

The Hamas – Israel Conflict: Forming A Potential “New Normal”

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Key Points

- The Hamas-Israel conflict has reshaped the ME security landscape, posing potential challenges to stabilizing relations, deterring Iran/ITN, and countering VEOs.
- The Hamas-Israel conflict could be the litmus test for the US grand ‘National Security Strategy’. The US support for Israel’s security and recent build-up in the region may also impact Strategic Competition, specifically in the CENTCOM AOR.
- Amongst the ITN, Houthis are trying to increase their power and legitimacy by using the plight of Palestinians caught up in the conflict as a pretext for attacking the SLOC’s.
- While differing from ISIS, Hamas also thrives on an ideology that, if not addressed effectively in the moral and conceptual domains, cannot entirely be eradicated in the physical domain.
- China (with other actors) is taking advantage of the US’s unequivocal support for Israel, disregarding Palestinian security, to infer an equal but opposite anti-US narrative.
- Resurgence of dormant conflicts, exemplified by the resumption of attacks by IAMG (Iranian aligned militia groups) in Syria and Iraq, poses additional challenges, potentially amplifying the overall regional instability.
- Israel’s approach could be counterproductive; continuation of aggression will not eliminate Hamas.
- Incoherent US actions in the region can create dissent, which may damage partnerships to adversaries’ advantage; a potential “New Normal”.

Introduction

The Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October has affected not only the political and security dynamics in the ME region but also the world at large. This attack being executed simultaneously in multiple domains i.e. air, land, and sea, culminating with ‘mass hostage captivity’, can be regarded as unprecedented due to its complexity, scale, and outcome. The resultant bloody conflict, which has been continuing for more than three months, has disrupted the entire region and threatens to escalate. Dismay over what many perceive as a disproportionate Israeli response has without question brought suffering to the majority of Gazans. Activities of the Iranian Threat Network (ITN) using the plight of Palestinians as a pretext to further violence, especially the Houthi attacks on merchant ships disrupting the sea lines of communication (SLOC), threatens the stability of the region.

While many actors in the region were navigating paths towards normalization of relations, the Hamas-Israel conflict altered the existing security paradigm. This may yet challenge US efforts in deterring Iran and countering VEOs. Implications remain fluid and may alter the ME integrated frameworks that had been established for greater stability.

The Hamas-Israel conflict could be the litmus test for the US grand 'National Security Strategy'. The US support for Israel's security and recent build-up in the region may also impact Strategic Competition, specifically in the CENTCOM AOR.

Deter Iran

At the beginning of the conflict, the US reinforced its troops and increased posture in the region against the growing instability and increased number of attacks by the ITN on coalition troops and bases. The deterrence of Iran is being questioned as Iran is astutely maneuvering in multiple domains and it is projecting transnational capabilities from the "Axis of Resistance".^{1, 2} Iran is capitalizing on the human cost of Israeli bombardments (in Gaza but to include strikes into the West Bank and Lebanon). A solution to the intricate challenge of divergent views from regional states concerning the conflict and the role of Hamas as an Iranian proxy remains elusive.³

Iranian proxies have also been involved in attacking US forces using pre-established coordination and a more unified command and control (C2) structure.⁴ The direct threat from Iranian proxies has raised fears of an escalation and the potential for a wider regional war.⁵ Amongst the ITN, Houthis are trying to increase their power and legitimacy by using the plight of Palestinians caught up in the conflict as a pretext for attacking the SLOC's. Through the narrative that they are only attacking commercial ships associated with Israel to compel Israel into a ceasefire, they are seeking public support.⁶ The Hamas – Israel conflict also broke a 17-year stretch of relative calm across the Lebanese-Israeli border, raising fears of an additional front that may plunge the region into a wider conflict.

The escalating tension has also engendered a noticeable rift between the US and regional states, with an erosion of trust among erstwhile partners and allies.⁷ Furthermore, Iran's acceleration of its nuclear program appears to be strategically motivated, serving as a tool for deterrence to pursue its principal objectives.⁸

¹ US deterrence against Iran is damaged but not dead, Bilal Y. Saab, Jan 3, 2024, Middle East Institute, <https://www.mei.edu/blog/us-deterrence-against-iran-damaged-not-dead>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

² Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis: Iran's 'Axis of Resistance,' Explained, Jan 2, 2024, WSJ, [Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis: Iran's 'Axis of Resistance,' Explained \(wsj.com\)](https://www.wsj.com/news/middle-east/hamas-hezbollah-houthis-axis-of-resistance-explained), (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

³ Hamas And Israel: Iran's Role, Haleh Esfandiari, Oct 10, 2023, Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/hamas-and-israel-irans-role>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

⁴ Proving Ground: Iran's Operational Strategy in Syria, Nicholas Hargreaves-Heald, May 27, 2018, Small Wars Journal, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/proving-ground-irans-operational-strategy-syria>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

⁵ "Iran's regional strategy is raising the stakes of Hamas-Israel war", DR Sana Vakil, Chatham House, Nov 10, 2023, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/11/irans-regional-strategy-raising-stakes-hamas-israel-war>, (Accessed December 15, 2023)

⁶ Ansar Allah Houthis, published via social media, "The Western media trying to mislead public opinion by showing focus on targeting cargo ships sailing in the Red and the Arab Seas. Houthis are only targeting all commercial ships connected to Israel. "As Houthis attack Israel and Red Sea shipping, Yemenis fear repercussions", Qasim Sayers, Dec 21, 2023, *The Jerusalem Post*, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-778939>, (Accessed December 22, 2023)

⁷ How the Israel-Hamas War Impacts Regional Relations, Amb Hesham Yousef, Oct 23, 2023, USIP, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/10/how-israel-hamas-war-impacts-regional-relations>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

⁸ "The Gaza war probably won't change Iran's nuclear strategy. Danny Citrinowicz, Atlantic Council, Nov, 9 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/gaza-israel-iran-nuclear-strategy/> (Accessed December 15, 2023)

Recent Iranian aggression on three different countries - Iraq, Syria and Pakistan, regarded as its retaliation against terrorist's elements linked with ISIS attacks on Iran, could engulf the Middle East and spread to other regions.⁹

Counter VEOs

VEOs demonstrate an escalating trend in both physical presence and geographical expansion, taking advantage of the prevailing instability and turmoil within the region. ISIS and Al-Qaeda retain capacities, effectively maintaining the ability to target not only the US but also allies and partners.¹⁰ The VEOs are transforming through migration into novel territories and the emergence of nascent groups, indicative of a broader proliferation. Furthermore, there is a noticeable shift towards a more decentralized and dispersed operational framework, evident in the transition from entities like ISIS to factions such as IS-K(Khorasan) and IS-Y(Yemen).¹¹ The recent attacks in Iran by IS-K are an example of its growing presence. While differing from ISIS, Hamas also thrives on an ideology that, if not addressed effectively in the moral and conceptual domains, cannot entirely be eradicated in the physical domain.¹²

Compete Strategically

Recent regional trends and threats have reinforced the criticality of the CENTCOM AOR despite the emphasis on the INDOPACOM AOR in the NDS. The US is categorized in the region as a “partner of choice” and China as a “partner of necessity”, with Foreign Military Sales (FMS) challenges remaining a key irritant affecting partnerships.¹³ Of late, the containment of ISIS and deterrence against the ITN allowed the US to shift its focus towards the Indo-Pacific in line with the NDS; however, the Hamas attack on Israel transferred US attention back into the ME.¹⁴ Containment and deterrence are effects which are transient and require resources to service.

China (with other actors) is taking advantage of the US's unequivocal support for Israel, disregarding Palestinian security to infer an equal but opposite anti-US narrative.¹⁵ Concurrently, China is reluctant to join the US-led naval force to defend international shipping lanes against Houthi attack unless its own ships are in danger. It opts to avoid unnecessary involvement in the ME conflict.¹⁶ However, the economic significance of the ME (principally through raw materials and as a trade route) draws both China and Russia's involvement, evolving the theatre into another

⁹ Iran's strikes in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan raise tensions in the fraught region, npr, Jan 20, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/2024/01/20/1225794977/irans-strikes-in-iraq-syria-and-pakistan-raise-tensions-in-the-fraught-region>, (accessed on Jan 22, 24)

¹⁰ Trends in Terrorism: What's on the Horizon in 2024?, Collin. P. Clarke, Dec 19, 2023, FOREIGN POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/12/trends-in-terrorism-whats-on-the-horizon-in-2024/>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

¹¹ “Handbook on Children Recruited and Exploited by Violent Extremist Groups: The Role of the Justice System”, United Nations, 2017, https://www.unodc.org/documents/justice-and-prison-reform/Child_Victims_Recruitment_and_selection_in_violent_extremist_organizations_US_Department_of_Justice_2017_, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/recruitment-and-selection-violent-extremist-organizations-exploring>, (Accessed December 15, 2023)

¹² “The Israeli Gaza campaign: High expectations, big risks and bleak outcomes”, Riad Kahwaji, *Breaking Defense*, Oct 20, 2023, https://breakingdefense.com/2023/10/the-israeli-gaza-campaign-high-expectations-big-risks-and-bleak-outcomes/?utm_campaign=Breaking%20Defense%20Air%20&utm_medium=email&_hsmi=287618799&utm_content=287618799&utm_, (Accessed December 15, 2023)

¹³ Partners of Choice: Biden's Plan to Check China in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, [David Ottaway](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/partners-choice-bidens-plan-check-china-saudi-arabia-and-gulf), May 1, 2023, Wilson Center, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/partners-choice-bidens-plan-check-china-saudi-arabia-and-gulf>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

¹⁴ Hamas's attack on Israel has changed the Middle East, Marwan Kaban, Oct 28, 2023, ALJAZEERA, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/10/28/hamass-attack-on-israel-has-changed-the-middle-east>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

¹⁵ China's approach to the war in Gaza is not anti-Israel. It's designed to contain the US, Ahmed Aboudouh, Oct 25, 2023, CHATHAM HOUSE, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/10/chinas-approach-war-gaza-not-anti-israel-its-designed-contain-us>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

¹⁶ Why hasn't China joined US-led naval force against Houthi rebel attacks in Red Sea?, Zhao Ziwen, Dec 27, 2023, South China Morning Post, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3246266/why-hasnt-china-joined-us-led-naval-force-against-houthi-rebel-attacks-red-sea>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

field for "Cold War 2.0".¹⁷ Prolonged conflict may favor the ITN in the long term, and they can be indirectly supported by Russia and China.

To harbor the precious resource and service demands of the NDS, the US is shifting its ME strategy from being a "Security Guarantor" for the region to a "Security Integrator" for its partners. However, unequivocal US response as a "Security Guarantor" for Israel feeds the perception that the US is not being even-handed in the Central Region, which erodes trust and leaves opportunity wide open to strategic competitors.¹⁸ Partnerships, CENTCOM's COG, can be threatened if common ground with regional partners regarding a ceasefire is not established.¹⁹ The increased US focus towards the ME may not only favor Russia in the Ukrainian war, but also counterintuitively assist China in gaining ground in the ME, and could encourage it to act against Taiwan.²⁰

Assessment/ Risks

Recent developments in the CENTCOM AOR have introduced a spectrum of potential risks that demand careful consideration. The perception of the US favoring a particular side in the conflict has caused disruptions within the partner network, leading to apprehension and potential divisions; these issues may challenge the availability of ABO, amongst the many other repercussions. Direct US involvement in the conflict, especially in response to Iranian proxy attacks, presents a tangible risk. Such involvement may escalate tensions further, potentially rendering US forces susceptible to 'mass attack' by Iranian proxies. The US needs to be cautious about the potential conflict along the Israeli-Lebanese border and ensure that it does not erupt into a full-scale war.²¹ This is likely to require support and further improvement of the legitimate and established security apparatus to provide security (to disenfranchise illegitimate organizations) and stability for the region.

The resurgence of dormant conflicts, exemplified by the resumption of attacks by IAMG (Iranian aligned militia groups) in Syria and Iraq, poses additional challenges, potentially amplifying the overall regional instability. Emboldened by the turmoil, VEOs may be activated, further heightening the risk of destabilization. The looming prospect of Iran achieving nuclear capabilities raises concerns about the potential proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) in the region, potentially altering the power dynamics significantly.

This shift in resources to the ME from other parts of the world not only impacts the strategic balance of the AOR, but also holds implications for conflicts beyond the ME, possibly strengthening Russia's aggressive actions in Ukraine and creating an environment where China might consider assertive measures against Taiwan. Despite the increased military presence of the US to de-escalate, there is a risk of becoming entangled in low-intensity conflicts, diverting attention from the primary focus of the NDS on the preparation for full-spectrum conventional warfare.

Becoming involved in the intricate security landscape of the ME region, with several interconnected loci of conflict such as Hamas vs. Israel, Hezbollah vs. Israel, Houthis vs. Israel, Syrian rebels vs. Israel - all of these scenarios directly

¹⁷ Cold War 2.0: Who will shape the new world order?, Marco Carnelos, Aug 17, 2022, Middle East Eye, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/cold-war-world-order-shape-who>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

¹⁸ U.S. Flowing Military Supplies to Israel, as Country Battles Hamas Terrorists, Jim Garamone, Oct 10, 2023, US Department of Defence, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/article/3553040/us-flowing-military-supplies-to-israel-as-country-battles-hamas-terrorists/>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

¹⁹ US vetoes UN resolution backed by many nations demanding immediate cease-fire in Gaza, Dec 9, 2023, AP, <https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-un-resolution-ceasefire-humanitarian-6d3bfd31d6c25168e828274d96b85cf8>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

²⁰ Could Israel shock waves hit Taiwan?, Peter Enav, Oct 14 23, Asia Times, <https://asiatimes.com/2023/10/could-israel-shock-waves-hit-taiwan/> (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

²¹ U.S.-Brokered Talks Seek to Ease Tensions on Israel-Lebanon Border, Adam Entous, Dec 22, 2023, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/22/world/middleeast/israel-hamas-lebanon-hezbollah-talks.html>, (Accessed Jan 4, 2024)

or indirectly involve the US against Iran and the broader 'Axis of Resistance', which threatens to draw in Russia and even China.²² These multifaceted risks necessitate meticulous assessment and strategic planning to effectively navigate this complex landscape and calibrate response options.²³

The region may become more volatile and instable after recent tense developments in the region, including Israel's and US targeted drone attacks in Lebanon and Iraq respectively, and ISIS involvement in Iran's twin bomb blasts at the memorial of Qassem Soleimani. All increase the risk that the conflict will expand.²⁴ The kinetic response by the coalition countries, led by the US, against the Houthis attacks on Red Sea commercial vessels can result in a dangerous escalation which risks derailing a settlement of the Yemen conflict.²⁵ Failing to land the argument before strikes that Houthis are after power and legitimacy and are not acting in support of beleaguered Palestinian's serves to obfuscate the fact that the strikes are to safeguard freedom of navigation and global commerce. It also feeds the narrative that the US is colluding with Israel against Palestinians and more broadly against Arabs. The risk of conflict expansion after Iran attacks neighboring states is significant, as it could lead to a wider regional conflict and potentially involve other countries.

Conclusions

There are several insights with regards to the US overall approach and CENTCOM's role in the AOR.

1. The reinforcement of US troops in the region is perceived as reactive, short-term and one-sided; there is a semblance of discord between partners and the US about how it is supporting Israel and how Israel, by using conventional war ROEs with permissive collateral damage constraints, is increasing civilian casualties and suffering in a complex COIN (albeit high intensity) conflict against Hamas and is implicating the US in this.
2. Israel's approach could be counterproductive; continuation of aggression will not eliminate Hamas. Instead, it would stimulate the ideology more (increased support for Hamas in the West Bank evidence of exactly that) and draw in all elements of the ITN, leading to a "multiple fronts war" for Israel.²⁶ The implication of "mass civilian casualties" by Israel with a nexus of US support will generate new radical movements and inspire extremist Islamic movements that are already present on the scene.
3. The recent decision to establish a new multinational security initiative under the umbrella of combined maritime forces, Operation Prosperity Guardian (OPG), against the maritime security challenges posed by the Houthis is broadly sensible but defensive in posture. The addition of an offensive element to this posture could be considered impulsive unless Arab partners (and the majority of their population) can be convinced that the Houthis are acting out of self-interest and not in defense of suffering Palestinians. There could be a scenario where the Houthis continue to operate independently, with minimum or no support from Iran while attempting to extract leverage from the crisis.²⁷

²² "Map Shows Attacks on US Forces Across Middle East Amid Gaza War", By the editors of the Newsweek, Newsweek, Nov 10, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/map-attacks-us-forces-middle-east-gaza-war-israel-iran-syria-iraq-1842744> (Accessed December 27, 2023)

²³ "Report on Israel and Hamas 2023 Conflict, U.S. Policy Options", USNI News, Dec 1, 2023, <https://news.usni.org/2023/12/01/report-on-israel-and-hamas-2023-conflict-u-s-policy-options>, (Accessed December 12, 2023)

²⁴ Israeli army launches attacks on targets in Syria and Lebanon, ALJAZEERA, 2 Jan 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/2/israeli-army-launches-attacks-on-targets-in-syria-and-lebanon>, Blasts kill nearly 100 at slain commander Soleimani's memorial; Iran vows revenge, Parisa Hafezi, Jan 3, 2024, REUTERS, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-media-report-explosion-near-guards-commander-soleimanis-tomb-anniversary-2024-01-03/> (Accessed January 4, 2024)

²⁵ US calls for urgent UN action on attacks by Yemen's Houthi rebels in the Red Sea, EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press, Jan 3, 2024, abc NEWS, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/us-calls-urgent-action-attacks-yemens-houthi-rebels-106090660> (Accessed January 4, 2024)

²⁶ Fears of regional escalation as Israel warns of 'multi-front' war, Bethan McKernan, Dec 26, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/dec/26/fears-of-regional-escalation-as-israel-warns-of-multi-front-war>, (Accessed January 4, 2024)

²⁷ Iran rejects US claims it is 'deeply involved' in Houthi attacks in Red Sea, ALJAZEERA, Dec 23, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/23/us-accuses-iran-of-being-deeply-involved-in-houthi-attacks-in-red-sea>, (Accessed January 4, 2024)

4. The opinions of analysts and pundits advocating for “US forceful military action” against the Houthis should be carefully weighed against the expected implications as it might escalate/expand the conflict.
5. The US has positioned itself in a complex, interconnected web of relations; this is a volatile situation where the US must be perceived to be effectively balancing between Arab and Israeli perspectives; security for all, not just for a single regional partner. The US unflinching military, political and diplomatic support to Israel, while not actively defending innocent Palestinians caught up in the conflict, is inadvertently implicating the US in a ‘Gaza massacre’. The US stance on Ukraine has broad international support, but this is not the case for the US stance on Israel. International support has been eroded by the disproportionate suffering of civilians in Gaza.
6. The military build-up in the region without a comprehensive strategy for conflict resolution risks embroilment into COIN (high intensity), distracting from the primary focus on preparation for full-spectrum conventional warfare against China.
7. Hezbollah may remain engaged in northern Israel to demonstrate its “resistance” credentials and show solidarity with the Palestinians but might not provoke full-scale war with the Israelis.²⁸ Any miscalculation can be dreadful for the region. The US through CENTCOM as a security integrator should consider how it supports and develops the legitimate security players, marginalizing the illegitimate and malign actors. This will avert horizontal escalation.
8. Despite the coalition's efforts to degrade the Houthi's capabilities, the group has not stopped its attacks. This suggests that the current approach may not be sufficient to deter the Houthis from continuing their aggressive actions.
9. The partners expect a responsible and comprehensive approach from the US that may prevent escalation, protracted conflict, direct participation and work for an acceptable “end state”.²⁹ Incoherent US actions in the region can create dissent, which may damage partnerships to adversaries’ advantage; a potential “New Normal”. The Israel-Hamas conflict confirmed the importance of the CENTCOM Commander’s priorities, particularly “Deterring Iran”. Nevertheless, the “New Normal” might demand scrutiny for future relevance and effectiveness of the means to pursue these priorities.

Recommendations for USCENTCOM

The ongoing conflict present both challenges and opportunities for CENTCOM. The following options for actions presents themselves:

1. Maintaining a robust STRATCOM framework is imperative to counter the so-called “abandonment narrative” and “Chinese competitor narrative” and “Arab Street negative narrative” against recent US military deployments.³⁰
2. The present posture should be utilized to reaffirm the unwavering commitment to regional partnerships, thereby solidifying the perception of sustained US support. Meeting the military needs of regional partners amid escalating instability can reinforce the US's status of a preferred security partner.
3. Increasing key leader engagement (KLE) and activating established engagement frameworks helps explain the US posture, presence, and commitment as a “security provider” to all partners and allies in the region, mitigating prior misinterpretations.

²⁸ Why Hezbollah and Israel haven't plunged into all-out war, Jane Arraf, Dec 19, 2023, npr, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/19/1219748268/lebanon-hezbollah-israel-hamas-iran-war>, (Accessed January 4, 2024)

²⁹ The End of De-escalation in the middle east?, Robert Mason, Nov 21, 2023, Foreign Policy Research Institute, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/11/the-end-of-de-escalation-in-the-middle-east/>, (Accessed January 4, 2024)

³⁰ ‘Chinese negative narrative’ is used to mean that China is trying to negatively propagate a narrative against US efforts in the ME, such as the US build up of forces in the region. China is maligning against the US and portraying the US as responsible for the ME crisis and instability. In particular, after the US veto against the UN Security Council ceasefire resolution, China is contacting the Arab world and global south and propagating messages against the US.

4. Utilizing its global stature, recognizing Arab partners' concerns, the US may prevent more instability by continuing to shape Israel's approach to the conflict. De-escalation through reduction or termination of the use of force by Israel will decrease the risk to Israeli forces and mission over the long term. The US may ensure that diplomatic and political means take lead and complement them by a precise military campaign restricted to Hamas only.
5. The US can stimulate a collective, regional solution to the crisis, involving major regional players like KSA, Jordan, Türkiye and others for a comprehensive end-state of the conflict. This can achieve the 'long-term strategic advantage' for the US over its competitors. The criticality of the "decisive decade" demands providence and judicious decision making; the US may thwart adversaries designs to disrupt the region and entangling the US in the broader conflict.
6. Since the Houthis continue to threaten the SLOCs, despite the coalition strikes, the US needs to find a different approach by encouraging the regional Arab powers to be pro-active and ensure containment of Houthis through incentivized measures.
7. Two potential areas for cooperation with China lie in securing vital SLOCs and collaborating towards achieving enduring peace in the ME by encouraging China to use its relationship with Iran to avoid expansion of conflict. Most importantly, the US must not surrender the field for China to take the lead if a bilateral understanding to work together on regional security is not possible.