



“ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR: THE IRANIAN FACTOR”



SUMMARY OF A ‘MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE’ WEBINAR



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OVERVIEW

In a webinar organized by the Washington based Middle East Institute (MEI) and moderated by Alex Vatanka, Senior Fellow and Director of its Iran Program at MEI, a number of reputable and informed academics provided a brief in-depth analysis of the contours of Iranian involvement (*the ‘Iranian Factor’*) in the ongoing war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.



While Iran, in concert with its own created ‘Axis of Resistance’, has diligently and consistently been committed to supporting Hamas in all its conflicts against Israel, its overall policies in this regard have been shaped by a series of important general considerations that could potentially escalate well beyond the contours of the current war by involving a number of other parties including the United States in a wider and much more dangerous

regional conflict.

Given these circumstances, the discussion that took place were conducted in an atmosphere where the participating speakers were all fully cognizant of such underlying key factors as:

- Iran and its Quds Force may not be in full control of proxy forces who may be causing significant and potentially unexpected strategic difficulties for Iran.

- Therefore, continued escalation by proxy elements such as the Houthis or others, may drag the region into an all-out war that could potentially reach Iran as well.
- The fact that while the ongoing war may on the one hand have diminished the chances of a nuclear agreement between Iran and the US at this time, it may on the other hand especially in the aftermath of current war, provide Iran with a new opportunity for dialogue as part of a much-expected broader regional conversation that is likely to come about..

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS MADE BY THE SPEAKERS



1. **NASSER HADIAN** (*Professor of Political Science, University of Tehran*)
 - The title of the webinar, in view of the fact that history in this regard did not begin (or end) on 7 October, is misleading in that this is not a war between Israel and Hamas but a war that is between Israel and Palestine.
 - However, no one in Iran was so naive as to be surprised by the level of support the US has provided to Israel. What has surprised the entire world might perhaps in light of world public opinion and the recent vote at the UN, be because of the way things have panned out, especially since no one expected the US not to call for or support a cease-fire.
 - At the same time, while everyone is cognizant of the fact that the US and Europe have traditionally espoused the virtues of human rights and the like, given that they have both projected themselves as symbolic backbones of modern day international humanitarian law, there is no question that this prior image has now been seriously tarnished by their failure to speak out against the kind collective punishment - if not genocide - that we are witnessing in Gaza.
 - It is clear that the US by failing to speak out, has shown that it is not a legitimate defender of these principles and it is likely that its word on such issues will not be taken seriously in the future.
 - The likelihood of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) to support any future peace plan is clearly dependent upon the manner in which the current hostilities comes to an end.
 - Should the war end quickly – i.e., with its current cost of only “thousands of dead as opposed to hundreds of thousands and a clear case of an impending massacre”, there is a good possibility that the IRI while not supportive, would not present any objections, as part of its current policy of wanting to stop the war, going for a cease-fire and managing the conflict (a position that is somewhere between war and peace).

- Hence, the IRI would be supportive of a process that manages the conflict and then moves towards resolving the situation.
- This is the current policy of the current government in Iran, although an alternative government would potentially have a different vision and act differently.
- Acknowledging the criticism made a fellow panellist (Eckart Woertz) accusing him of being disingenuous and having double standards when making reference to a lack of condemnation on the part of the West for Israeli violations of international humanitarian laws etc. when the government of Iran in collusion with the governments of Syria and other proxies were responsible for the death of more than 500,000 people and the dislocation of more than several million in Syria and other places, Hadian stated unreservedly that he condemned all such actions and double standards no matter which party had carried them out.
- However, it was also disingenuous to simply point to a wrong that was done elsewhere while not unconditionally acknowledging that they do not and should not provide Israel with an open mandate to justify its unacceptable actions in Gaza.
- On the subject of double standards, it was important to note what the German Chancellor and other Western leaders had stated in the case of atrocities committed by Russia against Ukraine while having remained silent on what was now transpiring in Gaza.
- The IRI was trying to find a way for ending the current war because of its long-term planning and because it was seen as something which had a sense of immediacy about it – something that had not been observed in other areas.
- The current war was likely to become extended in the region under two circumstances:
 - 1. If Israel was to mount a serious attack against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Any attacks on the Houthis, Hashd al Shaabi or even Iran itself would not necessarily lead to an expansion of the war given that with Iran's capability in making a proportional response, it would not change the general thrust of Iran's overall strategic calculus. But an attack on Hezbollah would be viewed differently.
 - 2. If the United States were to launch a military attack against Iran.
- In terms of what might proceed, while the IRI might not like the 'Arab Peace Initiative of 2002', it was likely to tolerate and come to accepting it.

- He felt that the IRI should be blamed for inadvertently pushing the cause of right-wing extremists in Israel at the cost of weakening the 'Left' in that country.
 - On the subject of Iran having operational command over its various proxies, the general principle applied by Iranian leaders was that decisions pertaining to their localities should be taken by each member of the 'Axis of Resistance'.
 - Hassan Nasrallah, for example, was in a much better position in comparison with the Iranian government or the Quds Force for making any decision that was related to his locality, something that he exercised with great autonomy.
 - But in the event that the IRI wanted something specific which threatened its red lines, Iran was in a position for ultimately obtaining what it wanted for its objective.
 - On the subject of a perceived feeling of support for Israel amongst the general population in Iran, this had to be attributed to a sense of popular reaction against the government in Iran and its unpopular posturing for Palestine. Public sentiment in this regard, had less to do with Israel/Palestine and more related to something of an 'action and reaction' against the Islamic government itself.
 - As to what the IRI is after in the Middle East, the answer at this time includes the following:
 - 1. A referendum to decide the future of relationships between Jews, Christians and Moslems in all the disputed territories.
 - 2. Whatever the Palestinians should decide on will be fine with the government of Iran.
 - 3. There are some in Iran who feel that the 2-State solution could be acceptable.
2. **MAHA YAHYA** (*Director, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut*)
- Prior to 7 October, IRI had indicated that in the event that there should be an accord between Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), this was something that was entirely their business.
 - Such a stance was based on the fact that for the first time in a long while, there was a feeling on the part of Iranian leaders in the aftermath of their rapprochement with KSA, that their regional policies were no longer being challenged in places like Syria or Lebanon.
 - Events on 7 October and what has followed since have placed Iran between a 'rock and a hard place' and as a result matters might no longer be the same.
 - This is due to the fact that what is starting to happen in the Arab world have changed as indicated by some recent polling that was taken of people in Gaza

and the West Bank which showed an acute rise in the popularity of Iran (40%) over that of the US (11%).

- At the same time, it was important to note that Hezbollah has not entered the fray by saying in clear terms that this was a Palestinian problem.
- While there has been no unified Arab position since the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, there is no question that the Palestinian issue after years of marginalization has now once again come to the fore once again.
- Nonetheless, as things stand at this time, it is clear that nobody has any inkling notion of what is like to come about on 'the day after', nor the amount of destruction that has been inflicted on the various existing infrastructure in Gaza.
- However, it is thought that Iran will need to be part of any discussion about an ultimate end game.
- It was important to underline the reality that the Abraham Accords and the Arab Peace Initiative were not the same and could not in any way be compared to 'land for the Palestinians in exchange for peace for Israel'.
- The presence of so many war ships in and around the region was a clear messaging that security in Israel was a red line issue. Hence, it is not surprising that Hezbollah for its part has shown a great deal of restraint fully cognizant of the reality that all hell would break loose if they crossed certain boundaries.
- However, it was also important to note that the war had already obtained a regional character, given the fact that the Houthis have been attacking maritime trade in the Red Sea and Bab-al-Mandab while Iran's proxies have proceeded to attacking US assets in Iraq and Syria,
- While the usage of phosphorus bombs by Israel has destroyed acres of olive plantations, it was quite clear that there was a lack of vision as to where things were going especially given the situation where we have a weak Israeli Prime Minister struggling for his survival and an Israeli society that was still in a state of deep shock.
- In such a scenario, it is a slippery slope that might lead to escalation and possibly a regional war, though the US has pressured Israel not to attack Lebanon.
- Nonetheless, as matters stand at this time, there was no visible conception of an end game.
- While actions of the IRI has probably played some role in what has transpired but primary blame has to do with national dynamics within Israel and the role that has been played by the likes of Ben-Gvir and Smotrich.

- As to what the Arab states are likely to do the 'day after', no one knows in the absence of an Israeli interlocutor on both sides, especially since Netanyahu has so much undermined the 2-State solution at a time when the 'Arab Peace Initiative' has been undermined by the Arabs themselves.
- The more immediate concern related to the ongoing war is about 'ethnic transfer' and the potential problems encompassed in any action that might result in Gazans being forced to relocate themselves into the Sinai.
- On the subject of what the IRI is after in the Middle East:
 - 1. Iran wants an acceptance of its regional role along with its strategic interests and proxy forces and partners.
 - 2. In its conundrum with Israel at a time when the IRGC is dominating the economic and political scene in Iran, the question will be what happens inside Iran as we move forward – i.e., will there be a shift in position vis-s-vis the US and Israel? While no one can provide an answer to this question at this time, the proposition is made even more complicated by other emerging inputs such as internal political dimensions inside Iran with a fed-up population that is extremely angry at seeing its wealth squandered in damaging external adventures.
- 3. **ECKART WOETRITZ** (*director of the Institute for Middle East Studies (IMES) at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg*)
 - In terms of how the Europeans view the topic of this discussion, it is important to state at the outset that there is no unitary European position or perspective.
 - Indeed, some former Eastern European states openly support Israel while the likes of Italy and Spain have been supportive of a cease-fire, with Germany and the UK hanging somewhere in the middle.
 - However, in an atmosphere where moods are shifting. there is no doubt that Iran due to the position it holds with its regional proxies in the region does have some kind of a role.
 - A new factor which might make things more complicated as matters move forward is a comment by the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian who said a few days before that the only thing Iran and Israel shared was that a two-state solution would not work (with Iran's proposal being to hold a referendum in order to determine the fate of Palestine, with only descendants of those who lived there prior to 1948 being permitted to vote).
 - Nonetheless, given the level of killings perpetrated by the Iranian backed government of President Assad in Syria, Shiite militias in Iraq, or sale of

Iranian drones to Russia for their use in the war against Ukraine, allegations made by Nasser Hadian seemed most disingenuous, given his one-sided reference to the West's value system and their support for international humanitarian laws and the like.

- Today, it was clear that the EU was not in a position of having any kind of a unitary policy on either Iran or Ukraine.
- However, in the past, the policy of 'Critical Dialogue' started and pursued by France, Germany and the UK in 2002 had gradually gained momentum and led to a situation when an agreement was arrived at with the signing of the JCPOA in 2015.
- Although the JCPOA was a success, with no new nuclear deal round the corner, there is no real role for the EU manifesting itself at this time.
- Therefore, the EU was unlikely to come up with any kind of a new initiative in an atmosphere where the Iranian regime was resorting to horrific behaviour either by brutally quelling internal protests or resorting to deplorable actions such as 'hostage diplomacy' which have led to Iran losing a great many of its friends in the EU.
- At a time when Israel is perceived to have another month before mounting international pressures may force its hand in some way, it is clear that attention being paid to the 2-State solution was nothing more than a 'lip service' since neither Israel nor Hamas actually believes in such a concept.
- However, once the war ends things might change in this regard, though no role is envisaged for the IRI in any of the immediate issues that might come up.
- But the IRI has no clear interest in any escalation either (as verified by the careful tone of Nasrallah's speech), given that it does not want to give up or sacrifice such an important deterrent (i.e., Hezbollah) which is more important for its other calculations (e.g., the protection of its nuclear program).
- As to what the IRI is after in the Middle East, their position has changed significantly in the past 10 years. They have shown themselves to be an expansionist power that has contributed significantly to regional instability.
- Moreover, it has proven itself incapable of letting go of its proxies though the biggest threat against it is likely to come from by disenchanting forces inside Iran - a situation that they resembles very much the state of Hezbollah in Lebanon especially in the aftermath of the downfall of the Lebanese economy.



A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE PARTICIPANTS



NASSER HADIAN is a professor of political science, faculty of law and political Sciences at the University of Tehran, where he also served as the director of Graduate Studies (1996-1998). He was a visiting professor and research scholar at the Middle East Institute and the Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures Department at Columbia University (2001-2004) and the director of the Political Development Program at the Center for Strategic Research (1992-1995). He is an author of many scientific publications on the issues of Iranian contemporary politics, Iran's nuclear program and political Islam.

MAHA YAHYA is the director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, where her work focuses broadly on political violence, identity politics, inequality, citizenship and the refugee crisis. She has consulted with international organizations, including United Nations organizations and the World Bank, as well as the private sector on a broad range of issues in Lebanon, Pakistan, Oman, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other countries. She serves on several advisory boards, including the UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education. Additionally, she is a global member of the Trilateral Commission, a co-chair of the International Advisory Board for the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Ana Aqra Association.

Alex Vatanka is the founding director of the Iran Program at the Middle East Institute. He specializes in Middle Eastern regional security affairs with a particular focus on Iran. He was formerly a senior analyst at Jane's Information Group in London. Alex is also a senior fellow in Middle East Studies at the U.S. Air Force Special Operations School (USAFSOS) at Hurlburt Field and teaches as an Adjunct Professor at DISAS at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. He has testified before the U.S. Congress and lectured widely for both governmental and commercial audiences, including the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, U.S. intelligence agencies, and a list of international corporations.

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