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WHAT DOES THE MIDDLE EAST CRISIS REVEALS ABOUT THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER?

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Abstract: United States (and to a lesser extent the European Union) and China will undoubtedly have a role to play in the war between Israel and Hamas. Also, the other regional powers, such as Russia, Türkiye, Iran or Saudi Arabia, will be part either of a diplomatic resolution, or of a conflict of attrition. Whether any of these powers will be able to resolve or contain that conflict is far less certain. The notion that great-power (or regional powers) competition defines geopolitics has comeback into vogue after it fell into obscurity at the close of the Cold War. Unspoken Cold-War-era assumptions, however, still shadow many contemporary claims about the nature of this competition. Great powers, analysts assume, will marshal immense resources to shape the international order. What they do will shape global affairs. Using their financial and military might for proxy wars, they will remain intensely focused on each other. Wherever one acts, the others will respond in kind. Drawing from structural realism and constructivism, as theoretical bechmarks, this paper will introduce the reader in the regional and international consequences of Hamas's terrorist attack on Israel and will put into discussion the way this unfortunate event might affect the dynamics of the new Global Order.

Key words: Middle East; New World Order; Great Powers; foreign policy; proxy wars; diplomacy.

1.Context

At approximately 06:30 local time October 7, 2023, the Gaza-based Hamas militant group launched a surprise land, air, and sea attack against Israel. The militant group fired thousands of rockets against Israeli cities, reaching as far away as Tel Aviv. Hamas has called the operation "Al-Aqsa Flood" [1]. It is the largest and most coordinated attack against Israel since its inception. It coincided with the Jewish religious holiday Simchat Torah and, most significantly, occurred 50 years and a day after the beginning of the 1973 Yom Kippour War. The attack resulted in more than 1,200 Israeli dead, including 220 soldiers, and more than 3,000 injured. Israel's response has also killed about 15.000 people in Gaza at the time when this article was written [2].

The events currently unfolding are on a scale far larger and of greater significance than that of the Yom Kippour War; this is Israel's 9/11 and Pearl Harbor combined [3]. External advice in the planning and preparation phase of the planned attack, most likely from Iran or its more influential proxy forces such as Hezbollah, may have been provided. The attack has shocked Israeli society and will undoubtedly leave a mark on it for generations. The events represent the most severe failure of intelligence in Israeli history, which will have long-lasting effects. For the Isarelian government this event meant the loss of legitimacy in front of its own population, because the security, beyond the military and technical elements, represents a state of mind or both, a feeling and a reality.

While Israel has been no stranger to conflict since its inception in 1948, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared to the nation in a televised speech that, "We are at war"[4]. Such words are significant and will echo in the hallways of history. Therefore, this war is unprecedented, and Israel will likely use all the capabilities at its disposal. This is a moral dilemma for Israel, as every citizen's life is highly valued, but to many Israelis the survival of the *State of Israel* is what is at stake.



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This conflict can be analyzed from multiple perspectives — military, sociological, humanitarian, diplomatic — but this essay proposes a look at how this conflict will contribute to the remodeling of the international system and on the consequences, it could have at regional and global level. Moreover, as this war is keep going, deterioration at the level governance and security is likely be deepened by the lack of a diplomatic and politic horizon or any possible future peace process.

The Middle East is one of the most volatile and violent subsystems of the international system as it emerged at the end of World War II. The postwar history of this region was punctuated by an unusually high number of interstate wars. In approaching the origins of wars, as in the case of any other class of international events, the level of analysis is a mandatory component of the methodology. The *first level* of analysis focuses on the international system and its impact on the behavior of states and the *second* focuses on domestic influences on states' behavior toward other states

The analytical framework adapted to the particular circumstances of the Middle East identifies three central factors that contribute to the outbreak of regional wars: the Arab-Israeli conflict, inter-Arab relations and the involvement of the Great Powers in the Middle East.

As Richard Haass put it, since 1990, in his book *Conflicts Unending. The United Stated and Regional Disputes*, conflict is the norm for international affairs [5]. Ambition, ideology, greed, security, insecurity, miscalculation, accident, ignorance, hatred-these and other explanations of human behavior account for the prevalence of tension and at times war between nation-states. Eliminating the sources of conflict is rarely a realistic possibility; instead, any would-be peacemakers must often content themselves with managing the tensions so that situations do not deteriorate. Yet if conflict is the norm, it is no less true that states and those who rule them have demonstrated an ability to limit the intensity of their conflicts. Between or among rivals, not every disagreement leads to war; just as important, not every war leads to complete submission or annihilation of one of the participants [6].

Some disputes simply lack a potential resolution that would benefit both parties. They are allor-nothing disputes, or, to use the term of contemporary political science, zero-sum games, in that what one party would achieve the other would sacrifice; the latter participant normally has little or no reason to reach agreement. In other situations, where apparently reasonable compromises can be formulated, political leaders are often unwilling or unable to risk the appearance of settling for half a loaf. The best that can reasonably be expected of diplomats in these cases is that they bring about some modest degree of progress or, failing that, at least keep things from getting worse. At the heart of management is an appreciation of the limits of foreign policy and the risks inherent in ignoring them [7].

The war between Israel and Palestinians is such a conflict. An unending one. An endless war that, in the last eight decades, has been carried in various forms and actors. Either in the form of Arab-Israeli warrior, or in the form of terrorist attacks of various emerging groups in the Gaza or West Bank strip. The resolutions of the United Nations that tried to stabilize the region and impose the compliance with the borders established in 1947, were violated one after another.

In this new confrontation, Israel vs. Hamas, rather than a "day after" [8], what seems more likely is a shift from intensive to low-level combat that has no clear resolution. There will be efforts to devise arrangements, to be sure. But the most notable diplomatic fallout from the fighting might be that diplomacy becomes even more difficult. The coordination necessary to make any arrangements for governance functions may be extremely difficult to achieve [9].

And changes within each actor are likely to complicate the problems further and will affect the short and medium -term evolution, both at regional and global levels.



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2.Middle East and the New Global Order

Vacuums of power are proliferating. In Africa, the Balkans, the Middle East, and the South Caucasus, old conflicts, some of which had been dormant, are rekindling into new crises. Middle powers and local actors are exerting themselves more and more boldly. Very often, the great powers end up looking on helplessly.

In the analyzed case there are three types of actors: (1) those facing strategic, political and diplomatic dilemmas – the United States and European Union, (2) hedging middle powers – India, the Gulf States, Iran and Türkiye and, (3) possible winners – Russia and China.

United States (also to a lesser extent the European Union) and China will undoubtedly have a role to play in the war between Israel and Hamas. Also, the other regional powers, such as Russia, Türkiye, Iran or Saudi Arabia, will be part either of a diplomatic resolution, or of a conflict of attrition. Whether any of these powers will be able to resolve or contain that conflict is far less certain. The notion that great-power (or regional powers) competition defines geopolitics has comeback into vogue after it fell into obscurity at the close of the Cold War. Unspoken Cold-Warera assumptions, however, still shadow many contemporary claims about the nature of this competition. Great powers will marshal immense resources to shape the international order. What they do will shape global affairs. Using their financial and military might for proxy wars, they will remain intensely focused on each other [10].

In the coming months, the many parties affected by the Israel-Hamas war will look to the great powers for leadership. But they are likely to find these four great powers inadequate to the crisis. Russia depends on Iran for military aid. The United States will likely lend signicant support to Israel but will have a hard time bringing the Palestinians to the table. China may generously offer platitudes about peace but will try to avoid any kind of direct involvement, and Europe will find itself largely without leverage. If this ambivalent scenario unfolds, it will be a microcosm of the twenty-first-century international order [11].

Much like the war in Ukraine, the conflict between Israel and Hamas is splitting global superpowers into two competing camps: the U.S. and its allies versus China and Russia. But the conflict has also revealed some unexpected shifts in alliances from countries that typically support Palestinians [12].

India — a longtime Palestine supporter — has announced that it strongly backs Israel in its conflict with Hamas. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's statement of solidarity offers a "signal to the United States about its willingness to support a critical U.S. ally" [13]. New Delhi only established diplomatic ties with Israel in 1992 and moved quickly to secure closer ties with the country following Modi's election in 2014. Days after Modi's initial response to the Hamas attack, the country's external affairs ministry reiterated India's long-held position calling for an independent Palestine state. But given Modi's foreign policy guided by "ruthless pragmatism," the leader's "bromance" with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and the expanding scope of Indo-Israeli relations, it seems "highly unlikely that India will adopt a more nuanced position on the Israel-Gaza war without pressure from Arab states" [14].

The growing casualties, particularly among Gazans, is proving a boon for the U.S.'s main geopolitical rivals and is tilting the power balance in favor of Russia, China, and Iran. The U.S. and European countries backing Israel are only mildly criticizing Israeli actions in Gaza leaving room for authoritarian leaders to fill the power vacuum. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for instance, relishes the fact that the Middle Eastern conflict has drawn attention away from the Ukraine war and he has a huge interest in prolonging the conflict in Israel as long as possible [15].

In avoiding direct criticism of Hamas and criticizing Israel's retaliation as going "beyond the scope of self defense" [16] China is attempting to remain neutral and has already been setting itself



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up to mediate in the Israel-Palestine conflict earlier this year, and its renewed support for Palestine is an attempt to "bolster its standing in the Arab world versus the United States." What's ironic is that China and Israel have more in common given that they are both "high-tech security states" which oppress a "Muslim population seen as a security threat" [17].

As for Türkiye, the position of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who accused Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of war crimes, is already known. Solidarity with the Palestinians has been a longstanding principle in his foreign policy—one that contributed to a decade-long rift with Israel and its regional friends after Israeli commandos killed Turkish citizens on the blockade-running ship Mavi Marmara in 2010. Erdoğan's electorate—especially his electoral base—see Israel's military response to the October 7 Hamas terror attacks in southern Israel as disproportionate. Yet he has also staked a reset in regional and Western relations on reconciliation with Israel and is unwilling to block that process altogether [18].

Based on his October 25 remarks, it seems that President Erdoğan has concluded that an approach rooted in nuance and balance is not working. In a scathing speech before his party (Justice and Development Party or AKP) parliamentary group, Erdoğan characterized Hamas as a national liberation movement rather than a terror organization. He accused Israel of acting like a gang rather than a state and declared the cancellation of a carefully prepared, long-awaited trip to Israel that was to occur later this year. Somewhat quixotically, Erdoğan also expressed hopes that his country might play a guarantor role of some sort and that the war would not become a religious one [19]. Yet Hamas, unlike Fatah or other Palestinian groups, casts its mission in explicitly religious terms and conducts attacks specifically targeting civilians. There is a fundamental contradiction between Erdogan's goal of a stable post-war arrangement in Gaza and the persistence of Hamas's rule there, given the group's explicit goal of destroying Israel.

However, Erdoğan is hardly alone in viewing Hamas as something more complex than a terror group and in considering Israel's approach to Gaza—isolation and the current campaign of airstrikes – as inhumane and unsustainable. In fact, these opinions have gained increasing traction across the Middle East. The Turkish president's remarks, therefore, are unlikely to prompt a new crisis regionally. For instance, reconciliation with the Gulf states and Egypt is unlikely to be affected [20].

All these events affect, at least in the short term, the American strategy toward China, the so called the Asian Pivot. The U.S. finds itself navigating the troubled waters of China's ascendance and countering Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After spending \$8 trillion in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and the "war on terror" [21] the US has now spent some \$75 billion to help Ukraine counter Russian aggression, with promises of additional support. Much of the Middle East, which has sought to remain neutral on Ukraine, is biding its time and looking to maximize the benefits that a global realignment could have for middle powers [22].

Before October 7, 2023, it seemed as if the United States' vision for the Middle East was finally coming to fruition. Washington had arrived at an implicit understanding with Tehran about its nuclear program, in which the Islamic Republic of Iran effectively paused further development in exchange for limited financial relief [23]. The United States was working on a defense pact with Saudi Arabia, which would in turn lead the kingdom to normalize its relations with Israel. And Washington had announced plans for an ambitious trade corridor connecting India to Europe through the Middle East to offset China's rising influence in the region [24]. Then Hamas attacked Israel, throwing the region into turmoil and upending the United States' vision. These new developments created a vacuum that Gulf States (Arabs and Iranians), other regional powers (Russia, Iran, India) and the emerging new superpower (China) will undoubtedly try to fill.



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The deepening distrust of the U.S., the country's lack of ability to lead the region to stability, and the lack of any common vision to rally around are driving different states to pursue their own short-term interests, increasingly guided by pressure from the streets and fears of a wider war. These divergent interests are prolonging the region's crisis and increasing the chance of unintended escalation [24]. To avoid the worst, the American administration will have to revisit its core assumptions, renew its commitment to the Middle East, and lay out a fresh vision for the region.

3. The Five Global Risks of the Israeli-Hamas War

The consequences of the new war in the Middle East are already beginning to make their effects felt, both at regional and global levels. The international threats are economic disruption, military vulnerabilities, political realignment of the emerging powers and of the non-aligned state actors, new strategic challenges, and the shifting nature of warfare due to belligerent non-state actors [25].

Economic disruption. In an alarming report, the World Bank warned on October 30, 2023, that the conflict between Israel and Gaza could trigger a global economic "shock," including oil prices soaring up to \$150 a barrel and millions going hungry due to higher food prices. It could mirror the crisis during the 1973 war, when Arab members of OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries), led by Saudi Arabia, imposed an embargo on oil sales to the U.S. in retaliation for Washington's decision to re-supply the Israeli military.

The 1973 oil embargo "contributed to an upward spiral in oil prices with global implications," according to the official State Department history of the crisis. "The price of oil per barrel first doubled, then quadrupled, imposing skyrocketing costs on consumers and structural challenges to the stability of whole national economies." It also "acutely strained" the U.S. economy, which had grown increasingly dependent on foreign oil [26].

Also, this report outlines the implications that might occure after a half century from now, as those from the 1970's oil crisis affected the global economy for couple of decades. If the conflict were to escalate, the global economy would face a dual energy shock for the first time in decades – not just from the war in Ukraine but also from the Middle East, warned Indermit Gill, the World Bank's chief economist and senior vice president for development economics.

Military vulnerability. The U.S. faces the already tangible danger of being sucked into a wider military conflict—a consistent danger in warzones – as an unintended consequence of its deployment in the Middle East. The Pentagon deployed two carrier strike groups with warships that carry more than 150 warplanes as well as abundant missiles. It has also prepped 2.000 troops to go to the world's most consistently volatile region. The goals are to prevent escalation that draws in other parties or nations and to provide force protection for its own troops [27].

For all the muscle flexed, however, US forces also create targets for attacks. As of October 30, the Pentagon reported 23 attacks by Iranian proxies that fired drones and rockets on US forces since October 17-14 attacks on sites in Iraq, where 2.500 US forces are deployed, and nine in Syria, where some 900 US forces are based. The Americans are stationed in multiple places, fairly thinly spread out, as part of the ongoing campaign against ISIS – a separate war. Most of the attacks failed to reach their target, according to Pentagon reports, but 21 Americans have suffered injuries from those that did.

The potential dangers for the U.S. forces harken back to a military catastrophe in 1982, when Washington deployed hundreds of Marines as peacekeepers to separate Israel and the Palestinians in Lebanon after Israel's invasion. Whatever the policy intentions, the peacekeepers ended up getting sucked into Lebanon's civil war a year later – and becoming a target of the then nascent embryo of Hezbollah. On October 23, 1983, a suicide driver drove into the four-story Marine barracks at dawn,



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as the men slept, and killed 241 naval personnel. It was the largest loss of U.S. military life in a single incident since Iwo Jima. It was then the largest non-nuclear explosion since World War II. Since then, anti-American militias have surged in numbers and military capabilities. Hezbollah is today the most heavily armed non-state actor in the world. It has a far larger arsenal than Hamas and is a far greater danger to Israel and its American allies.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken acknowledged the dangers: "We are concerned at the possibility of Iranian proxies escalating their attacks against our own personnel, our own people. We're taking every measure to make sure that we can defend them and, if necessary, respond decisively. Not at all what we're looking for, not at all what we want, but we'll be prepared if that's what they choose to do" [28].

Political realignment. In a world already tensely polarized, the war has spilled over to distant continents, faraway capitals, and divided college campuses. It has fomented ugly divisions not simply described as pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. Antisemitism, including death threats to Jewish groups and organizations in the United States, is on the rise in terrible ways. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands have turned out in pro-Palestinian demonstrations from London to Kuala Lumpur.

On October 31, 2023, several protestors repeatedly disrupted the Congressional testimony of Secretary of State Antony Blinken on U.S. national security issues. "No to the siege of Gaza", one woman, waving a sign, shouted before security ejected her. "Ceasefire now." A crowd in the congressional gallery raised bloodied hands, with *Gaza* written in black paint on their forearms. After several individuals with their own signs were removed, the crowd burst into chants of *Ceasefire now!* They, too, were physically ejected. The war has even split NATO allies, with the United States condemning the brutal Hamas atrocities, while Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan labeled Israel an occupying power and denied that Hamas was a terrorist group [29].

The idea that diplomacy could consolidate a different Middle East—through the Abraham Accords and a new connectedness between Israel and longstanding Arab adversaries—now faces huge hurdles, at minimum, amidst the rival public furies. Regional leaders who have engaged with Israel face pressure to back off, or more. The schism in views globally may not end with a cessation of fighting [30].

New strategic challenges. One of the "winners" – which is, at best, a dubious idea when applied to the current complex Middle East conflagration – is China. For almost two years, the United States has been consumed with aiding and arming Ukraine. Now it faces similar commitments to Israel. Meanwhile, Russia is expending its military resources in the draining war in Ukraine. China faces no similar strategic challenges. It is unimpeded in building up its military, expanding its influence far beyond Asia, and channeling its financial resources and diplomatic leverage into a long-term agenda.

In the wider scramble for global influence in the 21st century, China has been doing a deep dive into the so-called Global South of developing nations. "Many Global South nations are sympathetic to Palestine, and the war is therefore an issue China can use to mobilize support for its leadership of developing countries," Ahmed Aboudouh, wrote on October 25, 2023 [30]. Beijing's long-term objective is to "degrade" Washington's global standing by capitalizing on sympathy for Palestinians worldwide. "This in turn helps win backing for Chinese positions on core issues like Xinjiang and Taiwan – and for president Xi Jinping's vision of global governance" [31].

Belligernat non-state actors. The war in Gaza reflects the challenges of non-state actors—the militias that are not nearly as well armed, or well trained, or well financed as nations with formal armies, navies and air forces. Between 1948 and 1973, Israel fought four conventional wars with neighboring states. But for the past 50 years, all of its wars have been with militias – the PLO (The



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Palestine Liberation Organization), then twice with Hezbollah in Lebanon and multiple confrontations with Hamas. In many ways, they have been harder to fight [32].

The U.S. faced the same painful challenges twice in Iraq, from 2003 to 2011 and again from 2014 to 2017, and in Afghanistan during its longest war from 2001 to 2021. The ragtag Taliban had no navy or air force, yet it forced out the world's mightiest military. In Israel, another militia shocked the best-armed state in the Middle East, which may in turn stir other non-state actors. The balance of power between conventional and unconventional – or big armies and small ones – is no longer necessarily a calculable algorithm based on the number of arms and men [33].

The war has already had global impact in less than a month since Hamas burst across Israel's security wall in more than 20 places. The longer the war in Gaza plays out, the greater the potential for wider consequences well beyond the Israeli or Palestinian borders [34].

4. Conclusion

For now, radicalism has triumphed and it looks that the zero-sum logic rules. On the one hand, images of Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad members breaking through the border fence, infiltrating military bases in Israel, capturing and destroying tanks, have drawn the admiration of many on social media and the Arab street. The satisfaction of humiliating the Israeli military and exposing its vulnerability has revived the idea that Palestinians can only be freed by fighting.

Some of the hardest lessons of the October 7 attack were the false sense of stability in the Middle East and the diplomatic failure that could have resolved the Palestinian cause. Just a few weeks ago, U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan confidently declared: "The Middle East region is more peaceful today than it has been in two decades." Should the apocalyptic scenario of a regional confrontation happen, it will mean geopolitical and humanitarian disasters for the Middle East and beyond. The euphoria of a blitzkrieg and the destruction of the Gaza Strip will almost certainly radicalize new generations in the region and the West. This dynamic is an almost unexpected boon for terrorist groups like ISIS, Al Qaeda or other emerging groups advocating violent extremism.

Globally, a new old war front has reopened and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's religious diplomatic tour is primarily aimed at containing it in the Gaza Strip, exclusively against Hamas terrorists. Hezbollah's involvement in this war will depend on the group's sponsor, Iran. But Tehran is likely to retain Hezbollah's considerable missile power as a backup plan in the event of an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. It also remains to be seen whether and to what extent Palestinian militants in the West Bank will get involved, as they could open a third front against Israel.

President Joe Biden has already pledged unconditional and unlimited support for Israel, so there is no doubt that the country will eventually overcome these challenges. It remains to be seen how he will handle the post factum situation and what the international solution will be for the Palestinians. Even if it now seems like another diplomatic utopia, *de facto* and *de jure*, the two-state solution may be the only viable way to ease tensions in the Middle East region. As a new state would consume all negative energies, both historical and born, as a result of the loss suffered by almost every family of Palestinians. A new state would rather require adversities and internal, political and ideological struggles, and all this energy would be channeled for this purpose and not to attack the Israel or of the reconstruction of a terrorist organization.



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