



A Regional-Political Perspective on the Gaza Campaign

The Gaza campaign is not a local conflict. Although the fighting is centered in a limited geographic area, it has set off other battle zones and risks becoming a regional campaign. Whatever the outcome, the United States and regional players will play a key role in efforts to end the war and shape the "day after". Knowing and understanding the attitude of the countries in the region towards the Gaza campaign, their interests, sensitivities, capabilities and activities is therefore highly relevant. To that end, Mitvim experts have been providing ongoing analyses from Day One of the war, outlining the regional view of the campaign and its developments as they unfold, and suggesting guiding principles for Israel's regional foreign policy. The full compilation of *the regional-political perspective on the Gaza campaign* is available on [our site](#).

Four months of war

A Regional Perspective

Dr. Roei Kibrik, Director of Research, Mitvim

As of mid-February, the war in Gaza is well into its third phase, with a smaller IDF presence than in previous months and extensive maneuvers of the first three months replaced by a focus on specific areas, mainly around Khan Younis and Rafah. Some 1.3 million displaced Palestinians, who make up over 50% of the population, are crammed into the southern Gaza Strip around Rafah under harsh living conditions on the verge of a humanitarian disaster.

The international community and the countries of the region are emphasizing the vital need for humanitarian aid to prevent a catastrophe. Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries in the region continue to send assistance, reflecting their commitment to the Palestinian cause vis-à-vis their own residents and projecting their regional status. But Israel has so far rejected US and European pressure to open a humanitarian aid corridor through the Ashdod port, save for one flour shipment, in an attempt to sever all civilian ties with Gaza.

Various Israeli government ministers have been presenting conflicting positions regarding the administration of Gaza in the aftermath of the war, but the government as a whole continues to refrain from discussing the issue and adopting decisions. Its only clear stand is rejection of international pressure to agree to the two-state solution and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Israel rejects accusations that its objective is to expel Palestinians from Gaza and reestablish Jewish settlements there, but many government ministers participated in a "Back to Gaza" conference. While claiming it will not assume responsibility for running Gaza after the war, the government has failed to present alternatives.

Israel's consistent refusal to chart its vision of the day after has prompted international and regional frustration and growing criticism of its actions, even by countries that support its war against Hamas. In contrast to the Israeli government, the international community is

busy drawing up options for the day after the war based on an agreed framework in which Gaza and the West Bank are under the control of a renewed Palestinian Authority, Gaza is demilitarized, substantive negotiations are opened to implement the two-state solution, and as part of the process Saudi Arabia agrees to progress on the path to normalization with Israel.

Absent Israeli willingness to advance a similar plan, its friends have started examining practical measures that would prevent the government from reverting to the conflict management strategy it exercised until Oct. 7, this time while its military is entrenched in the Gaza sands. One of the measures under consideration is conditional recognition of a Palestinian state by the United States and European countries. Other measures already being taken include US, British and French sanctions on anti-Palestinian violent settlers in the West Bank.

Israel is also contending with a legal challenge in the international legal arena. While the International Court of Justice in The Hague rejected South Africa's demand that it order a halt to the fighting in Gaza, which it described as Israeli genocide, it imposed a number of orders underscoring Israel's obligation to comply with international law and report back to the court on its actions. The struggle in the international legal arena will continue in the coming months.

The war that began in Gaza has spread to other parts of the region. On the northern border, exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah continue albeit within the constraints of unwritten rules adopted by both sides. At the same time, the United States, France, and Qatar are continuing their efforts to promote a diplomatic solution to the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and prevent a major military campaign. On another front that has resulted from the Gaza war, the United States and Britain have launched attacks on the Houthis in Yemen, who threaten freedom of navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and against Iran's proxies in Syria and Iraq.

A US Perspective

Nadav Tamir, J Street, Mitvim Board Member

The Biden administration is increasingly and publicly frustrated with the Netanyahu government's conduct in Gaza. After unprecedented and continued support for Israel even when disagreements emerged, the American administration has changed course, making unilateral decisions unpalatable to the Netanyahu government. Netanyahu's conduct vis-à-vis the war and Israeli hostages held in Gaza has left the American Administration with little choice or flexibility. Biden, for his part, is paying a political price for his unequivocal support of Israel.

Biden has publicly said that Israel's military actions in Gaza are excessive and that he is working to achieve a permanent cease-fire in exchange for hostages. The administration has imposed sanctions on four Israeli settlers who attack Palestinians in the West Bank, including one who is accused of leading the February 2023 riots in Huwara that resulted in the death of a Palestinian. The sanctions include a freezing of their assets in the United States and a ban on their entry into the US. Biden also issued an order, clearly aimed at Israel, requiring foreign governments receiving U.S. military aid to assure that the assistance will be used in compliance with international law.

Secretary of State Blinken's seventh wartime visit to Israel highlighted American discontent with Israel. Blinken asked for a private meeting with IDF Chief Halevi, an unprecedented request clearly signaling distrust of Netanyahu. Blinken sought information from Halevi regarding the IDF's plans to push into Rafah. It is clear that U.S. officials are concerned about a Rafah offensive because of the risks to the more than 1.3 million Palestinians sheltering there. The US is also fearful that an Israeli invasion of the border city risks Israel's peaceful relations with Egypt, which is instrumental to the hostage negotiations and the rebuilding of Gaza after the war. In a particularly scathing remark during his visit, Blinken said the dehumanization of Israelis on Oct. 7th does not permit Israel to do the same to others. After meeting with the families of abductees, he added that the Netanyahu government prioritizes the release of the abductees less than the Biden administration does.

The White House also unveiled what NY Times columnist Tom Friedman dubbed the "Biden Doctrine" for the Middle East. It calls for creating an axis against Iran, normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, and advancing a two-state solution. Following Blinken's visit to Saudi Arabia (6.2), the Saudis issued a statement that normalization with Israel was conditional on the establishment of a Palestinian state and an end to the war in Gaza. Clearly intent on forcing Israel's hand, Blinken has asked the State Department to present policy options for a possible U.S. and international recognition of a Palestinian state after the war in Gaza. A similar statement by the British Foreign Secretary appeared coordinated with the Biden administration.

At the same time, the administration continues its efforts in other arenas. The U.S. military announced that it had attacked more than 85 targets of the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards and pro-Iranian militias in Syria and Iraq in response to an attack (28.1) on an American base in Jordan that killed three soldiers. The United States announced that it had assassinated a senior commander of the pro-Iranian Kataib Hezbollah militia in Iraq. The U.S., along with a number of countries, including Britain and Bahrain, led a wave of attacks by fighter planes, warships and missiles on 36 Houthi targets in Yemen.

A senior White House advisor, Amos Hochstein, continued his efforts to enforce UN Security Council Resolution 1701 in Lebanon in exchange for resolving 13 border disputes with Hezbollah on the Israeli-Lebanese border. The US National Security Council's Middle East Director Brett McGurk and CIA Director Bill Burns continue to assist in negotiations for the release of the hostages in coordination with Qatar and Egypt.

A European Perspective

Dr. Maya Sion-Tzidkiyahu, Director of the Israel–Europe Relations Program, Mitvim

The 27 EU member states do not share a unified view of the Gaza campaign. The shock at the human cost to Palestinian civilians in Gaza is great, and all agree on the need to increase humanitarian aid, but countries are divided over the conditions of an Israel-Hamas ceasefire. Despite agreement that the political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a two-state solution, and the desire for normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, there are nuances and disagreements about the "day after."

The High Representative for Foreign Affairs, Josep Borrell, presented (22.1) the Foreign Affairs Council with a **12-point plan** for the "day after," based on a two-state solution and normalization with Saudi Arabia. According to the plan, an international one-year conference will be convened at which the international community (headed by the European Union, pragmatic Arab states, and the United States) will discuss a framework agreement for

resolving the conflict, leaving it to the parties involved – Israel and the Palestinians – to determine the details. Israel has not responded to the plan, and Europe continues to discuss it. Israel's new foreign minister, Israel Katz, and his Palestinian, Saudi, Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts, as well as an Arab League representative attended (separately) the council meeting. This was Katz's first visit abroad as foreign minister, providing an opportunity for him to meet on the sidelines with foreign ministers from member countries (France, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, and others). However, while the Europeans wanted to talk about stopping the war and the political solution in its aftermath, Katz said he had come to talk about releasing the hostages and dismantling Hamas. Katz was criticized for straying from the point by screening two videos from his 2017 days as transportation minister, proposing the idea of an artificial island on the Gaza coast and railways from the Gulf to Israel. The videos are an optimistic vision for the future, but the way to realize them lies in ending the war, enabling the Palestinian Authority to control the Gaza Strip, and achieving a political solution with the Palestinians. Katz has no mandate to talk about any of these fundamental issues, which the Israeli government refuses to address.

Britain also sought to promote a political solution to the war, proposing a five-stage plan to end the war and achieve a political settlement. The British shared the plan with the Americans, Arab states, and Europeans, but Israel refused to discuss it. Foreign Secretary Cameron was the first to announce that Britain was examining **recognition of a Palestinian state** (29.1). Other European countries will join Britain and the United States in such a move, chief among them Ireland, Spain and Belgium. Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni also expressed support for the idea, while France's foreign minister said he is examining ideas for reviving the political process.

Many countries expressed their **support for Israel** in the past month as well, despite criticism of its military actions in Gaza, and even in light of the discussion and decision of the International Court of Justice in The Hague regarding South Africa's complaint that Israel was committing genocide in Gaza. France condemned South Africa's demand that the court order a ceasefire, and Germany even sided with Israel in the discussion itself. On the other hand, Slovenia and Belgium joined the accusations against Israel. Many European countries suspended temporarily their donations to UNRWA, including Germany, the second largest donor, following Israeli claims that 12 of the organization's Gaza workers participated in the Oct. 7 massacre. Borrell objected to this move, while Spain increased its financial support for the organization.

The disputes in Europe are well reflected in a **European Parliament resolution** (18.1) on the conflict. The center-left factions in parliament submitted a resolution that called for a permanent ceasefire in Gaza and the resumption of a political process. The center-right EPP faction and the Eurosceptic conservative and Reformists ECR faction added an amendment to the text that the ceasefire was conditional on the release of the hostages and the dismantling of Hamas. Thus, in effect, they not only neutered the resolution, but also legitimized Israel's continued fighting. European Parliament resolutions are not binding, but often reflect public opinion in the EU, and sometimes even prompt political moves.

Despite the difficulty in formulating common positions, the EU is in agreement on the need to **prevent escalation with Hezbollah** by implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1701 that calls for Hezbollah's withdrawal north of the Litani River. To this end, European countries, led by France, are holding talks with senior Lebanese political officials in cooperation with Arab countries and the United States. The EU has taken **two operative decisions** in recent weeks. The first, intensifying personal measures against the heads of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and their supporters as part of the EU's anti-terrorism policy. The EU

resolution stipulated that sanctions would be imposed on any person or entity (group, organization, etc.) that supports, facilitates or materially or financially enables violent acts by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Six people have already been blacklisted and their assets frozen in keeping with the decision.

Despite an attempt to promote sanctions against violent Jewish settlers (similar to the decision announced by the United States on Feb. 1), Hungary has so far prevented such a move, after Germany and the Czech Republic withdrew their objections. However, all European countries have expressed total opposition to the idea of renewing Israel's settlement in Gaza. The second operative decision calls for a joint operation to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea against Houthi attacks. The operation is expected to begin on February 19. Seven countries will take part. It should be noted that this is only a defensive operation, as opposed to the offensive that the United States and Britain are leading against the Houthis. The comparison between these two actions highlights the strength of the EU's financial arm compared to its security arm.

A Saudi Arabian Perspective

Dr. Michal Yaari, Mitvim Research Fellow, lecturer at Ben-Gurion and Open universities

Saudi positions vis-à-vis Israel were made clear at a conference of Arab foreign ministers (8.2). It called for an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip ahead of a complete end to the fighting and demanded that Israel act in accordance with international law. The Saudis also called for lifting all restrictions impeding the entry of humanitarian aid into Gaza. Its fourth demand was for the establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. In addition, the Saudi leadership expressed support for UNRWA, and warned of the grave consequences of an Israeli attack on Rafah, which would lead to the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of civilians from their last refuge.

Ostensibly, Saudi policy has remained constant throughout the war. On the one hand, the royal family refuses to see Hamas as the legitimate leader of the Palestinian people and its actions as advancing Palestinian interests. On the other hand, it is clearly demanding that Israel end its military offensive in Gaza due to the severe consequences reverberating throughout the Middle East. Regarding the resolution of the conflict, Riyadh has reiterated all along its traditional support for a two-state solution.

However, in a departure from its past stand, the Saudi leadership clearly rejects continued Israeli evasion of an in-depth discussion on the Palestinian problem. Even if the establishment of a Palestinian state is not feasible at this time, the royal family wants to see an Israeli commitment to negotiations and a long-term political vision.

The Saudis regard Israeli government policy as not only preventing the regularization of relations between Israel and the Palestinians, but above all as harming the kingdom's national security. Israeli rejection of binding negotiations on the Palestinian issue undermines the coveted trilateral deal that provides the Saudis with far-reaching US security benefits, includes a Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement, and hands President Biden a pre-election boost. Moreover, the war in Gaza undermines the process led by Saudi Arabia in recent years of rapprochement with its Arab and non-Arab neighbors, as a condition for stabilizing the Middle East and advancing Vision 2030. Regional calm is not a secondary goal for the royal family, but an existential interest that must be promoted in every way. If

the Israeli government continues its dogmatic and uncompromising policies, it risks turning from a legitimate Saudi partner into an agitator and threatening element.

An Iranian Perspective

Dr. Gil Murciano, CEO Mitvim

After months of gradual escalation (especially the combined missile attack launched by IRGC forces on targets in Iraq and Syria on January 15), Iran is demonstrating marked caution in its regional arena conduct. The large-scale military retaliation by the US and Britain for a deadly attack (28.1) by pro-Iranian militias on a US military base in northeastern Jordan, and their ongoing attacks on the Houthis in Yemen, have created an initial cooling effect on Iran's desire to bolster the activity of its proxies due to fear of being dragged into a direct regional confrontation. On the political level, Iran continues to promote an immediate ceasefire according to the conditions presented by Hamas, which it perceives as constituting a Palestinian victory and enabling the movement's survival. At the same time, Iran is increasing its political involvement in Lebanon. In this context, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian visited Lebanon (10.2), meeting with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Lebanon's caretaker prime minister. During the visit, Nasrallah remarked on Iran's reluctance to expand the scope of the war, even as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and other countries are increasing their coordination to resolve the internal political crisis in Lebanon as part of a broader move to arrange a diplomatic solution to the fighting between Israel and Hezbollah.

A Red Sea Perspective

Dr. Moshe Terdiman, Guest Research Fellow, Mitvim

Escalated fighting over the past month has turned the Red Sea into a naval theater that pits the bloc headed by Russia and China, which also includes Iran and the Houthis, against the US-led Western bloc. The new battlefield includes the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean. Under an agreement with India, the Indian navy is responsible for patrolling and protecting merchant ships in the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden, and the American and British navies are responsible for this same mission in the southern Red Sea. The Houthis are active in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, the Iranians are active in the Gulf of Oman and the northeastern Arabian Sea, while Somali pirates operate in the northwestern Arabian Sea near the shipping lanes surrounding Africa.

In a bid to stop the Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, the US and UK launched (11.1) airstrikes targeting 72 Houthi infrastructure sites in Yemen, including radar systems, and storage and launch sites of drones and cruise and ballistic missiles. Some of the airstrikes targeted the capital Sana'a and the city of Taiz in central Yemen, and others struck the area of Hodeida on the Red Sea coast and Marada in northwestern Yemen. Nonetheless, the Houthi attacks have continued. The US Treasury Department imposed sanctions (12.1) on two companies, one in Hong Kong and the other in the United Arab Emirates, for transporting Iranian goods on behalf of Houthi financial facilitator Sa'id al-Jamal. This was followed by a White House designation (17.1) of the Houthis as a global terrorist group.

None of these measures have deterred the Houthis, who continue to attack merchant ships with a focus on American and British merchant and war vessels in the southern Red Sea, and seem to have shifted the main focus of their activity to the Gulf of Aden. Senior Houthi political adviser and spokesman Mohammed al-Bakhiti announced (19.1) that Russian and Chinese ships would be guaranteed safe passage through the Red Sea, and that in order

for British and American ships to sail there safely, the United States and UK would have to stop their aggression against Yemen, stop the war in Gaza, and ensure the constant flow of medicine, fuel, and food to residents of the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, information has come to light showing that Iran trained Houthi forces for operations against merchant shipping, Iranian weapons were seized on their way to the Houthis, the IRGC reportedly established a command center in Sanaa to assist in Houthi attacks on the Red Sea, and the Iranian spy ship Behshad, currently anchored near the Chinese base in Djibouti, helps direct Houthi attacks.

Houthi attacks also have global economic consequences due to disruption of supply chains. The insurance premiums for ships continuing to sail the Red Sea have skyrocketed resulting in a 310% hike of freight prices. Tesla and Volvo announced (12.1) the suspension of some production in Europe due to a shortage of components caused by supply chain disruptions, and British oil giant Shell announced (16.1) the cessation of tanker traffic in the Red Sea. On the same day, Japanese shipping company Nippon Yusen Line announced it was suspending routes through the Red Sea, while American energy giant Chevron announced its decision on Red Sea sailing will be determined on a case-by-case basis.

In the Red Sea region, Houthi attacks have a negative impact mainly on Egypt, with ship transit through the Suez Canal plummeting by 30% and profits by 40% compared to the same period last year. As a result, Moody's downgraded Egypt's rating forecast from stable to negative, and Egypt has urged the Houthis and senior Iranian officials to prevent the further spread of Houthi attacks.

Houthi attacks also affect Israel. The Ministry of Intelligence Affairs presented (6.2) a position paper to a Knesset committee illustrating the risks to vital supply chains for Israel and recommended a series of preparedness measures to protect food and drug security, such as reducing dependence on countries of origin, self-production, expanding international supply sources, and shortening supply chains. Eilat Port Director Gideon Golbar reported that activity at the facility had stopped completely.

A Hellenic Alliance Perspective

Former Ambassador Michael Harari, Policy Fellow, Mitvim

Greece and Cyprus have for the most part settled into a routine in their stand on the Gaza war, following the lead of the United States and key regional players. During a visit to Nicosia by the Egyptian foreign minister (8.2), his Cypriot counterpart reiterated the Cypriot position that renewing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process based on the two-state solution is the only way to stop the cycle of violence. He reiterated his call for increased humanitarian aid to Gaza, including through a Cypriot-proposed maritime corridor. He also stressed Egypt's central role in exporting gas from the region.

Greece has focused in recent weeks on deepening relations with Washington following the approval of F-16 fighter jet sale to Turkey, and the compensation Athens expects in the form of a promised US sale of F-35 fighter jets and other advanced systems. It should be noted that the international coalition the United States is leading against the Houthis in the Red Sea will be based in Greece. It will be interesting to follow the Cypriot and Greek stand on the European attempt to impose sanctions on Jewish extremists in the territories, as the US has done.