

Ceasefire Part 2 – Regional Escalation

Ms. Sanna Stark (CF4), SWE Armed Forces (CSAG/CCJ5), COL Karim Ismail, EGY Armed Forces (CSAG/CCJ5), COL Jerzy Kania, POL Armed Forces (CSAG/CCJ5), MAJ Vasile Nodis, ROU Armed Forces (CSAG/CCJ5), LTC Mohammad Al-Hnaiti, JOR Armed Forces (CSAG/CCJ5), and LTC Ahmed Alzeyoudi, UAE Armed Forces (CSAG/CCJ5)

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Key Points

- The war in Gaza is and has been the ignition and enabler (and sometimes an excuse) for continued violence in the Middle East. Therefore, the U.S. and the international community should not lose sight of pushing a peaceful resolution for Gaza during the tensions in other operational areas.
- The security situation in the region is currently extremely volatile and could benefit great power competitors such as Russia and China.
- Continued escalation between Iran and Israel still carries an incalculable risk of having detrimental effects on the broader region and CENTCOM AOR.
- The scenario envisioned in the “General’s Plan” increases the risk for prolonged Israeli security control with continued suffering for the population in Gaza.
- In the mid to long-term, the war will likely also fuel further violence both in Gaza and the West Bank and create an increased base for recruitment to VEO’s.
- The U.S. should encourage Israel to clearly declare what the strategic objectives for Gaza are moving forward, as the international community is uncertain what Israel envisions in the longer term.
- Given the current ceasefire proposal for Gaza has not resulted in any success, it is possible it needs to be reframed to include smaller steps to be taken. The wait and see game increases the risk of extended reluctance to commit to a halt of hostilities.

Introduction

Since the U.S., together with Egypt and Qatar, started pushing for a ceasefire deal in May 2024, there have been times when a comprehensive ceasefire deal appeared close. However, as the situation in the region has evolved, it is becoming clear that objective is likely far off.

The first paper in the CSAG Ceasefire-series was written to pinpoint how threat perceptions are affecting the prospects for a ceasefire amid the negotiations. While this second paper was intended to add dimensions important for breaking the cycle of violence, such as conflict ripeness, exit and negotiation strategies, and the impact of the mediators, the recent intense escalation in the region has added complexity, further affecting the potential for a

ceasefire in Gaza. Therefore, this paper will address what the current state of the expanded regional, multiple front conflict means for a potential ceasefire in Gaza.

The conflict context expanded during the early fall of 2024 to include an escalating war between Israel and Hezbollah with increased consequences for the civilian populations in both Israel and Lebanon, and a further intensified direct conflict between Israel and Iran. In late November last year, a ceasefire deal was reached between Hezbollah and Israel, but the situation remains fragile with both sides violating the agreement. While it is important to focus on the broader escalation and its repercussions, it is crucial for future stability to not lose sight of what effects this has on the war in Gaza. Therefore, the question the CSAG is intending to answer in this paper is:

- How has the regional escalation affected the prospects for stabilizing the situation in Gaza and negotiating a ceasefire?

Method

A descriptive method of analysis has been applied to answer this question by looking at several different actors with an interest in the conflict and how they will have an impact on the negotiations and the potential for a ceasefire in Gaza. The material used comes from open sources and public statements. This limits the analysis considering actors may obfuscate their true intentions for the conflict moving forward. However, assessing the current situation through several lenses will afford some clarity ahead of ongoing work looking at possible exits.

Background - The Current Situation

The war between Hamas and Israel, with the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza, has functioned as a destabilizing factor for large parts of the Middle East region for over a year. Israel considers itself to be in a war on seven fronts. The escalatory steps taken by several actors with stakes in the conflict have now led to the most volatile situation in the region in many years. A summary of the events and analysis of key actors follows below.

Iran – Israel

The long-running conflict between Iran and Israel has been intensifying throughout the war in Gaza and has turned into an increasingly unstable situation in the region. While Iran has denied they had any knowledge beforehand of Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, they have consistently supported Hamas and other groups within the Iran Threat Network (ITN) that act aggressively against Israel and their allies.¹ Iran reiterated a condemnation of Israeli attacks on Gaza very early on in the conflict and threatened preemptive strikes.

Conflict escalation beyond a fight between Israel and Hamas began in December 2023 when Israel targeted one of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commanders in Syria. The first months of 2024 were characterized by limited tit for tat attacks by both parties in Syria and Iraq, but neither seemed to want to escalate beyond this. Despite the show of relative restraint, the direct confrontation escalated further in April 2024, which kicked off with an Israeli strike on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and the killing of the Quds Force Senior Commander of the IRGC, Mohammed Reza Zahedi and 12 other people. On April 13, Iran responded by launching hundreds of rockets and drones at Israel, unprecedented in that it was the first time Iran directly targeted Israeli territory.²

In the wake of the escalation between Hezbollah and Israel in September, Iran’s foreign minister commented that “Iran will not remain indifferent in case of a full-scale war in Lebanon” and said that the UN Security Council must act to put a halt on Israel’s warfare. The day after Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) announced what they identified as “limited, localized, and targeted ground raids” on Hezbollah strongholds in southern Lebanon. On October 1, Iran made real their threat and fired around 200 missiles into Israeli territory. The IRGC also claimed this attack was a response to the assassination of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran and Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon.³

Israel declared they would retaliate and carried out several precise strikes with ballistic missiles on military targets in Iran on October 25. Many had feared this retaliation would escalate the situation further, but Israel showed a degree of restraint after intense discussions and coordination with the U.S.⁴ Iran was initially cautious in their rhetoric, presumably guarding against uncontrolled escalation, but statements started coming out in the media from October 31 regarding another retaliation. This has not yet materialized.⁵

Hamas – Israel

Throughout the war in Gaza that started after Hamas’ attacks on October 7, 2023, Israel has targeted Hamas strongholds, command nodes, and high-value targets within the Hamas leadership. Despite the grave consequences for the civilian population, Israel have been consistent in their tactics employed within Gaza, where air strikes and indirect fire have been a large part of the modus operandi. Hamas military capabilities have been weakened over time, and with the killings of prominent profiles within Hamas political and military wings such as Ismail Haniye, Yahya Sinwar, Mohammed Deif, Saleh al-Arouri and Marwan Issa, it is fair to assume that the higher echelon of leadership is close to being completely dismantled.⁶ Their military capabilities are not completely diminished and Hamas has continuously used guerilla tactics to ambush IDF forces, but recently at a lower rate than before as depicted in the graph below.⁷ Hamas has previously not budged on their demands for a ceasefire or on the release of more hostages, rather, they seemingly tried to put pressure on Israel by killing six hostages in late August 2024 when the IDF were moving closer to reaching their positions in the tunnels below Gaza.⁸ Currently, it is uncertain how many of the remaining hostages are still alive. Further, on November 9, Qatar announced their withdrawal as a mediator from the negotiations due to lack of willingness from the parties and stated that they would shut down Hamas’ political office in Doha until further notice.⁹

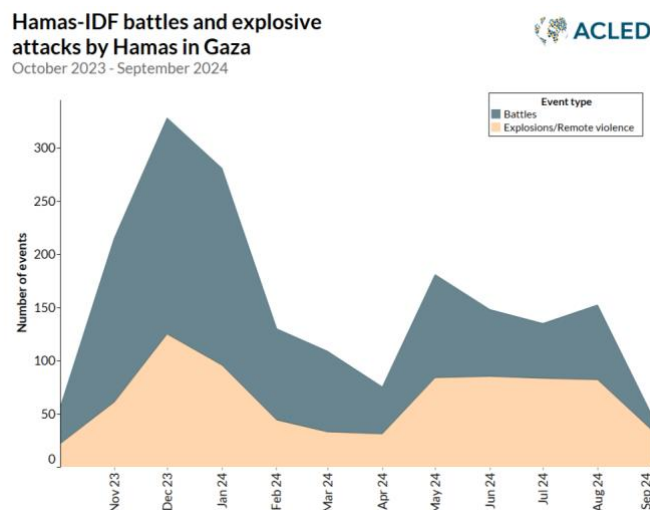


Figure 1 – Hamas-IDF battles and explosive attacks by Hamas in Gaza¹⁰

Israel has been clear that their war aims are to destroy Hamas' military and governing capabilities, free the hostages, and to deradicalize and demilitarize the Strip so that a threat to Israel cannot emanate from Gaza again. Prime minister Netanyahu's Security Cabinet has also added another objective, which is the return of evacuated Israeli residents to their homes in the north, which then linked the intensified conflict with Hezbollah to the ceasefire in Gaza.¹¹ Despite Israeli military progress on the ground, mainly related to the dismantling of Hamas' capabilities and leadership, they have not managed to achieve their war aims throughout the past year of warfare. Calls for a ceasefire by the international community has thus been without any result as Israel has continued their attacks in Gaza and given their position of power, shown little willingness to make compromises to end the hostilities.

While there was a slight reduction in the number of Israeli strikes in Gaza in September 2024, there were intensified attacks on the northern parts of the Strip.¹² In light of this, reports about what is referred to as "The General's Plan" has surfaced. The General's Plan has been promoted by a group of senior IDF reservists led by former Israeli National Security Advisor Major General (ret) Giora Eiland. While Netanyahu has only acknowledged that he is assessing it, the last months have shown a de facto implementation of the plan by the IDF. The main idea of the plan is to eliminate or make Hamas surrender by occupying the north of Gaza and laying siege to it, while not letting any of the goods in necessary for the remnant extremist's survival. The plans suggest forced evacuation of all civilians, so the IDF can move in and act against the remaining Hamas members and cells.¹³ For all civilians unable or unwilling to leave, this strategy means no access to food, water, or medicine and implies the IDF will consider them as combatants. This plan seems to be playing out on the ground with the suggestion there is increasing governmental support for Israeli extremist agendas in relation to settlements.¹⁴

The humanitarian situation is getting increasingly catastrophic for the civilians in Gaza overall. This is exacerbated by the onset of winter conditions. The complexity of distributing humanitarian aid includes looting by armed groups but also Israeli denial of the aid movements. In the north of Gaza, virtually no aid is coming in due to the siege. The UN also announced on December 1 that it would put a halt on the aid deliveries through the main cargo crossing in Gaza for security reasons.¹⁵

The ceasefire talks brokered by the U.S., Egypt, and Qatar that were intended to contribute to getting the hostages back as well as ensuring at least a partial Israeli withdrawal, was put on a complete halt during the fall.¹⁶ After the killing of Yahya Sinwar, hope rose there would be a window for negotiations of at least a limited ceasefire, but no steps were taken.¹⁷ In December, reports about resumed talks started surfacing where the parties reportedly moved positions closer to each other on key issues such as the release of hostages/prisoners, but it remains to be seen what results can be achieved.¹⁸

No party on the West Bank is directly involved in the negotiations for a ceasefire, however, the situation there has continued to be tense, contributing to increased instability overall.

Violence by and against Israel

7 October 2023 – 6 October 2024

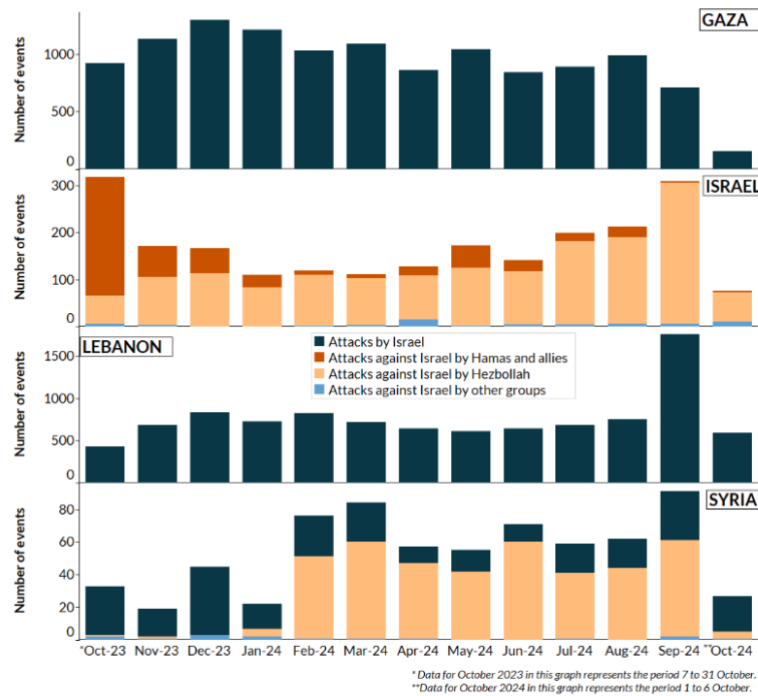


Figure 2 – Violence by and against Israel¹⁹

Hezbollah – Israel

Since October 7, 2023, and the start of the war in Gaza, Hezbollah has increased drone and rocket attacks on Israeli territory. The fire has predominantly been directed towards the north of Israel, but some attacks have targeted central Israel and Tel Aviv. As of now, well over 8,000 rockets have been fired against Israel by Hezbollah since October 2023.²⁰ Israel initially responded by putting increased pressure on Hezbollah by firing towards their strongholds in southern Lebanon, and the exchanges of fire between the belligerents remained fairly consistent for the first 11 months of the war. The number of violent incidents between Hezbollah and Israel between October 2023 and August 2024 was estimated to be 180-250 per week. From the middle of September 2024, the number of attacks skyrocketed. The attacks have contributed to large numbers of internally displaced civilians on both sides of the border, but recently in Lebanon particularly. The threat against Israeli residents in the north, combined with Hezbollah’s increased military capabilities in recent years and their relationship with Iran, has been a driver for Israeli escalation.

The conflict then turned into active warfare, moving from pager and walky-talky attacks on September 17, to Israeli air attacks in Beirut, the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on September 27, and a limited Israeli ground invasion into Southern Lebanon.²¹ Hezbollah has undoubtedly suffered big losses to both their senior leadership as well and military capabilities. There is currently a fragile ceasefire agreement in place between the parties, but with reports of violations on both sides, it remains to be seen whether it will be honored in the longer term.²²

Other Actors

Since the war started, the Iran backed Houthis have launched numerous attacks on Israel, including missile and drone strikes targeting cities like Tel Aviv and Ashkelon.²³ These actions are framed as solidarity with Palestinians and more recently also retaliation against Israeli military operations in Lebanon. The Houthi’s increased aggression indirectly complicates efforts to negotiate a ceasefire in Gaza, as their persistent attacks add another layer of complexity to an already volatile security situation.²⁴ In addition to support from Iran, the Houthis have also received support with small arms from Russia with reports of intentions to sell advanced missiles to the group.²⁵

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq consisting of different Shiite militias has, as depicted in the graph below, recently increased their attacks against Israel, purportedly to show support for Hezbollah and Iran. There is little information about the impacts as most of it seems to have been intercepted, but at least one of the drones managed to penetrate Israeli defenses and struck in Eilat in late September 2024.²⁶

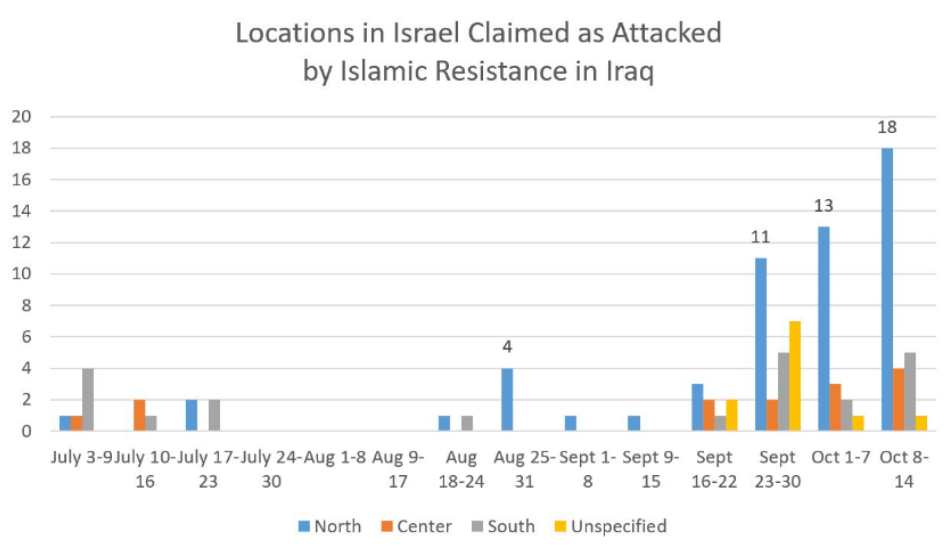


Figure 3 – Locations in Israel Claimed as Attacked by Islamic Resistance in Iraq²⁷

Analysis

1. Overall, the situation in the region is extremely volatile and creates security vacuums where numerous actors want to seize their opportunities to act for their own vested interests. It is also a beneficial environment for other great power competitors such as Russia and China, as it diverts attention from other conflict contexts and tries to drive wedges between western ambitions and coalitions.
2. The Iran-Israel archenemy conflict is complex and multi-faceted, influenced by historical grievances, regional politics, and security concerns. Though potential for further escalation remains high, diplomatic avenues may provide some pathways to mitigate tensions in the long-term.
3. The Israeli retaliation for the latest Iranian attack on Israel and how it has been received is an important variable for how the situation will develop in the shorter term, and indirectly for the possibilities of ceasefire

- negotiations in Gaza. Given that the Israeli retaliation was limited to military targets, it remains to be seen if the tit for tat will continue and contribute to further escalation. Both countries initially underlined the interconnectivity between the front in Gaza and Lebanon, but given the ceasefire in Lebanon, they seem to have backtracked on these statements, which may be beneficial for negotiations for Gaza.
4. Iranian actions, their control over proxies and the vast amount of support they provide to ITN actors in the region is and will continue to be a threat for stability in the foreseeable future.
 5. The escalatory steps taken and the uncertainty it inflicts on the Middle East region make it challenging for the international community to push Israel to commit to a ceasefire in Gaza, as it is evident that Israel is facing other pressing issues and threats emanating predominantly from Tehran.
 6. For the security and stability in the broader region, Israel's strategy of escalation dominance can be questioned, due to the increased tensions it has caused between Israel and many of the countries in the Middle East.
 7. The absence of a clearly communicated and coherent strategy of the Israeli government for Gaza post-war has created a strategic quagmire which undermines the efforts to reach a ceasefire. Currently, the situation is leaning toward indefinite Israeli control of Gaza. A possible imposition which likely has been affected by the escalation with Hezbollah and Iran but may very well be the underlying objective for the current Israeli government.
 8. The IDF have made military progress throughout the past year, where they have dismantled large parts of Hamas' military capabilities and their leadership. Israel, however, does not consider their war aims having been reached if Hamas is not completely eliminated, and there are still hostages being held in Gaza.
 9. The issue of the so-called General's Plan will have to be continuously assessed, as full implementation of the plan is accompanied with even graver consequences for civilians and an increased risk also for any hostages still alive.
 10. Israeli risk tolerance has decreased significantly after October 7, 2023, and Hezbollah's military capabilities constitutes a larger threat to Israel than Hamas'. Therefore, it is not surprising to see the escalatory steps taken by Israel in the conflict with the extensive air attacks on Beirut, the pager and walkie-talkie attacks, the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah and other Hezbollah leaders, and a ground invasion.
 11. It is, however, fair to assume not only Israeli security objectives have been driving Netanyahu's decisions on the deepening operations into Lebanon. Given the criticism Israel has been facing over the war in Gaza and the increasing tensions on the West Bank, it is politically beneficial for the government to move the focus on to other arenas where the immediate threat is more evident.
 12. The Houthis' aggressive actions underscore their strategic motivations. Their concern for Gaza and a ceasefire is seemingly just a narrative meant to justify their attacks on Israel for their own population and take focus from domestic issues. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq are also acting under the same premise, causing security concerns for both the U.S. and Israel with their increased targeting primarily against Israel. None of these actors currently have the leverage to significantly affect the prospect for a ceasefire but left undisturbed with continued support from Iran (and Russia), it may be harder to contain their actions in the future. Such a scenario will come at even higher costs to the international community.

Conclusion and Implications for USCENTCOM

- The root of the regional escalation lies deep within the different belligerents' history, but the war in Gaza is and has been the ignition and enabler of renewed and continued violence. Therefore, the U.S. and the international community should not lose sight of pushing for a halt of hostilities in Gaza during the tensions in other operational areas, though a comprehensive ceasefire agreement is unlikely at this stage.
- It is of particular importance for CENTCOM to continuously focus on strengthening the multilateral regional security ties to efficiently hinder continued escalation and disrupt spoiling activities, both for the purpose of

broader security objectives and to reach a cessation of hostilities in Gaza, while still being considerate of Israeli security concerns.

- The pertinence of creating coherence among partners and allies in the region on how to approach the situation is not only crucial for security objectives and safety of U.S. troops, but also in relation to strategic competition. The volatility that has been brewing over the past year has likely created a situation where Russia and China are not only biding their time to find vacuums to exploit for their own interests but has also contributed to strengthening Russia's relationship with Iran. It is not yet clear how developments in Syria have affected this.
- Continued escalation between Iran and Israel still carries an incalculable risk of having detrimental effects on the broader region and CENTCOM AOR. Given the latest Israeli retaliation against Iran was considered proportional and limited to military targets, there is still a possibility to move to peace talks in the future. If the tit for tat continues and the Israeli response has not had enough of a deterrent effect, the region is likely to see more spiraling escalatory steps. If so, the cycle of violence will continue to cause extended suffering, especially for the civilians on all sides of the multiple front conflict.
- Iran has shown ambivalence in relation to a continued direct confrontation with Israel but is likely to continue building on their proxies' capabilities and use them as a front for asymmetric operations. A crucial focus for CENTCOM, together with allies and partners, should be to utilize their strategic partnerships to disrupt the supply chains for Iranian military materiel to their proxies.
- If Israel is not certain that Hamas has been completely eliminated, their attacks are likely to continue in Gaza, even if there would be a deal regarding the remaining hostages. It is also a question of what parameters Israel is considering for the elimination of Hamas. The operators and leaders can be neutralized far more easily than the idea of resistance and extremism.
- The scenario envisioned in the General's Plan increases the risk for prolonged Israeli security control with continued suffering for the population in Gaza. In the mid to long-term, it will likely also fuel violence both in Gaza and the West Bank and create an increased base for recruitment to VEO's. This will be counterproductive for the security objectives not only for Israel, but also for the broader region and the stability in CENTCOM AOR.
- A broader Israeli implementation of the General's Plan carries a great risk of negatively impacting U.S. and CENTCOM coherence with partners and allies.
- The U.S. should encourage Israel to clearly declare what their strategic objectives for Gaza are for the conflict moving forward, as the international community seems uncertain what Israel envisions in the longer term to ensure their security but also for the safety and prosperity of the Palestinian people.
- Given the current ceasefire proposal for Gaza has not resulted in any success, it is possible it needs to be reframed for some smaller steps to be taken, since the situation for both the civilians and the remaining hostages is extremely dire. The wait and see game increases the risk of extended reluctance to commit to a halt of hostilities.
- The outcome of the U.S. elections will influence the dynamics, and future Israeli actions. While President (elect) Trump has made a promise of peace in the Middle East, he has expressed his full support for actions taken by the Netanyahu government but also been clear he wants the conflicts to end as soon as possible. Currently, it is likely Netanyahu will see a window of opportunity to act on possible strategic objectives to fundamentally reshape the dynamics in the Middle East.

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