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06.03.3024

Is Tehran Winning the Middle East?

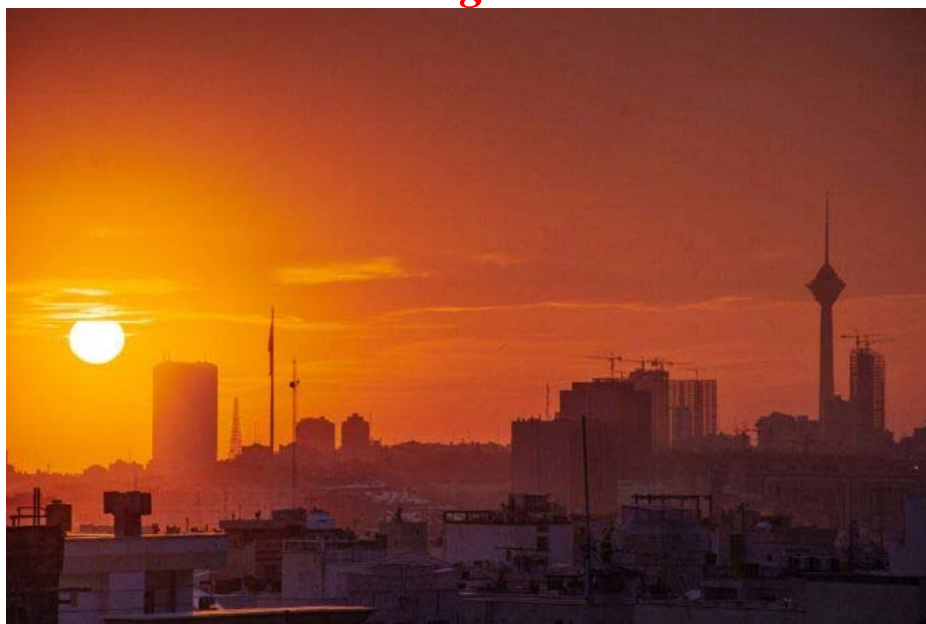


Image by hosein charbaghi.

In the midst of Israel’s ongoing devastation of Gaza, one major piece of Middle Eastern news has yet to hit the headlines. In a face-off that, in a sense, has lasted since the pro-American Shah of Iran was overthrown by theocratic clerics in 1979, Iran finally seems to be besting the United States in a significant fashion across the region. It’s a story that needs to be told.

“Hit Iran now. Hit them hard” was typical advice offered by Republican Senator Lindsey Graham after a drone flown by an Iran-aligned Iraqi Shiite militia killed three American servicemen in northern Jordan on January 28th. The well-heeled Iran War Lobby in Washington has, in fact, been stridently calling for nothing short of a U.S. invasion of that country, accusing Tehran of complicity in Hamas’s October 7th terrorist attack on Israel.

No matter that the official Iranian press has vehemently denied the allegation, while American intelligence officials swiftly concluded that the attack on Israel had taken top Iranian leaders by surprise. In mid-November, Reuters reported that Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei informed a key Hamas figure, Ismail Haniya, that his country wouldn't intervene directly in the Gaza war, since Tehran hadn't been warned about the October 7th attack before it was launched. He actually seemed annoyed that the leadership of the Hamas paramilitary group, the Qassam Brigades, thought they could draw Tehran and its allies willy-nilly into a major conflict without the slightest consultation. Although initially caught off-guard, as the Israeli counterattack grew increasingly brutal and disproportionate, Iran's leaders clearly began to see ways they could turn the war to their regional benefit — and they've done so skillfully, even as the Biden administration in its full-scale embrace of the most extreme government in Israeli history tossed democracy and international law under the bus.

The gut-wrenching Hamas attacks on civilians at a music festival and those living in left-wing, peacenik Kibbutzim near the Israeli border with Gaza on October 7th initially left Iran in an uncomfortable position. It had allegedly been slipping some \$70 million a year to Hamas — though Egypt and Qatar had provided major funding to Gaza at Israel's request through sanctioned Israeli government bank accounts. And after decades of championing the Palestinian cause, Tehran could hardly stand by and do nothing as Israel razed Gaza to the ground. On the other hand, the ayatollahs couldn't afford to gain a reputation for being played like a fiddle by the region's young radicals and so drawn into conventional wars their country can ill afford.

The Adults in the Room?

Despite their fiery rhetoric, their undeniable backing of fundamentalist militias in the region, and their depiction by inside-the-Beltway war hawks as the root of all evil in the Middle East, Iran's leaders have long acted more like a status quo power than a force for genuine change. They have shored up the rule of the autocratic al-Assad family in Syria, while helping the Iraqi government that emerged after President George W. Bush's invasion of that country fight off the terrorist threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In truth, not Iran but the U.S. and Israel are the countries that have most strikingly tried to use their power to reshape the region in a Napoleonic manner. The disastrous U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, and Israel's wars on Egypt (1956, 1967), Lebanon (1982-2000, 2006), and Gaza (2008, 2012, 2014, 2024), along with its steady encouragement of large-scale squatting on the Palestinian West Bank, were clearly

intended to alter the geopolitics of the region permanently through the use of military force on a massive scale.

Only recently, Ayatollah Khamenei bitterly asked, “Why don’t the leaders of Islamic countries publicly cut off their relationship with the murderous Zionist regime and stop helping this regime?” Pointing to the staggering death toll in Israel’s present campaign against Gaza, he was focusing on the Arab countries — Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates — that, as part of Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner’s “Abraham Accords,” had officially recognized Israel and established relations with it. (Egypt and Jordan had, of course, recognized Israel long before that.)

Given the anti-Israel sentiment in the region, had it, in fact, been rife with democracies, Iran’s position might have been widely implemented. Still, it was a distinct sign of terminal tone deafness on the part of Biden administration officials that they hoped to use the Gaza crisis to extend the Abraham Accords to Saudi Arabia, while sidelining the Palestinians and creating a joint Israeli-Arab front against Iran.

The region had already been moving in a somewhat different direction. Last March, after all, Iran and Saudi Arabia had begun forging a new relationship by restoring the diplomatic relations that had been suspended in 2016 and working to expand trade between their countries. And that relationship has only continued to improve as the nightmare in Israel and Gaza developed. In fact, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi first visited the Saudi capital, Riyadh, in November and, since the Gaza conflict began, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian has met twice with his Saudi counterpart. Frustrated by a markedly polarizing American policy in the region, de facto Saudi ruler Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and Iran’s Ayatollah Ali Khamenei resorted to the good offices of Beijing to sidestep Washington and strengthen their relations further.

Although Iran is far more hostile to Israel than Saudi Arabia, their leaderships do agree that the days of marginalizing the Palestinians are over. In a remarkably unambiguous statement issued in early February, the Saudis offered the following: “The Kingdom has communicated its firm position to the U.S. administration that there will be no diplomatic relations with Israel unless an independent Palestinian state is recognized on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital, and that the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip stops and all the Israeli occupation forces withdraw from the Gaza Strip.” Significantly, the Saudis even refused to join a U.S.-led naval task force created to halt attacks on Red Sea shipping by the Houthis of Yemen (no friends of theirs) in support of

the Palestinians. Its leaders are clearly all too aware that the carnage still being wreaked on Gaza has infuriated most Saudis.

In late January, President Raisi also surprised regional diplomats by traveling to Ankara for talks on trade and geopolitics with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, another sign of his country's changing role in the region. At the end of the visit, while signing various agreements to increase trade and cooperation, he announced: "We agreed to support the Palestinian cause, the axis of resistance, and to give the Palestinian people their rightful rights." That's no small thing. Remember that Turkey is a NATO member and considered a close ally of the United States. To have Erdoğan suddenly cozy up to Iran, while denouncing Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's war on Gaza as a Hitlerian-style genocide, was an unmistakable slap in Washington's face.

Meanwhile, Iran, Turkey, and Russia recently issued a joint communiqué that "expressed deep concern over the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and stressed the need to end the Israeli brutal onslaught against the Palestinians, [while] sending humanitarian aid to Gaza." From the Biden administration's point of view, Moscow's bombing of civilian sites in Ukraine and Iran's role in crushing Sunni Arab rebels in Syria had been the atrocities that needed attention until Netanyahu suddenly pulled the rug out from under them by upping the ante from mere atrocities to what the International Court of Justice has ruled can plausibly be labeled a genocide. One thing was clear: Washington's long struggle to exclude Iran from regional influence has now visibly failed.

Iran's Rising Popularity

At the Gulf International Forum (GIF) last November, Abdullah Baaboud, a prominent Omani academic, said that there had been a "very strong condemnation of Israel from Iran and Turkey, embarrassing some Arab countries that are not using the same language. My worry is that this conflict is leading to the empowerment of Turkey and Iran among the Arab public." GIF's executive director, Dania Thafer, concurred. Of that public, she said, "Grief and anger have reached unprecedented levels," and added, "with each photo out of Gaza, Iran gains more influence across the region." In short, at remarkably little cost, Iran is unexpectedly winning the battle for regional public opinion and its standing in the Arab world has risen strikingly. Meanwhile, the reputation of the United States has been indelibly tarnished by Washington's full-throated support for what most in the region do indeed see as a merciless slaughter of thousands of children and other innocent civilians.

A recent opinion poll of Arabs in 16 countries, conducted jointly by the Arab Center in Washington, D.C., and the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar,

found that 94% of them considered the American position on Israel's war "bad." In contrast, a surprising 48% of them considered the Iranian position positive. To grasp just how remarkable such a finding was, consider that a Gallup poll conducted in 2022 found that Shiite Iran's name was mud in most Sunni Arab countries and approval of its leadership fell somewhere between 10% and 20%.

In recent months, Iran has made striking use of the weakness of Washington's case in the region. While the State Department likes to contrast Iran's "dictatorship" with Israel's "democratic character," only recently foreign ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani observed, "The disaster in Gaza removed the mask from the face of the so-called advocates of human rights and showed the extent of vileness, brutality, and lies hidden within the nature of the Israeli regime, whose supporters used to refer to [it] as a symbol of democracy." Although Iran has among the world's worst human-rights records, Netanyahu has even managed to take the focus off of that.

Losing the Middle East, Washington-Style

Iran's allies in the region include Iraqi Shiite militias like the Party of God Brigades (*Kata'ib Hizbullah*), which first gained prominence in the struggle against the ISIL terrorist group from 2014 to 2018. Those were years when the regular Iraqi army had essentially collapsed and was only gradually being rebuilt. Washington was also focused on destroying ISIL then and so developed a wary *de facto* alliance with them in its campaign to crush that "caliphate." In January 2020, however, President Trump was responsible for the drone assassination of the group's leader, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, along with Iranian General Qasem Soleimani, just after their arrival by plane at Baghdad International Airport in what was evidently an attempt to prevent them, through the Iraqis, from forging an agreement with Saudi Arabia to reduce tensions with Iran.

That assassination led to a long-running, low-intensity conflict between the Shiite militias of Iraq and the 2,500 remaining American troops stationed there. With the onset of the Gaza conflict last October, the Party of God Brigades began launching mortars and drones against Iraqi military bases hosting American soldiers, as well as against small forward operating bases in southeast Syria where some 900 U.S. military personnel are stationed, ostensibly to support the Syrian Kurds in mopping up operations against ISIL. After more than 150 such attacks, on January 28th one of their drones hit Tower 22, a support base where U.S. troops were stationed in northern Jordan, killing three American soldiers, while wounding dozens more.

Iran's leaders generally back those Shiite militias, but whether they had anything to do with the attack on Tower 22 remains unknown. Officials in Tehran did, however, immediately recognize the danger of escalation once American troops had actually been killed. And indeed, the Biden administration responded with dozens of air strikes on bases and facilities of the Party of God Brigades in Iraq and Syria. *Washington Post* reporters were told by Iraqi and Lebanese officials that Iran had actually urged caution on the militias with clear effect. Their attacks on bases hosting U.S. troops ceased. At the same time, the Iraqi parliament and government complained bitterly about Washington's violation of the country's sovereignty, while heightening preparations to force the withdrawal of the last U.S. troops from their land. In other words, President Biden's fierce backing of Israel's war, his decision to increase weapons shipments to that country, and his bombing of pro-Palestinian militias may have led to the achievement of a longstanding Iranian aim: seeing American troops finally leave Iraq.

Meanwhile, in southern Lebanon, where the militant group Hezbollah has been exchanging occasional fire with Israeli forces in support of Gaza, according to the *Post* reporters, one Hezbollah figure told them that Iran's message was: "We are not keen on giving Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu any reason to launch a wider war on Lebanon or anywhere else." Wars are unpredictable, and the Lebanon-Israeli border could still erupt dramatically. Moreover, Iranian pleas for restraint appear to have had far less effect on the Houthi leadership in Yemen's capital Sanaa, leading to an ongoing American and British bombing campaign on that city and elsewhere in that country that has so far done little to stop Houthi missile and drone attacks against ships in the Red Sea.

So far, however, despite the Republican urge to devastate Iran, that country's leaders have taken deft advantage of the butchery in Gaza (in which the Israeli military has killed more civilian noncombatants each day than belligerents have in any other conflict in this century). The ayatollahs have significantly increased their popularity even among Arab and Muslim publics that had not previously shown them much favor. They have strengthened their relationship with the Shiites of Iraq and may be on the verge of finally achieving their goal of ending the U.S. military missions in Iraq and Syria.

They have also achieved closer ties with Turkey, while improving relations with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab oil states. In doing so, they have distinctly blunted the Biden administration's aim of isolating Iran while tying the wealthier Arab states ever more firmly to Israel through arms and high-tech deals.

In addition, through its backing of and weaponizing of Israel in these last grim months, Washington has made a mockery of the human rights talking points that the U.S. has long deployed against Iran. In the process, Joe Biden has done more than any recent president to undermine both international humanitarian law and democratic principles globally. With 94% of Arab poll respondents viewing American policy in the region as “bad,” one thing is clear: for the moment at least, Iran has won the Middle East.

This piece first appeared at [TomDispatch](#).

CounterPunch 05.03.2024