

NOTES AND REFLECTIONS

ONE YEAR AFTER 7 OCTOBER, THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE ABYSS

MARIANO AGUIRRE

maguernst@hotmail.com

Mariano Aguirre is an independent analyst on international politics and associate fellow of the international security programme in Chatham House (London). He has been senior advisor on peacebuilding at the Office of the Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Colombia (2017-19); director of the Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution (NOREF), in Oslo (2009-2016), program officer on peace and security with the Ford Foundation (New York), among other positions. He holds an MPhil in Peace and Conflict Studies from Trinity College, Dublin. Aguirre is professor of postgraduate studies at the Human Rights Institute at the Deusto University in Bilbao, University Castilla-La Mancha, and the School of Culture of Peace-Autonomous University of Barcelona. As a journalist and analyst he has written on issues ranging from neo-imperialism in fragile states, humanitarian intervention, exclusion and violence in the Global South, with particular interest on Latin America and the Middle East. His last book is *Guerra Fría 2.0. Claves para Entender la Nueva Política Internacional* (Icaria, Barcelona, 2023) (Portuguese edition published by Observare. Universidades Autónoma de Lisboa, 2023). In 2014 he received the Observare Award by the Universidad Autónoma de Lisboa for his professional career devoted to peace, security and human rights.

Twelve months after Hamas killed 1200 citizens in Israel and kidnapped 240 others, Israel's offensive in Gaza continues with nearly 42,000 fatalities (not counting those buried in the rubble). In the name of the right to self-defence, Israel has systematically violated international humanitarian law by subjecting 2.3 million Palestinians to harsh attacks, continuous displacement, destruction of all social and economic infrastructure, restricting access to humanitarian aid, food, water, medical care and medicines. High numbers of humanitarian workers and journalists have also been victims by the Israeli army.

In parallel, different war fronts have intensified between Israel and Hezbollah, a Shiite political party and military organisation in Lebanon; Iran; and a series of armed groups (the 'axis of resistance') in Yemen, Syria and Iraq that carry out limited attacks against Israel, US forces in the region and commercial vessels. Washington has sent 43,000 troops to different countries in the region and mobilised two warships to Israel's shores as a show of support for what prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu calls Israeli "sacred war".

Since last October, Yemeni Houthis have [attacked](#) several commercial vessels passing through the Bab al-Mandab Strait that separates Yemen from Djibouti and Eritrea (in Africa) in the Red Sea. This site is key to the control of almost all shipping between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal. The Houthis demand



an end to the offensive in Gaza and the entry of humanitarian aid to stop their attacks. The US regularly attacks Houthi positions in retaliation for their attacks on Israel and commercial vessels.

Around 100 Israelis are still being held hostage by Hamas (35 are estimated to have died). Negotiations to free them, mediated by Qatar, Egypt and the US, have failed. According to Israel, Hamas is demanding too much by asking for the release of all Palestinian political prisoners and the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. Relatives and parts of Israeli society accuse prime minister Netanyahu of obstructing them to continue the war for his own benefit (he has corruption cases pending in court), even if the hostages die.

Israel has also stepped up its attacks on the United Nations. It is demanding the dismissal of Secretary-General António Guterres and has declared him *persona non grata*. It also wants to close UNRWA, the UN agency for the protection of 5.9 million Palestinian refugees.

The Israeli government has rejected UN General Assembly demands in December 2023 to immediately implement a humanitarian ceasefire and in September 2024 to "put an immediate end to the illegal presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories". It also denies allegations of systematic violations of international humanitarian law and the International Court of Justice's recommendations to cease the operation in Gaza as it could incur the crime of genocide, and the International Criminal Court's arrest warrants against senior Israeli government officials (and Hamas leaders). Nor has it accepted the indictment of a UN Commission of Inquiry that holds Israel and Hamas responsible for committing war crimes.

Regarding Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups in Gaza involved in the 7 October attack on Israel, Human Rights Watch research [concludes](#) that they violated international humanitarian law through deliberate and indiscriminate attacks on civilians and civilian objects; intentional killing of persons in custody; cruel and other inhumane treatment; crimes related to sexual and gender-based violence; hostage-taking; mutilation and body snatching; use of human shields; and looting and pillaging.

No answers for Gaza's future

Since October 2023 the US has assured Netanyahu that it would continue to supply him with weapons while insisting that he moderate his responses to avoid civil casualties and a regional war. The US delivers about \$3.8 billion annually in arms to Israel. It is followed by Germany and Italy as leading providers. In February 2024 the US Congress approved an additional \$14 billion in military aid, and in August it added another [\\$20 billion](#).

For 12 months Washington, and some European governments, urged Israel to avoid attacks on civilians, not to carry out an offensive in the city of Rafah (where the Israeli military had earlier indicated it would be a 'safe zone'), and to soften its position in negotiations in Qatar. But neither the prime minister nor his far-right cabinet ministers took the advice, convinced that neither Washington, Berlin nor London would cut off arms deliveries.



Israel has not defined what it wants to do in Gaza when the war is over. The latest idea, dubbed the "Generals' plan", is to evacuate all remaining Palestinians in the northern part of the strip, occupy it militarily, and expel some of the 2.3 million Palestinians to Egypt or Jordan, or other countries. At the same time, handing over the management of Gaza to local tribal leaders unaffiliated with Hamas and delivering aid to Israeli-Palestinian mafias. Indeed, a Financial Times [investigation](#) shows that Israel already promotes and protects aid traffickers who sell food at exorbitant prices in Gaza while blocking the entry of UN assistance.

The war against Hamas is expected to continue for a long time, as after a year its militiamen are still holding out. US and EU proposals for the weak Palestinian National Authority, which runs part of the West Bank under Israeli tutelage, to take over Gaza have fizzled out. Likewise, Washington and Brussels' proposal to revive a two-state solution has faded, while not even a ceasefire has been reached. The future perspective is what is already happening in the present: a single state (Israel) that subjects the Palestinian population to a regime like Apartheid. That is, a violent binational state.

Israel's strategic objective is to weaken Iran's capacity and its regional network of armed groups that attack Israel from Gaza, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. In the long term, the aim would be to provoke a crisis and the fall of Iran's government after a series of military defeats that would delegitimise its politico-religious power. Netanyahu would also be using the offensive to push the US to confront Iran in an uncertain war and weaken candidate Kamala Harris chances against Donald Trump.

The Hezbollah factor

Israel's extrajudicial assassinations of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iranian military leaders, such as the seven Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards killed in Syria; Hamas leader Ismail Haniya in Iran; and the recent assassination of Hezbollah's top leader Hassan Nasrallah and several of his senior commanders, can be expected to continue.

Israel, Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas have been exchanging limited attacks for years, sometimes leading to longer and more intense wars, such as Israel-Hezbollah in 2006 and Israel-Hamas in 2008-2009. These clashes were also joined by exchanges between Israel and Houthi armed groups in Yemen and others in Iraq and Syria, supported but not directed by Iran.

Hezbollah emerged as a militia against the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. By 2000 it was already a powerful organisation which, due to Lebanon's splintering into sectarian identities, enabled it to seize some of the state's power. With Iranian assistance, it developed a powerful conventional arsenal, especially missiles, and strengthened its capacity to operate in the southern Lebanese strip bordering Israel. Iran has relied on this military force as a deterrent and eventual offensive against Israel. If Israel were to launch an all-out war on Iran, Hezbollah would retaliate.

In the past year, 60,000 Israelis living near the Lebanese border have been displaced. Israel's current offensive has caused 346,000 displacements in Lebanon between 8



October 2023 and 29 September 2024, according to the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Around 2,000 Lebanese have died as a result of the attacks.

The US-Israeli confrontation with Iran

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has become Israel's main regional strategic enemy. At the same time, Tehran's theocratic Shiite regime competes for regional hegemony with the Sunni Arab monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The governments of these countries, allies of the US, have moved progressively closer to Israel. In 2020 the Donald Trump administration launched the Abraham Accords, another attempt to build 'a new Middle East', to forge an alliance between Israel, Arab states and the US. The UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco began normalising relations with Israel. The Israeli government immediately recognised Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara.

From 1979 Iran became an enemy of the US. The revolution that triumphed in that year accused Washington of having interfered in the country's policies since the 1950s to control oil production and of having supported the authoritarian monarchy of the Shah of Iran (1941-1979). In retaliation, 66 US embassy diplomats and US citizens were held hostage in Tehran from November 1979 to January 1981.

Diplomatic relations between the two countries were severed, and the anti-Iranian alliance between the US and Israel was consolidated. Tehran, Washington and successive Israeli administrations were active in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq, supporting or fighting governments and armed groups.

Washington's relationship with Iran changed under President Barack Obama. He made it a priority to prevent Iran from having nuclear weapons, and pushed for a complex negotiation on Iran's nuclear programme that culminated in the *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action* (JCPOA) signed in July 2015 between Iran, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council - China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States and the United States - and Germany), and the European Union.

Iran's civilian nuclear programme was placed under international control in exchange for the lifting of Washington and European sanctions on Iran. The deal worked, but in 2018 then-president Donald Trump denounced it and withdrew the US from the deal and imposed new, tougher sanctions on Iran.

The Biden administration tried to reinstate it, but anti-Israeli and Republican pressures, an attempt by US negotiators to link a new version of the deal to Iran not supporting armed anti-Israel groups and demands for guarantees from Iran that in the future another Trump administration or another president would again abrogate the deal, scuttled the negotiations.

The escalation ladder

The delicate balance between Israel, Iran and its allies was upset this year. From 7 October onwards, the Israeli government felt it was possible to change the security



equation, especially towards Iran. As Prime Minister Netanyahu put it in October, one of the goals is to bring down the regime in Iran. The aim is to weaken Iranian capacity and destroy the 'axis of resistance' through the 'decapitation' of its leaders, and a series of military defeats that delegitimise the Teheran's political and religious power.

Israel has carried out these extra-judicial executions of non-state armed organisations for decades without any result in bringing them to an end. Even if temporarily weakened, Hezbollah and Hamas have deep social roots and will continue to exist.

At the same time, Netanyahu is using the offensive to push the US to confront Iran, and to promote various war fronts in the Middle East. This would create an unfavourable climate for Joe Biden's administration, especially as oil prices are already rising. This will have a negative impact on Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidate for president, against Donald Trump, the Republican candidate and Netanyahu ally.

Israel has three pillars for its plan to change the Middle East. First, the military and diplomatic support of the US and most of Europe. Second, its nuclear arsenal. Third, the support of a large section of Israeli society.

Both parties and most US politicians consider the alliance with Israel and the commitment to defend its existence to be a "ironclad" issue, despite possible disagreements. The so-called US-Jewish lobby, influential in business, media and political circles since the 1960s, is key to maintaining economic, military and diplomatic support for Israel.

This situation has changed over the past decade as a [new generation](#) of Jewish-Americans question Israel's policies towards the Palestinians, particularly the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, and US support for Israel. While failing to change the Biden administration's support with arms and diplomacy, this generation has a prominent role to play since October 2023.

Although it has never acknowledged it, Israel possesses at least 80 nuclear weapons. In 2014 the United Nations urged it to renounce them, accede to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and International Atomic Energy Agency verification. Israel did not accept these requirements, reserving the option to use nuclear weapons.

In April and a few days ago, Iran launched ballistic missile and drone strikes on military targets in Israel. Tehran warned the US three days before the attack in April and a few hours earlier in October. The aim, knowing that Israel has the technology to intercept the missiles, is to signal that Iran can use more missiles to saturate its shield, and accelerate plans for nuclear weapons.

For the Iranian government the immediate dilemma is how to respond to Israel. It can launch more missiles without warning by trying to breach Israel's missile defence shield. But it runs the risk that the response could be an attack on its nuclear and oil facilities, as could happen these days. If that were to happen, Iran could destroy oil facilities in the region, leading to sharp increases in the price of crude oil on the international market.

Israel's attack could also be pre-emptive. If Iran does not respond, trying to maintain tension without open war, it would lose credibility as a regional power and among the more radical sectors of the government. But if it does respond and an all-out



confrontation ensues, Israel has more military means, with the support of the US, Britain and some Arab countries, and nuclear weapons.

In the long term, the escalation ladder in this volatile regional scenario is very dangerous. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been pressuring the US for years to transfer civilian and military nuclear technology to contain Iran. Since the Gaza war, Saudi Arabia has indicated that it would establish diplomatic relations with Israel if Washington accepted such a transfer, and if Israel commits to the two-state solution.

Russia and Iran, in parallel, are on the verge of signing a cooperation agreement that includes security issues. Moscow has good relations with Israel and has to take care of them because of the Russian-Jewish community that emigrated from the former USSR in the 1990s. But it also seeks to maintain good relations with Iran, an important regional and military ally in the broader Moscow-Washington confrontation. All three sides find advantages in maintaining alliances. China, for its part, will continue to strengthen its relations with the region and Israel, but without intervening in the security field.

Hamas and Hezbollah's mistake

Hamas considered in 2023 that an October-style strike would be a wake-up call to the international community's lack of interest in Israel's illegal occupation of the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. At the same time, Hezbollah launched limited attacks against Israel on the Lebanese border to get Netanyahu to agree to a ceasefire in Gaza.

But the long-standing balance between Israel, Iran and Hezbollah has unravelled. Hezbollah and Hamas underestimated, as did the US and Iran, the will of Netanyahu's ultra-right-wing government and the Israeli army in going to a multi-front war for which they have been preparing for decades, and in which they have the support of various sectors of their society, from fanatics and settlers to those who reject having a Palestinian state as a neighbour and fear another 7 October.

Israel has on its side, despite criticism, the US and Europe, and Arab governments that hate and fear Hamas and Hezbollah, but they feel obliged to condemn Israeli actions because their societies support the Palestinians.

One year after 7 October and 76 years after the creation of the state of Israel, neither violence nor restraint have served the Palestinians well in gaining a state in part of what was the British Mandate of Palestine. Previous Israeli attempts to "change the Middle East" through assassinations of armed group leaders, invasions of Lebanon, and wars with neighbours have succeeded in making the Palestinian issue disappear.

The killing of civilians in Gaza in the name of the right to self-defence, the killings by Hamas also against civilians in the name of resistance to the occupation, and the escalation towards a regional war will bring security to no one. Resentment over the killings of civilians and leaders of armed organisations ensures revenge by future generations on all sides.



In the meantime, it has become definitively clear that the US and European political influence in the Middle East is totally non-existent.

How to cite this note

Aguirre, Mariano (2024). One year after 7 October, the Middle East in the Abyss. *Notes and Refletions, Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL 15, N.º 2, November 2024-April 2025, pp. 455-459. <https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.15.2.01>

