

## Recent Developments in the War on Gaza

Our original analysis of 'Israel's' War on Gaza concluded that it is the result of major strategic differences between 'Israel' and the United States.[1] The United States wants to "Pivot to Asia", for which it needs 'Israel' to sign formal treaties with the countries of the Muslim World and agree to establishment of a Palestinian State. The 'Israeli' government led by Prime Minister Bibi Netanyahu, however, wants to see some of the conditions in the proposed Abraham Accords changed, to ensure it remains militarily dominant in the Middle East, and flat-out refuses any talks about a Palestinian State. Instead, it wants to resolve the "Palestinian Issue" by pushing the Palestinians out of Gaza and the West Bank and annexing these areas into a "Greater Israel".[2] We said previously:

*"The United States was most likely aware of the Hamas plans for the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, and worked with elements of Israel's political and security elite to allow these plans to be executed successfully. The United States' objective was to use the 7<sup>th</sup> of October to put pressure on Israeli prime minister Netanyahu, in order to get him to align with the United States geopolitical strategy for the Middle East."*

We also noted in our original geopolitical analysis that at that moment, early to mid-December, the United States had not yet succeeded in getting from Israeli prime minister Netanyahu what it wants. This geopolitical analysis will look at what has happened since, and what these developments indicate about the most likely trajectory of the War on Gaza.

### The War on Gaza over the month of December 2023

The Zionist entity has continued its onslaught on Gaza throughout December. As of the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, 29,124 Palestinians had been killed. The great majority of those killed were civilians, including 11,422 children, 5,822 women, 481 health personnel, and 101 journalists.[3]

The 'Israeli' military operations penetrated deeper into Gaza over December, targeting areas in both the center and the south of the territory[4] – the areas where most of Gaza's 2.3 million inhabitants had earlier been told to flee to by the 'Israeli' army.[5]

The United States has continued its operational support for the Zionist entity military. To enable arms supplies to the Zionist entity, the administration of United States, President Biden twice took the unusual decision to declare an emergency in the Middle East, such that the normally mandatory Congressional review of the arms sale could be bypassed. On Friday, the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, the Biden administration used this emergency clause to supply 'Israel' with 1,300 tank shells on an urgent basis.[6] And on Friday, the 29<sup>th</sup> of December, it did so again for a further sale of artillery munitions and related equipment to 'Israel'.[7]

In addition to its operational support, the United States has also continued its diplomatic backing for the military operation. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of December, it vetoed a United Nations resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire.[8] On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, it allowed a toned-down resolution calling for "immediate, safe and unhindered delivery of humanitarian assistance at scale directly to the Palestinian civilian population throughout the Gaza Strip" through abstaining from voting.[9]

Behind the scenes, however, the United States has continued to engage the government of the Zionist entity's prime minister Netanyahu, in order to nudge it toward the course of action that is aligned with the United States' geopolitical strategy. It wanted 'Israel' to shift to a new phase in its war, in which the Jewish entity ends its carpet bombing of Gaza and instead focuses "in more precise ways on targeting the leadership" of Hamas. The United States communicated to 'Israel' that it expected this new phase to start "within weeks". 'Israel' continued its pushback to the United States' demands, arguing it could only change its military tactics after the War on Gaza had lasted for several more months.[10] During December, however, after a visit by United States Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, 'Israel'

changed its tune. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, 'Israeli' Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said, during a joint press conference with Austin, *"Soon we will be able to distinguish between different areas in Gaza (and) we will be able to transition gradually to the next phase and start working on bringing back the local population"*.<sup>[11]</sup>

The United States' "slow but gradual success" in nudging 'Israel' towards the course of action that it wants was again on display toward the end of December, when 'Israel' Prime Minister Netanyahu published an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal. " Hamas must be destroyed, Gaza must be demilitarized, and Palestinian society must be deradicalized", before there could be any talk of peace, he said.<sup>[12]</sup> This indicates progress in the nudging of the Jewish entity as it was the first time Netanyahu spoke about an end to the war, negotiations and peace, something he had refused to do for the first 8 weeks of the conflict. Still, the demands Netanyahu articulated were not only unrealistic, but even practically impossible. In other words, Netanyahu gave in to the United States' demand to talk about a post-war solution, but he chose to do so in a way that would allow him to continue the war for as long as possible.

Despite Netanyahu's words, however, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 2024, 'Israel' announced it would indeed be withdrawing some forces from Gaza to shift to more targeted operations against Hamas.<sup>[13]</sup> This confirmed that the Jewish entity is not immune to US pressure, and that in spite of its resistance, eventually it has to give in to the United States' demand due its dependency on the United States' weapons, money and diplomatic support.

### **Beyond Gaza**

There have been several developments over the course of December that highlight the potential of the War on Gaza to escalate into a wider war across the Middle East.

The first of these developments took place in the Red Sea, where the Houthis attacked a number of commercial vessels. These attacks severely disrupted global supply chains, as major shipping companies decided to avoid the Red Sea in response to the Houthi threat, and sail around the Cape of Good Hope instead of through the Suez Canal for transportation between Europe and Asia – a voyage that adds some 6 days to an average trip and increases costs by some 40%.<sup>[14]</sup> The United States blamed Iran for the Houthi's actions<sup>[15]</sup> – a credible accusation as the close relationship between the Houthis and Iran is well established.

In Iraq as well there was an escalation involving armed groups linked to Iran. There, the Kataib Hezbollah group launched a drone attack on United States military bases and diplomatic offices.<sup>[16]</sup>

The United States reacted firmly to both these escalatory developments linked to Iran. In the Red Sea it attacked the Houthis, killing 10.<sup>[17]</sup> In Iraq, the United States carried out retaliatory airstrikes on the Kataib Hezbollah group, as well as other Iran-linked armed groups.<sup>[18]</sup> This United States response indicates a strong resolve to not allow a horizontal escalation of the War on Gaza.

Additionally, it must be said, the Iranian intent behind these escalatory acts was most likely not to cause a true horizontal escalation and be dragged into a real war. A representative of the Kataib Hezbollah group in Iraq indicated this when he said the Iran-backed groups in Iraq don't want the conflict to spread across the region.<sup>[19]</sup> Further evidence for this assertion is that if Iran wanted to see horizontal escalation, it would instruct Hezbollah in Lebanon to open a second front for the 'Israeli' army. The most likely Iranian objective behind these escalations is to remind the United States that it has influence across the Middle East, and thus that it can cause problems for the United States if it wanted to.<sup>[20]</sup> In other words, the Iranian escalations were most likely designed to support the Iranian negotiation position as it tries to get the sanctions imposed on it by the United States lifted.<sup>[21]</sup> This assessment was confirmed by Iran's response to the terrorist attack at a memorial for Iran's former top general, Qassim Suleimani, which killed close to 100 people. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued only a statement, blaming the attack

on Iran's "malicious and criminal enemies," without naming 'Israel' or the United States – something he certainly would have done had his intention been to get Iran into an open war.[22]

The Zionist entity has also undertaken a number of escalatory actions since the beginning of December. Throughout its War on Gaza, the Zionist entity has threatened that it will eventually attack Hezbollah in Lebanon. War Minister Benny Gantz said on December 11th 2023 that *"Heightened aggression and increased attacks by Iranian-backed Hezbollah demand of 'Israel' to remove such a threat to the civilian population of northern 'Israel'."* Similarly, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said, *"When we complete the process of fighting in Gaza, the military effort will be directed mainly to the north... We cannot persuade the residents of the north to return to their homes along the border unless we make sure that (Hezbollah), which is stronger, better trained and equipped than Hamas, is not there to endanger our population."*[23]

In addition to threatening words 'Israel' has also undertaken material acts. Israel's Defence Minister Yoav Gallant said the 'Israeli' military has struck targets in six of the seven fronts it is currently active in, which he identified as Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Iran.[24] Most of 'Israel's' military actions across the Middle Eastern region have targeted Southern Lebanon. 'Israeli' strikes on Hezbollah positions there have over the course of October, November and December killed 118 people and injured a further 536.[25] Among the deaths are 20 civilians as well as a number of professional journalists. In Syria, 'Israel' has attacked and killed an Iranian diplomat stationed in Damascus, Sayyed Razi Mousavi, a general of Revolutionary Guards who was responsible for coordinating relations between Iran and Hezbollah.[26] And in Lebanon 'Israel' assassinated the deputy head of the political wing of Hamas, Saleh al-Aroui, who was Hamas' envoy to Hezbollah.[27] In any other context, acts such as these would have unanimously been condemned as "acts of war" by the international community. And if undertaken against any of the world's leading nations, such as the United States or the United Kingdom, would have resulted in military responses, risking all-out war.

In response to 'Israel's' acts of war against Lebanon and Syria, the United States has undertaken diplomatic efforts to prevent horizontal escalation of the War on Gaza. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has been touring the broader region, while US diplomatic envoy Amos Hochstein has focused specifically on working with 'Israel' and Hezbollah in order to avoid a war between them.[28] In addition, the United States has taken the step of pulling out the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group out of the Mediterranean Sea.[29] Following the events of the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, the Carrier Strike Group had been stationed there in order to deter any actor seeking to escalate the situation or widen the War on Gaza.[30] The fact that the United States have decided to call this Carrier Strike Group back home, at the very moment the risk of escalation is the highest, should be seen as a message from the United States to 'Israel' that it must back off from further escalating the war: "Don't count on us to defend you when your acts cause a reaction from your enemies across the region, so be wise, cool down, and hold back".

In the background to all this, Egypt has been leading negotiations with Hamas and 'Israel' in order to come to an end to the War on Gaza. The Egyptian efforts are in full alignment with the plan of the United States, as documented in our original analysis of 'Israel's' War on Gaza. Egypt is proposing that Hamas and Islamic Jihad relinquish power in the Gaza Strip in return for a permanent ceasefire.[31]

### **In conclusion**

The recent developments in the War on Gaza support the key conclusion from our first geopolitical analysis on the subject, which was that the United States sees the events of the 7<sup>th</sup> of October as an opportunity to further its plan for the Middle East, which results from its geopolitical strategy named the "Pivot to Asia": change 'Israeli' policy, to make it accept the Abraham Accords as proposed by the United States, as well as the 2-state solution for Palestine.

Since the publication of our first analysis, the United States has continued to pressure the Jewish entity to adjust its policies in line with this plan for the Middle East. This process has been “slow but steady” rather than “resolute and fast”, as politicians in the United States have to manage the Zionist Lobby in their country, something explained in further detail in our first geopolitical analysis on this subject. But the “slow but steady” approach has achieved some successes, as evidenced by the Jewish entity’s announcement of a “new phase” in its War on Gaza. Meanwhile, Egypt has taken the lead in working with Hamas, to make it accept the United States’ plan as well.

Noteworthy is the fact that the Jewish entity in particular has undertaken a number of acts that were designed to escalate the current war, in conflict with the United States’ plan. But to these acts the United States has responded in a manner that is aligned with its own plan, and not with the ‘Israeli’ plan. The United States has consistently worked to de-escalate whenever the Jewish entity escalated. And through ending the deployment of the USS Ford Carrier Battle Group it has even added pressure on the Jewish entity, to make it refrain from escalatory acts in the future.

Our assessment is that nevertheless, at least for a while, the Jewish entity will continue to seek escalation of the conflict. One reason for this is geopolitical. From the ‘Israeli’ perspective, a broader regional war, in which the United States actively participates to ensure ‘Israel’ is not defeated, would establish an ideal starting point for negotiations on the conditions of the Abraham Accords. A weakened Iran, Lebanon, Syria, and possibly even Saudi Arabia would enable the Jewish entity to get more of what it wants in these negotiations.

Another reason ‘Israel’ is likely to continue to seek escalation is related to domestic politics. The current ‘Israeli’ government headed by Prime Minister Netanyahu is almost certain to lose power once the war ends, namely. Once the War on Gaza enters the next phase envisioned by the United States, ‘Israel’s’ current “emergency war cabinet” is likely to fall apart.[32] In subsequent elections, Netanyahu would stand no chance, as a recent opinion poll showed that only 15% of ‘Israelis’ want Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to stay in office after the war.[33] But if Netanyahu loses office, he is likely to end up in prison as he is on trial for a variety of corruption and fraud charges. Many argue that in office, he has sought to overhaul ‘Israel’s’ judicial system to prevent this from happening.[34] But the ‘Israeli’ supreme court has struck down his proposed judicial overhaul.[35]

This leaves Netanyahu and his supporters in the current ‘Israeli’ government with no option but to seek a continuation of the war, until after the presidential elections in the United States, in the hope that a new president will be more supportive of their interests and objectives.[36]

In the end, however, the United States will decide how things develop next. A continuation of its “slow but steady” approach is its most likely course of action.

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