

The Iran, the war in Gaza, and the “convergence of the arenas”

Dr. Raz Zimmt

November 21, 2023

Highlights

- ▶ In recent days, senior Iranian officials have renewed their threats to expand the war in the Gaza Strip to additional fronts if a ceasefire is not reached soon and Israeli attacks in the Gaza Strip do not stop. At the same time, senior Iranian officials continue to claim that Iran’s proxy organizations in the region operate independently, make decisions based on their interests, and are not subject to instructions from Tehran.
- ▶ Senior Iranian officials continue to present the IDF’s activity in Gaza as a strategic failure, claiming that Israel is unable to realize the goals of the war, first and foremost the elimination of Hamas. Such messages serve Iran’s propaganda line, which seeks to portray Israel as defeated and weak, and help Iran justify its refraining so far from direct involvement in the campaign and even from involving Hezbollah in an all-out confrontation with Israel.



The “axis of resistance” in the al-Aqsa Storm (al-Mayadeen, October 21, 2023)

- ▶ At this stage, Iran continues to act according to gradual escalation steps to prevent the opening of a full-scale front against Israel. Iran is doing so while avoiding involving Hezbollah in an all-out campaign, which is liable to exact a heavy price from the Lebanese organization and perhaps even from Iran itself. However, Iran seeks a continuation of gradual escalation,

which will exact a price from Israel and the United States through attacks by its proxies in the region. So far, the pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq have been involved in dozens of attacks against American bases in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, the Houthis in Yemen have joined the campaign mainly by launching missiles and drones at Israel. At the same time, there is an ongoing escalation in the fighting between the IDF and Hezbollah, both quantitatively and in terms of the quality of Hezbollah's attacks along the border with Israel.

►The integration of pro-Iranian Shiite militias from Iraq and possibly Syria in the fighting against Israel could be another stage in the Iranian-led multi-arena campaign. The expansion of the war in Gaza to additional fronts, primarily Iraq and Syria, may enable Tehran to continue implementing the concept of “convergence of arenas” to make it difficult for Israel to continue focusing its fighting efforts against Hamas in Gaza while reducing the risk of an all-out confrontation with Israel and the United States. Iran's refraining from fully mobilizing all the capabilities of the “resistance front” is liable to face a significant test if it assesses that the continuation of the campaign may endanger Hamas' very survival or even threaten the ability of Hezbollah, considered Iran's preferred strategic arm, to maintain its capabilities after the war, especially regarding the organization's presence in southern Lebanon.

Details

►In recent days, senior Iranian officials have renewed their threats to expand the war in Gaza to additional fronts if a ceasefire is not reached soon and Israel's attacks in the Gaza Strip do not stop:

- ◆ **Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein-Amir Abdollahian** said that “we are witnessing the first stage of the expansion of the war by the resistance groups,” and if possible scenarios for stopping “Israel's crimes” do not yield results, “we will probably witness a new situation in the region” (Fars, November 19, 2023).
- ◆ At a meeting of the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Committee to discuss the developments in the Gaza Strip, Abdollahian said that the continuation of the “crimes of the Zionist regime” could lead to an expansion of the conflict. He noted the “resistance groups” were exerting prudent pressure on Israel and had many capabilities they had not yet employed (ILNA, November 19, 2023).
- ◆ On November 19, 2023, **former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei** told al-Mayadeen TV that the “resistance forces” in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen were on Hamas' side and that new fronts in the war would open in the coming days.

◆ **Esmail Qaani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force**, wrote in a communiqué to Muhammad al-Deif, commander of Hamas' military-terrorist wing, that the brothers in the "axis of Jerusalem and the resistance" were united with Hamas, would not allow Israel to realize its goals in Gaza and Palestine, and would do whatever was necessary in the historic confrontation (al-Mayadeen, November 16, 2023).

◀Referring to the Houthis' takeover of the cargo ship in the Red Sea in Yemen on November 19, 2023, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said, "In recent days, Israel's defense establishment has identified a growing Iranian tendency to intensify its militia attacks against Israel through its proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen." He called Iran "the root of hostility and aggression against the State of Israel" and stressed that the war had several arenas, although it was mainly focused on the Gaza Strip (Ynet, November 19, 2023).

▶Concurrently with Iran's threats, senior Iranian officials continue to claim that Iran's proxy organizations in the region operate independently, make decisions based on their interests, and are not subject to instructions from Tehran:

◆ **Foreign Minister Abdollahian** said in an interview with the Financial Times (November 17, 2023) that Hezbollah, the Palestinian organizations, and the Shiite militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen were not Iranian proxies and operated independently.

◆ **Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Nasser Kanani** rejected Israel's claims about Iranian involvement in the Houthi takeover of the ship off the coast of Yemen. He noted the resistance organizations in the region were making their own decisions based on the interests of their peoples and did not operate under Iran's command. According to him, the "Zionist regime" is unable to recognize its strategic defeat at the hands of a resistance organization in the Gaza Strip and is trying to blame Iran to justify its defeat (Tasnim, November 20, 2023).

◆ **Ali Fadavi, deputy commander of the IRGC**, said in an interview that the "resistance front" had reached full maturity in the region and could operate independently (Fars, October 23, 2023).



**“Netanyahu’s nightmare: Lebanese Hezbollah enters war with Israel”
(Tasnim, November 8, 2023)**

►At the same time, senior Iranian officials continue to present the IDF’s activity in Gaza as a failure:

- ◆ During a visit to an exhibition of the achievements of the IRGC aerospace force, **Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei** said the “Zionist regime” had been defeated in the Gaza Strip and had so far failed to realize its goal of eliminating Hamas despite its extensive attacks (Tasnim, November 19, 2023).
- ◆ **Hossein Salami, commander of the IRGC**, told a conference in Isfahan that the Gaza Strip would soon become the burial place of the Zionists and that Israel had so far lost more than ten percent of all the tanks in its possession (Tasnim, November 18, 2023). At a conference in Tehran, Salami said that every day the Zionists were attacked by the Palestinians, sustaining wounded and killed soldiers and losing at least 15 tanks (Tasnim, November 20, 2023).
- ◆ **Nasser Kanani, spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry**, claimed at his weekly press conference that the “Zionist regime” had not learned a lesson from its defeat on October 7 and had not recorded any military victory so far (Fars, November 20, 2023).



“The ground invasion of Gaza has failed, Hamas’ underground tunnels are a nightmare for Israeli forces” (Tasnim, October 28, 2023)

►Presenting the Israeli attacks as failed and emphasizing the assessment that Israel is unable to realize the objectives of the war, first and foremost the elimination of Hamas, provides Iran with justification for its refraining from expanding the conflict in a way that does not serve its interests.

- ◆ At the same time, voices continue to be heard in Iran calling on the authorities to adopt a cautious policy that will prevent direct confrontation with Israel and the United States:

- ◆ **Former Majles speaker and Expediency Discernment Council member Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel** warned against Iran’s entry into the war in Gaza, which, he claimed, could lead to a war between Iran and the United States. In a television interview, Adel said that Israel wanted to turn the conflict in the Gaza Strip into a war between Iran and the United States, and that for years, it had been trying to incite the Americans to war against Iran. He noted that, strategically speaking, it was unclear whether Iran’s entry into the war would serve the Palestinian cause (Tabnak, November 18, 2023).

- ◆ **Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad-Javad Zarif** claimed that the integration of Iran and Hezbollah in the war in the Gaza Strip was a clear Israeli interest and should be avoided (Asr-e Iran, November 13, 2023).

- ◆ According to a commentary article published in the conservative Iranian newspaper Hamshahri (October 23, 2023), Iran should not directly intervene in the war. According to the article, unlike the Iranian military intervention in Syria against ISIS, which was necessary given its strategic importance for Iran, the story of Lebanon and Palestine and the historic struggle against the “Zionist regime” are a different matter. In these arenas, local “resistance forces” supported by Iran operate as part of its efforts to strengthen the “resistance front” and weaken Israel. Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Kata’ib Hezbollah (the Hezbollah Brigades) in Iraq, and the Lebanese Hezbollah must act first, and Iran – as a supporter who does not take its eyes off the scene – must watch from the sidelines.

►At this stage, Iran continues to act according to gradual escalation steps to prevent the opening of a full front against Israel. It is doing so while avoiding involving Hezbollah in an all-out campaign, which is liable to exact a heavy price from the Lebanese organization and perhaps even from Iran itself. However, Iran seeks a continuation of a gradual escalation that will exact a price from Israel and the United States through attacks by its proxies in the region.

So far, the Shiite pro-Iranian militias in Iraq have been integrated into more than 60 attacks against American bases in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, the Houthis in Yemen have joined the campaign against Israel, mainly by launching missiles and drones at Israel. At the same time, there has been an ongoing escalation in the fighting between the IDF and Hezbollah, both quantitatively and in terms of the quality of Hezbollah's attacks against IDF outposts and Israeli communities along the border with Lebanon.



**The Supreme Leader of Iran meets with the Houthi spokesman in Yemen
(Tasnim, August 13, 2019)**

►The integration of pro-Iranian Shiite militias from Iraq and perhaps also from Syria in the fighting against Israel may be another stage in the Iranian-led campaign. In this context, a report was published on the Arabi Post website on October 18, 2023, according to which Qods Force commander Esmail Qaani secretly arrived in Syria in mid-October to coordinate with the heads of the pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq the possibility of an escalation in the campaign against Israel. According to the report, during his visit, a joint operations room was established for Iran's allies in Syria and Iraq to monitor the situation and coordinate the deployment of forces under the command of IRGC officers. The report also states that Qaani visited Baghdad on October 16, 2023, and met with commanders of the pro-Iranian Shiite militias to discuss the possibility of integrating them into the campaign in the coming weeks. According to the report, an Iranian intelligence source close to the IRGC told the news website that Iran intended to escalate the war through the Syrian arena rather than through Lebanon so as not to endanger Hezbollah, which is the most vital element in the "axis of resistance."



Qods Force Commander Qaani visits Iraq at the end of March 2023 (al-Alam, March 31, 2023)