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INTRODUCTION

The October 2023 issue of the Iran in Focus brief examines the role of Iran in the War on Gaza.

On Saturday morning, October 7, 2023, two Iran-backed organizations from the Gaza Strip, namely Hamas and the Islamic Jihad in Palestine (PIJ), perpetrated the deadliest assault on Israel since its establishment in May 1948. Operation Al-Aqsa Flood was launched precisely one day after the 50th anniversary of another Arab surprise attack on Israel – the October 1973 War – although it was purportedly planned for two years with only a handful of Hamas commanders in the know.

So far, Israel has reacted with a massive bombing campaign against Gaza, while announcing that it will engage in a ground offensive to eliminate Hamas. The ongoing conflict poses the risk of evolving into a full-scale regional confrontation, potentially drawing in other Iranian-backed groups, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah, and even the possibility of a direct war pitting Iran and its "axis of resistance" against Israel and its U.S. ally.

KHAMENEI'S OCT. 3 SPEECH: ACUTE WARNING AGAINST ARAB-ISRAELI NORMALIZATION

This major escalation came only four days after an Oct. 3 address by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to the International Islamic Unity Conference, ambassadors of Islamic countries in Iran and Iranian officials, which has raised speculations about Tehran's role in the Hamas attack. Khamenei stated that the "governments that are gambling on normalizing relations with the Zionist regime will suffer losses." Instead, he called for a united policy among countries like "Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Persian Gulf countries" against the U.S.

Above all, the prospect of normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel has been a thorn in the flesh of the Islamic Republic, with the latter's media even warning Riyadh about such a prospect. For instance, the ultra-conservative Kayhan daily stressed that if Riyadh aims to normalize its relationship with Jerusalem, Iran-affiliated "resistance" groups will pose threats to Saudi Arabia. It noted that if Riyadh would want to attain sustainable security, this would only be possible through relations with Muslim countries and "resistance" movements.

In his speech, Khamenei went on to say: "They are betting on a losing horse. Today, the situation of the Zionist regime is not a situation that encourages closeness to it. They [other governments] should not make this mistake. The usurper [Zionist] regime is coming to an end." While the latter could be interpreted as direct evidence for Tehran's advance knowledge of or even active participation in the Hamas operation, such formulations about the impending demise of Israel are a routine mantra employed by top regime officials. He then added: "Today, the Palestinian movement is more alive than it has ever been during these 70 or 80 years."

Today, the Palestinian youth and the Palestinian movement, the anti-occupation, anti-oppression, anti-Zionism movement, is more energetic, more alive, and more prepared than ever, and you can see this. And God willing, this movement will achieve its goals. The honorable Imam [Khomeini], may God be pleased with him, described, the usurper [Zionist] regime as a cancer. This cancer will definitely be eradicated, God willing, at the hands of the Palestinian people and the resistance forces throughout the region." This discourse – the claim that Palestinian resistance would stand at a historic high and that Israel will soon be eradicated – has also been conventional talking points of the Iranian regime's propaganda.

ISRAELI–SAUDI NORMALIZATION PROCESS: A TICKING BOMB FOR TEHRAN

The possibility of normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia is seen as a security threat by the Islamic Republic, which could involve a formal U.S. security pact with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi that would act as a powerful deterrence against renewed Iranian aggression against them and severely limit Tehran's expansive regional policies. While the Iranian leadership has refused to officially oppose such normalization, the perspective presented in Kayhan sheds light on how Tehran would want to react to this prospect. The daily, often seen as mouthpiece of Supreme Leader Khamenei, emphasizes that “resistance” groups would pose threats to Saudi Arabia in such a scenario, a reference to the Tehran-led “axis of resistance” that includes Hamas and PIJ in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon, pro-Iranian Shia militias in Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen. Furthermore, Khamenei's remarks underscore Iran's expectations from other regional countries, as he called for unity among Muslim-majority countries against the U.S. This suggests that Iran seeks a leadership role in shaping the foreign policies of these countries. Of course, such a posture makes it challenging to envision regional stability as Tehran does not appear to have shelved its ambition for regional hegemony via its “axis of resistance.” It is precisely because of a lack of evidence that the Islamic Republic's top leadership would reverse its regional policies, that the Iranian–Saudi détente deal signed in March proves to be more fragile than widely assumed.

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS FROM IRAN AND ITS “AXIS OF RESISTANCE”: CELEBRATION AND CONGRATULATIONS

Tehran's reaction was one of celebration and congratulations for Hamas' attack. Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani claimed that a new chapter had opened in the history of the Iran-led “resistance front.” Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general and adviser to Khamenei, Yahya Rahim Safavi said that “we support the commendable operation of Al-Aqsa Storm. [...] We will stand alongside the Palestinian freedom fighters until the liberation of Palestine and Al-Quds.” A number of Iranian military commanders, including the chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces Maj.-Gen. Mohammad Bagheri and IRGC commander-in-chief Gen. Hossein Salami, as well as President Ibrahim Raisi, echoed these sentiments. Raisi also spoke by phone to the Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh and PIJ's Ziyad al-Nakhalah.

Moreover, Lebanon's Hezbollah released a statement of support to Hamas, announcing that the latter's operation “sends a message to the Arab and Islamic world, and the international community as a whole, especially those seeking normalization with this enemy, that the Palestinian cause is an everlasting one, alive until victory and liberation.”

SOCIETAL BACKLASH: “NEITHER GAZA NOR LEBANON, MY LIFE FOR IRAN”

Meanwhile, the general mood among Iranian society – beyond the ever-thinner social base of the regime gathering at Tehran’s Palestine Square to celebrate the attack by Hamas – has become the anathema of the regime’s anti-Israel ideology and propaganda. In fact, since the 2009 Green Movement, the slogan “Neither Gaza, nor Lebanon, my life for Iran” has become a most prominent chant during nationwide protests. The chant involves a critique of the regime’s perceived priority for regional interventions that is also sustaining enmity with Israel and the U.S., which is ultimately seen as being detrimental to Iran’s interests. Also, the slogan constitutes a condemnation of the funds Tehran funnels into its “axis of resistance” instead of using them to fulfill domestic needs. For instance, the slogan was chanted on Oct. 20 in Zahedan, capital city of south-eastern Sistan and Baluchestan province, during the anti-regime protests following Friday prayers that have continuously taken place since the start of the 2022 revolutionary protests. Earlier, and one day after the start of Hamas’ attack, football fans at Tehran’s Azadi stadium, shouted “Stick your Palestine flag up your butt!” during an official ceremony that featured a Palestinian flag. This doesn’t necessarily amount to Iranian society being “anti-Palestine” but should rather be understood as a dramatic exposition of Iranian society’s opposition to the regime’s decades-long use and abuse of the Palestinian cause.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC’S RED LINE: REGIME ROWS BACK ITS BELLIGERENT RHETORIC

However, just a few days after Tehran’s initial jubilant reception of “Operation Al-Aqsa Flood,” top regime officials started denying any direct Iranian involvement regarding the Oct. 7 attack, including the Supreme Leader, the President, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, and the IRGC chief, instead praising the latter as an achievement of Palestinian resistance alone. This sudden U-turn occurred against the backdrop of the U.S. ordering two aircraft carrier groups to the Eastern Mediterranean as an explicit warning to Hezbollah and Iran not to get involved in the war. More generally, however, these Iranian denials demonstrate the regime’s adversity toward a great war, i.e., one pitting Iran against Israel and probably also the U.S. Tehran is aware that any such confrontation is better to be avoided, as it risks to present a severe threat to regime security and even existence. As a result, Iran is more likely to use its regional proxies to pressure both Israel and the U.S.

SPECULATIONS ABOUT IRAN'S ROLE – AND THE (GEO-)POLITICS SURROUNDING IT

The Islamic Republic has been a long-term supporter of militant Palestinian groups. In fact, PIJ leader al-Nakhalah explained in mid-April that Tehran pays for every house demolished by Israel in the West Bank to rebuild and provides or pays every weapon used by Hamas and his own organization. He added that Hamas alone has obtained annual payments of USD 150 million for the past 30 years and that other Palestinian groups have also received Iranian funds, which has allowed them to “have created deterrence vis-à-vis Israel.” Last year, Ismail Haniyeh reportedly stated that Hamas obtained USD 70 million in military assistance from Iran. A 2020 U.S. State Department report said that Tehran provides about USD 100 million annually to Palestinian groups, including Hamas, PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.

The attack by Hamas, particularly its guerrilla forces entering Israel and taking Israeli citizens and soldiers hostage, raises questions about its initiation without at least tacit approval, if not active encouragement and support from the Islamic Republic of Iran, and even from Russia. It is unusual for Hamas to employ such a bold strategy, which may suggest that it received guidance or support from Tehran or Moscow for that matter. For instance, the Islamic Republic has long shown interest in hostage-taking as a strategic tool, which can potentially grant Hamas with a means of leverage against the Israeli government during negotiations for a potential future ceasefire, while complicating Israel's military response in Gaza that may kill Israeli captives taken there. Or, it could simply lead to a U.S.-Hamas prisoner swap, as senior Hamas official Ali Baraka explained in an Oct. 8 interview with Russia Today: “There are Hamas members sentenced for life in the U.S. We want them too. Of course. We demand that the U.S. free our sons from prisons. The U.S. conducts prisoner swaps. Only recently, it did one with Iran. Why wouldn't it conduct a prisoner swap with us? After all, it is participating in this war.”

Also, according to an unverified video circulating on social media, Persian-speakers may have been part of Hamas' hostage-taking commandoes, suggesting that Tehran has sent military personnel for the Hamas operation, over and above possible financial and other military support to the Palestinian organization.

A controversially-discussed Oct. 8 report from the Wall Street Journal suggested Iranian security officials helped plan Hamas's attack and gave it their green light during an Oct. 2 meeting in Beirut. Shortly after, the Washington Post claimed that the operation was prepared at least one year in advance by Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, according to current and former Western and Middle Eastern intelligence officials. Given these reports, Khamenei's above-discussed Oct. 3 address can also be interpreted differently, i.e. of Tehran's advance knowledge of the Hamas operation a few days later.

In contrast, Barakeh told AP that merely half a dozen Hamas commanders were informed about the operation, and this also didn't include the group's closest allies Iran and Hezbollah. The latter would only get fully involved if Israel sought a "war of annihilation" in Gaza. His account also sheds doubt on whether Hamas had deliberately planned such a massive and spectacular operation; instead, Barakeh suggests that Hamas was even surprised by the lack of Israeli defenses, realizing that the Middle East's premier military power was merely a "paper tiger."

Given all this, the precise level and nature of Tehran's involvement remains unclear. "Iran is a major player but we can't yet say if it was involved in the planning or training," said IDF spokesman Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari. Also, the U.S. National Security Council spokesman said Washington had still no "hard, tangible, evidence that Iran was directly involved in participating in or resourcing, planning these sets of complex attacks" while noting "a degree of complicity" given Iran's longtime support for Hamas. In fact, such comments can also be interpreted as a lack of appetite from Israel and the U.S. to engage in a war with Iran.

In contrast, senior observers such as Joseph Bahout, director of the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI), suggests that the Oct. 7 operation was planned under "Iranian aegis" together with Hamas and Hezbollah, with each of the latter two preserving their own modus operandi and room for manoeuvre.

THE WAR AS A TWO-EDGED SWORD FOR THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

Despite the lack of concrete evidence about Iran's direct involvement in Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, one could argue that the Islamic Republic is a major beneficiary of this new war. First, this escalation will make it extremely harder for Saudi Arabia to pursue normalization with Israel. This is especially the case since Riyadh cannot possibly ignore Arab-wide pro-Palestinian public sentiments considered crucial for its own regional image and soft power. As a result of the war on Gaza, normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel is likely to be postponed indefinitely or even shelved altogether, which would be a highly desired outcome for Tehran, as well as for Hamas. Against this backdrop, it may be plausible to assume that Iran could have encouraged Hamas's plan or at least not discouraged it. Second, another Israeli-Palestinian war can serve as a welcome diversion from its domestic woes and the Islamic Republic's legitimacy collapse, while allowing the regime to nurture its ideological base with pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli propaganda. Third, also domestically, amid a stagnating Iranian revolutionary process, Tehran can divert attention from the Oct. 6 Nobel Peace Prize award to prominent jailed human-rights activist Narges Mohammadi and the case of 16-year old Armita Geravand who was beaten into a coma by the regime's hijab enforcers for not adhering to the rigid official

dress code and who was declared brain dead by state media on Oct. 22, echoing the case of the late Mahsa Jina Amini whose death in police custody triggered the most severe anti-regime protests since 1979.

Regarding the possibility of Hezbollah joining the war on the side of Hamas, it will only do so if Iran determines that the Lebanese group's involvement may be needed to avoid a decisive Israeli blow against Hamas – which is unclear at the time of writing (late October). At the same time, Hezbollah has much to lose from entering the war, especially its standing in Lebanon – both in general and among its social base – at a time when the country is in shambles. Last but not least, the apparent failure of Israel and probably U.S. intelligence regarding Hamas' attack will be encouraging factors for their regional foes, inviting future escalations against Israel.

Against this backdrop, Iran may view Hamas's operation as a way to indirectly pressure Saudi Arabia and the United States, given the weakness of U.S. deterrence in the Middle East. Tehran has been using its proxy networks to significantly undermine U.S. and allied interests in the region, and Hamas' attack comes just days after Iran received USD 6 billion of its frozen assets as a result of a deal with the Biden administration. Therefore, controlling Iran's malign activities will prove increasingly challenging in the absence of an effective U.S. deterrence policy.

For now, the only scenario in which Iran and Hezbollah would enter the war would be in the case of a major Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip threatening to annihilate Hamas. In such case, Iran's regional allies may be led to forcefully enter the military arena in a bid to stop Israel from cutting off the Palestinian leg of their "axis of resistance." Meanwhile, Iran threatens Israel by the "unity of all fronts," i.e. multi-front against Israel, as a way of deterrence.

The war comes at an opportune moment, not only for Iran but also for Russia. According to Barakeh, "Our allies are those that support us with weapons and money. First and foremost, it is Iran that is giving us money and weapons. There is also Hezbollah, and the Arab and Islamic people who are standing by us. There are countries that support us politically. Even Russia sympathizes with us. Even the Russians sent us messages yesterday morning. They sympathize with us. Russia is happy that America is getting embroiled in Palestine. It alleviates the pressure on the Russians in Ukraine. One war eases the pressure in another war. So we are not alone on the battlefield." For Moscow, the war deviates attention away from its military assault on Ukraine and pushes its most important foe, the U.S., to refocus attention and military deployments to Israel/Palestine.

In conclusion, the war is benefiting the interests of both Iran and Russia, while shattering Israel's image of invincibility, exposing the West's neglect of both the Palestinian question and Iran's regional expansionism because of its obsession with the nuclear file, and concomitantly the legacy of the lack of robust U.S. deterrence against Iran and its "axis of resistance."

However, the Islamic Republic's discursive shift indicates a profound sense of vulnerability. The regime cannot afford a great war with Israel and/or the U.S. for its severe risks for its stability and perhaps even survival. Also, crucial in this context, in case of such a war, the Iranian leadership seems to be cognizant that it cannot rely on a national mobilization - a result of its legitimacy collapse at home amid a fundamental rift between state and society.

MORE INSIGHTS

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