

# **The War in Gaza From Local to Regional**

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November 2023

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# SPECIAL REPORT

## The War in Gaza From Local to Regional

Dr. (Col. Res.) Shaul Shay

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### Abstract

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant warned on April 20, 2023, that Israel would likely no longer see limited conflicts on single fronts, but rather would have to face a multi-front escalation in the near future.

Defense Minister Galant's warning proved to be correct and Israel is indeed in a multi-front conflict, but the assessment of the multi-front conflict threatening Israel did not help her prevent the surprise attack by Hamas which was the first step in this conflict.

Over the past two years, Iran has developed a concept known as "unity of fronts," under which Hezbollah, Hamas and other regional allies have pledged closer cooperation and mutual defense.

Iran's coordination with its regional proxies since Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7 strongly suggests that the proxies are acting as part of an Iranian-organized strategic plan. Iran has denied involvement in planning the attack, but the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the slaughter in a televised address.

The Iranian decision on whether to expand the war in Gaza into a regional war will be influenced by two main factors:

1. The determination that Israel will demonstrate in the war in the Gaza Strip and its success in destroying Hamas infrastructure.
2. The level of threat that the US will create for Iran and its proxies.

If the Biden administration hopes to prevent more fronts from opening, America's threat to intervene has to be seen as credible by making clear, through words and deeds, that participation of Iran and its proxies in the conflict would elicit a strong U.S. response.

Keywords: Iran Proxies; Hamas; Gaza; Hezbollah; United States; IDF; Middle East

Received: 31 October 2023 • Accepted: 08 November 2023.

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Defense Minister Yoav Gallant warned on April 20, 2023, that Israel would likely no longer see limited conflicts on single fronts, but rather would have to face a multi-front escalation in the near future.

"This is the end of the era of limited conflicts," Gallant told reporters in a briefing. "We are facing a new security era in which there may be a real threat to all arenas at the same time. We operated for years under the assumption that limited conflicts could be managed, but that is a phenomenon that is disappearing. Today, there is a noticeable

phenomenon of the convergence of the arenas,” Gallant said. “Iran is the driving force in the convergence of the arenas. It transfers resources, ideology, knowledge, and training to its proxies,” Gallant said, referring to Palestinian terror groups in Gaza, Lebanon’s Hezbollah, and other Iran-backed militias across the region.<sup>1</sup> The IRGC’s Qods Force has the infrastructure and experience to lead a multi-front attack on Israel.

Defense Minister Galant’s warning proved to be correct and Israel is indeed in a multi-front conflict, but the assessment of the multi-front conflict threatening Israel did not help her prevent the surprise attack by Hamas which was the first step in this conflict.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched an unprecedented attack on Israel under the name “Al-Aqsa Flood”. In the early morning of 7 October, Hamas fired a rocket barrage of at least 3,000 rockets into Israel and Hamas forces crossed the border with Israel. Upon arrival, they murdered hundreds of Israeli civilians and soldiers. Around 1400 Israelis were killed and at least 222 were taken hostage.<sup>2</sup>

In response Israel launched operation “Iron Swords” and declare a state of war. Israel unleashed air and artillery strikes on Hamas targets in Gaza Strip. Israel also blockaded the Gaza strip, severing all supplies including food, water, and electricity. Israel has amassed tanks and troops near the border around Gaza for a planned ground invasion aiming to annihilate Hamas.

Over the past two years, Iran has sought to reinforce the strategy with a concept known as “unity of fronts,” under which Hezbollah, Hamas and other regional allies have pledged closer cooperation and mutual defense.

Iran’s coordination with its regional proxies since Hamas’s attack on Israel on October 7 strongly suggests that the proxies are acting as part of an Iranian-organized strategic plan. Iran has denied involvement in planning the attack, but the country’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the slaughter in a televised address. The Iranian state television broadcast featured footage of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said that if the war continued “nobody could stop the forces of the resistance.”

Iranian security officials said on October 20, 2023, Iran’s strategy was for Middle East proxies like Hezbollah to pursue limited strikes on Israeli and US targets but avoid a major escalation that would draw in Tehran.<sup>3</sup>

President Biden has warned Iran and its regional allies repeatedly and clearly not to get

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1 Gallant warns multi-front war far more likely for Israel than limited conflicts, The Times of Israel, April 20, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/gallant-warns-multi-front-war-far-more-likely-for-israel-than-limited-conflicts/>

2 How the Israel-Hamas war will test Egypt’s balancing, the new Arab, October 11, 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-hamas-caught-israel-surprise-and-risked-its-future>

3 Israel pummels Gaza as US sees ‘significant’ risk of attacks on Mideast interests, Al Arabiya, October 22, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/22/US-beefs-up-Mideast-military-assets-as-Israel-pounds-Gaza-targets-in-Syria-Lebanon>

involved in Israel's war with Hamas.<sup>4</sup> It seems that President Biden's warnings and the reinforcement of US forces in the Middle East are preventing Hezbollah from starting an all-out war against Israel for the time being, however Iran, despite the American threat, is encouraging its proxies to act against Israel and American targets in the Middle East with a low intensity that, in Tehran's estimation, will not result in a strong American response or Israel's attack on Hezbollah.

### **Iran and the "Axis of Resistance"**

Iran's foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian, warned on October 16, 2023 that a regional network of militias known in parts of the Middle East as the "axis of resistance"<sup>5</sup> would open "multiple fronts" against Israel if its attacks continued in Gaza. Mr. Amir Abdollahian spoke after returning to Tehran from a tour of capitals aligned or close to Iran. He met the top political official of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, in Doha, Qatar; the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, in Beirut; and President Bashar al-Assad of Syria in Damascus.

Iran, a key source of financial and military support for Hamas, praised the October 7 Hamas attack while denying any involvement in its planning or execution.<sup>6</sup> Mr. Amir Abdollahian said that Iran did not give orders to the leaders of the "resistance axis" and that they are autonomous in their decision making. Asked by the state television news anchor if Iran would enter the war, he said: "Anything is possible".<sup>7</sup>

Mohammad Bagheri, the chief of staff of Iran's armed forces, also warned that the ongoing Israeli attacks against Gaza could lead to the involvement of other parties in the conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Iranian state television has warned about attacks on Israel from multiple fronts on its borders if the ongoing crackdown on terrorist group Hamas in the Gaza strip region by IDF continues. The three-and-a-half-minute TV broadcast was narrated by Iranian reporter Younis Shadlou. The television broadcast featured footage of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said that if the war continued "nobody could stop the forces of the resistance."<sup>9</sup>

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4 Ibid.

5 Iran commonly uses terms like "resistance forces," "resistance groups," "resistance front," and "resistance axis" to refer to a network of regional militant groups that it supports. This network includes organizations like the Palestinian militant group Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, as well as various militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthi militia in Yemen.

6 Ibid.

7 Iran warns of 'multiple fronts' if Israel's Gaza attacks continue, The New York times, October 16, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/world/middleeast/iran-gaza-israel-hamas.htm>

8 Iran commander warns 'other actors' could join war if Israel continues Gaza attacks, Al Arabiya, October 19, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/topics/palestinian-israeli-conflict/2023/10/19/Iran-commander-warns-other-actors-could-join-war-if-Israel-continues-Gaza-attacks>

9 Iran commonly uses terms like "resistance forces," "resistance groups," "resistance front," and "resistance axis" to

The TV report highlighted how a vicious attack on Israel would unfold from multiple fronts. It highlighted that Houthis in Yemen from the south, Syrian and Iraqi militias in Syria from the east, and Hezbollah in Lebanon from the north would launch coordinated attack on Israel with missiles and drones. The coordinated attack would lead to a siege of Israel from every side.<sup>10</sup>

The report claimed that Houthis in Yemen possessed missiles with a range of more than 1200 miles. It also claimed that Hezbollah in Lebanon had stock of advanced missiles which could target Israeli warships in the Mediterranean Sea as well as Israel's important city of Tel Aviv. In the report, Shadlou signed off by saying that the vicious attack might happen in the next few days if Khamenei's ultimatum to cease offensive by Israel in Gaza, isn't implemented.<sup>11</sup>

## Lebanon

Since the Hamas attack in southern Israel, Hezbollah has launched various provocations along the northern border, and the IDF has responded with similarly limited action. Hezbollah is walking a fine line. Israel's northern border with Lebanon is being closely monitored as the first potential flashpoint where the war could spread.<sup>12</sup>

On October 21, 2023, Hezbollah said 24 of its members killed since October 7, 2023, in heavy exchanges of fire with the IDF. Lebanese security sources said 11 fighters with Palestinian militant groups in Lebanon had also been killed alongside four civilians. Five Israeli soldiers and one civilian have been killed on Israel's side of the frontier, according to Israeli military reports.<sup>13</sup>

The frontier is volatile because strategy could change at any moment and miscalculation of the sort that sparked the 2006 war is a real danger.<sup>14</sup>

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refer to a network of regional militant groups that it supports. This network includes organizations like the Palestinian militant group Hamas, Lebanon's Hezbollah, as well as various militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthi militia in Yemen.

10 Iranian state TV visualises how 'multiple front attack' on Israel would happen, Hindustan Times, October 19, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/iranian-state-tv-visualises-how-multiple-front-attack-on-israel-would-happen-101697718741437.html>

11 Ibid.

12 Iran warns of 'multiple fronts' if Israel's Gaza attacks continue, The New York times, October 16, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/16/world/middleeast/iran-gaza-israel-hamas.htm>

13 Israel pummels Gaza as US sees 'significant' risk of attacks on Mideast interests, Al Arabiya, October 22, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/22/US-beefs-up-Mideast-military-assets-as-Israel-pounds-Gaza-targets-in-Syria-Lebanon>

14 Michael Eisenstadt and Michael Knights, deterring escalation and expansion of the Gaza war by Iran's "axis of resistance", Policy Watch 3796, October 13, 2023. <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/#inbox/FMfcgzGtxdZHwJXXmJB-zBtJlDQJfvgjq>

## The Golan Heights (Syria)

Iran might open another front in the Golan Heights, which it considers a safer option than the Lebanon border. The Golan is a favorite area of operations for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who have been recruiting local groups into militia outlets to support Hezbollah activities in Syria while deploying drones and rocket capabilities around the area.

On October 21, 2023, Israeli missiles hit Damascus and Aleppo international airports putting both out of service and killing two workers. The airports are used by Iran to transfer weapons and ammunition to Hezbollah.<sup>15</sup>

## Yemen

The Pentagon said on October 19, 2023, that the USS Carney destroyer shot down three land-attack cruise missiles and several drones launched by the Iran backed Houthi rebels from Yemen heading north along the Red Sea, towards targets in Israel.<sup>16</sup>

The USS Carney an Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, was patrolling in the northern Red Sea as part of a heavily reinforced US military presence ordered by President Joe Biden to maintain stability in the wake of war between Israel and the Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Pentagon spokesperson Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder told reporters: "This action was a demonstration of the integrated air and missile defense architecture that we have built in the Middle East, and that we are prepared to utilize whenever necessary to protect our partners and our interests in this important region."<sup>17</sup>

A senior official in the Israeli army told an Israeli radio channel that they have intelligence "confirming" that the missiles were launched by Houthis and headed towards Israel.<sup>18</sup> IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said the Israeli Air Force is ready to repel attacks by Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen. Israel has some of the world's best air defenses, and is prepared for threats like these, he added.<sup>19</sup>

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15 Israel pummels Gaza as US sees 'significant' risk of attacks on Mideast interests, Al Arabiya, October 22, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/22/US-beefs-up-Mideast-military-assets-as-Israel-pounds-Gaza-targets-in-Syria-Lebanon>

16 US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen 'potentially' at Israel: Pentagon, Arab news, October 20, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394376/middle-east>

17 US Navy warship shoots down cruise missiles, drones 'potentially' targeting Israel, aa. com. October 20, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/us-navy-warship-shoots-down-cruise-missiles-drones-potentially-targeting-israel/3026576>

18 US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen 'potentially' at Israel: Pentagon, The new Arab, October 19, 2023. <https://www.newarab.com/news/us-intercepts-yemen-missiles-potentially-aimed-israel>

19 IDF says ready to repel Houthi attacks, is striking Gaza 'at rate not seen in decades', The Times of Israel, October 20, 2023. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-says-ready-to-repel-houthi-attacks-is-striking-gaza-at-rate-not-seen-in->

## **The U.S. and the War in Gaza**

Following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, President Biden has bolstered America's military presence in the Middle East to show the country's commitment to Israel and to serve as a guard against the Israel-Hamas war spilling over in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin deployed two US aircraft carrier strike groups and a rapid response Marine unit to the Eastern Mediterranean. The Pentagon also ordered 2,000 personnel on standby for potential deployment.

Despite the moves, US officials say there are no plans for American boots to be on the ground in Israel. There is, however, a group of US servicemembers advising and helping with hostage recovery in Israel.<sup>21</sup>

President Biden, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and other US officials warned Iran, Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies against opening a second front on Israel. as the latter prepared to launch an operation against Hamas militants in Gaza.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the deployment of US forces in Eastern Mediterranean would allow the United States "to respond more quickly" to the crisis, while the White House stressed it did not intend to put US combat forces on the ground.<sup>22</sup>

President Biden flew to Israel on October 18, 2023, in a dramatic show of US support to Israel. President Biden repeated the warning to Iran and its proxies in an address to the nation. "So, in this moment, we must be crystal clear. We stand with Israel. Let me say again to any country, any organization, anyone thinking of taking advantage of this situation, I have one word. Don't. Don't!"<sup>23</sup> President Biden also urged Congress to fund military backing for Israel and another embattled US ally — Ukraine.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on October 20, 2023, that Washington would send more military assets to the Middle East in support of Israel and strengthen the US defense posture in the region after "recent escalations by Iran and its proxy forces" - a reference to Hezbollah, Palestinian and other militants.<sup>24</sup>

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decades/

20 US Navy intercepts cruise missiles fired from Yemen, The Telegraph, October 20, 2023. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/10/20/us-yemen-iran-attack-israel-hamas-gaza-war-houthis/>

21 US Navy shoots down Houthi drones, missiles potentially targeting Israel: Pentagon, Al Arabiya, October 20, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/19/US-Navy-warship-near-Yemen-intercepted-projectiles-US-official-tells-Reuters>

22 US Navy intercepts 3 missiles fired from Yemen 'potentially' at Israel: Pentagon, Arab news, October 20, 2023. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2394376/middle-east>

23 Iran's Proxies in Yemen, Iraq Threaten US Over Support for Israel, Iran international, October 19, 2023. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202310102133>

24 Israel pummels Gaza as US sees 'significant' risk of attacks on Mideast interests, Al Arabiya, October 22, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/22/US-beefs-up-Mideast-military-assets-as-Israel-pounds-Gaza-targets-in-Syria-Lebanon>



US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said that the United States did not want to see the conflict spread. But the United States sees the prospect of further attacks on its troops in the Middle East and the Israel-Hamas war escalating to the wider region.<sup>25</sup>

## **The Attacks of Iranian Proxies on U.S. Bases in Syria and Iraq**

### **Syria**

There were two drone strikes in Syria. Two drones attacked US personnel at the al-Tanf garrison in southeastern Syria. One drone was shot down, but another caused minor injuries. The garrison is located at a sensitive juncture often used by Iranian-backed militants to ferry weapons to Hezbollah.

Three drones with explosives attacked the Conoco oil field in eastern Syria province of Deir A-Zour that borders Iraq and houses American troops.

### **Iraq**

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the state paramilitary organization that contains many Iran-backed factions, has voiced its “unequivocal support” for the Palestinian factions fighting Israel and the Iraqi government has said the Palestinian operations were a natural outcome of what it calls “oppressive” policies by Israel.

Abu Hussein Hamidawi, the secretary-general of Kataib Hezbollah, a radical Iraqi Shiite paramilitary group and part of the PMF said that If the US forces intervene in the operation al-Aqsa Storm – the codename for the Hamas attack, “we will target the American bases” as well as Israeli positions.

American forces encountered three drones in western and northern Iraq. US forces intercepted all three, destroying two but only damaging the third.

In the first attack, two drones were intercepted by coalition forces based at Al-Asad air base in Western Iraq which is used by US forces, with no damage or casualties reported. The second attack occurred in Harir base in northern Iraq. with no damage or casualties reported.

The “Islamic Resistance in Iraq”, claimed responsibility and said it “heralds more operations” against the “American occupation.” The “Islamic Resistance” is not a group per se, but rather an umbrella term used to describe all Iran-backed militias in Iraq. The use of this name indicates that Iraqi militias are posturing themselves as one front amid

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25 US sees risk of Middle East escalation, threat to US troops amid Israel-Hamas war, Al Arabiya, October 22, 2023. <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/10/22/US-sees-potential-for-escalation-in-Mideast-war-due-to-actions-of-Iran-its-proxies>

the war in Gaza, which is typically a sign that their Iranian patron is marshaling and corralling the disparate “Resistance ” (muqawama) groups.<sup>26</sup>

It followed a threat from groups aligned with Iran that US interests would be targeted if Washington intervened to support Israel against Hamas in Gaza. Many signs indicate that Iraq’s “resistance” militias are in fact preparing for a regional war in which they will support Hamas and Iran.

## **Summary**

Iran’s coordination with its regional proxies since Hamas’s attack on Israel on October 7 strongly suggests that the proxies are acting as part of an Iranian-organized strategic plan. Iran has denied involvement in planning the attack, but the country’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the slaughter in a televised address.

The Iranian state television broadcast featured footage of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who said that if the war continued “nobody could stop the forces of the resistance.” The TV report highlighted how a vicious attack on Israel would unfold from multiple fronts. It highlighted that Houthis in Yemen from the south, Syrian and Iraqi militias in Syria from the east, and Hezbollah in Lebanon from the north would launch coordinated attack on Israel with missiles and drones.

The Iranian proxies are operating simultaneously in several arenas: Hezbollah from the border of Lebanon, groups affiliated with Hezbollah in Syria on the border in the Golan Heights and the Houthis in Yemen by launching missiles and rockets towards Israel. At this stage all the activities are relatively limited in scope and the main front of the campaign with the IDF is in the Gaza Strip.

Iran has already accomplished its main objectives from the war in Gaza: regaining some regional leverage, freezing Israel-Saudi normalization, and isolating Israel from its neighbors.

It seems that Iran at this stage is interested in discouraging Israel from carrying out its threat to bring down Hamas and demonstrating to the US that Iran is capable of harming American interests in the Middle East if it supports Israel.

The Iranians may be content to sit on the sideline for now while calculating the risk vs. reward of direct Hezbollah involvement in the war against Israel.

The Biden administration hasn’t said it yet, but Iran is responsible for the war in Gaza and if the war spreads, it will only happen because Iran gives the order.

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26 Amir al Kaabi, Hamdi Malik, Michael Knights, Signs of Iranian Coordination in Iraqi Base Attacks and Messaging, The Washington Institute, Oct 18, 2023. [https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/signs-iranian-coordination-iraqi-base-attacks-and-messaging#utm\\_term=Signs%20of%20Iranian%20Coordination%20in%20Iraqi%20Base%20Attacks&utm\\_campaign=Iraqi%20Base%20Attacks%25252C%20Post-](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/signs-iranian-coordination-iraqi-base-attacks-and-messaging#utm_term=Signs%20of%20Iranian%20Coordination%20in%20Iraqi%20Base%20Attacks&utm_campaign=Iraqi%20Base%20Attacks%25252C%20Post-)

The Iranian decision on whether to expand the war in Gaza into a regional war will be influenced by two main factors:

1. The determination that Israel will demonstrate in the war in the Gaza Strip and its success in destroying Hamas infrastructure.
2. The level of threat that the US will create for Iran and its proxies.

If the Biden administration hopes to prevent more fronts from opening, America's threat to intervene has to be seen as credible by making clear, through words and deeds, that participation of Iran and its proxies in the conflict would elicit a strong U.S. response.

To discourage that from happening, America will have to respond decisively to attacks against its forces across the region and hold Iran directly accountable for the actions of its proxies.