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25 October 2023

**Editor’s Top Picks**

**Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed meets JP Morgan Chase CEO**

25 October 2023

WAM

**Biden speaks to Saudi Crown Prince amid growing concerns of Israel-Gaza war spillover**

White House says it remains concerned about Iranian proxies attacking US troops and bases

By Jihan Abdalla

24 October 2023

The National

**U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council To Establish AI Task Force within Digital Working Group**

25 October 2023

U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council

**[U.S.-U.A.E. News](#USUAENews)**

**Single Gulf visa plan a tourism game-changer, experts say**

Unified entry permit aims to ease access to the region and could be introduced within two years

By Patrick Ryan

24 October 2023

The National

**Dubai to set up committee to settle family business disputes**

New panel aims to prevent any harm to family businesses’ reputation or financial position while disagreement is being considered

By Alkesh Sharma

24 October 2023

The National

**Ministry of Finance convenes with Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry**

25 October 2023

WAM

**Biden is worried about wider war in the Middle East. Here’s how it could happen.**

From Yemen’s rebels launching missiles to alleged Israeli settler killings of Palestinians in the West Bank, the entire region faces chaos.

By NAHAL TOOSI, LARA SELIGMAN and PAUL MCLEARY

25 October 2023

Politico

**Exclusive: US military steps up Middle East surveillance as threats to troops grow**

By Phil Stewart

24 October 2023

Reuters

**Opinion This is not the State Department I know. That’s why I left my job.**

By Josh Paul

23 October 2023

Washington Post

**10 hours, 2 nominees: Chaos on Capitol Hill and still no House speaker**

‘It’s a dumpster fire, frankly,’ one House Republican said

By Jonathan Edwards

25 October 2023

Washington Post

**Progressives rebel against Biden’s handling of Israel-Gaza crisis**

Split over Middle East war jeopardizes a coalition that Biden has nurtured for three years

By Marisa Iati and Colby Itkowitz

25 October 2023

Washington Post

[**Business News**](#BusinessNews)

**ADCB's Q3 profit hits record on strong loan growth**

Net profit surges 22% to $528m as lender posts 10% net loan growth year-to-date

By Alvin Cabral

25 October 2023

The National

**Boeing Cuts 737 Delivery Goal for Year**

Aircraft maker posts quarterly loss on production troubles

By Sharon Terlep

25 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

**Emirates Global Aluminum an advancing environmental excellence for sustainable future**

25 October 2023

WAM

**Exxon, Chevron Look to West in Uncertain World**

The two largest Western crude producers are focusing their investments closer to home as the world gets more dangerous.

By Benoît Morenne

25 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

**Microsoft Earnings Growth Accelerates on Stronger-Than-Expected Cloud Demand**

Company’s partnership with OpenAI has helped power new AI businesses

By Tom Dotan

24 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

[**Regional News**](#RegionalNews)

**The global consequences of the Israel-Hamas war are just beginning**

By Kirsten Fontenrose

25 October 2023

Atlantic Council

**Qatar’s Emir says Israel’s ‘barbaric bombing’ of Gaza ‘exceeds all limits’**

The country has acted as a mediator in negotiations with Hamas to release four hostages

By Ismaeel Naar

24 October 2023

The National

**Israel says Hamas ‘is ISIS.’ But it’s not.**

By Ishaan Tharoor

25 October 2023

Washington Post

**Weapons Flood West Bank, Fuel Fears of New War Front**

By Sune Engel Rasmussen and Benoit Faucon

25 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

**Yemen getting involved in Israel-Gaza conflict is US envoy's 'worst fear'**

Houthi rebels last week launched drones and missiles believed to have been aimed at Israel

By Ellie Sennett

24 October 2023

The National

**US agrees to send two Iron Dome batteries to Israel**

By Noah Robertson, Bryant Harris and Jen Judson

24 October 2023

Defense News

**Qatar’s Relations with Washington and Israel Are Being Tested**

by Simon Henderson

24 October 2023

Washington Institue for Near East Policy

**If this war stops Israeli-Saudi normalization, then Iran wins**

Opinion by Eric Mandel

24 October 2023

The Hill

**Opinion Iran’s proxy forces are teaming up to attack Americans**

By Josh Rogan

25 October 2023

Washington Post

**Biden’s Red-Line Moment With Iran**

Blinken promises a swift and decisive response, but will Biden back it up?

Editorial Board

24 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

**US forces attacked more than 12 times in Iraq, Syria in past week -Pentagon**

24 October 2023

Reuters

**Rockets attack targets Iraqi base housing U.S. forces – sources**

24 October 2023

Reuters

**Editor’s Top Picks**

**Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed meets JP Morgan Chase CEO**

25 October 2023

WAM

H.H. Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Chairman of Abu Dhabi Executive Council, has met with JP Morgan Chase Chairman and CEO Jamie Dimon in Abu Dhabi.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed areas of mutual cooperation in the banking sector, as well as investment opportunities offered by the UAE and Abu Dhabi to international companies.

His Highness highlighted the key milestones achieved in diversifying the economy, building a business-friendly legislative ecosystem, and laying the foundations for a knowledge-based and innovative economy that have contributed to strengthening the UAE’s position as a leading global investment destination.

Also attending the meeting were Khaldoon Khalifa Al Mubarak, Chairman of the Executive Affairs Authority and Managing Director and Group CEO of Mubadala Investment Company; Ahmed Jasem Al Zaabi, Chairman of the Abu Dhabi Department of Economic Development; Saif Saeed Ghobash, Secretary-General of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council; and Waleed Al Mokarrab Al Muhairi, Deputy Group CEO of Mubadala Investment Company.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Biden speaks to Saudi Crown Prince amid growing concerns of Israel-Gaza war spillover**

White House says it remains concerned about Iranian proxies attacking US troops and bases

By Jihan Abdalla

24 October 2023

The National

US President Joe Biden spoke to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on Tuesday to discuss efforts to deter a regional spillover of the Israel-Gaza war, the White House said.

The call came amid growing US concerns that Iran-backed groups such as Hezbollah are seeking to escalate the conflict and attack American troops at military bases in the Middle East.

“The two leaders agreed on pursuing broader diplomatic efforts to maintain stability across the region and prevent the conflict from expanding,” the White House said in a statement.

Pentagon Press Secretary Brig Gen Patrick Ryder said there had been 10 attacks on forces in Iraq and three in Syria in the past week.

Biden administration officials have repeatedly warned of the risk of more attacks on US troops and of Iran seeking to widen the conflict.

“It's potentially a dangerous environment and we're taking it very, very seriously,” White House National Security spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Tuesday.

“Our commanders on the ground have the right to defend themselves, take and are taking the appropriate force protection measures.”

The US is bolstering its military presence in the region, moving an aircraft carrier and attack ships to the Arabian Gulf. It has also sent advanced missile defence systems.

The move, Mr Kirby said was “to make sure that we send a strong signal not only difference but a willingness to protect and defend ourselves and our national interests”.

The development comes as Israel has been bombarding the Gaza Strip with retaliatory air strikes that have killed more than 5,000 people.

The US, which has voiced staunch support for Israel, has also been trying to advocate the entry of humanitarian aid into the tiny enclave that is home to 2.3 million people.

But as Israel tightened its siege on Gaza, it has prevented the entry of water, fuel, food and medicine.

Three small convoys carrying critical aid have so far made their way to the strip following diplomatic efforts, but Israel has not allowed the entry of fuel.

Israel is thought to be preparing for a ground invasion of the Gaza Strip with the aim of destroying Hamas.

Meanwhile, the US has vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions calling for a ceasefire.

“A ceasefire right now would only benefit Hamas,” Mr Kirby said.

The major escalation dealt a blow to efforts by the Biden administration to forge a landmark normalisation deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia under the Abraham Accords.

As the conflict rages on, the White House said efforts towards achieving peace between Israelis and Palestinians would resume “as soon as the crisis subsides”.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council To Establish AI Task Force within Digital Working Group**

25 October 2023

U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council

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| |  | | --- | | The U.S.- U.A.E. Business Council is pleased to announce the formation of an AI Task Force within its Digital Domain Working Group. This initiative builds on the longstanding relationship between the U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council and H.E. Omar Al Olama, U.A.E. Minister of State for AI, Digital Economy, and Remote Work Applications as well as H.E. Dr. Mohamed Al Kuwaiti, Head of Cybersecurity for the U.A.E. Government. The new task force also leverages the Business Council’s partnerships with leading U.S. and U.A.E. companies and academic institutions, such as New York University - Abu Dhabi (NYUAD), the Technology Innovation Institute (TII), the Mohamed bin Zayed University of Artificial Intelligence (MBZUAI), G42, Google, Microsoft, Amazon Web Services (AWS), and IBM. This task force aims to:   * Provide a platform for U.A.E. leadership to engage with industry about their vision for AI * Bring together industry to discuss and advocate for policies that underpin the responsible regulation of AI * Convene key stakeholders from across industry to explore the transformative potential of AI in all sectors, including education, healthcare, and energy * Promote AI research and development between U.S. and U.A.E. private sector companies, research institutions, and academic institutions * Help nurture an AI talent pipeline * Highlight AI initiatives undertaken by Business Council member companies   U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council members are invited to register their interest [here](https://usuaebusiness.us16.list-manage.com/track/click?u=b2e45224530063633717b76cc&id=4d4749c52c&e=06d4278666) in joining this task force. Existing Digital Domain Working Group members will automatically be included in the work of the new AI Task Force.  For more information please contact Amira Siddiqi at [asiddiqi@usuaebusiness.org](mailto:asiddiqi@usuaebusiness.org). | |

[Back to Top](#_top)

**U.S.-U.A.E. News**

**Single Gulf visa plan a tourism game-changer, experts say**

Unified entry permit aims to ease access to the region and could be introduced within two years

By Patrick Ryan

24 October 2023

The National

A planned single unified tourist visa for the Gulf would be a game-changer for the region, hospitality and tourism experts said.

The visa, expected to be introduced within two years, will open the GCC nations to tourists from the Middle East and around the world.

Experts said there was an untapped market for tourism in the GCC bloc, with many travellers put off by visa restrictions that made reaching some nations difficult.

“It’s going to be a game-changer because it’s going to be a lot easier to travel around the countries in the GCC,” said Stephan Vanden Auweele, chief executive of United Hospitality Management, which owns and operates 15 properties in the Middle East and Europe.

“You could spend a few days in Dubai or Abu Dhabi for example before heading to other countries in the region.

“Previously it was difficult to obtain a visa for some countries in the GCC depending on what passport you had, as different countries have their own criteria.”

Abdulla bin Touq, the UAE’s Minister of Economy, said the GCC tourism visa would probably be introduced within the next two years.

A recent meeting of GCC tourism ministers in Oman “unanimously" endorsed the introduction of the visa, which was said to be presented at the coming GCC summit, state news agency Wam reported on Monday.

Mr bin Touq said the unified visa initiative was an integral part of the GCC 2030 tourism strategy.

“People are always wondering how they can get a visa into Qatar or Saudi and wherever else they want to visit,” said Zahara Kurji D’Souza, who runs a travel counselling company.

“They end up just going to Dubai or Abu Dhabi as a one-stop shop because of all the fracas they have getting visas to other countries in the GCC.

“Even when they travel in groups they find some might be eligible for visas in some countries, while others travelling with them may not, so it puts them off.”

Other hospitality experts said the move would be hugely beneficial to the local economies across the GCC.

“It simplifies travel and enhances the allure of the GCC as a multi-faceted tourist hub with much to offer, from iconic skyscrapers to rich cultural experiences,” said Dany Cherfane, director of sales and marketing at Grand Plaza Movenpick Media City in Dubai.

“Hotels together with tour operators stand to benefit significantly from this innovative policy allowing them to collaborate by offering travelers multi-destination experiences.

“It is poised to create new opportunities for the hospitality and tourism sectors making the region a more attractive global destination.”

The UAE alone has 1,114 hotels, ranking second in the region after Saudi Arabia.

The GCC tourism strategy aims to increase the number of visitors to countries in the region to 128.7 million visitors by 2030.

There were 39.8 million visits last year, which was an increase of 136.6 per cent compared with 2021.

“The move presents an opportunity for the industry to really tell the diverse story of the GCC as one, showcasing all the authentic experiences that each Gulf state has to offer, and to share resources that benefit all,” said Naim Maadad, founder of Gates Hospitality.

Single visa for GCC states would simplify regional travel, UAE Minister of Economy says

“I also have doubt that it will give global hospitality chains further confidence in investing in the GCC, as the logistics of multi-destination trips become a lot easier.

“Apart from the positive impact that it will bring to the hospitality sector, the announcement also demonstrates perhaps something more arguably more important, and that is the appetite for the region to work together in unity.”

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Dubai to set up committee to settle family business disputes**

New panel aims to prevent any harm to family businesses’ reputation or financial position while disagreement is being considered

By Alkesh Sharma

24 October 2023

The National

Dubai is to set up a committee to boost family businesses, a critical part of the emirate's private sector economy, its Government Media Office said on Tuesday.

The move will prevent any harm to family businesses’ reputation or financial position while a dispute is being considered, a statement said.

Sheikh Maktoum bin Mohammed, First Deputy Ruler of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, has issued a resolution to set up the Family Business and Family Ownership Disputes Settlement Committee.

"This committee will consider and settle all disputes concerning family businesses and ownerships, along with the authority to take the preventative and urgent measures to preserve its continuity and to prevent the interruption of its work or affect its reputation or financial position throughout the period of consideration of the dispute,” Sheikh Maktoum said in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

“Family businesses are an essential component of Dubai's economy and through the activation of this committee's role it will remain a steadfast partner in Dubai's prosperity and progress.”

Dubai's family businesses generate more than 40 per cent of the emirate's gross domestic product, government data indicates.

About 90 per cent of private companies in the country are family-owned, a report by the UAE Ministry of Economy says. They also employ more than 70 per cent of the private-sector workforce.

Family businesses operate in a range of vital sectors including property, construction, retail and wholesale trade, hospitality and tourism, manufacturing, financial services, health care, education and technology.

The outlook for family businesses in the emirate is “exceptionally promising”, as financial wealth in the UAE is projected to surge 6.7 per cent annually to reach $1 trillion in 2026, up from $700 billion in 2021, which will spur significant growth in this sector, Dubai Media Office said in July.

“Dubai is keen to ensure we have the right climate that helps family businesses grow and flourish generation after generation, contributing to the Dubai Economic Agenda D33’s objective of making Dubai one of the world’s top urban economies as well as the fastest-growing and most attractive business hub,” DMO quoted Sheikh Maktoum as saying.

A judge with a rank not lower than appeal level will be appointed committee chairman. The panel will include two members with experience in the legal, financial and family business-management fields, who will be appointed on a recommendation from the director general of Dubai Chambers.

In May, Dubai Chambers set up a dedicated centre for family-owned businesses to help them to navigate challenges such as succession planning and achieving sustainable growth.

All family businesses in the emirate, regardless of their size or turnover, will be able to use services offered by the Dubai Centre for Family Businesses, which aims to make corporate governance an integral part of growth and continuity strategy of family-owned private companies, Abdul Aziz Al Ghurair, chairman of Dubai Chambers, said at the time.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Ministry of Finance convenes with Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry**

25 October 2023

WAM

The Ministry of Finance convened with the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ADCCI) at the Ministry’s headquarters in Abu Dhabi, with the aim of cooperating to create a conducive environment for businesses, which enhances governmental work and is in line with the UAE’s directions and strategies.

Younis Haji Al Khoori, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Finance, and Ahmed Khalifa Al Qubaisi, CEO of Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, attended the meeting.

Ahmed bin Sulaiman, Director of Public Debt Management Office; Azza Al Jasmi, Director of Government Communication Department; and Ibrahim Al Jarwan, Director of GCC Affairs, represented the Ministry of Finance at the meeting. From the Abu Dhabi Chamber’s side, attendees included Dr. Latifa Al Ameri, Acting Executive Director of the Relationships and Membership Affairs Sector; Hilal Al Hamli, Advisor for Special Task Development; Mohammed Al Sabbagh, IT Advisor; and Aref Al Fara, Economic Advisor. Several specialists from the Ministry and the Chamber also were in attendance.

“The Ministry of Finance seeks to establish effective communication to create a supportive environment that elevates the levels of governmental work in line with the directions and strategies of the UAE," Younis Al Khoori said.

He added, “The Ministry of Finance prioritises national talents, developing their competencies, and refining their skills in finance, taxation, and other domains. This approach aligns with the nation’s directives and commitment to develop the business environment and diversify the strategic sectors. Such endeavours will contribute to boosting competitive efficiency and advancing the UAE’s growth and prosperity.”

Ahmed Khalifa Al Qubaisi stated, “At the Abu Dhabi Chamber, we remain committed to strengthening our cooperation with public and private entities with the aim to bolster economic growth and promote investment opportunities within Abu Dhabi. Our strategic goals revolve around supporting the growth of the private sector and facilitating doing business in Abu Dhabi, where our collaboration with the Ministry of Finance is vital. Through our constructive discussions, we seek to identify our shared interests and the necessary mechanisms to provide the private sector with the right initiatives to encourage investment, growth, and operational development, in addition to upholding global financial and taxation standards in Abu Dhabi and the wider UAE.”

The Ministry of Finance’s team reviewed six topics – partnership with the private sector, the Treasury Bonds Programme, joint Gulf economic work, double taxation agreements and investment promotion and protection agreements, and relations with regional and international organisations, and areas of collaboration with ADCCI.

The pillars of cooperation between the Ministry of Finance and the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry are based on the Ministry’s strategy. This strategy aims to strengthen relations with international institutions and organisations and qualify Emirati youth, enabling them to engage at the highest levels in international financial organisations.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Biden is worried about wider war in the Middle East. Here’s how it could happen.**

From Yemen’s rebels launching missiles to alleged Israeli settler killings of Palestinians in the West Bank, the entire region faces chaos.

By NAHAL TOOSI, LARA SELIGMAN and PAUL MCLEARY

25 October 2023

Politico

U.S. officials are worried that violence in Israel’s neighbors will spiral into a larger regional war.

Missile strikes from Yemen. Killings in the West Bank. Attacks on U.S. troops in Syria. And that’s before Israel officially launches a ground invasion of Gaza, the territory controlled by Hamas militants who killed more than 1,000 Israelis on Oct. 7.

Biden administration officials are especially concerned that armed groups backed by Iran are preparing to exact more bloodshed. Aside from Hamas, those proxy forces include Lebanon and Iraq-based Hezbollah and the Houthis of Yemen.

“We see a prospect for much more significant escalation against U.S. forces and personnel in the near term. And let’s be clear about it, the road leads back to Iran,” a senior Defense Department official told reporters Monday. The official was granted anonymity because the person was not authorized to speak on the record.

Arab officials are worried, too. They are urging Washington to help defuse the tensions by using what leverage it has with Israel. Some say the United States should call for a cease-fire, but the Biden team is unwilling to do so, saying Israel has the right to respond to the Hamas attacks.

It’s especially tough to contain the violence because the sparks are flying in many different places. If tensions don’t lower soon, “the whole region will be affected,” predicted one Arab diplomat, granted anonymity for the same reason. “No one will be spared.”

Here are some of those potential flashpoints:

Iraq and Syria

American troops in a variety of locations across Iraq and Syria have already come under attack from drones and rockets more than a dozen times in the past week. Officials worry that these small-scale assaults, which the Pentagon blamed on Iran-backed militant groups, could continue — and even worsen.

There is concern the attacks could expand beyond Iraq and Syria — which host 2,500 and 900 American troops, respectively — to the thousands of other U.S. personnel stationed across the region, from Bahrain to the United Arab Emirates. Even commercial vessels in the Persian Gulf could come under increased threat, according to a U.S. official, who was granted anonymity to discuss a sensitive topic.

“Generally, we know there is a significant threat of escalation throughout the region, and that would include toward U.S. forces,” a senior U.S. military official told reporters.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has directed additional forces to the region in response to the attacks in Iraq and Syria — including redirecting an aircraft carrier strike group en route to the Eastern Mediterranean to its Middle East command on Saturday. He also deployed additional air defense capabilities including Patriot battalions and a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system to locations across the region, the Pentagon said.

This is in addition to another carrier strike group currently operating in the Eastern Mediterranean, and thousands of forces on 24-hour prepare-to-deploy orders in case needed.

Along the Israeli-Lebanese border

Israel’s northern border with Lebanon is already the scene of seemingly intensifying tit-for-tat strikes between the Israeli military and Hezbollah, another Iran-backed militant group.

Israel has been evacuating villages near the border amid rocket launches and concerns about militant incursions. Over the weekend and on Monday, Israel Defense Forces reported using aerial drones and other means to hit multiple targets in Lebanon, including militant cells suspected of trying to launch anti-tank missiles as well as a Hezbollah compound and an observation post.

Such skirmishes are worrying but not unprecedented, and they can still be prevented from further escalation, said Khaled Elgindy, an analyst with the Middle East Institute.

“Hezbollah faces its own domestic pressures, and Lebanon is already economically a failed state,” Elgindy said. “They don’t need the kind of death and destruction happening in Gaza to happen to them.”

U.S. officials have leaned on Lebanese leaders to make this clear to Hezbollah, which also yields significant political influence in Lebanon. Like Hamas, the United States considers Hezbollah a terrorist group and generally avoids direct interactions with it.

In a recent call with Lebanon’s caretaker prime minister, Secretary of State Antony Blinken “reiterated the importance of respecting the interests of the Lebanese people, who would be affected by Lebanon being drawn into the conflict instigated by Hamas’ terrorist attack on Israel,” according to a State Department readout.

The West Bank

Dozens of Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank since Hamas’ attack on Israel.

Many are suspected to have died at the hands of Israeli settlers who reside in the territory and may be taking advantage of the moment to sow fear in Palestinian communities and try to take their land.

The Israeli military has also staged raids and carried out at least one airstrike in the West Bank, aimed at a mosque Israeli officials said that Hamas was using as a base to plan attacks.

U.S. officials are very worried that clashes in the West Bank could turn into a more serious conflict, said Jon Alterman, an analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies who speaks with administration officials.

Tensions already were unusually high in the West Bank prior to the Hamas attack, much of it due to Palestinian frustrations over Israeli settlements where residents appear more willing to act violently.

Gaza, which is home to 2.2 million Palestinians — the vast majority of them civilians — has long been run by Hamas. Israeli airstrikes since Oct. 7 have killed thousands of Palestinians there.

“The West Bank is a special kind of place in between,” Alterman said. “You have armed settlers, some of whom have messianic views. You have complicated jurisdictions — who’s governed by what law, those kinds of things.”

Yemen

A potential new front emerged on Thursday when a U.S. Navy destroyer, the USS Carney, intercepted four ballistic missiles and more than a dozen drones launched by Yemen’s Houthi rebels in the northern Red Sea.

A Pentagon spokesperson said the missiles were heading north, toward Israel, when they were shot down. The Iran-backed Houthis are widely believed to field ballistic missiles capable of hitting Israel. It is unclear how many of these missiles the Houthis possess, but a military parade in Yemen’s capital of Sanaa last month showed off several new Iranian-made and supplied short and medium-range missiles.

The shaky ceasefire between the Houthis and the Saudi-backed coalition that supports the country’s internationally recognized government has continued to hold.

Other Middle Eastern capitals

Pro-Palestinian protests have been held across the region as words and images — some of it disinformation — from the Israel-Hamas war have spread.

American and Israeli diplomatic facilities have been focal points of such demonstrations; police in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon have used tear gas to disperse some protesters who tried to storm such buildings.

The autocrats permitting the gatherings in places such as Egypt are likely happy to let their people vent rage against Israelis, a favorite bogeyman of Middle East rulers, even those who have peace deals with Israel.

But those same autocrats are often unpopular themselves, and there’s always a risk that the protests could turn against them. Frustrations toward their own leaders could soar in particular as the Palestinian body count rises.

Few expect a new round of pro-democracy demonstrations like the Arab Spring, but the potential for violence — from protesters or the state — remains as high as the emotions inspired by the Israel-Hamas war.

A second Arab diplomat, who was granted anonymity to discuss a sensitive issue, acknowledged the challenge posed by protests, but argued that should the government in charge remain steadfastly on the side of the Palestinians, its people would only support it more.

“The protests will continue and there will be a very strong pressure on the authorities and on the leaders,” the diplomat said. “When it comes to the Palestinian cause … it’s a common cause. It’s in our blood.”

The Hamas attack may breathe new life into Islamist extremist movements whose cause had been getting less attention given the growing international focus on Russia’s war on Ukraine and America’s rivalry with China.

Alleged Islamist sympathizers killed two Swedes in Brussels and a teacher in France this month. Although it’s not clear if those attacks have a direct link to the Israel-Hamas conflict, they’ve all factored into heightened European Union concerns about better screening of migrants and asylum-seekers.

Numerous antisemitic and anti-Muslim attacks also have been reported in recent days, including in the United States.

In Illinois, a 6-year-old Palestinian-American boy was killed and his mother wounded when they were stabbed in an alleged hate crime. Police said the suspect, their landlord, was angry over the Hamas attack on Israel.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Exclusive: US military steps up Middle East surveillance as threats to troops grow**

By Phil Stewart

24 October 2023

Reuters

The U.S. military is taking new steps to protect its troops in the Middle East as concerns mount about attacks by Iran-backed groups, and it is leaving open the possibility of evacuations of military families if needed, officials tell Reuters.

The measures include increasing U.S. military patrols, restricting access to base facilities and hiking intelligence collection, including through drone and other surveillance operations, officials say, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The U.S. military is also beefing up monitoring from guard towers on U.S. military facilities, hiking security at base access points and increasing operations to counter potential incoming drones, rockets and missiles, the officials say.

The new package of force protection measures have not been previously reported.

"With the increase in the number of attacks and attempted attacks on U.S. military locations, continuous review of our force protection measures is critical," U.S. Army General Michael "Erik" Kurilla, head of U.S. Central Command, said in a statement to Reuters.

Kurilla, who oversees American forces in the Middle East, said the steps already taken to increase force protection measures, as well as the deployment of additional U.S. military assets to the region in recent days, "has prevented more serious casualties of our forces in theater."

U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria have been repeatedly targeted since the Israel-Gaza conflict began on Oct. 7. The attacks have caused minor injuries to four U.S. service members so far and five U.S. military contractors, all of whom returned to duty, one of the officials said.

Last week off the coast of Yemen, a U.S. warship shot down more than a dozen drones and four cruise missiles fired by Iranian-backed Houthis.

The heightened tensions have put U.S. personnel on constant alert. During a false alarm at Al-Asad air base in Iraq on Thursday, a civilian contractor died from cardiac arrest.

A U.S. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity, did not specifically say what might trigger the evacuation of U.S. military families, who are deployed to Middle East locations including Bahrain, home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet.

"We continuously review and should we think the threat is rising to a level that threatens the dependents of our service members in the (region), we will err on the side of caution," the official told Reuters.

Senior Biden administration officials including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin have warned of the risk of major escalation in attacks on American troops in the Middle East and that Iran could seek to widen the Israel-Hamas war.

"We see a prospect for much more significant escalation against U.S. forces and personnel in the near term and let's be clear about it, the road leads back to Iran," a senior defense official told Pentagon reporters on Monday.

Austin has ordered new air defenses to the Middle East to safeguard troops, including a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system.

The United States has also sent warships and fighter aircraft to the region to try to deter Iran and Iran-backed groups, including two aircraft carriers.

The Pentagon has said it has not seen a direct order from the highest levels in Iran to carry out the attacks. But White House spokesperson John Kirby said it was clear that Iran was facilitating them.

"We know that Iran is closely monitoring these events, and in some cases actively facilitating these attacks and spurring on others who may want to exploit the conflict for their own good for Iran," Kirby said on Monday.

Iranian security officials told Reuters Iran's strategy was for Middle East proxies like Hezbollah to pursue limited strikes on Israeli and U.S. targets but to avoid a major escalation that would draw in Tehran.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Opinion This is not the State Department I know. That’s why I left my job.**

By Josh Paul

Washington Post

For more than a decade, I worked in the State Department bureau responsible for arms transfers and security assistance to foreign governments. In that time, I was involved in many complex and morally challenging debates over what weapons to send where. What I had not seen until this month, however, was a complex and morally challenging transfer in the absence of a debate.

So last week, I resigned.

A basic premise of U.S. military assistance to Israel since the Oslo Accords has been “security for peace” — the notion that if Israel can feel secure, including through the provision of billions of dollars’ worth of U.S.-funded arms transfers each year, it can more readily make the concessions allowing for the emergence of a Palestinian state. (This is also the basic job of the U.S. Security Coordinator, a State Department initiative I worked for in Ramallah for a year.)

But the track record shows that U.S.-provided arms have not led Israel to peace. Rather, in the West Bank, they have facilitated the growth of a settlement infrastructure that now makes a Palestinian state increasingly unlikely, while in the densely populated Gaza Strip, bombings have inflicted mass trauma and casualties, contributing nothing to Israeli security.

On Oct. 7, when Hamas massacred Israeli civilians, I felt sick to my stomach, both because of the horror being visited upon innocents and because I knew what would come next. Israel has a right to defend itself, but the country’s track record over a half-dozen major clashes in the past 15 years suggests that thousands of Palestinian civilians will die in the process.

Sure enough, Israeli requests for munitions started arriving immediately, including for a variety of weapons that have no applicability to the current conflict. These requests deserved the attention we would pay to any large arms package, and I urged a frank discussion. My urging was met with silence — and the clear direction that we needed to move as fast as possible to meet Israel’s requests. Concurrently, the same Congress that had previously blocked arms sales to other regimes with questionable human rights records was now pressing us to move forward to meet Israel’s demands.

The idea that U.S. arms should not be used to kill civilians has never been a controversial one in any of the four administrations I have served, dating back to my work helping rebuild the Iraqi security sector in 2004-2006.

Earlier this year, the Biden White House supposedly strengthened protections against such occurrences. Its new Conventional Arms Transfer Policy establishes a standard that transfers will not be authorized if they are “more likely than not” to be used to violate human rights.

In August, the State Department notified all its embassies of a new Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance (CHIRG), which lays out a set of actions to be taken after a report of civilian harm resulting from use of U.S.-origin weapons. The risk is obvious that American weapons provided to Israel, especially air-to-ground munitions, will inflict civilian harm and violate human rights. But the department was so adamant to avoid any debate on this risk, even the publication of a pending department release about the CHIRG was blocked.

This is, at least in my experience, an unprecedented unwillingness to consider the humanitarian consequences of our policy decisions.

Managing the tension between human rights concerns and the requests of our partners is a standard and healthy part of the arms transfer policymaking process. A lot of good people collaborate to ensure such transfers advance U.S. relationships while meeting the standards of law, policy and conscience. Debates typically rage within the bureau and across the State Department at a level of detail that I believe would make most Americans proud.

The motto of the arms trade cannot be “first, do no harm.” But there must be at least an effort to do as little harm as possible. The furious debates in the department over the provision of cluster munitions to Ukraine, for example, show that such discussion is possible even in the midst of a crisis.

The absence of a willingness to hold that debate when it comes to Israel is not proof of our commitment to Israel’s security. Rather, it is proof of our commitment to a policy that, the record shows, is a dead end — and proof of our willingness to abandon our values and turn a blind eye to the suffering of millions in Gaza when it is politically expedient.

That is not the State Department I know. And that is why I had to leave it.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**10 hours, 2 nominees: Chaos on Capitol Hill and still no House speaker**

‘It’s a dumpster fire, frankly,’ one House Republican said

By Jonathan Edwards

25 October 2023

Washington Post

House Republicans started out the day Tuesday nominating one of their own as House speaker, their third nominee in as many weeks since Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) was ousted from the job earlier this month.

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By the close of business, that nominee was done.

Rep. Tom Emmer (R-Minn.) met the same fate as Reps. Steve Scalise (R-La.) and Jim Jordan (R-Ohio) while trying to win the speaker’s gavel. While all three got a majority of Republicans’ votes to become their nominee, none could coax enough to secure the 217-vote threshold needed on the House floor.

And so Republicans fell back to square one and again find themselves scrambling to choose a leader. Without one, the House of Representatives is stalled as situations at home and abroad increasingly demand the attention of Congress. On Tuesday, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said the stalemate and resultant paralysis in Congress are hurting President Biden’s ability to manage global affairs, including the Israel-Gaza war and the war in Ukraine.

‘Harbinger of problems ahead’

Tuesday began with eight Republicans running to be the party’s nominee for House speaker. But even as Republicans elevated their majority whip, the cracks started to show. In early rounds of voting, five Republicans chose members who were not candidates for the job, which one lawmaker described as a “harbinger of problems ahead.”

“If six people don’t vote for whoever our designee is, we don’t have a speaker, again,” Rep. Bill Huizenga (R-Mich.) told reporters. “So that’s problematic.”

Overnight, former president Donald Trump had taken to his social media platform to share two posts originally written by far-right activist Laura Loomer criticizing Emmer.

Emmer wins nomination

After multiple rounds of voting, Emmer won the nomination. Emmer, 62, had the support of McCarthy, with whom he had served on the House leadership team. Speaking to “Meet the Press” on Sunday, McCarthy described him as “head and shoulders above all those others who want to run.”

“We need to get him elected this week and move on,” McCarthy said.

‘It’s a dumpster fire, frankly’

For about four hours after winning his party’s nomination, Emmer tried to appeal to enough Republicans to become House speaker.

Emmer soon met behind closed doors to try to woo holdouts in what Rep. Tom Cole (R-Okla.) called a “spirited discussion.” Rep. Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) hailed Emmer’s efforts as a political persuasion tour de force.

“Tom Emmer is putting on a master class in there about how to stand in the fire and answer questions in front of a room of 200, frankly, very opinionated members,” Johnson said.

House Republicans adjourned a meeting of the full conference to let Emmer zero in on roughly two dozen holdouts. As he left the room, Huizenga described the situation in less charitable terms than Johnson.

“It’s a dumpster fire, frankly,” he told reporters.

But Emmer did have the support of Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.), the far-right firebrand who led the successful charge to oust McCarthy. Standing up during a closed-door meeting, Gaetz told fellow Republican members that, even though he doesn’t like Emmer, he was going to vote for him, The Post reported. He asked Emmer to speak about his relationship with Trump. Emmer said that he’d spoken with the former president by phone over the weekend and that he would support him in his campaign to return to the White House next year.

Trump weighs in

Minutes after Gaetz voiced support for Emmer, Trump posted to his social media platform to denounce his bid for the speakership. The former president wrote that “[v]oting for a Globalist RINO like Tom Emmer would be a tragic mistake!”

“He never respected the Power of a Trump Endorsement, or the breadth and scope of MAGA — MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN,” Trump said.

After Trump’s post, multiple Republican lawmakers and senior aides reported that Emmer wouldn’t be able to get to 217 votes. They said that Trump’s criticism had emboldened the holdouts even as Emmer tried to win them over.

Not conservative enough

Those holdouts said that Emmer wasn’t conservative enough. Some disapproved of his vote last year to support same-sex marriage. Others don’t like that he voted to certify the 2020 presidential election results, affirming Biden’s win. Some didn’t like that he served on the House leadership team alongside McCarthy.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.) said Emmer’s voting record turned her off and led her to openly oppose him during the closed-door roll-call vote. She said that Emmer was not sufficiently conservative to an evolving Republican Party tacking to the right.

“Here’s what’s going on: The GOP conference is changing,” she said.

Just before 4:30 p.m. Emmer stormed out of the meeting and bolted for his security detail’s car. A few minutes later, word trickled out that he had withdrawn from the process.

After Emmer’s bid failed, Republicans scrambled to choose another nominee. More than a dozen members ran to try to be the conference’s fourth nominee for speaker.

A little after 8 p.m., Rep. Jodey Arrington (R-Tex.) stuck his head out of the Ways and Means conference room to tell The Post that he believed Rep. Mike Johnson (R-La.) was going to be the next House speaker.

“I just feel it in my bones,” Arrington said.

About two hours later, Johnson indeed emerged as the new nominee — the fourth of the month and the second of the day. But a nominee does not a speaker make.

Just ask Scalise, Jordan or Emmer.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Progressives rebel against Biden’s handling of Israel-Gaza crisis**

Split over Middle East war jeopardizes a coalition that Biden has nurtured for three years

By Marisa Iati and Colby Itkowitz

25 October 2023

Washington Post

Cordell Cox has volunteered for a Democrat in every presidential race since Barack Obama’s 2008 run. Next year, he might sit it out.

Cox, a 33-year-old in Michigan, said he’ll probably still cast a ballot for President Biden if he’s the Democratic nominee. But, Cox said, he won’t work to increase turnout and fears that some of his friends will choose a third-party candidate or decline to vote altogether.

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To them, Biden’s handling of the violence in Israel and Gaza has been unacceptable. As the White House advocates for sending $14 billion in aid to Israel, Cox and his like-minded friends commiserate in a group text about their shared belief that, as Cox said in an interview, “we should stop sending money and bombs to other countries while we can’t fix the water crisis in Flint, [Mich.,] or feed our homeless.”

That sentiment reflects a surge of pro-Palestinian feelings on the part of progressives, especially younger ones, that could jeopardize the fragile alliance Biden has carefully nurtured with the left over the past three years. From climate change to student loans to labor activism, Biden’s policies and rhetoric have won over many liberals who have long been suspicious of him, and several prominent progressive leaders vowed last summer to back Biden for another term.

But in recent days, former staffers to congressional Democrats have criticized Biden’s refusal to call for a cease-fire in Gaza. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested after protesting at the White House and the Capitol making the same demand. A State Department official and a staff member for Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.) resigned. Crowd members booed a Muslim White House official who spoke at the funeral of a Palestinian American boy killed in what authorities say was a hate crime.

Former president Barack Obama released a statement on Monday that defended those on the left worried about the plight of Palestinians, writing, “it is possible for people of good will to champion Palestinian rights and oppose certain Israeli government policies in the West Bank and Gaza without being anti-semitic.”

The growing schism over Israel is especially evident as the war has been front-and-center in Biden’s public appearances since Oct. 7, when Hamas militants crossed the border and killed at least 1,400 Israelis, prompting Israel to respond with airstrikes. The debate threatens to complicate Biden’s bid for another term, especially since some younger Democrats are already expressing hesitation or anxiety about his candidacy.

With the election a year away, the war could well fade into the background by the time Americans cast their ballots. But in interviews, progressive voters and younger activists said they will not forget Biden’s full-throated support of Israel, and Arab and Muslim groups have also expressed anger about U.S. backing for Israel’s airstrikes on Gaza, which Palestinian officials say have killed about 5,800 people.

Democrats' unity starts to splinter on Israel-Gaza

“You can want Israel to be safe, you can condemn what Hamas did — and you can not want Palestinian civilians to be killed,” said a Democratic aide who signed a letter supporting a cease-fire, speaking on the condition of anonymity out of fear of a backlash. “All of those things aren’t in conflict. They aren’t morally in conflict. Yet the dynamic on the Hill has reached this place where those are in conflict and you have to pick a side.”

Josiah Wampfler, who worked for Sen. Bernie Sanders’s 2020 presidential campaign, said he reluctantly voted for Biden in the general election that year. A videographer in Wisconsin, Wampfler said he was pleasantly surprised by Biden’s foreign policy in office — until the president’s response to the Israel-Gaza violence, which he called “atrocious.”

Wampfler said he probably would still vote for Biden next year, especially if former president Donald Trump is the Republican nominee, but that he understands that others with his viewpoint might not. “To see the blatant destruction that is happening right now and to see my president fully supporting it … it’s unconscionable,” Wampfler said.

Biden’s initial reaction to the Hamas attacks was to call them “sheer evil” and emphasize that Israel had a right to defend itself against the militant group. Since then, he has also emphasized that Israel should abide by international law, urged Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu not to be “consumed by rage,” and repeatedly pushed for humanitarian aid to flow into Gaza.

“We can’t ignore the humanity of innocent Palestinians who only want to live in peace and have an opportunity,” Biden said Thursday in an Oval Office address, drawing a distinction between Hamas and innocent Palestinians.

Asked about the dissent, White House spokeswoman Karine Jean-Pierre said Biden supports Americans’ right to speak out if they feel the administration is missing the mark. “As it relates to protests, peaceful protests, people have the right to do that,” she said Monday.

Ammar Moussa, a spokesman for Biden’s campaign, said the president has been unequivocal in opposing Islamophobia. Moussa also sought to contrast Biden’s handling of issues affecting Muslim and Palestinian communities with that of Trump, who leads in polls for the Republican presidential nomination.

As president, Trump banned travel from several predominantly Muslim countries. Last week, he proposed restrictions on immigration for Hamas sympathizers and critics of Israel. Trump has vowed that if elected, he would expand his travel ban and reject refugees from Gaza.

“As MAGA Republicans continue to run on an openly [Islamophobic] platform — including renewed support for Donald Trump’s Muslim ban — the stakes of next year’s election could not be more consequential,” Moussa said in a statement. “President Biden continues to work closely and proudly with leaders in the Muslim and Palestinian communities in America, to listen to them, stand up for them, and fight back against hate.”

State Dept. official resigns, citing objection to Israel arms transfers

But some activists argue that Biden and other Democratic leaders are making a political miscalculation if they assume young liberals will support them regardless of their position on Israel.

“I think that they are taking all that for granted, believing that those people will inevitably vote for President Biden over anything else,” said Usamah Andrabi, a spokesman for Justice Democrats, an organization that seeks to elect liberals to Congress. “When that is actually a failure of Democratic leadership, to not actually listen to those voters and see what they are demanding.”

Polling on Israel and the U.S. response to the current crisis reveals a significant generational divide. In a Quinnipiac University poll released this month, about half of voters ages 18 to 34 expressed disapproval of the United States sending weapons to Israel. In contrast, 59 percent of voters ages 35 to 49 said they approve, with even stronger support among older age groups.

In part, those figures reflect an evolution of attitudes on Israel, especially in the Democratic Party. Many Democrats of Biden’s generation — who witnessed Israel’s early days, when it was a vulnerable and left-leaning country founded in the aftermath of the Holocaust — view it as an indispensable haven for Jews. (“I think without Israel, there’s not a Jew in the world who’s secure,” Biden said on his recent trip to Israel.)

Younger Democrats, in contrast, know Israel as a powerful country that has severely restricted the lives of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and visible solidarity with Palestinians has grown within the party. That is reflected in the 400 congressional staff members who anonymously signed a letter to their bosses appealing for a shift in the U.S. approach to the war.

The signatories asked the lawmakers to demand a cease-fire and cessation of hostilities, the safe return of nearly 200 Hamas-held hostages, and the provision of additional humanitarian aid to Gaza.

One Democratic aide who signed the letter said they feared that the White House and the Biden campaign were underestimating the “sea change” in public opinion toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many young voters might sit out the election if they feel disappointed in Biden, said the aide, who spoke on the condition of anonymity out of fear of backlash.

“We’re worried the decisions are empowering Trump and making people leave the Democratic Party,” the aide said.

Calls for cease-fire divide Democrats

More than 250 people who worked on the 2020 presidential campaign of Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) sent a separate letter to their former boss expressing disappointment that she had not advocated for a cease-fire. A smaller group of people who worked on the campaign of Sen. John Fetterman (D-Pa.) sent him a similar letter.

Progressive activist Max Berger, who worked on Warren’s campaign, said he signed the letter because elected Democrats’ response to the war has felt disconnected from many Democratic voters. He said he was disappointed that the White House castigated as “disgraceful” the statements of liberal Democratic lawmakers who called for a cease-fire without publicly supporting Israel.

“On the politics, I think they’re really messing this up,” said Berger, who co-founded IfNotNow, a group that organizes Jewish people to help “end U.S. support for Israel’s apartheid system.” He added that there are already many young voters that “Biden is already going to have trouble turning out in ’24 and really needs. He can’t afford to lose enthusiasm among marginal voters in that demographic.”

A spokesman for Warren, Alex Sarabia, pointed to a response she gave last week, when she said “I respect my former staffers, who are doing exactly what I have always encouraged them to do — stand up and fight for what they believe in.”

Marianela D’Aprile, a writer who volunteers with the Democratic Socialists of America, attributed the shift in opinion among younger Americans to a broader awareness of oppression in the United States. She said social media has made it particularly easy to see other people’s pain.

“I think that the kind of imagination leap that it might take for the average American to empathize and be kind of understanding of what’s going on with people and what’s happening to people in Gaza, that leap is a lot smaller than it was maybe 20 years ago,” D’Aprile said.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Business News**

**ADCB's Q3 profit hits record on strong loan growth**

Net profit surges 22% to $528m as lender posts 10% net loan growth year-to-date

By Alvin Cabral

25 October 2023

The National

Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank, the UAE's third-largest lender, reported a 22 per cent increase in its third-quarter net profit, driven by strong loan growth and robust economic conditions in the UAE.

Net profit attributable to equity holders for three months ending September reached a record Dh1.94 billion ($528 million), up from Dh1.59 billion a year earlier, ADCB said on Wednesday in a regulatory filing to the Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange, where its shares are traded.

Total net interest income – what banks earn from their lending activities minus the interest they pay to depositors – surged 28.6 per cent to Dh2.65 billion, while net income from Islamic financing and investing products rose 6.2 per cent to Dh531 million.

Net interest margin – a key indicator of a bank's long-term profitability – climbed to 2.87 per cent, from 2.46 per cent a year earlier.

RakBank's third-quarter profit surges 29% after strong business and robust deposits

Multiply Group's third-quarter revenue jumps 24% on strong performance by its units

“In our core market, the UAE, the economy has remained resilient in the face of global headwinds,” said Ala'a Eraiqat, group chief executive of ADCB.

“ADCB is leveraging its strong franchise and digital proposition to serve a growing customer base amid robust consumer and business confidence.”

The bank has extended Dh52 billion of new credit year-to-date, driving net loan growth of 10 per cent during the first nine months of the year, he said.

In the nine months through September, net profit rose 23.6 per cent annually to Dh5.75 billion, while operating income jumped 22.7 per cent to Dh12.2 billion.

The bank had grown its assets by 7.8 per cent to nearly Dh537 billion at the end of September.

“Looking into 2024, we remain confident in the country's fundamentals and continued investment in its economic diversification strategy,” Mr Eraiqat said.

The UAE's banking sector has maintained its strength and has grown in parallel with the country's economy, which was able to strongly rebound from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Business activity in the Emirates' non-oil private sector expanded robustly in September as the addition of new clients, competitive pricing and sturdy underlying economic conditions increased demand, the seasonally adjusted S&P Global purchasing managers’ index showed earlier this month.

The country's gross domestic product grew by 3.8 per cent on an annual basis in the first quarter of this year, boosted by its strong non-oil sector extending the momentum of its 7.9 per cent expansion in 2022, its biggest in nearly 11 years.

With economic momentum continuing this year and interest rates staying higher for longer, the profitability of the four largest banks in the UAE – First Abu Dhabi Bank, Emirates NBD, ADCB and Dubai Islamic Bank – is set to improve this year, Moody's Investors Service said in March.

The UAE is also putting a particular focus on sustainability with its Net Zero by 2050 initiative, and businesses have been falling in line to adhere to its objectives and tap into its potential.

"Green bonds have become an integral part of our funding strategy, and our second issuance received strong demand from regional and global investors in September," said Deepak Khullar, group chief financial officer of ADCB.

The bank's $650 million green bond, which was 2.9 times oversubscribed and attracted more than $1.9 billion in orders from local, regional and international investors, will help it finance eligible projects that meet its environmentally friendly standards.

"ADCB is finalising an enhanced climate framework. Having completed a baseline assessment of financed emissions, we are now prepared to make clear and credible commitments on climate. Our immediate priority is to develop a suite of green products to support our customers in their transition journey," Mr Khullar said.

ADCB has updated its guidance for full-year 2023 "amid strong performance", with the bank targeting a 50 per cent cash dividend payout on this year’s earnings, "supported by its robust capital position".

The bank now expects a return on average tangible equity in the range of 14 per cent to 15 per cent, driven by net loan growth of between 10 per cent and 12 per cent, and a net interest margin of approximately 2.80 per cent.

ADCB group's UAE operations, including Al Hilal Bank, welcomed about 167,000 new retail customers in the third quarter, with 81 per cent on-boarded digitally, underlining the bank's online-centric strategy.

Digital engagement continued to grow as well, with the bank's mobile banking subscribers surging by a record 114,000 customers in the quarter.

The number of digital banking subscribers, from both internet and mobile banking platforms, were up by a third year-on-year.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Boeing Cuts 737 Delivery Goal for Year**

Aircraft maker posts quarterly loss on production troubles

By Sharon Terlep

25 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

Boeing BA -2.19%decrease; red down pointing triangle booked a third-quarter loss and lowered delivery goals this year for its 737 MAX jet, which accounts for the bulk of the plane maker’s output.

Boeing lost $1.64 billion in the quarter ended Sept. 30, more than analysts expected, and it reported negative cash flow from its operations. But the company met expectations for sales, and executives kept their full-year and medium-term financial guidance unchanged.

MAX production has been running at about half the company’s target while Boeing and one of its largest suppliers race to fix misdrilled holes on the jet’s fuselage.

“When we set our recovery plans, we knew issues would come up along the way,” Boeing Chief Executive Dave Calhoun wrote in a message to employees. He said improved quality procedures and a culture that rewards speaking up about problems means the company is finding more things in need of repair.

“I have heard those outside our company wondering if we’ve lost a step. I view it as quite the opposite,” Calhoun wrote.

The company said Wednesday that it will this year deliver between 375 and 400 of the 737 jets. It had previously set out to deliver 400 to 450 this year, and executives had said in September that they believed they could hit that target. Boeing said Wednesday that it still expected to deliver 70 to 80 787s.

Earlier this month, Boeing and the supplier, Spirit AeroSystems SPR -2.34%decrease; red down pointing triangle, expanded the scope of fuselage inspections to include hand-drilled holes in addition to those made using an automated drill.

Boeing says there is no immediate flight-safety concern tied to the Spirit defect. But rooting out and repairing the misdrilled holes is complicated and time-consuming.

The production shortfall comes as aerospace manufacturers and suppliers scramble to meet soaring demand for postpandemic travel. European discount carrier Ryanair recently cut its winter schedules, citing Boeing delivery delays.

Boeing still expects to hit a target of producing 38 of its 737 MAX jets a month by year’s end, a key milestone as Boeing’s customers face delayed deliveries. The company is working to recover from the pandemic and the MAX crisis, when two crashes of the jet in 2018 and 2019 grounded the fleet around the world for almost two years.

Boeing’s sales rose 13% to $18.1 billion in the quarter ended Sept. 30. Its net loss was narrower than a year ago when the company lost $3.3 billion in the same period. Analysts polled by FactSet expected a loss of $1.5 billion.

Boeing’s defense unit continued to weigh on the business, reporting another quarterly loss as it booked more expenses on converting the two 747 jumbo jets that will serve as Air Force One, as well as on a satellite contract.

Boeing and Spirit AeroSystems earlier this month reached a tentative pact for price increases on Spirit’s 787 work and decreases for 737 MAX fuselages. Boeing would also advance Spirit more cash and amend the terms of existing advances under the deal, boosting the supplier’s sales through 2025.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Emirates Global Aluminum an advancing environmental excellence for sustainable future**

25 October 2023

WAM

Environmental policies are integral to the Emirates Global Aluminium (EGA)'s approach to its environmental and social responsibilities. The company is committed to producing aluminium in an eco-friendly manner as it plays a vital role in building a green and sustainable future, given its multiple applications across various industries.

In reaffirmation of the company's dedication to fostering positive environmental change, a clear roadmap has been established to outline a more sustainable future, aligning with the UAE's vision and targets for achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. The company achieves this by consistently implementing top-notch environmental practices throughout its operations and maintaining a responsible approach to its management, contributing to the country's environmental goals.

In response to the expected increase in aluminium demand by 50 to 80% by 2050, as projected by the International Aluminum Institute, the company recognises the importance of enhancing its recycling efforts. Recycled aluminium consumes significantly less energy, up to 95% less, than new metal production. As a result, EGA is working on establishing the UAE's first aluminium recycling facility.

It's worth noting that the company achieved a recycling rate increase of up to 57% in 2021 compared to 2020, as reported in its 2021 sustainability report.

As a testament to its commitment to the environmental sector, the company announced the launch of the "Aluminium Recycling Coalition" earlier this year. This initiative encourages individuals to adopt sustainable lifestyles, accelerate carbon removal, and solidify the UAE's position as a global leader in international efforts towards green development.

The company is firmly committed to achieving the goal of carbon neutrality and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. It reached a 35% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions during the smelting process in 2021 and an 85% reduction in perfluorocarbon emissions during the same period. Recycling plays a central role in reducing aluminium industry emissions.

Regarding carbon emissions, EGA is the world's first company to produce aluminium using solar energy, solidifying its role in promoting renewable and clean energy in the industrial sector, both locally and globally.

The company adheres to a pioneering sustainability approach in line with the Aluminum Stewardship Initiative, incorporating nearly 100 environmental and social governance conditions. It has received international recognition for sustainability in the aluminium industry, with all its operational assets worldwide being certified by this initiative.

In 2017, EGA was the first Middle East-headquartered company to join the Aluminium Stewardship Initiative. Al Taweelah alumina refinery was certified for its environmental, social and governance performance by the Aluminium Stewardship Initiative in 2019.

In 2021, the company's Jebel Ali facility met the same criteria. Guinea Alumina Corporation, a subsidiary of the company, received the first Outstanding Performance certificate for sustainability in Africa in 2023, recognising its sustainable operations in Guinea.

The company continues its progress by conserving natural resources, reducing waste generation, and safeguarding biodiversity. Environmental protection is a fundamental part of the company's corporate policy. It continuously monitors and audits the environment, and no negative impacts on its operations have been identified thus far.

Additionally, the company is actively involved in biodiversity preservation in the areas surrounding its operations. This is achieved through initiatives to protect wildlife, such as its dedicated programmes for preserving turtles and gazelles.

These programmes have been in place at the company's UAE sites since 2011, and they have successfully protected 110 nests on the beach adjacent to the company's site, resulting in the successful hatching of over 7,200 turtles.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Exxon, Chevron Look to West in Uncertain World**

The two largest Western crude producers are focusing their investments closer to home as the world gets more dangerous.

By Benoît Morenne

25 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

As the world becomes more dangerous, the two largest Western crude producers are focusing their investments closer to home.

Chevron CVX -2.51%decrease; red down pointing triangle on Monday announced that it was acquiring Hess HES -3.77%decrease; red down pointing triangle in a $53 billion deal that gives it access to one of this century’s biggest oil finds in the South American country of Guyana and allows it to double down on shale by expanding its presence to North Dakota. Both regions are established oil producers with limited geopolitical tensions, affording Chevron new reserves with fewer risks.

The deal follows a megadeal in the U.S. shale patch by Exxon Mobil XOM -0.97%decrease; red down pointing triangle, which this month acquired Pioneer Natural Resources PXD -0.93%decrease; red down pointing triangle in a $60 billion merger that anchors its future to the prolific Permian Basin of West Texas and New Mexico.

The back-to-back acquisitions signal that the oil majors are increasingly turning their attention to the Western Hemisphere as international investments are complicated by the threat of expanding regional conflicts, from Ukraine to the Middle East.

In a call with analysts to discuss the Pioneer deal earlier this month, Exxon Chief Executive Darren Woods said that diversification allowed the company to manage geopolitical risks but that Exxon also had to make sure that it had access to low-cost production including in the U.S.

Chevron’s announcement was made two weeks after Israel ordered the company to shut down natural-gas production at one of its two major offshore platforms in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea as the war between Israel and Hamas escalated. The order was a stark reminder of the risks oil majors face in a region marred by violence that has previously jeopardized ambitious energy projects.

The companies also face investors’ demands that they focus on returns and steer away from the potentially profitable but costly and risky frontier exploration of untested regions that vaulted them to their global status.

“The age of frontier basin, breakthrough basin exploration may be done,” said Raoul LeBlanc, an analyst at S&P Global Commodity Insights.

Exxon and Chevron built their businesses for decades by scouring the globe for exploration opportunities as investors pressured the companies to add to their booked reserves, a key metric used by shareholders to value the producers. As a result, oil giants operated in far-flung locales rife with what is known in industry parlance as aboveground risk.

The emergence of U.S. shale eased some of the pressure as companies were able to drill in their own backyards, where frackers didn’t have to worry about wars or sudden regime changes.

In recent years, large Western oil companies have packed up and left places such as Southeast Asia, West Africa, Russia and parts of Latin America.

Exxon has planned since 2018 to sell at least $15 billion worth of assets as it shrinks its global footprint and focuses on its more valuable assets. It has sold out of projects in Chad and Cameroon and made progress on its goal to shed additional holdings in Iraq and Nigeria.

The company pulled out of Russia, where it had spent years establishing a foothold, once cultivating ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin wiped out Exxon’s stake in a major oil-and-gas project there after the company tried to exit from the venture following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Chevron since 2019 has unloaded assets in Azerbaijan, Denmark, the U.K. and Brazil, among other places.

As the companies have retreated, their overall production volumes have shrunk. Exxon produced about 3.7 million barrels of oil equivalent a day last year, down about 17% from 2011, its annual peak. Chevron’s international output fell 3% last year after concessions in Thailand and Indonesia expired.

Following the Pioneer deal, about 45% of Exxon’s production will come from the U.S., up from roughly 31% before it, according to JPMorgan Chase.

Both Exxon and Chevron said their recent shale acquisitions would strengthen U.S. energy security, reflecting concerns that oil supplies may become harder to come by as war rages in Ukraine and diplomats rush to the Middle East to try to prevent a regional conflagration involving Israel and Iran-backed forces.

Guyana’s proximity to the U.S. and relatively stable politics are similarly appealing to the oil companies. The country has exhibited respect for contracts for oil concessions there, allowing Exxon and Chevron to tout their investments as low-risk projects that will deliver new oil barrels to the U.S., potentially lowering gasoline prices, analysts said.

“This gives you, as majors, an important foothold in regions that are also of strategic importance for the U.S.,” Carolyn Kissane, a clinical professor at New York University’s Center for Global Affairs, said of the recent deals.

President Biden ran on a platform to stop new oil production but encouraged companies to drill more after the war began in Ukraine, which pushed gasoline to record levels. Earlier this year, he approved ConocoPhillips’s massive Willow oil-and-gas project in the U.S. Arctic. The decision angered environmentalists but sent a signal to producers that the administration likely wouldn’t skewer them for making fossil fuel investments close to home.

Chevron and Exxon have played down concerns that U.S. antitrust regulators would block either deal, saying the tie-ups will benefit consumers by ensuring domestic energy supplies.

Exxon and its partners, Hess and China’s Cnooc, have revved up Guyana’s oil production from nothing in 2019 to 400,000 barrels a day. The partners expect to be pumping 1.2 million barrels a day by 2027, making it one of the world’s fastest-ever oil developments.

Hess owns nearly a one-third share of the estimated 11 billion barrels of oil and gas found off the shores of Guyana.

By acquiring Hess, Chevron also gains a foothold in North Dakota’s Bakken Shale, a mature basin where relatively few investments are required to maintain production, said S&P’s LeBlanc. Hess produced 181,000 barrels of oil and gas a day in the region in the second quarter of the year.

The companies say that by applying the skills learned in challenging regions to domestic provinces, they will be able to recover more oil. Exxon said it now expected to produce about 2 million barrels of oil and gas a day in the Permian by 2027, in part by drilling longer lateral wells.

“The game now is about investing large amounts of dollars for a low-risk asset,” LeBlanc said.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Microsoft Earnings Growth Accelerates on Stronger-Than-Expected Cloud Demand**

Company’s partnership with OpenAI has helped power new AI businesses

By Tom Dotan

24 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

Microsoft’s MSFT 0.37%increase; green up pointing triangle sales growth accelerated last quarter as demand for its cloud computing services heated up amid growing enthusiasm about artificial intelligence.

The company reported Tuesday that its revenue grew 13% to $56.5 billion for the quarter through September. That was above analysts’ expectations and a step up from growth of 11% during the year-earlier period.

The growth rate in Microsoft’s Azure cloud business was 29%. While that was below the pace that Microsoft posted in the same quarter last year, it was above the preceding quarter and analyst expectations. It gained around 3 percentage points from demand for AI services.

Microsoft is one of the first technology titans to report quarterly results. Like many in tech, it has been managing a sharp slowdown and reducing staff and other costs after years of high growth when the pandemic shifted work and life online.

For the current quarter through December, the company projected revenue of between $60.4 billion and $61.4 billion, above analysts’ expectations of $58.67 billion, according to FactSet.

The company’s net income rose 27% to $22.3 billion, an acceleration from a year earlier and above Wall Street’s predictions.

The Redmond, Wash., company has been a leader in AI. Microsoft executives have been fanning excitement about artificial intelligence, thanks largely to the cultural phenomenon ChatGPT, OpenAI’s chatbot. Microsoft has invested billions into OpenAI and incorporated the startup’s technology across its line of products, including its workplace software suite Microsoft 365 and search engine Bing.

“We are using this AI inflection point to redefine our role,” said Satya Nadella, Microsoft’s chief executive, after the results Tuesday.

Microsoft’s investment in AI was reflected in its capital expenditures, which jumped 70% from a year earlier to a record $11.2 billion.

The excitement around AI may also be boosting spending on cloud computing businesses like Microsoft’s Azure, which hosts software from companies like OpenAI and Meta Platforms. While it is still a small business for Microsoft, analysts and investors expect it to start contributing to the company’s bottom line in a much larger way in the future.

Next month, the company will roll out the AI-powered assistant for Microsoft 365 called “Copilot.” It is charging businesses $30 a person to access Copilot, more than double the least expensive version of the software.

Investor enthusiasm about Microsoft’s ability to capitalize on this AI moment has powered the company’s stock, which has risen more than 35% this year, outperforming a Nasdaq Composite Index rally of around 25%.

Still, this has been a challenging year for Microsoft. The company has undergone a series of layoffs, including a round in January that cut 10,000 employees. Earlier this month, Microsoft laid off around 300 employees from its LinkedIn division.

This month, Microsoft completed its acquisition of videogame studio Activision Blizzard. The $75 billion deal, which makes hit games like Call of Duty, was struck in 2021 and then beset by legal challenges from regulators in the U.S. and U.K. Over the summer, Microsoft prevailed in court against the Federal Trade Commission, which tried to block the deal. Microsoft finally won approval in the U.K. after agreeing to license out the streaming rights to Activision’s games to an outside company.

Adding Activision’s revenue to Microsoft’s gaming unit would make its gaming business around 10% of its overall business. The gaming company’s earnings won’t be folded in to Microsoft’s until the current quarter.

Customer demand for Microsoft’s operating system and other software has cooled. Sales of personal computers, which took off during the pandemic, have slipped in recent quarters. Worldwide PC shipments have slipped since the height of the pandemic, as the surge in sales has subsided and some workers have returned to the office.

Microsoft’s device business, which includes Surface computers, fell 22% for the quarter.

The company’s videogames business grew 13%. Videogames and Microsoft’s Xbox consoles are increasingly important businesses for the company.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Regional News**

**The global consequences of the Israel-Hamas war are just beginning**

By Kirsten Fontenrose

25 October 2023

Atlantic Council

The critical variable in how this conflict will impact foreign policy in the United States, Europe, and the Gulf is whether it spills over to the broader Middle East. Will the war ignite beyond Israel and Gaza?

Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian are doling out daily reminders that Iran’s “friends” in the Middle East will respond to Israeli abuses of Palestinians. They have not offered a timeline or many specifics beyond threatening dire consequences for Israel. Iranian leaders said on October 15 that Iran will get involved if the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) roll into Gaza. We can assume based on past behavior that Khamenei and Amir-Abdollahian do not mean the involvement of the Iranian army (widely known as the Artesh) or even its expeditionary Quds Force. They mean their vassals in Lebanon and Syria, including Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. (A note that by making this statement, Tehran ceded plausible deniability when these groups use violence.)

The United States, in turn, warns that it will act against Hezbollah if it opens a northern front in the war. And Iran’s militias across the Middle East vow to act against US soldiers and interests if the United States strikes Hezbollah. The Iraqi Shia militant group Kata’ib Hezbollah says that it will ramp up targeting of US bases in Iraq with missiles, drones, and what it calls special forces if the United States intervenes militarily. This puts roughly 2,500 US troops in the crosshairs, along with another nine hundred in Syria where Kata’ib Hezbollah also has reach. In recent days US troops stationed at Iraqi military bases have seen the first incoming fire in nine months. These attacks may be an attempt to exploit US fears of spillover to nudge Washington toward a decision to remove troops from Iraq—a stated goal of Tehran’s and the Iraqi militias it backs. Hadi al-Amiri heads the Iraq-based Badr Organization, which constitutes much of the Iranian-aligned Popular Mobilization Forces that, despite their alignment, are part of the official Iraqi military under the Ministry of Defense. Two days after the Hamas attack, al-Amiri said that his militia will stage attacks against US interests in Iraq if the United States enters the fray and that “all American targets will be legitimate.”

In Yemen, the Houthi rebel group says that if the United States intervenes the Houthis will coordinate their military reaction with the “Axis of Resistance,” which generally refers to Iran, Syria, Palestinian militant groups, Iranian-aligned militias in Iraq, and Hezbollah. The Houthis did not specify what their targets would be, and have since launched a strike toward Israel that was intercepted by a US Navy warship. The Houthis’ vow to strike the United States’ friends was likely on the mind of Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has fought them since 2014, during his recent phone call with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

What to watch

Hezbollah, on which a lot hinges.

So far, the group has just dipped a toe in the water with, for example, tit-for-tat exchanges of shells with the IDF on the border, resulting in casualties on both sides. But Hezbollah has not brought out its big guns. These include suicide drones, precision-guided missiles aimed at Israel’s critical infrastructure, air-defense missiles, an IDF-estimated twenty thousand rockets, a bevy of small arms, and a group of trained fighters with recent and relevant experience in Syria.

Other than Hamas, nobody seems to want Hezbollah to enter the fight because that is the wick that would ignite regional escalation. Hezbollah’s deputy chief Naim Qassem says the group will not be influenced by calls for it to stay out of the war and that it is ready to join if necessary. Meanwhile, Hezbollah’s leaders are content to encourage Muslims globally to take to the streets through vague statements that don’t outright incite violence but are open to interpretation.

If the IDF stages a ground assault on Gaza, however, Hezbollah appears to be on the hook to jump in the deep end, which raises the question of why the group didn’t come in at the beginning and kick Israel while it was down. The answer is probably because Hezbollah has much to lose: War with Israel will mean massive destruction of infrastructure inside Lebanon that the Lebanese government cannot afford to rebuild. With Hezbollah currently calling the shots in that government, blame for willfully sacrificing infrastructure and lives will fall squarely on the group’s shoulders. Hezbollah can say it runs a country right now. Despite that country having a failed economy and no governance, that position is a lot for the group to risk.

The evacuation of citizens from Israel by Israel’s closest allies.

In light of the threat of full Hezbollah activation, the US government will not allow Israel to stage a massive ground assault without pulling families and non-essential personnel out of the crossfire. Charter planes full of American citizens are already leaving Israel. The Department of Defense is staged for a non-combatant evacuation operation, if necessary. Should an evacuation take place, it will indicate that the United States anticipates escalation.

The reaction of other extremist groups.

Outside of Iran’s militias, spillover risk seems contained. One indicator of this is the lack of large-scale violence that occurred on October 13, Hamas’s “day of general mobilization for the Al Aqsa Flood operations.” Though the Hamas statement urging people across the world to come out in support of them only used the word “protest,” there was a very real risk that lone wolves could interpret mobilization to mean acts of violence. With two exceptions in Europe, the response was nonviolent.

Al-Qaeda’s network, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent, and al-Shabaab in East Africa, jumped on the Hamas verbal support bandwagon, but has not pledged military action at any threshold. That the al-Qaeda network hasn’t declared war is another reason spillover risk currently is more constrained than it could have been. The interest for al-Qaeda is in how perceptions of a brutal Israel can boost the terrorist group’s own recruitment and fundraising. Globally, collateral damage could shape the recruitment efforts of Islamic extremist groups, which will use footage of Israeli strikes in Gaza to enrage and enlist youth. Extremist recruitment has been on the downturn in the past five years, due to the failure of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in Syria, but could spike again as a second-order effect of this conflict.

Back to top

The United States ramps up force posture

To prevent the slate of Iran-backed militias from opening other fronts in the war, US leaders are carefully presenting their actions to beef up defense posture off the coast of Israel as a means of deterrence. Messaging through every channel to Iran and armed groups around the region reinforces that the United States is not looking for a fight and discourages others from seeking one.

But the impressively rapid movement of a second carrier group to the eastern Mediterranean proves that the United States does not need large numbers of forces on the ground in the Levant to be ready to fight there. The sea will be full of Aegis long-range air and missile defense capabilities, Tomahawk missiles, electronic-attack and early-warning capabilities, and specialized jets and helicopters. Two thousand servicemembers from the US Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines are on alert to deploy. The intent of this show of force is to disincentivize violent action by Iran’s threat network against Israel, Americans, and US partners across the region.

It is important to note that this posture increase is not an indicator of impending US military intervention in the conflict. As proof, look at the twenty thousand additional troops the United States sent to Europe last year in the event that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine expanded to other countries or otherwise required intervention. These troops remain in place but have not entered the conflict.

Also primarily in the interest of deterrence, the United States is breaking land-speed records in up-arming Israel. Why is this happening so much faster than it has for Ukraine? Because there is a lengthy track record of US security assistance to Israel, with longstanding mechanisms in place to enable it and a pipeline of foreign military sales already in motion that are now being expedited.

The United States positions stockpiles of military materiel in locations around the world, including Israel, should American forces need to enter combat abroad quickly. Israel is being given access to the US War Reserve Stockpile in Israel, though not all of the items in it are interoperable with Israeli platforms, and some of the stockpile was already poached to support Ukraine.

What to watch

Congress and those purse strings. Dipping into the US stockpile isn’t free, and the requisite funding can’t be found under a continuing resolution. As long as Congress can’t agree on a budget, the US Department of Defense can’t offer Israel everything it has the authority to offer, and foreign military sales will be hamstrung. Congress will have to muster a bipartisan prioritization of this issue to follow through on President Joe Biden’s promises of support to Israel.

The defense industry. The US government is pulling from stockpiles around the world, not just those in Israel, but will only release what it is confident it can replenish. This falls again on Congress to obligate funds, but also to industry. Supply chains and production timelines must be able to guarantee that replenishment is possible. Beyond government, watch the statements from and conversations among industry about how much is possible.

The reemergence of counterterrorism. Regardless of the success of IDF operations to eliminate Hamas, militant opposition to Israel’s control over Gaza—verily to Israel’s existence itself—will not go away. Grievances will remain in a Gazan population of over two million that is poor and stateless, and new militants will be radicalized by the gruesomeness of the conflict. Counterterrorism never fell off of US Central Command’s list of top objectives, but the focus in recent years has been on consolidating gains in that area. Counterterrorism may be about to make a comeback in the US policy lexicon.

Back to top

Who wants a ceasefire?

All the talk of a possible ceasefire centers on whether Israel would agree to one. But what about Hamas? Hamas expected, invited, and now needs a brutal Israeli retaliation to render Israel untouchable to Arab governments and unsupportable at the United Nations. In Hamas’s strategy, the more civilian Palestinians who are implicated in Hamas’s attack and suffer while the world is watching Israel’s response, the closer the group is to achieving these goals. Why would Hamas agree now to a ceasefire that would make Israel look reasonable—even benevolent? That would fall far short of its goals.

A ceasefire and negotiated agreement that simply returns hostages to Israel and returns power and electricity to Gaza would essentially return the situation to where it was the day before Hamas’s October 7 attack. Neither side would be satisfied with that. Neither side is likely to cede these key points of leverage that easily. A ceasefire agreement will have to grant more to both sides. Hamas’s recent release of two Israeli-American dual citizens was intended to send a signal to Washington that the group’s beef is with Israel and not the United States. This move will reinforce US resolve to keep humanitarian aid moving into Gaza, but it will not change Washington’s calculus about protecting Israel from terrorism.

What to watch

Investigations into the October 17 rocket strike on the al-Ahli hospital are ongoing. In the immediate aftermath of the event, Hamas pointed the finger at the Israel Defense Forces and media outlets and social media platforms quickly amplified the inaccurate accusation online. By the time Israel presented evidence that countered this accusation, the damage to Israel’s reputation was done. Hamas may assess that its goal to make Israel untouchable by Arab regimes was sufficiently advanced by their hospital-attack messaging campaign. In this case Hamas may feel that it is in a strong position to negotiate a ceasefire.

Hamas accepting a ceasefire would be an indication that it does not believe Hezbollah or other Iran-backed militias in the neighborhood are willing to jump in the ring.

Israel accepting a ceasefire would be an indication that it does not feel certain it could eliminate Hamas leadership or free hostages without many of the hostages dying.

Back to top

Saudi-Israeli normalization, delayed but not dead

Israel’s eventual integration or normalization of ties with Saudi Arabia is delayed but not dead. Like Israel, Saudi Arabia perceives Hamas (and its brethren in the Iranian embrace, Hezbollah and Islamic Jihad) as a threat. The kingdom insisted on concessions for the Palestinians in its negotiations with Israel and the United States on what it calls “regional integration,” and it is freezing those discussions to reevaluate what concessions might be necessary in the eyes of global Muslim public opinion and possibly in the eyes of the Israeli populace now. But make no mistake: Saudi Arabia will not allow Hamas to dictate the speed of the kingdom’s long-term, strategic goals, nor to limit them. Israeli ideas in areas as diverse as irrigating the desert and establishing an indigenous defense industry are central to those goals. Saudi Arabia needs Israeli technologies that will help prepare its economy for the post-oil world, and it needs them in the next two to four decades.

When talks about some form of normalization resume, the starting point from which Saudi Arabia will have to negotiate the “path forward” for Palestinians will be set back much farther than it was just several weeks ago. In this way, Hamas has grossly undermined Palestinian goals. One example of why: Until the October 7 attacks, over twenty thousand Palestinians from the Gaza Strip were transiting to Israel every day to work, supporting their families. That is over. The new starting point for negotiation will presumably be zero residents of Gaza permitted to work in Israel, forcing Saudi Arabia to bargain for even the first.

The timeframe for normalization will certainly be impacted by the scope of Israel’s response to the Hamas attack. Israel says retaliation against Hamas is just beginning and will continue over the coming days and weeks. Its intent in exploring a ground incursion into Gaza is to root out Hamas leadership and establish deterrence against other anti-Israel groups joining Hamas’s operation. Israeli intent is also to minimize mass civilian casualties that would make it politically implausible for Saudi Arabia to be in public talks with Israel about normalization. But Hamas’s use of the residents of densely populated Gaza as human shields for its operational planning centers and arsenals makes civilian casualties inevitable. Israeli leaflets alerting residents of incoming strikes on Hamas targets will not reach everyone.

What to watch

Saudi asks of Washington. Despite the abrupt freeze in public Saudi-Israeli talks, the United States should expect pressure from Saudi Arabia to complete an upgraded bilateral defense-cooperation agreement that has been in discussion as part of the package for normalizing relations with Israel. The question becomes: What’s in it for the United States without the normalization deal that would serve as a legacy for the Biden administration? Whether the US asks of Saudi Arabia on oil-price leveling, China relations, and dollar-based transactions are significant enough to justify a collective security agreement can be debated, but without the agreement, the Biden administration will not see any favors from Saudi Arabia on oil prices or on keeping China out of sensitive industries.

The impact of misinformation and disinformation on public sentiment. The conflict has inspired the viral spread of inaccurate information and fake or misattributed photos and video footage that support different political opinions about the parties to the conflict and their partners. No matter how tenuous its basis, perception drives real-world outcomes. According to Ellen McCarthy, a former US assistant secretary of state for intelligence and research, Hamas and Iran exploit the use of misinformation about both Israeli atrocities and their own successes to feed social media algorithms that pick up on sensationalist content. A primary objective of these campaigns is to drive a wedge between the United States, Israel, Europe, and the rest of the world. Should public opinion in Saudi Arabia or countries that have already normalized relations with Israel drive their governments to step back from the work they are doing together, then Hamas, an enemy to all of them, wins.

Back to top

European opinion splinters over aid

In Europe, expect the continued splintering of opinion on this crisis—and expect the debate about aid to get heated soon. An EU Commissioner’s rushed, unauthorized announcement of the suspension of $730 million in EU development aid to the Palestinians immediately sparked a debate among members. Each country is making independent decisions on its bilateral aid and relations. Germany, by far the largest individual European donor to the Palestinians, froze development aid and plans to conduct a review of how aid received by the Palestinians is used. Austria, Denmark, and Sweden also froze their development funds. Italy says it will not. The United Kingdom has not frozen its aid but is submitting it to review. Amid all this activity, the needs of those uprooted by the Israeli counteroffensive in Gaza will only grow, and current humanitarian aid pledges can’t meet them.

What to watch

Europe’s approach to refugees. Over 185,000 residents of Gaza are already displaced internally. They won’t be able to relocate within Israel. Who will take them? Jordan is already strained by a population of generations of displaced Palestinians. Egypt’s economy cannot support them. In the short term, convincing Israel and Egypt to accept the risk posed by a humanitarian corridor from Egypt to Gaza is the only way to prevent waves of Palestinians from making desperate attempts at flight. Europe must be concerned about a potential inflow of refugees.

Conflict baggage imported into Europe. There are fears that the animosity entrenched in Israeli-Palestinian political discord in the Levant could stoke anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim or anti-Arab sentiment and actions in Europe. Europeans are also bracing for energy shocks should the crisis expand to the broader Middle East, which would compound the energy crunch already caused by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Back to top

A distracted Congress offers near-unanimous support

On October 11, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby noted that “We’re certainly running out of runway” to fund both Ukraine and Israel with what the US Congress has already provided. On paper, the US commitment to Israel is stronger than the commitment to Ukraine, but whether the worldview of Hamas or of Russia is a greater existential challenge to the US worldview is a question of perspective—and will be the root of unhelpful public debates within the US government. Sustained US assistance to Ukraine and Israel could become a tug of war, and that’s between those members of Congress who don’t oppose both.

Russia will interpret this conflict as a widening window of opportunity. While Middle East watchers in the West have tunnel vision on Israel, Moscow is working to strengthen relations with Iraq, the second-largest oil producer in the OPEC cartel. If Russia has the bandwidth, expect it to expand operations against Ukraine and test NATO, because the threat to Israel distracts the United States politically and militarily and will be a major draw on US weapons stocks and funds for foreign military aid.

What to watch

Additions to the congressional resolution expressing support for Israel. This resolution is cosponsored by almost every member of the US House of Representatives. But resolutions of support do not task the interagency with actions. Watch for new language on specific measures like removing the cap for Israel on presidential drawdown authority from US weapons stockpiles, currently limited to $100 million; waiving the standard congressional notification periods for foreign military financing; or waiving Cargo Preference Act requirements that usually require US-provided assistance to travel on US carriers—all to speed up delivery of that aid.

New Authorization for Use of Military Force legislation. Congress is taking note of the firebrand rhetoric from Tehran’s top leadership, and there is bipartisan support for holding Iran accountable for what could become a region-wide war waged by its proxies. The United States effectively has two tools for limiting Iran’s ability to carry out an assault across the region: sanctions and military action. Sanctions have been tried, though not diligently enforced. Though the US government is loath to enter a new war, some Republicans in Congress are aiming to smooth the way for Biden to take military action against Iranian proxies in the region if needed.

New attention to Iran’s sources of funding for terrorism. There is growing congressional attention to Iran’s role in arming militias around the region following the expiration of UN limits on Iran’s ability to import and export missile and drone components. Lawmakers are introducing bill language that would attempt to prohibit Iran’s access to previously frozen funds transferred from South Korea. Watch for new hearings where Congress will dig into issues like Iraq’s energy purchases from Iran.

Any potential efforts to punish NATO member Turkey and Qatar, a major non-NATO ally, for their relationships with Hamas. The Biden administration will push back strongly on bill language punishing these countries for relationships that the United States and Israel have at times leveraged.

The outcome of the House speaker race. Congress cannot pass a supplemental aid package for Israel (or Ukraine) until a speaker is voted in. Lawmakers may try tactics never used before because of the urgency of expediting this support—for example, granting limited, time-bound powers to a temporary speaker. Some Republicans would oppose this, so it would also require votes from Democrats to pass.

Back to top

Gulf states nervously eye Washington, Jerusalem, and Tehran

The United States’ Arab partners in the Gulf are closely watching the speedy deployment of arms to Israel. They have been at the frontline of Iran’s proxy group attacks until now and have asked the United States for upgraded armaments since the start of the Biden administration, when US arms sales to Saudi Arabia were frozen. But despite other indications of US commitment to their security, there is a newly reinforced feeling in the Gulf that they are the partners that haven’t merited a rescue.

The United Arab Emirates issued two statements after the Hamas attack, one calling it a “serious and grave escalation” and another stating that the UAE is “appalled” by Hamas kidnappings of Israeli civilians. Bahrain made similar statements condemning kidnappings. These attracted criticism from Iran-affiliated militias across the Middle East. That puts the United States’ Arab partners at heightened risk of attack.

It is possible at this juncture for the United States to protect its interests in the Gulf and its partners. If Iran fully activates militias in Yemen or Iraq against Arab neighbors in retaliation for their condemnation of Hamas, Gulf nations will expect the United States to defend them. The United States moved the USS Bataan and the USS Carter Hall with elements of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit to the Gulf in August, as part of a US response to Iranian naval operations. That was a significant action to establish deterrence in defense of Gulf partners. Now that deterrence message must be sent from the eastern Mediterranean. But Iran interprets the movement of a US ship away from its shores as a sign that the risk to its homeland is lowered, and could still encourage or direct Houthi attacks on the UAE or Saudi Arabia, or sleeper-cell attacks inside Bahrain, while believing that Middle East watchers in the United States are fully focused on Israel. It would be wise to preempt such temptation in Tehran by making it clear through diplomatic channels that Iran will be held accountable for attacks on Gulf partners by any of the militias it supports.

Qatar carefully balances its relationships with the United States and Iran. The only favor Tehran does Doha is not attacking it—a pretty valuable favor, if you ask Saudi Arabia or the UAE. With Israel’s blessing, Qatar functions as the home base for a cadre of Hamas leadership, including the pro-attack political head, Ismail Haniya. But the October 7 attack challenged the logic behind Israel’s support for Hamas’s posh life in Doha.

What to watch

Qatar’s balance. One of Israel’s stated objectives for its ongoing response operations is to eliminate Hamas’s military leadership. The Israeli government’s public statements make clear that it no longer differentiates the political arm of Hamas—which is partially based in Qatar—from the military arm, and that all Hamas members are legitimate military targets. Last week I asked a senior IDF officer whether Israel’s operations in pursuit of this objective will be limited to the Levant or whether there will be an Operation Wrath of God-esque global manhunt. Without a pause he replied, “We will go anywhere.” Qatar wants to play a facilitation role in the conflict, assisting with de-escalation and hostage negotiation efforts. Hosting individuals who may be named military objectives could force Doha into becoming a party to the difficult politics of the conflict, instead of a facilitator to end them.

US commitment. What’s at stake if an attack on these Gulf partners occurs and the United States is not stocked or positioned—or willing—to defend them? In a nutshell, the leverage the United States has over global shipping and energy markets. What’s the risk? Chinese leverage replacing that US leverage. Relative to the United States, China is already an equal or greater trade partner with countries in the region. Any US influence over policies made in the region is based on trust that was built sixty years ago. The United States formed that trust with a previous cadre of regional leadership and has not done a stellar job of reinforcing it with their successors. So far, it is US good luck that Chinese interlocutors with the region have only had transactional success and have struggled more with forming relationships.

Back to top

Iran sees its investments in Hamas paying off

The regime in Tehran, which has armed Hamas for the greater part of two decades, perceives the conflagration in Israel as a win. Iran’s leaders will happily fight Israel to the last civilian Palestinian (or Lebanese, Iraqi, Syrian, Yemeni, etc.). The knock-on effects of this conflict line up with the interests of the Iranian regime: The conflict stalls Saudi-Israeli normalization talks. It degrades Israel’s reputation for vigilance and military readiness. It distracts the United States and Europe, creating space for Iran to press its proxies into attacks on Iran’s adversaries elsewhere. It spikes anti-Israel and anti-Western sentiment in many Muslim communities. It provides a second battlefield laboratory in addition to Ukraine to test Iranian drones and rockets. Finally, it puts Washington in a tough position, taking on a high reputational risk by sending arms to an “ironclad” partner facing an existential challenge without real control on the ground over how these arms are used. All of these wins come with a low risk of serious blowback to Iran even if the United States finds a smoking gun linking Tehran to the planning of the October 7 attack; Congress isn’t whole enough to process a declaration of war.

BBC Persian shared this picture, of an advertisement circulating in Iran encouraging young men to register to fight abroad in support of the Palestinian cause, on October 18. (BBC Persian)

What to watch

Other Iranian-backed groups coming off the sidelines. Tehran knows a fight by its regional militias against Israel and its friends is a win-all or lose-all prospect. Therefore, if it chooses to ignite a region-wide war, Iran will likely do whatever it takes to mobilize whatever it can. We should not read the regime’s current stance as simply “interested observer,” “supportive fan,” or even “hopeful gambler.” Iran has much more riding on this.

Iran’s value proposition. In Tehran, the return on investment in arming Hamas looks high. But that investment ultimately has to pay off. If Hamas is crushed and other proxies like Hezbollah decide to sit out this conflict or suffer major setbacks after engaging Israel, Iran’s stock will plummet. Groups armed by Iran have been suppressed before, but they have not all banded together like this before. On October 18, a group of militias in Iraq announced a joint operations room in which they will coordinate their support for Hamas’s war effort. This umbrella group of militias and the Houthi rebels in Yemen issued nearly identical statements about their support for Hamas and intent to plan together for actions against Israel and its friends, should they choose to take them. If Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen all declare they are entering the fight, and are all rebuffed, it will be a failed referendum on Iran’s worldview.

Iran’s domestic recruitment campaign. Billboards and banner ads in Iran are calling for volunteers to register and declare their readiness to fight for the recapture of occupied Palestinian lands. The campaign website claims millions of registrants. It is possible that Tehran is making a list of volunteers to muster. But right now this is more likely an influence campaign intended to rally national fervor inside Iran in support of Tehran’s position and to message to Iran’s militias around the region that Iranians themselves will enter the fight if the militias begin it. The militias, however, should not count on this.

Back to top

The factors influencing Gaza’s future

Even as the world anticipates the next phase in the war, Israel, Europe, Iran, the United States, Arab states, and Palestinians in and outside Gaza all face the same question: What happens the day after the conflict ends? It’s likely each actor will answer differently. Those varying answers, as they become clearer, will give a sense of the consensus and the parameters of a possible plan.

What to watch

Hamas’s choice between terrorism and political survival. At the crux of the future of Gaza is the unknown future of Hamas. Israel vows to eliminate the leadership, tools, and infrastructure that permit Hamas to engage in terrorism. The group will not be allowed to exist as both a terrorist organization and a political actor. It can retain one identity, but Israel, the United States and donor nations in Europe and the Gulf will no longer let a terrorist entity administer Gaza if Gaza wishes to receive foreign aid. To survive as a terrorist organization, the group will be forced underground. Hamas’s political survival or demise is up to Gazans. The group will need to renounce violence and very likely need to recognize Israel in order to be acknowledged by donors as the legitimate representatives of Gaza’s population going forward.

The Palestinian Authority’s credibility crisis. Both Mahmoud Abbas’s role as the head of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the PA’s role as the credible representative of Palestinian interests have been called into question by their response to events since October 7. In the interest of preventing activity in the West Bank in solidarity with Hamas that would spark an Israeli siege like that on Gaza, the PA has “responded by suppressing Palestinian protests throughout the West Bank,” according to one report. The PA's past cooperation with Israeli security forces has been exceedingly unpopular among Palestinians and jeopardizes the PA leadership’s political future. Watch for fractures in the inner circle of the PA when negotiations about administering the West Bank and Gaza become public. Optimists will look for new Palestinian political leadership to arise from the ashes of Gaza and speak as the voice for those Hamas does not represent. But at present there are no indications of such new leadership, which would require consensus among Palestinians about who may represent them. This consensus did not exist before the conflict and opinions are even more divided now. In neighboring Lebanon and Syria, opposition to ruling parties has been similarly unsuccessful in prioritizing the greater good over internal disputes. Tehran has learned that these conditions serve its interests and will undoubtedly seek to prevent any opposition from coalescing in Palestinian territories as well.

Egypt leading the charge to keep refugees in Gaza.

Egypt is adamantly pushing back against what it sees as Israeli intent to create a permanent refugee camp in northeastern Sinai. That’s not only because Hamas originated as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, which successive Egyptian leaders sought to suppress until the group briefly came to power in 2010, and which puts Hamas in diametric opposition to current Egyptian leadership.

European diplomats posted in Cairo told me that the Egyptian public is critical of the government even engaging in discussions about accepting refugees from the Hamas stronghold of Gaza. Egypt’s economic planners fear that taking refugees would pose an unbearable economic burden on top of the country housing over 300,000 Sudanese refugees. Perhaps more importantly, the government argues that doing so would fray Egypt’s social fabric because Hamas has Egyptian blood on its hands from acts like arming fighters who staged attacks in the Sinai in 2015. Of particular note, government officials in Cairo reminded me that Hamas has a relationship with the Islamic State in the Sinai, and potentially co-locating their supporters would dramatically increase the national security threat to Egypt.

Because Egypt has the most to lose if the humanitarian situation in Gaza fails to meet the minimum standards defined by international humanitarian law, expect Egypt to lead the charge in scheduling multilateral meetings and working groups to ensure a continuing flow of international humanitarian aid to Gaza and a resumption of development aid to Gaza, and to define a roadmap for returning refugees to what’s left of their homes.

Back to top

Who will lead an eventual peace process?

As all these players weigh their next moves, expect international calls for a renewed peace process. The Biden administration won’t be able to sit this round out, but when the US government reenters the game it won’t be as team captain.

US officials are already stressing to their Israeli counterparts the need to start thinking concretely about the future of Gaza. The United States can bring to that effort lessons learned the hard way in the post-conflict era in Iraq, but Washington does not have a workable model to share for mapping the future of Gaza.

For a while, it was a truism of international affairs that the general contours of a peace plan for Israel and the Palestinians were known but just needed to be agreed upon and implemented. If that was still true on October 6, it isn’t now. A plausible plan for a stable, well-governed Gaza—one that is also not a haven for extremists—seems far over the horizon at this point. A lesson drawn from previous wars is that a lack of planning for immediate post-conflict governance is a recipe for more conflict. With that in mind, the most critical item to watch as this crisis continues to unfold is the conversation about how Gaza will be governed.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Qatar’s Emir says Israel’s ‘barbaric bombing’ of Gaza ‘exceeds all limits’**

The country has acted as a mediator in negotiations with Hamas to release four hostages

By Ismaeel Naar

24 October 2023

The National

Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani harshly criticised Israel on Tuesday, describing the intensive bombing of the Gaza Strip since October 7 as “barbaric”.

“The barbaric bombing of innocent civilians in Gaza is a dangerous escalation and exceeds all limits. We refuse attacks on civilians from any party, regardless of their nationality, and we refuse to act as if the lives of Palestinian children do not count, as if they have no faces or names,” Sheikh Tamim said in a speech addressed to the country's Shura council.

“We say to Israel: enough is enough. It is untenable for Israel to be given an unconditional green light and free licence to kill, nor it is tenable to continue ignoring the reality of occupation, siege and settlement,” Sheikh Tamim added.

Qatar has been playing an active role as a mediator between Hamas and other parties on the release of hostages held by the Palestinian militant group in Gaza since the attack on Israel earlier this month.

Qatar, which hosts Hamas’ political office in Doha, has been successful in negotiating the release of two dual American-Israeli citizens last Friday as well as two elderly Israeli women on Monday.

Sheikh Tamim’s statement comes just three days after he took part in the peace summit on Gaza in Cairo where he had been expected to speak. The summit concluded without the Qatari Emir speaking and no consensus was reached on a final communique among the leaders attending.

The Qatari leader also spoke on Tuesday about his country’s willingness to continue its role as an arbitrator in the continuing conflict.

“Qatar is a trusted mediator in peacemaking and conflict resolution, and we will continue in this approach. Openness to cultural interaction contributes to the maturity and development of our Qatari Arab Muslim identity,” Sheikh Tamim said.

A source from the Qatari government told The National that the Foreign Ministry will continue its work to negotiate the release of further hostages, adding that the focus right now is on the release of elderly female and male hostages.

“The release of the two American hostages by Hamas … came after continuous contact with all parties. Our foreign ministry is working very closely with all parties to ensure that the Qatari dialogue regarding the release of the hostages will continue in the coming days. We cannot guarantee or promise specifics at this point, but this has been an active file for the Qatari government right now,” the source told The National.

Qatar is in a position to negotiate with Hamas but faces difficulty speaking with Israel as they have not formally established ties.

Qatar recently negotiated the release of three Ukrainian children who had been taken to Russia under a mechanism it set up for similar future releases.

A source from Qatar’s Foreign Ministry said officials hope to “bank on their success of Russia and Ukraine” in playing a larger role between Israel and Hamas as the war continues.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Israel says Hamas ‘is ISIS.’ But it’s not.**

By Ishaan Tharoor

25 October 2023

Washington Post

In the grim aftermath of Hamas’s Oct. 7 attack on Israel, a slogan spread. “Hamas is ISIS,” declared Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, linking the grotesque slaughter carried out by the Palestinian faction’s militants to the ravages of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria almost a decade prior. The latter — driven by an apocalyptic, millenarian creed — had embarked on a frenzy of killing, torture, grisly execution and abductions of civilians from communities of supposed apostates and enemies. The reports of what Hamas fighters did across towns and kibbutzim in southern Israel recalled the cruelty and savagery of the Islamic State’s rampage.

And, in the Israeli view, it merited an equivalent response. “Just as the forces of civilization united to defeat ISIS, the forces of civilization must support Israel in defeating Hamas,” Netanyahu said.

The refrain became a hashtag, and has been echoed by Israeli officials and politicians across the spectrum, as well as by Israel’s allies. A week after the massacres, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin described what Hamas did as “worse than ISIS.” On Tuesday, French President Emmanuel Macron appeared alongside Netanyahu and took the analogy further, suggesting that an international coalition the likes of which fought al-Qaeda and the Islamic State should now defeat Israel’s quarry. He said that Israel was not alone and that “France is ready for the coalition, which is fighting in Iraq and Syria against ISIS, to also fight against Hamas.”

What that means in practice is still unclear. Israel is preparing for the next phase of its offensive against Hamas, which Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen said on Tuesday “must be erased off the face of the planet.” Relentless Israeli bombardments of the besieged Gaza Strip killed 5,791 Palestinians and compounded an already devastating humanitarian crisis. Meanwhile, the United States has rushed aid and military assets to the region. Along with European allies, the Biden administration is attempting to tamp down the possibility of the conflict turning into Middle East conflagration.

Given the scale and horror of Hamas’s carnage, the invocation of ISIS is not surprising. Oct. 7 marked the single bloodiest day in Israeli history, and the bloodiest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. More than two weeks later, journalists are still learning more grisly details from Israeli authorities of how Hamas militants allegedly butchered toddlers and babies, raped women and incinerated terrified civilians in their homes. Israeli officials have vowed a merciless campaign of retribution against “human animals” and framed their actions, which have led to soaring Palestinian civilian death tolls, in the same moral light as battles against Nazis, let alone the global campaign to defeat ISIS.

But scholars of the Middle East contend that such rhetoric deliberately flattens the deep forces at play. Saying there’s no distinction between Hamas and ISIS is “an effective tactic to paint it — and all Gazans, given many Israeli leaders’ generalizing language — as inhuman, irredeemably evil and therefore legitimate targets for savagery in reprisal,” argued Monica Marks, a professor of Middle East politics at New York University’s Abu Dhabi campus. She added that Hamas’s Islamist character and theological convictions were arguably less important than its self-styled vision of being the armed standard-bearer of Palestinian national liberation.

Itzchak Weismann, an Israeli historian of Islamist movements at the University of Haifa, concurred. “There’s a tendency to say that [Hamas] was always ISIS. But that’s not necessarily true. It’s an organization that responds to the situation,” he told Israeli newspaper Haaretz last week, pointing to how Hamas has tolerated other religious groups in Gaza. “Hamas tried to be inclusive of all of Gaza’s population ... In contrast, ISIS would murder any Muslim who didn’t pray at the correct time. You can’t just say, ‘ISIS slaughtered people and so did Hamas, so they’re the same.’ That’s very superficial.”

There’s also the small wrinkle, noted Aaron Zelin, senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, that ISIS “literally views Hamas as apostates” because of its ties to the Shiite theocratic regime in Iran.

How Hamas’s carefully planned Israel attack devolved into a chaotic rampage

Israel’s desire to wholly eliminate Hamas may be understandable, but analysts query whether it’s actually possible. It would require a brutal ground war even more fraught and complicated than the effort to drive ISIS out of its redoubts in Iraq and Syria. Though chased from their so-called “caliphate,” their ideology has hardly been expunged and ISIS offshoots proliferate in various parts of the world.

Andrew Exum, a former senior Pentagon official in the Obama administration who helped craft the anti-ISIS strategy, warned of the hideous toll exacted on civilians as coalition forces recaptured ISIS’s main strongholds of Mosul in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria. “The human costs of recapturing Raqqa and Mosul were staggering,” Exum wrote, adding that, “like Gaza, too, Raqqa and Mosul are large urban areas: Avoiding large-scale civilian casualties was impossible.”

And even if Hamas is crushed and shorn of its ability to threaten Israel with the horrific violence it unleashed on Oct. 7, it won’t address the context from which Hamas emerged and has since operated. That includes, as U.N. Secretary General António Guterres observed at the Security Council on Tuesday, more than five decades of Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories, the predations of an Israeli settlement project emboldened by the far-right government of Netanyahu, and the collapse of any political process to reckon with the absence of a Palestinian state or Palestinian political rights within Israel.

“For all of Israel’s efforts to paint it as the Palestinian branch of the Islamic State, and as reactionary and violent as it is, Hamas is an Islamic nationalist organization, not a nihilist cult, and a part of Palestinian political society; it feeds on the despair produced by the occupation, and cannot simply be liquidated any more than the fascist zealots in Netanyahu’s cabinet,” wrote Jewish American author and critic Adam Shatz, in an essay in the London Review of Books.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Weapons Flood West Bank, Fuel Fears of New War Front**

By Sune Engel Rasmussen and Benoit Faucon

25 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

Long before Hamas militants burst out of their Gaza stronghold to massacre scores of civilians with handguns and assault rifles, Iran and its allies had accelerated efforts to smuggle weapons into a different part of the Palestinian territories, the West Bank.

Using drones, secret airline flights and a land bridge that traverses hundreds of miles and at least four national borders, the smuggling operation is raising the specter of a new conflagration in the war between Israel and Palestinians. It also poses a growing threat to Jordan, a staunch U.S. ally which borders Israel and the West Bank and has been struggling to contain a growing flow of drugs and arms.

“Iran wants to turn Jordan into a transit area for weapons going into Israel,” said Amer Al-Sabaileh, founder of Security Languages, a counterterrorism think tank in Amman. “But my fear is that the weapons might be used in Jordan as well. Where is the easiest place in the Middle East to punish the U.S. and the West? Jordan,” he said.

Iran is a patron of Hamas, which it over the years has supplied with money, weapons and training. But as Egypt has cracked down on smuggling routes through the Sinai Peninsula, which borders on the Gaza Strip, Hamas has become increasingly self-reliant on indigenously built weapons, especially rockets.

The bulk of Iranian weapons to Palestinians go into the West Bank, particularly to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a militant group allied with Hamas, according to a senior Jordanian security official. The official said networks of smugglers, assisted by the Syrian government and Iranian-backed militias like Hezbollah, were growing.

“The weapons flow has really increased, specifically over the past year. This is because Iran has been much more focused on the West Bank recently, and trying to arm some of the groups there, especially the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which is Iran’s more direct partner,” said Michael Horowitz, Israel-based head of intelligence at Le Beck International, a risk consulting firm.

“This probably explains part of the intelligence failure [during the Hamas attack], because Israel was more focused on the West Bank than Gaza,” Horowitz said.

For more than a decade, Iran has taken advantage of upheaval and corrosion of government authority in the Middle East to cement its footprint in the region. Through a network of loyal militias, Tehran has established a land corridor across Iraq and Syria into Lebanon and, via Jordan, into the West Bank, allowing it to transport troops, equipment and weapons to its allies in the Levant.

Jordan, which has porous borders to war-torn Syria, controlled by Iran’s ally Bashar al-Assad, as well as to the West Bank, has long been vexed by the trafficking of weapons and drugs through its territory.

Jordanian officials have complained to Syria, and expressed their concerns to European allies, worried that weapons flows into the West Bank would strain its relations with Israel, according to European and Middle Eastern officials.

Weapons smuggled into Jordan include Iranian replicas of U.S.-made Claymore antipersonnel mines, M4-style assault rifles, TNT and other explosives and handguns, according to the senior Jordanian official. Terrorgence, an information network that includes advisers to Israeli police, said in October that Israeli border forces had confiscated antipersonnel mines manufactured in Iran and Russia.

Going across the Syrian border into Jordan, the arms are hidden in trucks going through official border crossings or carried across the vast desert expanses, which in the winter are shrouded in fog and dust.

Drones, a new tool of warfare for nonstate actors, are also handy for smuggling. In February, Jordanian agents caught the first unmanned aerial vehicle from Syria carrying hand grenades—four of them. A commercial drone, bought cheap online and fairly easy to maneuver, can also carry two assault rifles, and is very difficult to detect, another Jordanian security official responsible for monitoring the Syrian border said.

“We only see drones by chance,” he said.

Iran has used other means to transport weapons. In February, after a devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria, Esmail Qaani, commander of Iran’s elite Quds Force, which is responsible for the Revolutionary Guard’s foreign operations, visited the Syrian city of Aleppo, ostensibly to supervise aid deliveries. Qaani flew to Syria in an aircraft owned by Mahan, an airline that has been sanctioned by the U.S. for flying militants and weapons from Iran to Syria.

Soon after Qaani’s visit, the airline, under the guise of delivering aid, began hauling large quantities of weapons to Syria, according to a Central Intelligence Agency operative in the region, a Syrian government adviser and a European security official.

It is unclear how many weapons are smuggled into the Palestinian territories, and whether some of the weapons end up in Gaza, via Israeli proper, though the vast majority going through Jordan appears destined for the West Bank, regional security officials say.

The Israeli army last year said there had been a “significant rise” in detected attempts to smuggle weapons and drugs into Israel from Jordan and Egypt. From March 2021 to April this year, Israeli police thwarted at least 35 smuggling attempts from Jordan, seizing more than 800 weapons, according to a tally by the Washington Institute think tank.

“The Iranians are investing lots of efforts in inflaming all arenas, in the north and the West Bank alike,” a spokesperson for the Israel Defense Forces said. “The IDF is reinforcing the troops and ready for every possibility.”

Traffickers in Jordan profit from the country’s large black market in arms, where guns trade for about one-fourth of the price in the Palestinian territories, according to licensed arms dealers in the capital, Amman. An AK-47 sells for as much as $20,000 in the West Bank, and an M16 rifle for $30,000, according to an arms dealer in the West Bank.

“The country is awash with weapons,” said a gun shop owner in downtown Amman. Prices on the black market are roughly the same as his: from $700 for a Czech 7mm to $4,200 for an Austrian Glock.

In May, a Jordanian lawmaker, Imad al-Adwan, was detained trying to smuggle more than 200 firearms, including 12 assault rifles, across the Allenby Bridge into the West Bank. Israel extradited Adwan to Jordan where he faces trial and up to 15 years in prison. He and 13 other defendants are expected to respond to the charges in court this week.

Palestinian groups have built sizable caches of weapons. In July, Israeli forces carried out their largest assault on the West Bank in decades, targeting militant facilities and weapons depots in Jenin that belonged to the Iran-allied Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas, seizing about 1,000 weapons and hundreds of explosive devices. They also dismantled six bomb-making facilities. Twelve Palestinians were killed, most of them militants, 30 suspects were arrested and hundreds of people were displaced.

Portions of the West Bank are policed by the Palestinian Authority, which is dominated by Fatah, a faction opposed to Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In the past two years, Palestinian police have seized about 600 to 1,000 weapons annually in the West Bank, more than twice the number before 2021, police spokesman Louay Zreikat said, adding that about 60% of those weapons were used for self-protection or criminal activities.

Following Hamas’ attack earlier this month, Israeli security forces have intensified a two-year crackdown on Palestinians in the West Bank, and settlers have attacked protesters and civilians. On Friday, 13 Palestinians were killed in a 30-hour long Israeli military operation against militants in refugee camps in Tulkarem. That came after 55 people were killed in the first week after Oct. 7, the deadliest week for West Bank Palestinians since at least 2005, according to the United Nations.

Anger over the crackdown and the Gaza bombings, which have killed more than 5,000 Palestinians, according to the Hamas-controlled Palestinian health ministry, paired with an increasingly heavily armed West Bank, poses a problem for the governing Palestinian Authority, whose grip on security has slipped as new militant groups have jockeyed for power, and residents resort to violence rather than turn to law enforcement to resolve internal disputes.

An arms dealer in Al-Ram in the West Bank said he sells hundreds of weapons every month, mostly to people who are organizing to defend their villages in the absence of coordinated Palestinian security.

“There’s a big demand nowadays,” he said, “but I tell you all of them are very young.”

The absence of a viable candidate to replace 87-year-old Mahmoud Abbas, whose popularity has long been waning, adds to volatility in the territory as loyalists of competing prospective candidates acquire arms and jostle for power.

The Palestinian Authority didn’t reply to a request for comment.

Horowitz said an ignition of the West Bank could lead to a “cycle of violence,” with the Israeli army deploying more forces, and settlers carrying out more revenge attacks against Palestinians.

For Jordan, stemming the flow of weapons is a Herculean task. The Kingdom is to some extent a victim of its geography. Its long northern border is largely unguarded on the Syrian side, due to lack of cooperation from the Assad government, and its frontier with Israel isn’t protected by significant fencing, making it a viable route for large-scale smuggling.

Jordan this year has made nine weapons seizures on the border, compared to seven in 2022 and 21 in 2021, according to the senior security official.

Years ago, at the peak of Islamic State’s reign, many weapons smuggled into Jordan were destined for Sunni terrorist groups, but now they are mostly traded for commercial gain, said Mohammad Afeef, a former president of Jordan’s State Security Court.

He warned that if security continued to deteriorate, the high concentration of weapons could in time benefit terrorist sleeper cells. That should worry the West, he said.

“Jordan is playing a pivotal role in preventing smuggling of narcotics and weapons,” Afeef said. “It is a huge burden for us.”

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Yemen getting involved in Israel-Gaza conflict is US envoy's 'worst fear'**

Houthi rebels last week launched drones and missiles believed to have been aimed at Israel

By Ellie Sennett

24 October 2023

The National

The US Special Envoy to Yemen said on Tuesday that he is afraid the crisis in Gaza is threatening progress towards peace between the Houthis and the government, saying the prospect of the country being drawn into the conflict between Israel and Hamas is his “worst fear”.

Speaking at the US Institute of Peace during a discussion on the offloading of the FSO Safer, Tim Lenderking referenced the Houthi rebels' launching of several drones and missiles towards Israel last Friday, calling it “unfortunate”.

“My worst fear, of course, is that Yemen gets dragged into another war, and [Yemen's] war is not over yet,” he said.

A US warship operating in the Red Sea intercepted the drones and missiles believed to have been launched by the Iran-backed group towards targets in Israel.

It was another escalation that has threatened to broaden the conflict beyond the borders of Israel and Gaza, as the Israeli military prepares for a ground invasion of the enclave.

On October 7, Hamas militants killed more than 1,400 people in Israel. The Israeli military has killed more than 5,000 Palestinians in its counter-offensive in Gaza.

As the conflict continues, the administration of US President Joe Biden has continued to financially support its long-time ally Israel.

Mr Lenderking said that “we all feel the impact of the loss of life that is taking place” and that the killing of civilians “is inexcusable from either side to perpetuate”.

There had been relative optimism on prospects for peace in Yemen in the months running up to the escalation of violence between Hamas and Israel.

A UN-brokered ceasefire in April 2022 resulted in a reduction in fighting, which has more or less continued despite the ceasefire expiring in October last year.

Saudi Arabia recently hosted Houthi representatives for several days of talks, in the first official visit by a Houthi delegation to the kingdom since 2014.

“I am afraid of what will happen if the Gaza conflict grinds on and we see more inflammation in the region and pressure on actors across the spectrum to get involved,” Mr Lenderking said.

But the seasoned US diplomat expressed hope about the Yemen peace process despite intensified regional tension, and emphasised that Washington continues to prioritise that process.

“We've got to keep the Yemen diplomacy going … I think Yemenis may sense that there's a moment when this could be end of the conflict,” he said.

“There's a huge amount of work that needs to be done, but we want to make sure that the effort can go forward.”

[Back to Top](#_top)

**US agrees to send two Iron Dome batteries to Israel**

By Noah Robertson, Bryant Harris and Jen Judson

24 October 2023

Defense News

The Pentagon plans to send Israel two Iron Dome missile defense systems as the country continues to fight the militant group Hamas, according to a U.S. Defense Department official.

The transfer will aid Israel’s air defense after Hamas on Oct. 7 launched a massive, coordinated attack — making it the deadliest day for Israel in 50 years. Some 1,400 Israelis have since been killed, and Hamas continues to fire rockets from the Gaza strip.

“As we’ve said previously, the U.S. will be flowing additional Iron Dome support to Israel,” the official said. “As a result, the Department of Defense is currently engaged in planning to support the provision of U.S. Iron Dome batteries to Israel.”

The U.S. Army bought the two Iron Dome systems — manufactured by Israeli defense company Rafael Advanced Defense Systems and co-developed by RTX — at the request of Congress several years ago. The purchase was meant to fill a gap in cruise missile defense while the Army developed a longer-term countermeasure for various air and missile threats. But the service doesn’t plan to purchase more Iron Domes or to integrate the system into its air defense architecture, Army officials have told Defense News.

It has scarcely used the two batteries it has. Army personnel trained with the Iron Dome systems at Fort Bliss, Texas, before one system deployed to Guam at the end of 2021 for a two-week exercise. Otherwise, the systems have sat with a unit at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state.

The official, speaking on background to discuss the transfer, did not specify under what arrangement the batteries will be provided, nor did the official say whether the batteries will be returned to the U.S. should they survive combat.

U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin recently announced the Defense Department is also deploying a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery and Patriot air defense battalions to the region.

By providing Iron Domes, the U.S. continues to widen the spigot of security aid entering Israel. In the week after Hamas’ attack, Pentagon and Israeli officials announced the arrival of American aircraft stocked with air defense supplies and munitions. It has since expanded this aid to include artillery rounds, armored vehicles and precision-guided munitions, according to Israeli and American officials.

The supply effort is just one stream in a larger outpouring of American support.

One carrier strike group — led by the U.S. Navy aircraft carrier Gerald R. Ford — has already deployed to the Eastern Mediterranean. Another is on its way to the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, a Marine expeditionary unit and 2,000 troops are readying themselves to deploy within a day if given orders by the White House, said Pentagon spokeswoman Sabrina Singh.

Austin, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and President Joe Biden have all visited the country, pledging continued U.S. support. In a nighttime address from the Oval Office, the president asked Congress for more than $100 billion in supplemental security aid, including $14.3 billion for Israel. The aid so far has not come with conditions that Israel limit civilian casualties.

Still, U.S. officials in the last week have publicly called on its closest Middle Eastern ally to obey the laws of war. As Israel retaliates, some 5,000 people in Gaza have been killed so far, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, which is run by Hamas.

With more than 2,000 rockets intercepted, Iron Dome is among the most statistically successful air defense system in the world, said Tom Karako, director of the missile defense project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies think tank.

“This is a system that was built to defend [against] certain kinds of threats, especially the kinds of threats that Israel is facing,” Karako said.

Each battery consists of three main parts: a radar, a command-and-control system, and the launchers that fire interceptors. Each of these, Karako argued, will be useful for Israel, as extra radars will increase their ability to detect threats, while more launchers and command-and-control technology will help defend more Israeli territory from rocket fire.

Should the war widen beyond the Gaza strip, the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah has tens of thousands of rockets it could fire, said Karako.

This week, Israel’s military said its aircraft had struck two Hezbollah cells, which the country said were preparing to launch rockets across the border.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Qatar’s Relations with Washington and Israel Are Being Tested**

by Simon Henderson

24 October 2023

Washington Institue for Near East Policy

On October 22, Secretary of State Antony Blinken commented on the release of two American hostages seized in the October 7 Hamas assault on Israel, telling NBC News, “I again want to thank the government of Qatar for playing a very important role in getting them out.” Two more hostages were released a day later. Commenting on the negotiations, a senior Qatari official told a German newspaper, “The release took place within a framework that confirms the positive intention to release the hostages. We are optimistic that the hostages, especially the civilians, will be released very soon.” Yet Israel’s official statement on the matter made no mention of Qatar—unsurprising given Doha’s close ties with Hamas, its initial claim that Israel was “solely responsible” for the current conflict, and the fact that more than two hundred Israeli and foreign hostages are still being held.

Qatar’s role has prompted public furor in the United States as well, with many observers asking why Washington is so close to the Gulf state. Doha simultaneously hosts a major U.S. air base and Hamas’s leadership and bureaucracy; it also maintains ties with Iran and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Yet its relationships with Hamas and the Taliban have sometimes been encouraged and praised by U.S. administrations for varying policy reasons. Critics also tend to forget the recent history of close Qatari relations with Israel—less public these days but almost certainly still functioning (e.g., one journalist identified Israeli government executive jets making flights to and from Doha in late September). U.S. and Israeli officials have repeatedly and unsuccessfully tried to find an alternative intermediary to replace Doha in dealing with the Gaza Strip; the current crisis may lead them to try again.

Qatar’s Balancing Act with Israel, Gaza, Iran, and the Gulf

The earliest public evidence of Doha’s ties with Israel emerged after Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated in 1995, with Qatari information minister Ahmed al-Aziz al-Kuwari attending his Jerusalem funeral wearing full Arab dress. Rabin’s successor, Shimon Peres, visited Doha in 1996, and an Israeli “trade office”—functionally a de facto embassy—was set up there soon after. Despite regional tensions, this office remained open until 2008, when Israel carried out its Operation Cast Lead in Gaza; plans to establish a reciprocal office near Tel Aviv never came to fruition. Today, Israelis are still able to visit Qatar using their native passports, and Israel’s Foreign Ministry has a Qatar desk officer.

These relations have been balanced with Qatari assistance to the Palestinians. Doha has favored Gaza over the West Bank in this regard, providing the Strip with funding for power needs, public salaries, new apartment buildings, and schools. The main Qatari envoy organizing these projects has been construction magnate Mohammed al-Emadi. Interviewed by the author in 2018, he denied that Qatari government funds went to Hamas, explaining how he regularly flew to Jordan before driving to Gaza via Jerusalem, where he stayed in a hotel favored by religious Jews.

One of Doha’s main motivations for ties with Israel has been the perception that they will help Qatar influence the United States via its Jewish community. The government’s ties with Hamas have domestic drivers as well—Arab Qataris sympathize with the Palestinians in general, and many share the strict adherence to Islam represented in the Muslim Brotherhood ideology that Hamas purportedly follows. (Though the government has been smart about enabling non-Muslims to easily obtain alcohol there.)

With Iran, Doha’s posture has been complicated by geography and hydrocarbons. A solitary peninsula that sticks out into the Persian Gulf, Qatar has a small citizenry of around 300,000 but is blessed with huge reserves of natural gas, the third-largest in the world after Russia and Iran. Its massive offshore North Field is contiguous with Iran’s less-developed South Pars field, however, creating a “two straws in one milkshake” situation that essentially compels Doha to maintain good relations with Tehran.

Relations with other Gulf neighbors have been more fraught. For instance, Bahrain still resents that the site of its historical capital is inaccessible in northern Qatar—and that its modest hydrocarbon reserves are dwarfed by Doha’s. For their part, Qatari officials often complain about where neighbors have positioned existing or planned nuclear power reactors, likely for symbolic reasons as much as actual contamination fears. The United Arab Emirates has placed its four reactors well away from Abu Dhabi but quite close to Doha; similarly, Saudi Arabia’s tentative plans for a Chinese civil reactor would place it on the border with Qatar.

In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a complete trade and diplomatic embargo against Qatar, alleging that Doha was supporting terrorism and issuing a long list of demands for ending the rift. Yet the dispute ended abruptly for no clear reason in early 2021, with Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman lifting the embargo even though none of the demands had been met.

Does Washington Have Alternatives to Qatar?

Over the years Doha has played its “resource-rich but vulnerable” hand cannily, if controversially. In the late 1990s, it built the giant al-Udeid Air Base even though the facilities far exceeded its military needs at the time. When the Saudis barred the United States from using Prince Sultan Air Base for operations against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in 2003, Qatar made al-Udeid available. The U.S. Air Force and allied contingents have since used it as their main Gulf base, even establishing a crucial operations center there that controls all U.S. air activity in an area stretching from Iraq to Afghanistan. Next door, the UAE has allowed U.S. forces to operate from al-Dhafra Air Base, but that facility’s operational restrictions reportedly make it unattractive compared with al-Udeid.

Returning to a Saudi basing alternative today seems like a nonstarter given the fraught historical experience of U.S. forces in the kingdom. Meanwhile, the UAE has damaged its credentials with Washington by surreptitiously allowing China to build an intelligence base there. And Bahrain already hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet—asking the Sunni-ruled nation to do more could prove problematic given the presumably widespread sympathy for Iran among its majority Shia population.

Doha’s sponsorship of the Al Jazeera television network has also frequently exasperated Washington. Its Arabic channel in particular is heavily pro-Islamist and anti-American—sentiments that have had deadly practical consequences for U.S. forces on the ground. After the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, for example, Al Jazeera journalists in Iraq appeared to conspire with militants ambushing U.S. forces, in part to get better pictures. At the time, American diplomatic anger toward Doha did not have a visible impact on the network’s practices.

More recently, Washington has been grateful for Qatar’s major role in helping refugees leave Afghanistan when the Taliban took over in 2021; a core group of Afghan-focused U.S. diplomats now operates out of the U.S. embassy in Doha. Yet now that the Hamas war has brought longstanding concerns to the fore again, the United States may seek to pressure Qatar by threatening to withdraw military assets or actually reducing its military and diplomatic presence.

Conclusion

The United States and Israel have similar but not necessarily identical priorities in the Gaza crisis. Both want to free more hostages, but Washington is keen to prevent the conflict from widening to Lebanon and Iran, while Israel is more focused on reestablishing deterrence against Hamas after the shocking surprise attack. Finding an alternative to Qatar’s willing diplomatic channel with Hamas seems improbable.

Yet Washington can certainly make Doha more aware of how deeply disgusted the White House and most Americans are about the group’s horrific terrorist attacks against Israeli civilians. Doha views the United States as its most important ally, and its previous deafness to U.S. concerns was most evident during the reign of former emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. The country is now led by his son Tamim, who has built Qatar’s reputation as a world-class player in the energy sector, sports world, and other fields. Emir Tamim now faces his toughest test—disassociating Doha from Hamas. Otherwise, he faces the prospect of significant downgrades to his country’s most crucial bilateral relationship.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**If this war stops Israeli-Saudi normalization, then Iran wins**

Opinion by Eric Mandel

24 October 2023

The Hill

The most compelling proof of Iran’s direct involvement in this war with Hamas is the timing of the hostilities.

Last month, Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed Ben Salman said, “Every day we get closer” to reaching an agreement with Israel. The alarm bell must have rung for the Iranian Supreme Leader and his henchmen, the terrorist paramilitary organization known as the Islamic Revolutionary GuardCorps. Iran’s well-planned hegemonic ambitions to dominate the Middle East and chase the U.S. from the region will be thwarted if Arabs and Israelis find common ground. Iran needed to start a war before the normalization reached fruition.

There is also ample evidence of Iranian involvement beyond just the timing. According to the State Department, Iran is a leading state sponsor of terror, providing one hundred million dollars a year to support Hamas terrorism through a “global network of crypto, cash and charities,” according to Reuters. Hamas would not have been able to wage this war without Iranian funding.

The Biden administration realized the best path to stabilize the Middle East was to create diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel. America’s adversaries, Russia and China, had already joined Iran in an axis of resistance against America. So the logical choice to advance American interests was to create a bulwark of allied nations against Iran.

If Saudi Arabia were to normalize relations with Israel, other Arab and Muslim countries would more likely participate in various forms of American-led rapprochements with the strongest military in the Middle East, Israel, profoundly undermining Iran’s goal for regional dominance. It is still a primary American security imperative to restart the normalization process between Riyadh and Jerusalem, creating a united front against Iran.

Earlier this month, President Biden told 60 Minutes that normalization is not dead because it is in the interest of the Arabs. “The Saudis, and the Emiratis, and other Arab nations understand that their security and stability is enhanced if there’s normalization of relations with Israel.”

What must not be forgotten, however, is that Iran remains a bitter rival of Saudi Arabia despite their recent rapprochement, facilitated by China.

Today, the Saudis are on the sidelines, waiting to see the outcome of this war before taking a chance on the U.S. and Israel. In part, this is because their population empathizes with their fellow Arabs, who have been portrayed as victims of the Jewish state. If America wants to get the Saudis on board with normalization eventually, American officials need to make a concerted effort to call out the international media, who provide little context for the images they show, which leaves the viewer with the impression Israel deliberately targets civilians.

I know firsthand from covering four Gaza wars Israel does not target civilians. In 2014, I was with an elite IDF unit that was attacked by Hamas from a United Nations hospital, not responding until a military lawyer was consulted, with final approval from the Defense Minister. The cost of comporting with international law was the lives of three Israeli soldiers.

The message to moderate Arab states should be that this war is against Hamas terrorists who abuse their people, not a war against Palestinian civilians. When electricity was cut from Israel, the Palestinians suffered, but Hamas and its army continued to have light, food, and clean water for themselves. Using Palestinians as human fodder to increase causalities is anti-Palestinian. Is there an Arab leader who can say that publicly without risking his neck?

The Arab nations are privately rooting for Israel to decimate Hamas, as its Muslim Brotherhood Salafist ideology is a genuine threat to the stability of their governments. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia, Jordan’s King Hussein, and even the Palestinian Authority president want Israel to end Hamas’ reign and send a message to Iran that they won’t stand for interference with their government or people.

It must be repeated again and again that it is Hamas that commits war crimes, especially by using innocent Palestinians as human shields to protect the sites from which they fire against Israeli civilian areas. When you break the international law of distinction by not wearing uniforms and deliberately blending into the civilian population, you define yourself as a terrorist.

No one should entertain excuses or rationalizations for their barbarity. The Biden administration must lobby our allies and potential allies — the Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia — to present a more balanced picture to their populations. Their media outlets are conduits for their leadership.

Meanwhile, if Iran activates Hezbollah in the north, it will become a defining moment in American history. Hezbollah can overwhelm Israel’s multilayered anti-missile system and strike accurately everywhere in Israel. If the U.S. uses its carrier strike groups to help Israel devastate Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, it will send a clear message to the Saudis, Jordanians, Emiratis, Egyptians, and others, that normalization with Israel, America’s best friend in the region, makes strategic sense.

President Biden’s visit to Israel and American bipartisan support in Congress also powerfully conveys to the world that America stands with its allies. Taiwan is listening and is hopeful.

If Iran is diminished, her allies will be chastened, and the region might become more stable. If this scenario unfolds, American national security will be strengthened, and the likelihood of another round of violence in the region will be reduced for years.

That is all one can hope for in the Middle East: a strong Israel a respected America, and both coinciding with Saudi interests.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Opinion Iran’s proxy forces are teaming up to attack Americans**

By Josh Rogan

25 October 2023

Washington Post

The Biden administration often says it wants to prevent the Israel-Gaza war from expanding across the region. But the near-daily attacks by Iranian-backed militias on U.S. troops in several Middle Eastern countries demonstrate that President Biden’s containment effort is cracking. Iran is already attacking U.S. bases using its proxy forces — and the United States has yet to formulate a proper response.

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Since Oct. 17, a new coalition of armed groups called the “Islamic Resistance of Iraq” has claimed credit for at least 11 attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria. This organization didn’t exist before the Israel-Gaza war erupted. But its membership, consisting of several Iranian-backed militia groups in Iraq (all of whom also operate in Syria), is a clear indication that Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is pulling the strings.

Iranian-backed militias have used drones or rockets to attack U.S. military personnel at the al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq, al-Harir Air Base in Iraqi Kurdistan, al-Tanf garrison in Syria and the U.S. base at Conoco natural gas field in Syria — with multiple strikes on each location.

I spoke with two Syrian rebel commanders who partner with U.S. forces there in the fight against the Islamic State. They told me that the IRGC’s notorious Quds Force has consolidated various militias under the new moniker to focus efforts and resources on one shared mission: targeting Americans.

“There has been absolutely no response to these attacks, which has resulted in the fact that the Iranian backed militias are getting much braver,” said one Syrian rebel commander, who requested anonymity out of concern for his safety.

The Biden team looks like it is trying to downplay the events. Several U.S. personnel have been wounded, but the Pentagon hasn’t commented on the numbers and the severity of the injuries. One U.S. contractor at al-Asad Air Base died of a heart attack while scrambling for cover on Oct. 18 during what the Pentagon later said was a false alarm.

On Oct. 19, a Pentagon spokesman noted the “uptick” in Iranian-militia attacks but said available information showed “no direct linkage” to the Oct. 7 Hamas terrorist attacks in Israel and Israel’s response in Gaza. “It’s important to separate these attacks from the current situation” in Israel, the spokesman said.

That same day, the Pentagon announced U.S. ships in the Persian Gulf had shot down three cruise missiles and more than a dozen drones launched by Iranian-backed Houthi forces in Yemen. The target of those drones remains unclear. But the connection between all these attacks and the Israel-Gaza war has been explicitly acknowledged — by Iran.

“I warn the U.S. and its proxy Israel that if they do not immediately stop the crime against humanity and genocide in Gaza, anything is possible at any moment and the region will go out of control,” Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said at a news conference in Tehran on Sunday.

To be sure, the Biden administration must be careful about feeding a cycle of escalation that could lead to a wider conflict. But that fear of escalation risks paralyzing policy. U.S. forces have responded to Iranian-backed militia attacks in Syria before while Biden was president. The logic then still applies now; failure to respond encourages these groups to get bolder.

Rep. Michael McCaul (R-Tex.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, told me that U.S. military forces in Iraq and Syria don’t have legal authorization to go after Iranian-backed militias properly. U.S. forces have authority to strike terrorist groups under current authorizations for the use of military force, but they don’t explicitly allow for preemptive strikes against Iranian-backed militias.

“With Hamas’s brutal attacks in Israel that killed innocent people, including Americans, and with the renewed attacks on our service members in the region, I hope the administration will revise their position and support including Iran-backed proxies in an updated AUMF,” he told me. “We cannot close our eyes to these very real threats to U.S. national security.”

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) told me that President Biden has the authority he needs to protect U.S. forces against imminent threats, but the United States should reexamine deploying thousands of troops across the region at all. “We ought to be talking about whether the presence of so many U.S. troops in a dangerous neighborhood actually makes us safer or just presents more targets for our enemies,” Murphy said.

There are about 2,500 U.S. troops stationed in Iraq and 900 in Syria, plus an undisclosed number of U.S. contractors.

That’s an interesting debate for later on. Right now, U.S. troops are there and in harm’s way. The Pentagon redeployed two U.S. aircraft carrier groups to the region to increase deterrence against Iran or any other group that might want to expand the Israel-Gaza conflict. But as these attacks continue, it’s becoming more and more apparent that this new “Islamic Resistance of Iraq” has not been deterred.

On Monday, White House spokesman John Kirby said Iran was not only spurring on these attacks but also in some cases facilitating them. He pledged the United States would not allow Iran to use proxies to attack Americans with impunity. It’s time for the Biden team to match those words with action.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Biden’s Red-Line Moment With Iran**

Blinken promises a swift and decisive response, but will Biden back it up?

Editorial Board

24 October 2023

Wall Street Journal

Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned Tuesday that the U.S. would respond “swiftly and decisively” to any attack on American forces from Iran or its proxies. That’s a welcome message aimed at deterring the mullahs in Tehran and their agents. But will the President enforce the red line he appears to be drawing? He hasn’t so far.

“The United States does not seek conflict with Iran,” Mr. Blinken said at the United Nations. “We do not want this war to widen. But if Iran or its proxies attack U.S. personnel anywhere, make no mistake. We will defend our people.” Mr. Blinken’s remarks are the sharpest U.S. warning to Iran so far, and from the most senior U.S. official. They go beyond President Biden’s previous vague warnings of “don’t” to discourage Hezbollah or Iran from getting involved in the Hamas-Israel war.

Clearly the White House is worried, and it should be. Even the Administration has been obliged to acknowledge that Iranian clients have used drones and rockets to attack U.S. forces in the Middle East more than a dozen times in the past week.

White House spokesman John Kirby said Monday that Iran is “in some cases, actively facilitating these attacks” on U.S. positions in Iraq and Syria. Mr. Kirby also acknowledged that “Iran’s goal is to maintain some level of deniability here, but we’re not going to allow them to do that.” A senior defense official noted this week that “when you see this uptick in activity and attacks” in the Middle East, “there’s Iranian fingerprints all over it.”

The obvious implication of Mr. Blinken’s remarks is that if American forces are attacked, the U.S. will respond with military force. Multiple reports suggest that Iran’s clients are planning more attacks on U.S. positions in the Middle East. The Pentagon has dispatched more air defenses and on Tuesday announced an F-16 deployment to complement other fighter aircraft in the region. One carrier strike group is already operating in the area and another is on the way. So when will the swift and decisive U.S. response arrive?

Mr. Biden no doubt remembers Barack Obama’s “red line” warning to Syria in 2012 over the use of chemical weapons that went unenforced when Bashar al-Assad crossed it. The fallout from that failure of deterrence and follow-through included Vladimir Putin’s intervention to save the Assad regime, then his invasions of Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

The Biden Administration wants to deter a second front against Israel from Iran’s proxies in Lebanon and Syria. But failing to respond to Iran’s many attacks, even when there are so far no U.S. troop casualties, is an invitation to Iran to keep calling the U.S. bluff.

This could invite the provocation the White House is trying so hard to avoid. One risk is that Iran or its proxies will eventually kill Americans in these attacks, which might require an even greater use of U.S. force and would be damaging politically. Or the U.S. might have to intervene to help Israel defeat Hezbollah.

Iran is using its proxies to test U.S. resolve. The more they attack without Iran paying a price, the more likely that Iran will raise the stakes. The paradox Mr. Biden has to appreciate: The most stabilizing move for the region would be restoring America as a deterrent power.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**US forces attacked more than 12 times in Iraq, Syria in past week -Pentagon**

24 October 2023

Reuters

U.S. forces have been attacked more than a dozen times in Iraq and Syria in the past week, the Pentagon said on Tuesday.

Pentagon spokesman Brigadier General Patrick Ryder said there had been 10 attacks on forces in Iraq and three in Syria.

Reuters reported earlier on Tuesday a new set of measures the U.S. military is taking to protect deployed forces in the Middle East during the rampup in attacks by suspected Iran-backed groups.

[Back to Top](#_top)

**Rockets attack targets Iraqi base housing U.S. forces – sources**

24 October 2023

Reuters

Two rockets landed inside Iraq's Ain al-Asad air base, which hosts U.S. and other international forces west of Baghdad, two security sources told Reuters on Tuesday.

One of the sources said the rockets were big, and the rocket launcher was found about 50 km southeast of the base.

Ain al-Asad air base is located in the western Anbar province.

[Back to Top](#_top)