Long-Term Implications of the Israel-Hamas War

Eliot A. Cohen
Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy
For Israel, in the years ahead, every day will be October 8 but with the fear that it is October 6. Isreal’s sense of security after decades of limited conflict with its neighbors has been shattered. 

Earthquakes have aftershocks,” a veteran Israeli intelligence officer told a CSIS delegation on a recent visit to that country, “and sometimes the aftershocks are more important than the earthquake.” He spoke wisely.

For Israel, this was a transformative event, every bit as much as the Six-Day War in 1967 or the 1973 Yom Kippur War. On October 7, 2023, Israel suffered an attack of unparalleled barbarity as thousands of Hamas fighters, led by the elite Nukhba forces and followed by the less disciplined Qassam Brigades and finally mobs of Gazans, attacked at over two dozen points along the frontier. During the initial fighting, 1,200 Israelis, 900 of them civilians, including children and invalids, were slaughtered; men and women were raped and mutilated; and hundreds were taken hostage.

For Israel, in the years ahead, every day will be October 8 but with the fear that it is October 6. Israel’s sense of security after decades of limited conflict with its neighbors has been shattered. The existential question is on the table because Israel soon entered a war on multiple fronts including on its northern border, as Hezbollah joined in the fight in a limited way; on the West Bank; and even further afield.

Israel will now no longer trust in its ability to detect and preempt threats; instead it will seek to prevent them. Israeli political and military leaders will be much more ready than in the past to initiate conflict if they think that by doing so they can reduce the possibility of another day like that one, or worse. It will arm itself more intensively and wage war with a kind of disciplined aggression it has not shown in some time. It will not crumble or weaken because it has shown itself to be a resilient society; it is wounded, enraged, and determined.

One of the most interesting features of this war has been the muted public reactions of many governments around the world, even in the face of protests and demonstrations in the streets. Israel’s Arab partners, including Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, quietly share their
fears and hatred of Hamas, itself an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood. They will not openly support Israel’s actions, though they will do so quietly. The global war against extreme versions of Islamism never really ended, but it has now come back and with a vengeance. Moderate Muslim states are also going to find themselves on the front line.

For Iran, the war has been a huge, if perilous, success. Its strategy of building a ring of enemies around Israel—to include Hamas (which it helped arm and train), Hezbollah in Lebanon (far more heavily equipped than Hamas), various Shiite militias in Syria that can attack Israel on the Golan Heights, and the Houthis in Yemen—seems to be working. The purpose may not be to destroy Israel in one blow but rather to weaken it in a series of wars, as Iran itself is protected by the nuclear deterrent it seeks to acquire.

There is, however, considerable danger of overreach. The Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping invite a U.S.-led response. Whether through tit-for-tat escalation or because of a decision to make a larger point, the day may well come when the United States, with or without its allies, attacks not only the Houthis but their Iranian advisers and logistics as well. Neighbors probably fear Iran more than ever and will be willing to be quiet partners in counterstrikes against it.

The possibility, therefore, exists for a substantial regional war in the near future. It could come about because of an Israeli preventive war against Hezbollah or merely escalation of the fighting along the current border. It might begin in an attempt by Hezbollah to emulate Hamas with a similar strategy of building up its forces along the Israeli frontier and striking suddenly. Or it could come about through an escalation of U.S. strikes on Iranian targets in Yemen and retaliation by Iran against Persian Gulf shipping, creating a broader conflict.

Finally, the alignment of states on the Israel-Hamas war is revealing. Russia and China are more or less openly supporting Hamas and Iran; the United States and its allies are supporting Israel. It is the same set of opposing coalitions as in the Russia-Ukraine war and, with some adjustments, the increasing tensions in the South China Sea.

The upshot is that when Hamas terrorists stormed across the fence dividing them from Israel and began the slaughter of civilians, they accelerated the division of the world into opposing blocs. They brought to the fore the challenges posed to liberal democracies in confronting enemies who openly embrace extreme brutality directed against civilians, as Russia has in Ukraine. This war is not entirely separable from other conflicts in which the United States is an interested and committed party, and it may turn out to be a trigger for other, even more devastating conflicts in the Levant, the Persian Gulf, and beyond.

To see endnotes and all contributions in the 2024 Global Forecast, please [click here](#).