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Israel vs Iran and its Proxies: Strategic Stalemate or Peace Settlement?

By Lawrence Anderson

SYNOPSIS

More than a year into Hamas' deadly 7 October 2023 surprise attack on Israel, there is no certainty regarding peace and stability in the Middle East. The conflict rages on, even though Hamas' and Hezbollah's capability and capacity to attack Israel have been severely destroyed by Israeli military and technological operations. Iran's ability and appetite to fight seems to be on the "pause" button. Donald Trump's ascent to the White House in the US portends a strategic stalemate or a longer-term peace arrangement being concocted.

COMMENTARY

Hamas' attack on 7 October 2023 was a severe wake-up call for Israel. Hitherto, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had been drawing down its forces and relying more on weapons, technology and intelligence gathering to safeguard its security. The attacks by Hamas, Hezbollah and other Iranian-sponsored terrorist groups have forced the IDF to recognise that it also needs "boots on the ground" to eliminate these threats. Consequently, the IDF has been revamped to meet this reality as the war rages.

Politically, Israel has swung sharply to the right. While mainstream media in the West focuses on the fate of the hostages and protests President Benjamin Netanyahu's insistence on continuing the war, the reality is that most Israelis back the war against Hamas and Hezbollah. This, coupled with distractions on the US government in the run-up to the presidential election, enabled the beleaguered Israeli Prime Minister to ignore repeated demands by many world governments, including the Biden Administration, that Israel implement a humanitarian pause and permit humanitarian aid to flow into Gaza.

Israel's War With Hamas

Israel's persistence in its military operations and its inordinate use of force have resulted in a shocking scale of Palestinian casualties and destruction in Gaza. At the same time, the IDF has proven spectacularly successful in crippling Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Over the last several months, it has also eliminated top enemy leaders, including Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh and Yahya Sinwar and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah, right down to their mid-level commanders. Fighting has practically ceased in Gaza, with Hamas neutered as a fighting force. The IDF is now conducting operations in the West Bank to prevent Iran and elsewhere from supplying weapons to Hamas.

Hamas has now adopted a more conciliatory posture in the peace negotiations. This is due to its setbacks, including the deaths of its political leaders and military commanders, and to Qatar – its principal Arab patron – stepping back from mediating in the negotiations because of Hamas intransigence.

Reports indicate that Hamas is in favour of a peace proposal that would lead to a ceasefire and Israeli military withdrawal from the Gaza Strip. Potential deal breakers include its long-standing demand for a Palestinian state and its participation along with the Palestinian Authority on the West Bank in a future government, and Israel's insistence that it reserves the right to resume military operations if Hamas reneges on the deal.

Israel's War With Hezbollah

The focus of the war has now shifted to Lebanon, where, as in Gaza, the IDF has decimated Hezbollah's political and military wings. The deaths of Hezbollah's leaders, including Nasrallah and his potential successor, have seriously hampered its ability to continue the war.

A peace proposal is being discussed that entails an Israeli withdrawal and a permanent ceasefire after 60 days. It also entails the demilitarisation of southern Lebanon and the stationing of a UN peacekeeping mission based on provisions stipulated previously in UNSC Resolutions 1701 and 1559. Reportedly, the IDF is prepared to allow UN peacekeepers, reinforced with additional forces, to resume their tasks on condition that it could carry out military operations if Hezbollah resumes its activities.

As with the negotiations over Gaza, much will depend on the influence the incoming Trump Administration and its mercurial President-elect can bring to bear on Israel, as well as what Iran is prepared to accept and do about its regional proxies. Given the animosities engendered over past and recent conflicts and the fact that both Israel and Iran regard each other as mortal threats, the prospects for peace remain decidedly dim.

Will Iran Go to War?

Iran's ability to threaten Israel has also been seriously compromised. Its key proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah – which constitute its forward defence – are no longer an

immediate threat to Israel, while other acolytes like the Houthis are no more than an irritant. Iran is also mindful that Israel can strike at strategic Iranian assets and, with assistance from the US and some of the Arab states, repel Iran's retaliatory attacks.

An all-out regional war is unlikely because neither Israel nor Iran wants to fight for now; Iran has lost its immediate ability to conduct war, while Israel is still focused on its battles with Hamas and Hezbollah and the need to resupply the IDF. As for Iran's partners and friends, Russia has its hands full in Ukraine and is unable to spare weapons needed to replenish depleted Iranian stocks. China has no desire to be dragged into the quagmire. In the case of the US, both the Biden and incoming Trump Administrations are ready to underwrite the peace and to ensure Israel's security.

Iran's immediate objective is likely to focus on replenishing its arms supplies. It will also focus on building its nuclear capability, but this runs the risk of attacks by Israel at a time when Tehran's missile and other defences are seriously crippled. So, Iran's nuclear ambitions can be expected to be put on hold for now. If Iran persists, the Saudis and Emiratis are likely to develop their nuclear capabilities, further undermining prospects for peace in that troubled region.

The Arab States

The wars also proved instructive in the way the Arabs have reacted. First, none of them have gotten involved against Israel. Instead, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and UAE helped to defend Israel from Iran's drone and missile strikes. Others, like Qatar and Egypt, attempted to broker a ceasefire or peace settlement. The reality is that most of the Gulf States loathe Iran and the terrorist groups which includes Hamas and Hezbollah.

Second, the 7 October attack has stalled talks between the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia. Later developments, including firm US support that has helped Israel deliver such devastating responses, would have reinforced the thinking of the Arabs, particularly the Saudis, to look to both the US and Israel as guarantors against Iran. With Donald Trump's election victory and once the aged Saudi King, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, passes on, we can expect the putative Saudi-Israel-US alliance to materialise with Saudi recognition of Israel and America's defence commitments in the Middle East firming to cover Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

It seems that prospects for a peace settlement between Israel and its adversaries, Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran, have become brighter, but it will be temporary at best. October 7 and its aftermath have bred the next generation of combatants on both sides. The likelihood of a durable two-state solution to the Palestinian question is far from materialised. Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is an end to the fighting, for aid and assistance to flow to those who need them, the release of the hostages and the rebuilding and reconstruction of homes and infrastructure in Gaza and southern Lebanon. Ultimately, both sides are seeking the strategic advantage and considering the best possible "pause" options.

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