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## **The Rising Joint Israel-US Strategic Fortunes in the Middle East**

*By Amin Saikal*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Israel's military triumph in the Middle East is not entirely its own. It is a result of joint Israeli-American campaigns. The US defence of Israel has never been greater since Hamas' attack on 7 October 2023.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Israel's Gaza and Lebanon wars, along with its incursion into Syria and destruction of that country's military assets, have elevated both Israeli and American strategic fortunes in the Middle East. In a patron-client relationship where Israel has been in the driver's seat, the US has benefited as much as Israel from this development.

Israeli military and intelligence operations have blunted the Iran-led "axis of resistance", undermining Tehran's regional influence. In the process, Israel has dictated the terms of its military campaigns, but the US has enabled them. While Israel has been the explicit actor, the US has acted as the power behind it, changing the regional contours with global implications.

### **US Aid**

The US's all-round support has been central to Israel's military successes. Without it, Israel would have been very vulnerable and incapable of defending itself on its own, let alone pursuing an offensive posture. America's complicity in Israeli operations is indisputable.

Since the Hamas attack and hostage-taking, the US has backed Israel's retaliatory, cataclysmic actions politically, diplomatically, and militarily. It has shielded the country from widespread international condemnation. It has defended the Netanyahu

government from charges of violating international humanitarian law and the rules of war and what has widely been branded as genocide in Gaza, and let it override the United Nations Security Council resolutions for a ceasefire in Gaza.

It has also damned the International Criminal Court's (ICC) arrest warrant for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defence minister Yoav Gallant for crimes against humanity. The US Congress has announced sanctions against the ICC with the aim of rendering it defunct.

Further, the US has reinforced Israel's capability in its military campaigns. This has included providing nearly US\$30 billion worth of direct military assistance, shooting down Iranian retaliatory missile attacks on Israel, and deploying one battery of the state-of-the-art anti-missile THAAD system manned and operated by American special forces in Israel.

It has executed, in combination with another staunch backer of Israel, the United Kingdom, regular air strikes on Yemen to deter and punish the Iran-backed Houthis for their anti-Israeli actions in solidarity with the Palestinians, especially in Gaza. In the absence of such American aid, it is highly doubtful that the nationally and globally besieged Netanyahu and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) would have emerged so strongly.

### **Decimation of Gaza**

US President Joe Biden has described his administration's support as both defensive and deterrent in nature. But it has essentially empowered Netanyahu and extremist ministers in a shaky coalition to perpetrate acts that French President Emmanuel Macron has called "barbarism".

In its military campaigns, Israel has levelled Gaza to the ground, killed and injured tens of thousands of its innocent inhabitants (with 40 per cent of them being children) and invaded southern Lebanon while killing more than 3,000 civilians and destroying villages there – all in the name of fighting Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist entities and boosting Israel's security.

The IDF has also expanded its footprint by ten sq km on the Syrian side of the occupied Golan Heights and bombed the country to demilitarise it in the wake of the fall of the Iran and Russia-allied Bashar al-Assad rule in December. With American-made planes and bombs, it has dropped 70,000 tons of explosives on Gaza alone in what it has called self-defence operations.

### **Israel's Costs**

The military campaigns have not been without severe costs for Israel. The country's economy – manufacturing, high-tech and tourism industries – as well as social and administrative services, have suffered. With inflation running high and the cost of living soaring for many citizens, Moody's has recently downgraded Israel's credit rating from A2 to BAA1 – the lowest rating ever. A thriving sector, though, is the military-industrial complex, funded largely by the United States.

Yet, after 15 months of scorched-earth actions in Gaza, the Israeli forces have not been able to locate the remaining 100 hostages or completely uproot Hamas' resistance. The issue has traumatised and polarised the Israeli population, with most still wanting to see the back of Netanyahu. Below the surface, the state-society dichotomy has never been greater in the country. This and international pressure have finally prompted the Israeli leader to negotiate, though indirectly, a ceasefire with his bitter enemy Hamas, which he had promised to wipe out within six months.

### **Breaking the “Axis of Resistance” and Fear of Iranian Nuclear Threat**

In a shared goal with the US, and for a long time, Netanyahu has desperately sought to disarm Iran's regional capabilities. He has fiercely opposed Iran's nuclear programme and vowed never to allow it to produce nuclear bombs to rival Israel's status as the only nuclear-armed state in the Middle East. But since Israel cannot take on Iran on its own, he has persistently goaded the US to do the heavy lifting in a war with that country – something that the Biden administration has not been keen to do due to its wider regional implications.

When Biden took office, he promised not to involve the US in a Middle East war. He made overtures to Tehran to renegotiate the July 2015 Iran nuclear agreement that limited Iran's uranium enrichment to 3.7 per cent for peaceful purposes in return for sanction relief. But Tehran felt no compelling reasons to renegotiate the deal from which President Donald Trump had unilaterally withdrawn and which Netanyahu had castigated as the “worst deal of the century”.

While Biden has been hesitant to ignite a war with Iran, President Trump may not show such hesitancy as a committed Israel backer. In fact, a joint Israel-US strike against Iran's nuclear facilities is reportedly under consideration. If it does eventuate, it could be disastrous for all sides. Whilst Israel has scored military successes against some of Iran's affiliates, Tehran still possesses the necessary defence capability to turn such a strike into a regional inferno.

### **Conclusion**

Israel's battlefield successes have not been entirely its own. They are a result of joint efforts with the United States. By impairing the Iran-led “axis of resistance” and limiting Iran's and, for that matter, Russia's regional capabilities, Israel is not the only benefactor militarily. The US has also managed to recoup much of its pre-7 October 2023 sagging influence in the region, which had been particularly damaged by its Afghanistan fiasco. Even so, the Middle East remains a very volatile zone of frenemies and major power rivalry, with its future uncertain.

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