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Implications of the Israel-Hamas War for the Global Strategic Environment

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The unfolding war between Israel and the Hamas terrorist organization is like watching a slow-motion train wreck. Hamas' unconscionable, extensively planned terror unleashed against Israel on October 7 has set in motion tragically predictable actions, likely to accelerate the fundamental transformation underway in the global security environment, to the benefit of not only Hezbollah and Iran, but also, Russia and China. These consequences have profound and negative implications for the United States and a range of other actors, including in Latin America.

From an Israeli perspective, the success of Hamas in planning over two years, and executing, the large-scale attacks by land, air and sea, with all of the resources, coordination, and people involved, demonstrates the non-viability of the "two-state" solution, which is the generally accepted, politically correct position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict taken by most of the globe. It was arguably Israel's relative lack of access to Gaza, which it effectively allowed to be operated as a self-governed "open-air prison" adjacent to Israel, that gave Hamas, operating in a population raised on a diet of hate toward Israel, the secure space to plan its atrocities.

Israel's military response is transitioning from initial attacks by air against Hamas leadership and infrastructure targets in the Gaza Strip, to the likely conduct of a ground incursion and occupation once adequate conditions are achieved. Yet even if through a protected campaign on the ground in Gaza, Israel eliminates the actors and infrastructure that permitted the October 7 attack (and this is by no means certain), it is unlikely that after incurring the significant casualties to do so, Israel will be able to withdraw, returning power to a self-governing population, raised to hate its Jewish neighbors, and surrounded regimes hostile to Israel, with the reasonable risk that another such act of depravity could occur within years.

Israel's cordon of Gaza Strip is likely intended, in part, to drive a significant part of the population out of the area, reducing (not eliminating) the risk of engagement with hostile civilians as the IDF moves in, while also making it easier to identify hostages (who cannot be easily smuggled out of the country through the Egyptian checkpoint. Yet Israeli ground actions in Gaza, even with the maximum exercise of caution, will inevitably produce civilian casualties, just as occurred with US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. The images of such casualties and suffering civilian populations will be substantially prejudicial to Israel's image in the Muslim world, fueling anti-Israeli sentiments, anti-US sentiments for its perceived role in backing Israel, and an expanded flow of money and recruits into radical organizations such as Hezbollah, even if Hamas itself is effectively destroyed.

Just as Hamas likely planned an attack of maximum brutality with the objective of obligating the harshest possible Israeli response, in order to tap into and fuel anti-Israel sentiment, Hamas and other radical organizations now have every incentive to hide behind civilian targets and force Israel into actions that generate civilian casualties, in order to cast Israel in the worst possible light in the war of public opinion. In the context of swelling anti-Israel public sentiment, Middle Eastern governments that have previously sought pragmatic courses, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, will lose freedom to maneuver, and will confront expanded radicalism in their own countries. These dilemmas for pragmatists will advantage their rival Iran, which likely played a role in helping Hamas to prepare the attack.

Beyond the Middle East, and among the left globally, the continual stream of casualties and real plight of Palestinian refugees will fuel "morally neutral" calls for an "end to the violence," forgetting the brutal chain of events that obliged Israeli action.

It is not yet clear whether Islamic radicals will expand the focus of their terrorism beyond Israel to target Western societies, as suggested by "day of rage" protests around the world, or how successful they would be in doing so. A key objective of such attacks would presumably be to widen the conflict into a struggle between the West and the Islamic world, as other groups from Al Qaeda to ISIS previously sought to do. It is also possible that Hezbollah, with Iranian encouragement, may attack Israel from Lebanon to open up a two-front war, although Lebanese arguably recall the damage caused from the country's last involvement in a war against Israel in 2006.

As an alternative to such possibilities of escalation, key actors behind the Hamas attacks may now seek to restrain others from attacking a broader set of targets, in order not to undercut their campaign to maximize sympathy for the Palestinians and turn global opinion against Israel. It is not clear, however, that in the decentralized world of Islamic extremism, such dynamics can be effectively controlled by any individual actor.

As occurred in Middle Eastern politics following every war against Israel that produced Palestinian refugees (1948, 1967, and 1973), governments in the region today have little incentive to resettle Gaza's refugees into their own societies, rather than maintaining them in a state of limbo and economic marginalization in camps, focusing their energy on returning to the lands that Israel forced them out of, once Israel is decimated.

In the medium term, US support for Israel, although strategically and morally necessary, will divert munitions, resources, and leader attention away from the Ukraine, as the latter's army runs out of time in exploiting its hard-fought breakthroughs before winter sets in, and the Russian army has time to reinforce itself, ensuring that the war will extend through the 2024 season, at an even greater cost of Russian and Ukrainian lives and Western treasure, as the People's Republic of China looks on.

The PRC will strategically benefit from such mutually reinforcing conflicts, as its geopolitical rival, the United States, is trapped into expending its resources in two simultaneous wars, and as world opinion turns against the US for its perceived association with the casualties inflicted by Israel in its ongoing operations in Gaza. In this context, the PRC may have an opportunity to take advantage of the situation to move against Taiwan, particularly if it calculates the US lacks the capacity to simultaneously conduct major military operations in three theaters. On the other hand, given the probable catastrophic economic costs of such a war, in the context of PRC economic difficulties such as the financial crisis in its property sector, it is not a given that the PRC will exploit the opportunity that the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine may present it.

For Latin America, the ongoing conflicts will likely bring more bad news on multiple fronts. The violence will likely increase fuel prices, especially if the conflict expands, hitting the region's most vulnerable, as occurred following Russia's invasion of the Ukraine. Islamic groups in Latin America may attack Jewish targets, as occurred in Argentina with the attack against the Israeli embassy in 1992, and that against the AMIA Jewish Community Center in 1994. Terror cells in the region may also target governments perceived

as supportive of Israel. Iran, buoyed by the lopsidedly pro-Palestinian positions already expressed by anti-US regimes in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, may seek to deepen its already in-progress re-engagement with the region.

As with Russia, Iran may further seek to leverage the calculated neutrality of Latin American regimes in Mexico and Brazil, to strengthen political and other interactions with those regimes, beginning with proclaimed interest in brokering a peace accord.

The irony of the currently unfolding tragedy, with a dear cost in lives, is that neither Israel, nor the United States, arguably have strategic options better than the one they are pursuing, although the intelligence with which both plays the disadvantaged hand they have been given, will be decisive in the outcome, not only in the Middle East, but in the broader, increasingly illiberal and polarized global order.

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Dr. R. Evan Ellis is a research professor of Latin American studies at the U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, with a focus on the region's relationships with China and other non-Western Hemisphere actors as well as transnational organized crime and populism in the region. Dr. Ellis previously served as the secretary of state's policy planning staff with responsibility for Latin America and the Caribbean as well as international narcotics and law enforcement issues. In his academic capacity, Dr. Ellis presented his work in a broad range of business and government forums in 27 countries on four continents. He has given testimony on Latin American security issues to the U.S. Congress on various occasions, has discussed his work regarding China and other

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