region.

The ideal outcome for it would be a repeat of the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war where the Lebanese group managed to stay in the fight for 34 days. When Washington finally realised that Israel was unable to achieve its goal of dismantling Hezbollah, it backed UN Security Council Resolution 1701 for a ceasefire, the enforcement of which enabled Hezbollah to claim victory and grow as the most powerful non-state actor/Iranian proxy in the world.

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and some of his current hardline ministers have been very cognisant of that outcome. This time, they are determined to prevail over Hamas whatever it takes. Washington has been willing to give them free rein, but not at all costs. As the fighting has dragged on – already for much longer than the Israel-Hezbollah war – America has deemed it expedient to call for pauses to help secure the release of more than 200 hostages taken by Hamas, provide more humanitarian assistance to the desperate people of Gaza, and limit damage to the regional and international standing of the US.

Meanwhile, Tehran has found it reasonable to work on an assumption that ultimately Israel will not be able to totally wipe out Hamas, just as it could not disable Hezbollah,

and just as the US failed to uproot the Taliban and, for that matter, their Al Qaeda allies, after two decades of fighting in Afghanistan.

The Gaza war may not last for very long, given the size of the territory involved and its strict territorial confinement under the Israeli blockade. But any Israeli declaration of victory may be confounded by many experts' argument that the war and its aftermath are most likely to spawn more radical Palestinian and Islamist groups to replace Hamas in ideological and operational terms.

For Tehran, it is not just a question of what Israel can achieve through war, but also what is likely to transpire when the conflict ends? It watches how Israel and the US – the main financial and arms supplier to Israel and also at the same time to Ukraine – will manage the exorbitant costs of the war and handle the Gazans and their kindred in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Israel itself, whose hatred for Israel and distrust of the US cannot be underestimated.

Conclusion

The Iranian regime has so far acted more pragmatically than ideologically – something that has characterised its foreign policy priorities since its foundation forty-four years ago. It has treated the war and Gazans' suffering as part of a strategy to allow Israel and the United States to undermine their reputations as much as possible, to Iran's advantage.

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