

Iran Fears Full-Scale Regional War

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 16.12.2023

Israel should attack the Qods Force apparatus in Iran and across the region.

The Gaza war is only a part of Iran's grand plan

written by Joseph Rozen | 16.12.2023

During a UN Security Council meeting on the 24th of October, the secretary general, Antonio Guterres, said that Hamas' October 7th attacks on Israel "did not happen in a vacuum". He was not wrong - Hamas' attacks were planned and executed with the close assistance of Iran, which continues to arm, guide, finance, and activate its proxies in the Middle East.

The Israel-Gaza war has repercussions on the international fight against Iran and its other accomplices. Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shia militias in Syria, Iraq, and recently in Sudan, are all Iranian agents of chaos and terror, who serve Iran's interests - to create a Shia-dominate strip stretching from Iran to the Mediterranean Sea to shift the leadership of the Muslim world from Sunni countries to Iran, end the US presence in the Middle East and destroy Israel. Besides Iranian direct support, the use of these proxies would not have been effective without an envelope-supporting system of private entities, with the ability to enable money transfers, technologies, communications, etc.

The current situation in the Middle East provides an opportunity to increase global efforts to stop Iran's malign behavior, not only by sanctioning Iran and its proxies but also use complementary measures to sanctions and target private companies which assist Iran in executing terror activities.

The Military Sphere

After the fog of October 7th atrocities faded away, the Israeli defense forces were

able to recover Iranian-produced weapons used by Hamas during the October 7th attack. The Foundation For Defense of Democracies (FDD) reported that 60mm mortar rounds with Iranian-made AZ111 mortar round fuses and M112 demolition charges were used by Hamas in the attack. Evidence shows that these components were produced in Iran and appear in a catalogue of the Defense Industries organization, an Iranian company that is affiliated with the Ministry of Defense of Iran. The M112 explosives recovered were identical to those intercepted by US-led operations in Yemen and Bahrain to stop smugglers.

In addition to these familiar weapons, the IDF has also recovered new Iranian-made warheads for Rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPG) that were not seen before. In the new warhead, the first charge is designed to penetrate light armoured vehicles and the second charge is thermobaric, aimed at burning the target.

The latest launching of drones and cruise missiles by the Houthis in Yemen towards Israel demonstrated more Iranian weapons variety. Since November last year, the US Navy seized many weapons and munitions en route to Yemen, in the area of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. These included explosives, ammunition, weapons and missiles, which are in the use of Hamas and other proxies as well.

Iran's creativity goes as far as its cruelty in its efforts to maintain a flow of arms to Iranian proxies in the region. Following the devastating earthquakes that hit Syria in February 2023, the IRGC used humanitarian assistance as camouflage to transfer weapons and crucial components to assist with Hezbollah's efforts to turn their rockets more accurate. Recently, Syria accused Israel of launching simultaneous missile attacks against its airports, probably to stop the already known route of weapons transfer from Iran to Syria and further to Hezbollah. After the destruction of these airports, Russia hurried to allow Iranian flights to use the "Khmeimim" air base in Syria. This is happening while Hezbollah and Shia militias in Syria have been targeting Israel with rockets since October 7th.

The technological efforts

Alongside supplying weapons to terrorist organizations, Iran is also very active in the technological sphere, which is crucial for securing funds for terrorism, surveillance, and supporting other terror-related activities inside and outside Iran.

ArianTel, an Iranian wireless communications services provider was pivotal to Iran's efforts to create a large-scale surveillance network. According to Citizen Lab, a cybersecurity NGO based in Canada, the surveillance and censorship capabilities resulting from this level of integration with mobile service providers cannot be understated.

Prime example for this is MTN Group. MTN entered the Iranian telecom sector in 2005 and launched its services in Iran a year later using a subsidiary named Irancell, a front company of the IRGC, in which MTN owns a 49% stake, the other 51% owned by the Iranian Electronic Development Company. Since then, MTN has been closely involved with ArianTel, as part of its joint venture with the Iranian government. MTN and Irancell, provided multiple Access Points and Roaming agreements, granting ArianTel explicit access to their cellular networks. This allowed ArianTel and the Iranian government to carry out surveillance operations on dissidents and critics within Iran.

MTN group openly and knowingly conducted business with the IRGC and ArianTel despite international sanctions against them. In April 2023, ArianTel was sanctioned by the European Union, for contributing to the telecommunications surveillance architecture mapped out by the Iranian government to quash dissent and critical voices in Iran. In 2020, a year after IRGC was officially designated as a foreign terrorist organization (FTO) MTN released a statement saying that it would continue its business as usual.

MTN made conscious decisions to engage in misconduct while violating sanctions, and effectively supporting and facilitating Iran's terrorism. But the use of telecommunication systems does not stop at surveillance and suppressing dissent at home, rather it is used to advance Tehran's international aspirations as well, supporting Iran's proxies in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen.

This activity is at the core of the US district court in New York's high-stakes anti-terrorism act lawsuit against MTN Group. In addition to its direct engagement with the IRGC, the lawsuit revealed the group's violations of the Anti-Terrorism Act by paying protection money of more than \$100M to al-Qaeda and the Taliban so they wouldn't target its cellular towers, and they deactivated the towers at night, preventing US intelligence operations.

Another dimension of concern is MTN's decades-long association with Hezbollah,

a designated terrorist organization and a proxy of Iran. This relationship involved providing equipment that Hezbollah used as detonators and for tracking their adversaries. This history of supporting and enabling terror activity might indicate that other proxies of Iran, such as Hamas were also benefiting from MTN's services.

There is evidence that Hamas' brutal attacks against Israel, were accompanied by cyberattacks conducted by a group linked to Iran. The attacks were aimed at stealing, publishing, and deleting sensitive information such as personal data and intellectual property from educational institutions and tech companies. These attacks began in January 2023 but were intensified following the October 7th attacks.

NYT reported that Iranian hackers were waging an espionage campaign targeting rivals across the Middle East, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The cyberattacks are linked to Iran's Ministry of Intelligence. According to Israeli cybersecurity officials, 15 groups of hackers, such as "agonizing serpents" and "LionTail", affiliated directly or as a proxy, with the IRGC and Iranian Ministry of Intelligence, are responsible for the attacks. During this campaign, there were also attempts by groups affiliated with Hamas and Hezbollah to hack CCTV cameras in Israel.

It's time to stop Iran

As shown above, Iran's terror network is broad, and it also serves as a distraction from its efforts to cross the nuclear threshold and reach a nuclear military capability. Following Iran's involvement in Hamas' attacks against Israel and the continuous support of other proxies in the Middle East, the international community must step up joint efforts to stop both Iran and its accomplices.

The most common measure against Iran is sanctions, mainly in relation to the nuclear program. While sanctions took a toll on Iran's economy, the shadow financial network provided it a lifeline. This year, the US imposed new and broader sanctions on a "shadow banking" network of 39 entities across multiple jurisdictions, including those registered in China, Türkiye, and UAE. These sanctions are targeting Iranian front companies abroad that have generated tens of billions of dollars for the Iranian regime.

One of Iran's ways to bypass sanctions is the use of cryptocurrencies, which

Tehran legalized in 2019. Around 4.5% of global bitcoin mining is done in Iran. International compliance regulations, including those issued by the FATF (Financial Action Task Force), have made it more difficult to use cryptocurrencies as a way to evade sanctions but did not entirely stop Iran.

In addition, the US decided to freeze \$6 billion that was part of a prisoner swap deal with Iran to free 5 American citizens. Due to Iran's backing of Hamas, the US reached an understanding with Qatar to prevent access of Iran to the funds. The US also imposed new sanctions on Hamas and members of IRGC for arming, training, and providing financial assistance to the terror organization. The US Department of Treasury emphasizes Iran's role in providing financial, logistical, and operational support to Hamas.

The EU announced that it is considering imposing similar sanctions against Iran over its support of Hamas. Moreover, the big three European countries refused to lift sanctions on Iran after the 18th of October 2023, a date set by the original deal in 2015 and relates to missile capabilities of Iran.

Although there is still some pressure on Iran, the effectiveness of sanctions is debatable. The Iranian leadership is very flexible in its ways to evade sanctions, leaving the Iranians to suffer as a result of the sanctions, especially when these are focusing on financing channels. Yes, the economy plunged but that did not change the behavior and ambitions of the Iranian regime.

The current situation in the Middle East generates an opportunity and momentum to act now against Iran. This should include complementary means to sanctions, such as cyber tools, a direct credible military threat to Iran's strategic infrastructure, and dismantle of its proxies. But also, the targeting of target channels of technology transfer and financial support with direct links to IRGC. In this context, the lawsuit against MTN Group is an important step. The Iranian leadership and its accomplices must know that as long as they engage in terrorism and nuclear armament, the international community will react vigorously.

Published in The National Interest 04.12.2023

Don't you dare!

written by David M. Weinberg | 16.12.2023

Israeli leaders have no mandate to scale-back the assault on Hamas. The war cannot and must not end until Israel has achieved its legitimate military objectives in full.

The IDF has got its act together

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 16.12.2023

The foray into Jabalia is a successful model for continuing the offensive against Hamas. Israel must maintain a complete siege on Gaza.

Israel must crush Hamas

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 16.12.2023

It wasn't supposed to happen. The surprise attack by Hamas is an extremely severe blow to Israel's image of deterrence, beyond the direct, very heavy price it exacted from us physically and emotionally.

This attack also severely damages Israelis' trust in the security forces. The time will come for the hard questions, investigations and drawing conclusions. Right now it is only right to focus all attention and efforts on the success of the fighting and to strengthen the hands of the commanders and fighters from all the security forces, who, while suffering the painful price of failure, are required to gather their strength and lead the hard fighting against Hamas.

How do you prevent Hezbollah from joining the fighting ?

We are in a situation that will have historical repercussions. Not only Hezbollah but also Iran and other organizations are looking to see what happens. The more powerful and tougher our response against Hamas will be, then this will convey to Hezbollah that it is not worth its while joining the fighting against Israel. Israel's actions must turn the surprise attack by Hamas against Israel into Gaza's *nakba* (tragedy).

The IDF must crush Hamas, kill everybody that belongs to the organization and destroy everything connected to it. The pattern of surgical strikes must be abandoned and practices such as "knocking on the roof" (warning with non-explosive devices that a building is about to be razed) must end. The warnings to the residents have been given, and now the time has come for guns and not just planes.

With all due respect, reports on the number of attacks or the weight of bombs dropped or the number of targets blown up are not interesting. The only figure of interest right now is the number of terrorists killed in Gaza. Unfortunately, in the tough neighborhood where we live, this is the only deterrent.

Israel has no reason to rush the offensive. The only considerations that should guide it are security and operational matters. There is no need to fear international political pressure and "the legitimacy clock running out of time." As long as 130 Israelis - children and the elderly - are held in Gaza, the international community will be forced to recognize Israel's right to continue fighting.

Beyond that, the IDF must immediately create a "security perimeter" - an area of approximately 300 meters east of the border, along its entire length, and announce that any Palestinian who enters this area risks his life, and accordingly set instructions for opening fire.

In the civil sphere: Israel should see itself freed from any civil-economic consideration. Israel's Gaza District Coordination and Liaison office should be abolished, and a total siege should be imposed on Gaza, with the crossings between Israel and Gaza completely closed. This includes passage of fuel and goods from Kerem Shalom, electricity supply should be reduced and the communication and internet connections in the entire Strip should be disrupted.

How to deal with world reaction to the steps now necessary ?

The world understands the situation very well. The countries of the world do not want to return to the era of ISIS. Hamas has brought them back to it. The monstrous attack provides full justification for unconventional measures on Israel's part. It is wrong to act under a stopwatch or out of fear of the reaction of the international community.

What about the expected impact on Judea and Samaria?

The events have contradictory effects. On the one hand, they raise morale in the Palestinian camp and provide inspiration for more attacks. On the other hand, the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria understand that Israel is currently in great pain and will not show tolerance towards provocations. I believe that a complete closure should also be imposed on the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria. At this time, military efforts should be focused on Gaza, while no risks should be taken regarding terrorist attacks that might be inspired in Judea and Samaria.

Is there a connection between the Hamas attack and the rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia?

I find it hard to believe that moving closer to Saudi Arabia had a real impact. In the eyes of Hamas, this could amount to another possible gain, but not a major consideration.

It is also too early to assess what the consequences of the situation are for normalization with Saudi Arabia, and whether this puts everything in jeopardy.

In any case, I suggest not to see our ambitions regarding Saudi Arabia as a consideration that should restrain our activities in Gaza. Even in Saudi Arabia, the similarities between the barbarism of Hamas and that of ISIS are recognized. Not everyone there will understand Israel's actions, but no one will doubt the justification.

Moreover, in the Kingdom, as in the entire Middle East, those who react strongly to such a criminal attack will be respected. At the end of the day, peace is made with the strong.

Published in Globes, October 11, 2023.

Zionist Strategy for Israel

written by David M. Weinberg | 16.12.2023

On the day after Tisha BeA'v, it would be nice to write about national unity, shared destiny, moderation, and restraint. But I cannot ignore the kasach - the unbridled confrontation, the inflammatory demagoguery, the violent warmongering - that has become standard and acceptable behavior for some of Israel's once and supposed leaders.

There are very specific people responsible for this degradation, with Ehud Barak taking first place in the ugly contest for the most hateful, most extreme, most seditious rabble-rouser of all.

Former prime minister Ehud Barak appears at every anti-government protest rally and in every foreign television studio with preening self-confidence, sky-high arrogance, and the most untamed political language heard in this country in decades. He savages Prime Minister Netanyahu and anybody to the right of him as "dark and dangerous ultra-nationalists who are undermining the foundations of Zionism and Israeli democracy."

He blabbers uncontrollably about Israel becoming a "fascist state" and an "apartheid" country. He even called a recent Israeli Supreme Court ruling that went in Netanyahu's favor "a Weimer Republic-like decision."

This year he has escalated his rhetoric to talk about the "shattering of Israeli democracy," the "darkest days Israel has known," "imminent dictatorship in Israel," and "silencing" by the right wing. (Funny, Barak doesn't seem so silenced.)

In one speech I heard, Barak hurled the epithet "fascist" at Netanyahu three times, "dictator" at Justice Minister Levin four times, and "apartheid" at right-wing West Bank settlement policies another three times. He then accused all Israelis to his political right of wearing Nazi-style "selection eyeglasses" (mishkefei selectzia shel hayamin) - which is a disgusting political slur whether used by an antisemitic non-Jew or a born-again wannabe Israeli leader.

To this, Barak recently has added piercing, scornful characterizations of Netanyahu and his cabinet ministers as “jokes,” “jackasses,” “pissers,” “drivellers,” “simpletons,” and “people sick with autoimmune diseases.”

Barak delivers all this dreadful demagoguery alongside incessant use of the epithet “messianic” in describing policies of the right wing. This, of course, is supremely ironic, since the only messianism that exists in abundance in Ehud Barak’s presence is his own messianic self-assurance.

Ehud Barak’s near-antisemitic language is unacceptable

Whatever you think of the Netanyahu government or its judicial reform proposals, Barak’s wild exaggerations and exceedingly belligerent characterizations are disgusting. His use of near-antisemitic and pseudo-BDS language is unacceptable. His feral ambitions and savage hatreds clearly have propelled him off into the deep end.

WORST OF ALL, by far worst of all, is the lead role that Barak has taken in calling for subversion of the IDF through mass refusal-to-serve by Israeli soldiers and reserve duty officers.

Barak began barking about the need to refuse to serve in the IDF “under dictatorship” at a February Haaretz conference. “When a black flag of extreme illegality flies over an army order, it is not just the right of a soldier to obey that order, it is his obligation,” said Barak. “We are now facing the civilian equivalent of black flag illegality.”

“Our only obligation is to liberal democracy as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. We have no obligatory contract with dictators, and history will judge to purgatory all those who submit to the dictates of dictators.”

Asked whether he wasn’t going too far with his call for mutiny in the military, Barak responded with his characteristic messianic self-possession that “we are the right side of history and we are not afraid of anybody or anything.”

On Channel 12 television on July 6 Barak specifically called upon “air force pilots and front-line commandoes” to warn Netanyahu that if the so-called reasonability restriction legislation was passed, they would “refuse to serve a dictatorship, period.”

Reportedly, the Israel Police have opened an investigation into the possibly treasonous remarks made by Ehud Barak, and by Yair Golan of Meretz, but don't hold your breath waiting for indictments. Prosecuting these people for sedition and concrete damage to the security of the State of Israel would not be politically correct.

It would require Israel's legal elites to admit, which they won't, that Barak's discourse is the true threat to Israeli democracy. It would require them to concede, which they won't, that those screaming the loudest about imminent threats to democracy are the people engaging in tactics that smack of dictatorship and lawlessness. It would force them to draw red lines, which they are unwilling to do, against the growing calls from Barak and his coterie to deny political and civil rights to anybody who thinks and votes differently, like ultra-Orthodox Jews.

THIS IS THE PLACE to remind readers of Ehud Barak's dismal political record. He was resoundingly defeated in the elections of 2001 and 2009, leading the once all-powerful Labor Party to a nadir. His term as prime minister was blessedly the shortest term of any Israeli prime minister. He was responsible for the helter-skelter retreat from Lebanon, which led to the rise of Hezbollah. His disastrous diplomatic policies led directly to the second intifada.

The last point is especially important. Barak betrayed the trust Israelis had given him, by agreeing at the July 2000 Camp David summit to divide Jerusalem and give away the Temple Mount. This was a radical diplomatic departure from the platform on which he had campaigned and which he had reaffirmed publicly just two months earlier. (So much for "democratic" behavior...)

This reckless gambit, for which Barak had no public mandate, terribly weakened Israel's political hold on Jerusalem. It heedlessly broke an important and rightful Israeli diplomatic taboo about maintaining Jerusalem united under Israeli sovereignty.

This transgression undermined a core Jewish claim to legitimacy in Zion, which at source is rooted in the holiest place on earth to Jews - Jerusalem's Temple Mount. It appreciably enfeebled Israel's diplomatic fortitude. It drove Palestinian expectations sky-high and became the baseline for international demands that the city be split into two capitals. It later gave cover to other politicians on the Left

(like Ehud Olmert and Tzipi Livni) to go astray too.

It also promptly led to Yasser Arafat's so-called second intifada, the most murderous spree of Palestinian terrorism in Israel's history.

Arafat incorrectly assumed that all Israelis would be as supine as Barak; that several dozen bus-bombers would push Israelis over the edge and bring about capitulation in Jerusalem and across Judea and Samaria.

And sure enough, Barak almost gave away the store at the January 2001 Taba summit, after his government had fallen and despite the raging intifada. For the first time, an Israeli prime minister imprudently accepted the 1967 lines (and 97% of Judea and Samaria) as the basis for a Palestinian state. Fortunately, Barak was swiftly kicked out of office, and Israelis proved far more resilient and loyal to their principles than either Barak or Arafat imagined.

Barak has never expressed remorse for his flagrant offenses: for the near plundering of Jerusalem, and for his near subversion of democracy. God only imagines to what insane ends of surrender Barak might go if he were to regain the reins of power.

- Published for the first time in The Jerusalem Post

500 days of war in Ukraine

written by Meir Ben Shabbat | 16.12.2023

Some 500 days have passed since armored columns shook the ground of Ukraine, but there is no end in sight for the war. The outbreak of hostilities ended the Pax Europaea that had reigned supreme since World War II, marking a historic milestone in the new world order. It is hard to tell if we are past the peak, but the results of this conflict will determine the global balance of power and impact the international norms, as well as shape our world for the next several decades.

Five days before the war, the annual Munich Security Conference took place in Germany. With the war drums already heard in the background, Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy pleaded with NATO and Western leaders, saying, "What are you waiting for? Has our world completely forgotten the mistakes of the 20th century? I just want to make sure you and I read the same books. How did we get to the biggest security crisis since the Cold War?"

In what was the speech of his life, the Ukrainian leader called on the world to act immediately so that Russia's plot would be foiled. "Don't wait for the bombs; when they fall we will no longer need your sanctions," he warned, but to no avail. All those who believed that bloody wars can no longer happen in the 21st - or only in far-flung areas of the world - century got a rude awakening by reality. "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun," the Book of Ecclesiastes says.

Weakness invites evil. This is the first lesson from this war. While the methods of war keep changing due to technological advances and other developments, war's essence remains. Its human component continues to be the most important factor. Margaret Atwood once wrote: "Wars happen because the ones who start them think they can win."

It's hard to assess what impact the US actions in Afghanistan and the Middle East had on what has unfolded in Europe. At the very least, we can say that they were not a restraining factor in Russia's overall calculus. The lessons of the war in Ukraine highlight the need to resolve the Iranian issue. Iran's arrogance and its self-confidence under the current US and European policies have demonstrated the West's eroding stature. This is clear in Tehran's brazen conduct on the nuclear issue and its destabilizing actions in the form of arming militias and other proxies, as well as expanding and enhancing its export and production of UAVs and missiles. Iran is not just involved in the war in Ukraine but also occupies a significant role in the re-establishment of an anti-West and anti-US axis. It has lent its support for Russia's war effort and the two have deepened their cooperation, while Iran has simultaneously come close to China, whose leader has recently said that it supports Iran's rights on the nuclear issue.

The regime in Tehran has picked up the West's weakness and is squeezing everything it can from it to its benefit. Iran is threatening the stability and peace of the entire world; there is no need for any additional proof.

The West's leaders, chiefly the US, now have an opportunity to implement the

lessons of the war in Ukraine. They must look at what is going on in Europe and make a decision to change their posture toward Iran. They must assume that the current provocations of the regime will pale in comparison to what it would allow itself to do if it were to have a nuclear arsenal.

If history is any guide, we know that only a credible military threat will stop Iran's nuclear program. Such a threat from the US will not drag Washington into the war it seeks to avoid because the regime in Tehran knows full well what the balance of power is and the fate of other regional leaders who tried to use their force vis-a-vis the US. In fact, if the US fails to act forcefully against Iran, this will greatly increase the likelihood of a regional war that Washington can prevent.

The future of the world order is on the line. The US knows this, as do the Europeans. Let's hope that they marshal enough courage and leadership to make the right decisions.

- Published for the first time in Israel Hayom