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## Israel must look northward and resist taking Iran's bait

BY SETH CROPEY AND HARRY HALEM, OPINION CONTRIBUTORS - 10/14/23 10:00 AM ET

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After Hamas's barbaric attack on Israel, a massive attack of Gaza seems like the obvious response. But Israeli and American policymakers must first carefully consider the nature of the impending conflict and recognize its strategic reality.

Iran stands behind the coming war, making Iran's most effective proxy, Hezbollah, the most strategically, although not politically, consequential first target. In turn, the U.S. must be prepared for a long war in which Israel rolls back Iranian power, not another week-long counter-terrorist campaign.

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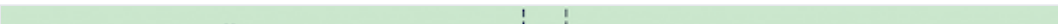
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At first glance, Hamas's attack seems a particularly brutal but typical instance of Palestinian terror. On closer inspection, however, the full scope of Iranian ambition and of the current crisis becomes apparent.

The Axis of Resistance, Iran's Middle Eastern proxy network, is powerful but unsustainable in the long-term. Not only must Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps facilitate operations for terrorist partners, but it must also sustain the economy of each Axis member. This is creating a particularly heavy load in Syria and Lebanon, both of which need enormous amounts of almost-free energy.

Turkish pressure in Syria threatens Iran's corridor to the Levantine Basin in the long-term, while Turkish ally Azerbaijan's victory over Russian-aligned Armenia portends a more assertive Ankara to Iran's north. Moreover, the Axis of Resistance is brittle. Iraq's Sadrists have a persistent nationalist streak. Assad will seek other partners to reduce Iran's leverage. The collapse of Lebanon will derail Hezbollah.



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Iran therefore must take advantage of the strategic opportunity it now faces.

Hamas's attack was the opening move of a broader campaign designed, in Iran's view, to shatter Israel. Colored by antisemitic tropes — including the conviction that most Israelis are actually Eastern Europeans who moved to the country only recently — Iran saw Israel's domestic crises and American weakness as unimpeachable evidence of Jerusalem's vulnerability. The time is now, in Iran's eyes, to liberate al-Aqsa and break the Zionist entity.

But Iran cannot invade Israel. Nor can its proxies, despite Hamas' ability to occupy towns around Gaza last weekend, and Hezbollah's large commando force designed for short raids. Nor can Iran physically flatten Israel. But it can wear Israel down in a war of attrition.

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series of brutal wars that overstretch its military capabilities.

Antisemitism again permeates this analysis. Israeli and American leaders are, in Iran's eyes, identical. Thus, Israel should, when baited, react as the U.S. did to 9/11 and rush headlong into a protracted ground war. Hamas's violence was therefore precisely calculated to provoke an invasion of Gaza — if not from blind rage, then from immense domestic pressure for revenge.

A Gaza operation would be immensely costly for the IDF. It would require somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 men, likely the majority of them active-duty soldiers — that is, the most effective maneuver forces of the IDF as it currently stands. It would also be a bloodbath. Urban operations require extensive planning and reconnaissance to map enemy strongpoints and mitigate casualties in ferocious close-combat. They are also long-term and manpower- and materiel-intensive, at least when they have more than limited objectives.

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Concurrently, the West Bank would likely erupt, with violence spreading to Israeli Arab communities as it did in 2021, tying down mobilized Israeli forces even further. Finally, Hezbollah can then unleash its rocket arsenal upon Israel, when the best IDF units are already in combat, and saturate Israeli critical infrastructure and military sites.

The results of a properly sequenced operation by Iran could be catastrophic. Israel may well “win” the war on the ground, but only after six months to a year of combat, and at a cost of thousands of soldiers — and tens of thousands of civilians. Damage to Israeli

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years.

As a consequence, Israel will require economic aid for the first time in two decades. The international community, meanwhile, will be fed footage of supposed Israeli brutality, undermining support from Europe in particular. All of this is meant to shatter the political stability of the Israeli state and lead to a mass exodus, after which Israel collapses, all by its 80th birthday.

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This would be a moral calamity for the West. It would also be a strategic disaster for the U.S. Israel is fundamental to American grand strategy. Since the fall of the Shah in 1979, the U.S. has always sought a second pillar for its Middle East policy, but never found it. The Gulf Arab states are too unreliable, and Turkey too enmeshed in NATO. U.S. forces cannot solve the problem themselves. Without a militarily capable, strategically assertive Israel, the entire system falls apart.

The U.S. would be forced either to occupy the region itself, ruling the Levant through proxies supported by significant airpower and land assets, or see the economic connection point between Europe and Asia fall into hostile hands. In turn, an Iran that destroys Israel and ejects America from the Middle East would undoubtedly attract loyalty from all parts of the Ummah, making it into global power.

Israel can still win this war, but only if it deals with the larger threat first.

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Hamas can, for now, be managed. Israeli air assets can destroy the majority of Hamas's longer-range rockets, limiting its ability to stress Iron Dome, while giving Israeli intelligence time to map the terrain in Gaza. Meanwhile, Israel can shift its best offensive ground and air forces north and conduct an interdiction effort in Lebanon, likely followed by a ground campaign to compress Hezbollah's launch points for its missiles, and ultimately destroy Hezbollah and Iranian forward-deployed combat power.

With a coalition cabinet taking office, the political pressure on Benjamin Netanyahu to rush headlong into Gaza will be reduced. This enables an actual appraisal of the strategic situation and, ideally, a first-strike against the bigger threat in the north.

There is already some evidence that Israel understands this. It has exchanged artillery fire across the Lebanese border and, as of Thursday, incapacitated Damascus and Aleppo airports to prevent aerial resupply. An interdiction campaign in Syria would signal that Israel has declined Iran's Gaza bait.

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short timeline to end this war. As in Ukraine, it must be in it for the long haul. Premature pressure to terminate the conflict will only encourage Iranian pressure and, with it, raise the risk of Israeli collapse and American strategic calamity.

*Seth Cropsey is the founder and president of Yorktown Institute. He served as a naval officer and as deputy Undersecretary of the Navy and is the author of Mayday and Seablindness. Harry Halem is a Senior Fellow at Yorktown Institute.*

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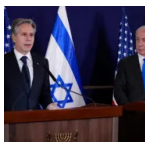
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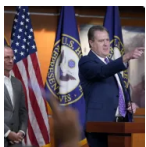
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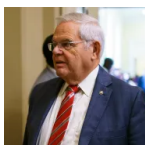
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