

## Middle East War: US Should Not Miss Lessons and Opportunities!

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Will the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas ease tensions and conflicts in the Middle East? Possibly. But only with America's decisive leadership and renewed resolve. Otherwise, many things could go wrong.

Hamas is trying to reassert control in Gaza through fear and violence, including through the execution of accused Israel collaborators, and the terrorist organization remains committed to the destruction of Israel. Hamas's new leadership vowed to repeat its "great victory" of 10/7, and is recruiting new members to join its ranks. Hamas's continued hold over Gaza is sure to reignite the conflict.

Israel's commitment to the ceasefire is also fragile. As Israel's cabinet ratified the agreement, right-wing members of Prime Minister Netanyahu's government exited the thin coalition. If Israel has to re-form its government, the phased ceasefire could be derailed, and the far right could spark renewed hostilities.

During the many months that the ceasefire negotiations dragged on, Iran and its proxies regularly attacked Israel and United States assets in the region. Iran and Hezbollah launched thousands of rockets and missiles at Israel; Yemeni Houthis attacked U.S. Navy ships in the Bab-al-Mandeb Strait; and Iran-backed militias attacked U.S. facilities in Syria and Iraq.

Israel's counterpunches have dealt significant blows to the military capacity of Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, and left Gaza in utter ruin.

So why didn't Hamas negotiate for a ceasefire in exchange for hostages sooner, to spare themselves and the people of Gaza from the ravages of the war?

The answer lies in Iran's and Hamas's view of America's actions (or inactions) over the past four years, which were interpreted as favorable for their purposes and punishing for Israel.

The chaotic messaging of the Biden Administration started before the 10/7 Hamas attack. Soon after Biden took office, he removed the Houthis from America's terrorist list; criticized Saudi Arabia in its war against the Houthis; called the Saudi ruler a pariah; restored

hundreds of millions of “humanitarian” dollars to Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (much of which was embezzled or used to build tunnels or other military capabilities); and—perhaps most importantly—all but abandoned efforts to expand the Abraham Accords between Israel and its neighbors.

To make matters worse, the U.S. tried to appease Iran by dropping Trump’s oil sanctions against Iran, paying Iran \$6 billion for the return of U.S. hostages, and pleading without success for the renewal of the weak nuclear agreement with Iran.

Such displays of weakness—on top of America’s Afghanistan withdrawal debacle and failure to head off Russia’s Ukraine invasion—cost the U.S. significant influence and respect and emboldened Iran and its proxies to unleash destruction throughout the Middle East.

Soon after the 10/7 Hamas attacks, the U.S. also undermined its own supposed “full support” of Israel. Some U.S. Congress members pushed to place conditions on American aid to Israel, and the U.S. slow-walked arms shipments—even threatened to stop weapons deliveries altogether—while Israel was in the midst of its survival war. New York’s Senator Schumer even called for a regime change in Israel—but not in Iran, Gaza, or Syria!

During the 2024 election campaign, Biden and Harris seemed to place more importance on courting Muslim voters in the swing state of Michigan than supporting Israel. They treated pro-Hamas street demonstrations with indifference, or even encouragement, though Iran may have sponsored some of the demonstrations. They restrained Israel from responding to Hezbollah’s attack in the North and tried to prevent Israel from attacking the southern Rafah Hamas bastion and the Egyptian border axis, the last strategic Hamas holdouts.

In sum, U.S. policies, words, and actions amounted to a disincentive to Iran, Hamas, and Iran’s other proxies to bring the war to an end.

Fortunately for the U.S. (and the rest of the free world), Israel has decimated the ability of Iran and its proxies to wage war effectively—for now. Iran’s grand and costly proxy strategy is in ruins, which not only reflects failed strategy but also represents an existential threat to Iran’s leadership and regime.

The Middle East’s recent past and its present situation offer the U.S. both lessons to apply generally and specific opportunities in the region.

First, the lessons...

America should never, never, never again lose its deterrence power. While diplomatic and economic levers should always be considered, in the case of direct kinetic attacks, a passive or defensive-only stance should never be the answer. Aggression must have its limits. America needs to demonstrate the political will to use all its levers of deterrence—military, diplomatic, and economic. *Credible* deterrence is the cornerstone of “peace through strength.”

Yet over the last 16 months, the U.S. has had limited or no response to Islamist militia attacks on U.S. personnel in Syria and Iraq, or to Houthi missile attacks on commercial shipping and the U.S. Navy in the Red Sea, choking one of the world's vital trade routes. Words of warning have not phased Iran or its proxies—just as words have not deterred Russia in Ukraine or China's provocations in the Pacific. Endless diplomatic negotiations with Iran (a master negotiator), coupled with coddling attempts at appeasement, have proven fruitless.

Next, the U.S. must “defend forward” in dealing with emerging threats, before they materialize. The U.S. must also exercise integrated deterrence, including both direct military operations and “gray zone warfare,” the goal of which is to subvert adversaries, denying them any advantage and deterring them from aggression.

In this regard, the U.S. and the rest of the free world should never have allowed Iran to form its proxy “ring of fire” in the first place. America should have focused on disrupting Iran's proxy network before it grew into the threat it has become. Similarly, the U.S. should have exerted more deterrent power against Russia before it invaded Ukraine.

Furthermore, the U.S. should recognize that its lame responses to provocations have a dire effect on friends and allies. The lack of American political will to engage Iran with every available lever, for example, raises doubts among our allies about America's commitment to them. As a result, some allies are building relationships with Iran, China, and Russia as a hedge—at great cost to America, especially in the “great power competition.”

For example, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar are all developing relationships with Russia to influence the price of petroleum, and Egypt and Turkey procure Russian air defense systems. Nations in the Middle East are also cultivating commercial relationships with China, the world's largest buyer of Middle Eastern energy and a major investor in regional infrastructure projects.

Finally, the U.S. must recognize that under-governed states and territories in the Middle East are breeding grounds for extreme ideology and rogue actors. These areas require early intervention, because what happens in the Middle East does not stay in the Middle East.

Accordingly, the U.S. needs to take proactive steps to prevent extremist militant or Islamic ideologies from governing any state or territory in the region—not in Gaza, not in Lebanon, not in Syria, and ultimately not in Iran.

As for America's opportunities...

With Israel defanging Iran, decimating its proxies, and freeing people from under the thumb of those proxies, an unprecedented, historical opportunity has arisen to reshape Middle East. If the U.S. and its allies and partners take full advantage of this opportunity, regional

cooperation, prosperity, security, and stability will be the prize. This opportunity should not be squandered by the new American administration.

Here is what the U.S. could do.

First, the U.S. must never again allow Iran to extend its hostile reach beyond its borders or develop nuclear weapons. Diplomacy should first be given a chance, but with firm time limits and the clear objective of Iran immediately terminating all actions and aspirations toward acquiring nuclear weapons. No endless negotiations, no coddling, just blunt talk with a big stick on the side. The Iranian people should be made aware of the stakes and benefits, and called upon to join in putting pressure on Iran's leaders (even, if need be, toppling the oppressive Iran regime).

Second, the U.S. should throw its full weight behind freeing the Palestinian and Lebanese people from the control of Hamas and Hezbollah and their toxic ideology. A victory against these malign forces is a victory for the entire free world.

Third, the U.S. must work with leaders in the Middle East to develop a clear path for Palestinian statehood that offers dignity and prosperity to the Palestinian people and security to Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. It is said that extreme, malevolent ideology does not die on its own; it can only be replaced by a benevolent alternative. The path to such an alternative must include the deradicalization and disarming of the Palestinian cause to eliminate Israel. No more "from the river to the sea." To achieve peaceful coexistence in the region, the U.S. should spearhead a Marshall-like plan to rebuild war-torn areas, foster economic opportunities, and eliminate corruption and violence.

Fourth, the U.S. should work tirelessly to expand the Abraham Accords to build peaceful relations between Israel and more Middle Eastern nations, especially Saudi Arabia. Clearly, every nation has a self-interest in improving prosperity, security, and stability, and the Abraham Accords provide a path.

Fifth, the U.S. must maintain strong alliances in the Middle East—political, economic, and cultural—but shift America's role to be a security integrator rather than a security guarantor. Accordingly, the U.S. would be well advised to work with regional partners to promote common denominators, communicate effectively, and integrate a collective approach to defense and deterrence in the face of common risks.

The Middle East, of course, is not homogenous. Although its states and peoples seem to share geography, culture, and aspirations for prosperity, security, and stability, local conditions prevent each state and each people from achieving their unique potential. Simply put, a one-size strategy would not fit all. The U.S. needs a set of bespoke, country-by-country strategies.

Take Saudi Arabia to start. The world, and especially the U.S., should recognize, encourage, and support Mohammed bin Salman's courageous and risky social and economic transformation of the Kingdom toward a more open society with broader economic prospects. The success of this transformation will bring significant rewards and positive regional influence. Mohammed bin Salman can ill afford an international or extended disruption along this road of progress.

Next, the U.S. should fully support its staunch ally, Jordan, in its pivotal role as an agent of security and peace. Don't let Jordan succumb to societal and economic pressures that put its government at risk—don't take Jordan for granted!

Lebanon also deserves intense focus. The country is on the cusp of freeing itself from the shackling influence of Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria, who have turned Lebanon into a dysfunctional state. America should lead the world in assisting Lebanon's new government and jump-starting Lebanon's failing economy, including through offshore gas exploration, World Bank programs, and sovereign financial assistance. Such steps could quickly stabilize the country and help the deserving Lebanese people.

Syria—with the potentially diminished influence of Iran and Russia—also requires special attention. The diplomatic outreach of the U.S. and Europe is the first, key step to ensure that Syria's new governing body follows through on its initial signals of moderation. Turkey should not be left on its own to dominate the outcome in Syria.

The U.S. should also balance the promotion of America's values with pragmatism. The human rights enshrined in the U.S. legal system are a beacon for the world, but in the Middle East, with its complex mix of religions, cultures, and values, American-style democracy does not come easily. The U.S. should encourage its values through collaboration and quiet diplomacy, not through self-righteous exhortations.

Finally, Israel's security is paramount for regional stability. Israel is sure to react to any threat or provocation that puts its national security at risk.

The fact is, as long as Hamas and the Islamic Jihad remain in power, whether or not supported by Iran, a permanent and enduring cessation of hostilities in the Middle East is utterly impossible.

As costly as all these initiatives might be, they would cost less than containing ongoing regional conflicts or a nuclear-armed Iran—and potentially a regional nuclear arms race that could follow.

The U.S. should do everything in its power to act now—taking advantage of the unique conditions that now exist—to reshape the stability and deradicalization of the Middle East.

The U.S. can push more to eliminate Iran's threat and, at the same time, work with the other nations in the region to build more cooperation, prosperity, and peace.

**About the Author**

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