



A Regional-Political Perspective on the Gaza Campaign

The Gaza campaign is not a local conflict. Although the fighting is confined to a specific geographic area, it risks spreading and turning into a regional campaign that involves the United States and its regional allies in shaping the war and its aftermath. Understanding the attitudes, interests, sensitivities and capabilities of each country in the region regarding the campaign, as well as the actions each is taking, is thus of great importance. Below is a compilation by Mitvim experts outlining the regional view of the Gaza campaign as it unfolds, summing up events of the third week and offering guiding principles for Israel's regional foreign policy. For a broader view of our experts' insights, we recommend Mitvim's series of publications on the regional-political perspective on the Gaza campaign.

Ninth week of the war

A Regional Perspective

Dr. Roei Kibrik, Director of Research, Mitvim

The ninth week of the war saw Israel seeking to gain time in its war to bring down Hamas in Gaza. To this end, it continued its public diplomacy efforts in the United States and Western countries, acceded to US demands for significant increases in humanitarian aid allowed into Gaza, including fuel, and highlighted its attempts to reduce civilian casualties.

The protracted war in Gaza blunted the urgency that characterized diplomatic activity in the first weeks of hostilities. The war in Gaza still made headlines, but the world seemed to have grown accustomed to it. Street protests dwindled in Jordan; Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey were more preoccupied with the Athens-Ankara rapprochement than with Gaza. In Egypt, some attention shifted to the presidential elections scheduled for Dec. 10, while the country continued its critical contribution to the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza and its campaign to derail suggestion of relocating the Gaza population into its territory. The war in Gaza also took up less space in the public discourse in Morocco and the Gulf states. The more the world grows accustomed to the war, the greater the danger of the sides sinking into a protracted conflict. President Biden's political timetable appears to be the only deterrent to further entrenchment in a military campaign that lacks clear diplomatic and political objectives.

The Arab states kept up their extensive diplomacy vis-à-vis Western countries and international institutions in order to advance broad political moves, chief among them the cessation of hostilities, the promotion of the two-state solution, and the adoption of the Arab Peace Initiative. Iran was also very active in the diplomatic sphere, trying to take advantage of the war in Gaza in order to draw closer to the countries of the region, and shift the regional alliances and ties in its favor. Israel, meanwhile, employed short-term diplomacy to serve its immediate military operations and needs, but kept stalling on formulating security-enhancing diplomatic initiatives of its own or responding to its allies' suggestions for such measures.

While the intensity of the fighting on the northern border between Israel and Hezbollah appeared to have settled at a level short of all-out war on which both sides accept, the Houthis stepped up their activity and opened a new and different battlefield. Although they frame their hostilities in the context of the Palestinian issue, the Houthi attacks and the threat they pose to international trade routes do not conform to the fault lines of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza. They threaten Egypt's revenues from the Suez Canal, Saudi Arabia's security, and the interests of the United States and the West, and to a certain extent China's. Here Israel finds itself part of a wider global conflict, which also holds opportunities for strengthening ties with countries beyond the fault lines of the Gaza conflict.

A US Perspective

Nadav Tamir, J Street, Mitvim Board Member

The Biden Administration maintained its public support of the campaign against Hamas, exerting pressure on Israel behind closed doors to change its military tactics and strive to end the military phase of its anti-Hamas campaign. Politico reported that the administration had set Dec. 31 as a target date for ending the fighting. Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer denied the report, but Blinken reportedly did tell members of Israel's war cabinet that they should not count on international support for months of fighting.

Israel's war cabinet was reportedly updated on the increasing pressure being exerted on the Biden Administration over its absolute support for Israel. This difficulty stems not only from domestic political considerations, but also from the position of several governments in the Middle East which the administration needs for the day-after strategy.

The United States vetoed a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire. Of the council's 15 members, the United States was the only one to vote "nay", generating criticism by the left wing of the Democratic Party, as well as by Arab countries that supported the proposal.

Six US soldiers have been killed in the Middle East in attacks on their bases in Syria and Iraq since the start of the Gaza war, prompting growing concern in Washington that additional American casualties will hamper administration support for Israel's war.

The Biden Administration is concerned that calling for a ceasefire could result in a public confrontation with Netanyahu, angering Republicans and the hawkish segments of American Jewry. With this potential for confrontation in mind, some within the administration believe the US should demand a ceasefire in the near future so that the clash with Netanyahu will occur in January, as far away as possible from the November 2024 presidential election date.

A European Perspective

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

Ostensibly, the EU's position has not undergone formal change and it maintains support for Israel's elimination of Hamas. But the growing support by most European leaders for a ceasefire, even if for humanitarian reasons, creates a head-on clash between the two goals. In other words, some Europeans are trying to have their cake and eat it too – backing both the elimination of Hamas and a ceasefire. France took the lead on this position, voting (8.12) along with 12 non-European states in favor of a Security Council ceasefire resolution tabled

by Secretary-General Guterres. This despite France's declared support for the struggle against Hamas, including practical cooperation with Israel on the issue.

Yet again the Security Council resolution did not include a condemnation of the Oct. 7 Hamas massacre in Israel. The UK was the only Security Council member to abstain, reiterating Israel's right to defend itself against Hamas, but also noting that the number of Gaza civilians killed was shocking and civilians must be protected. The US vetoed the resolution, arguing that a ceasefire would have left Hamas intact and undermined Palestinian prospects for a better life. The scheduled meeting (11.12) of the European Union's Council of Foreign Ministers and the resolutions adopted there, as well as the leaks from its deliberations, will attest to the extent of change in the position of the organization's 27 member states to Israel's detriment.

In general, the war in Gaza is a bit less dominant in Europe's headlines. After dozens of European leaders and senior ministers visited Israel in the initial weeks of the war, the flow of visitors dwindled, as have the demonstrations in Europe on both sides of the divide, but warnings of terrorist attacks and rising demonstrations of anti-Semitism remain high.

The EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy Josep Borrell told foreign ministers of the Union for the Mediterranean (27.11), which was convened without Israeli representation, that Israeli-Palestinian peace had become a strategic need for the Euro-Mediterranean community, urging the creation of a coalition for peace. Commission President von der Leyen said (28.11) that "an Israeli-Palestinian solution is now or never."

Many European countries joined an international task force (27.11) led by Israel and the United States to thwart money transfers to Hamas. Germany and the Netherlands are the European countries leading the force, and many more have joined. The EU is also formulating additional sanctions on senior Hamas figures and commanders. France, for example, froze Yahya Sinwar's assets.

Europe is also monitoring the situation in the West Bank, fearing escalation. Like the United States, France and Belgium announced plans to ban the entry of extremist settlers into their territory and to freeze their assets. Germany is considering similar measures. The text of an EU resolution on the matter also includes increasing sanctions against Hamas. However, Hungary may try to veto the sanctions against settlers if the resolution comes to a vote in the Council, leaving individual member states to act unilaterally on the matter. Borrell condemned Israel's recent budgetary allocation of funds for the settlements.

Borrell's position reflects the multiplicity of conflicting European goals. He calls for a ceasefire, rails against the high Palestinian death toll and urges more humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, but also reiterates that Hamas cannot be allowed to control Gaza and should be replaced by the Palestinian Authority. As noted above, as long as the Hamas leadership has not been toppled, these goals clash with each other.

A Jordanian Perspective

Prof. Ronen Yitzhak, Western Galilee Academic College

Jordan continued its intense efforts to mobilize international pressure on Israel to end the war and promote a political process based on the two-state solution, accusing Israel of committing war crimes in Gaza.

In a Nov. 29 letter marking the anniversary of the 1947 Partition Plan, King Abdullah wrote that "the war must end." He linked the fate of the Palestinians during the 1948 war to their current plight, and blamed Israel. The king accused Israel of committing "war crimes" by denying Gaza Palestinians water, electricity, food and medicine, and called on the international community to increase humanitarian aid to the enclave. Abdullah promised to stand by the Palestinians until they achieve their full rights. He warned that only a political solution based on two states can guarantee peace and security for both Palestinians and Israelis, not military operations.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safadi made similar remarks at a special session of the UN Security Council on Nov. 29, saying the Council's silence and lack of real action against Israel allow it to continue the war. He claimed that Israel was to blame for the Palestinians' situation because it had sabotaged peace efforts over the past 30 years. "Whoever wants to defend his own people does not steal the rights of another people," he said. Occupation and peace are contradictions in terms, Safadi added, saying Jordan seeks a just, comprehensive and stable peace that respects the Palestinians' right to an independent state.

Jordan also took advantage of the Dubai climate conference to highlight the Palestinian issue, with King Abdullah telling participants (1.12) that "climate change cannot be talked about apart from the human tragedy that is happening around us." He spoke about the plight of the Palestinians, the uprooting of more than 1.5 million Palestinians from their homes, and the Palestinians killed and wounded as a result of the war. The situation in Gaza is dire due to shortages of food and potable water, and climate threats exacerbate the tragedy of war for Palestinians, the monarch said. On the sidelines of the conference, Abdullah met with US Vice President Kamala Harris and voiced concern over Israel's continued attempts to separate Gaza from the West Bank. He reiterated his call to end the war and renew the political process based on the two-state solution, delivering a similar message in a telephone conversation with US President Biden (7.12).

Meanwhile demonstrations against the war continued, with their focus shifting from the Israeli embassy to the US embassy in Amman, reflecting public anger at Washington that is perceived as primarily responsible for renewal of the Gaza war after the weeklong ceasefire. While, the scope and size of the demonstrations has declined, Muslim Brotherhood activists in Jordan were particularly prominent among the crowds.

According to a public opinion poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies in Amman and published on November 26, the Gaza war is of concern to the Jordanian public. According to the survey, 79% of Jordanians are interested in events in Gaza, obtaining their information from two main sources: social networks and Al-Jazeera, considered Jordan's most popular news channel. The survey also shows that a majority of Jordanians (about 66%) support the Hamas attack on Israel, and most (about 75%) believe Israel is committing genocide in the Gaza Strip.

Indeed, Jordan's broad support for Hamas is reflected not only in ongoing demonstrations but also in a consumer boycott of international chains that support Israel and operate in Jordan. Starbucks, which has announced plans to close its stores in Jordan citing "lack of profitability", is just one of dozens of international retailers affected by the boycott since the outbreak of the war. The H&M fashion giant intends to pull out of Jordan, too. Although the public has welcomed these moves, the store closures could have a negative impact on the Jordanian economy and increase unemployment, which currently officially stands at 22%.

Jordan continued its efforts to increase humanitarian aid to residents of the Gaza Strip, hosting a coordination meeting of international, Arab, and Islamic aid organizations in Amman (30.11). In addition to the aid it organized for Gaza in late November in cooperation with UNICEF, and fundraising with the support of the Hashemite charitable organization, Jordan continued to transfer support to the Jordanian military hospital in Khan Yunis that opened on Nov. 27 with 145 Jordanian staff. By order of King Abdullah, urgent aid was delivered to the hospital on a Jordanian military plane (7.12) for the fourth time since it opened.

Despite accusing Israel of war crimes and of the deterioration of relations with Jordan, Jordanian Prime Minister Bisher Al-Khasawneh made it clear that the peace treaty between the countries would not be abrogated. In an interview with Jordan's official news channel (26.11), he claimed that canceling the peace treaty meant declaring war. The strategic relations between Israel and Jordan are important not only to both countries, but also to the United States and Western countries. Moreover, the prime minister rejected calls by parliamentarians and the Jordanian public to revoke the gas agreement and other agreements with Israel. The prime minister's remarks not only express the kingdom's official position towards Israel (for those who questioned the future of the peace agreement between the countries), they were made on official media and directed at Arab ears in general, and Jordanians in particular.

An Iranian Perspective

Dr. Gil Murciano, CEO Mitvim

Iran continued to exploit the war in Gaza to improve its global and regional standing. This effort has included strengthening ties with Russia to limit US and Western influence, with President Raisi visiting Russia (7.12) and consulting with President Putin, inter alia, on the war in Gaza. At the same time, Foreign Minister Lavrov and his Iranian counterpart signed an agreement designed to counter Western unilateral sanctions. Iran also continued efforts to enhance its regional influence while attempting to downgrade Israel's regional ties. In this context, Iran has been using calls for solidarity with the Palestinians in Gaza to blur the distinction between the Shiite axis it leads and the Sunni Arab states.

At the same time, Iran continues to advance its nuclear program, contrary to the spirit of the understandings that were discussed with the United States on the eve of the war in Gaza (thawing Iranian funds in exchange for stopping Iranian uranium enrichment). A harsh IAEA report (15.11) accused Iran of upgrading its enrichment facilities and increasing the rate of uranium enrichment to 60%. Iran is also restricting IAEA inspections of its activities. These actions, along with the Iranian foreign minister's statements (9.12) about the futility of a new agreement in the spirit of the JPCOA, cast doubt on prospects of previous understandings blocking progress of Iran's nuclear program in the coming months.

On the military level, friction increased between the IDF and Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iranian subordinate militias in Syria. One confrontation led to the deaths of two senior IRGC officers in an Israeli airstrike in Syria last week. At the same time, Iranian militias in Iraq increased their hostilities against American targets, with the US embassy in Baghdad attacked for the first time (8.12) since the war began.

A Red Sea Perspective

Dr. Moshe Terdiman, guest researcher, Mitvim

The war in the Red Sea arena escalated last week with Houthi and Iranian attacks on American cargo ships, tankers and destroyers in the southern Red Sea and western Indian Ocean, and the selective blocking of the Red Sea to Israeli-flagged, operated or owned vessels. On Nov. 26, gunmen attacked and boarded a tanker belonging to a UK company owned by Israeli shipping magnate Eyal Ofer. A US Navy regained control of the ship and freed it from the militants. The Houthis also fired two ballistic missiles at the tanker that missed their target. On November 29, a US warship intercepted a drone launched at it by the Houthis. On December 3, the Houthis attacked three commercial vessels in the southern Red Sea. On December 4, the British Navy's Trade Management Department announced that a drone had been launched at a cargo ship in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The ship was not damaged. The United States issued a statement accusing Iran of allowing these attacks. Indeed, according to official intelligence sources, senior Iranian official Abdel Rida Yusuf Shahla'i led the Nov. 19 abduction of the Galaxy Leader.

As a result of the Houthi attacks, Israeli-owned ships have started changing their routes. ZIM announced (29.11) that it was diverting its ships from the Suez Canal, which would cause a delay of almost 30 days in the arrival of shipments and containers in Israel. Transportation prices are also expected to increase following the extension of the shipping route. On Nov. 30, the Danish shipping giant Maersk, announced that it was diverting the Red Sea route of two ships linked to Israel. The Gaza war has already resulted in increased rates for vessels entering Israeli ports from China, in contrast to the shipping price declines from China to Mediterranean ports over the past month. Also, shipping companies are forced to pay higher insurance premiums in addition to extra payments for security services. They are therefore demanding greater military protection on Middle East maritime routes due to fears of disruptions to world trade, including oil supplies.

Israel and the United States are working to secure Israeli and international shipping in the Red Sea. Israel has approached a number of countries, including Japan and Britain, proposing a task force to protect shipping lanes in the southern Red Sea as part of a multinational coalition against the Houthis. The United States is also holding talks with other countries on establishing such a task force to ensure the safe passage of ships through the Red Sea. Moreover, Bloomberg News reported that the US is discussing a military operation against the Houthis with the Gulf states, but the talks were still at a preliminary stage and the preference, for now, was to avoid military action. This is apparently because Saudi Arabia has asked the United States to show restraint in its response against the Houthis in order to prevent the war between Israel and Hamas from escalating into a large-scale regional conflict. The United States, for its part, has also asked Israel not to attack the Houthis for fear of expanding the war.

At the same time, the Houthis continued to launch drones and surface-to-surface missiles at Israel, which were intercepted by American ships, Saudi Arabia, the Israel Air Force and Navy deployed in the Red Sea for defense missions, and Israeli air defense.

A Turkish Perspective

Dr. Nimrod Goren, Founder and President Mitvim, Diplomeds

Turkey's policy on the war in Gaza remained unchanged, with hostile statements by Turkish President Erdoğan regarding Israel's military actions and the Western support of Israel. The renewed tension between Israel and Turkey due to the war is already negatively affecting the scope of relations between the countries, and is evident in data relating to trade and tourism.

Erdoğan has focused his condemnation on Netanyahu, arguing that the Israeli prime minister should be put on trial for war crimes. He attacked Israel over the extent of its damage to Gaza, claiming that Netanyahu is acting out of personal motives, thereby endangering the security and stability of the entire region. Specifically, the Turkish president expressed opposition to an Israeli-proposed buffer zone inside the Gaza Strip, saying that Gaza should be under full Palestinian control.

Erdoğan also attacked the U.S. for vetoing a UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, claiming that the Council had become a "council for the security of Israel." Erdoğan took the opportunity to once again call for reform in the composition and functioning of the Security Council, which he has been doing for years.

Turkey also warned Israel of serious consequences should it attack Hamas leaders on Turkish soil, following the Israeli threat to assassinate Hamas leaders abroad, wherever Israel can find them. This message was conveyed to Israel through intelligence back channels, but was also echoed publicly by Erdoğan.

Turkish Foreign Minister Fidan is taking part in the ministerial contact group established by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the Arab League following their joint November summit in Riyadh. The group has been holding meetings in various capitals.

In recent days, it met in Washington D.C. with U.S. Secretary of State Blinken, with whom Fidan also met separately. In media interviews, Fidan criticized the U.S.' Security Council veto, underscored his disappointment with the U.S., and noted that it remained isolated in its position.

A Hellenic Alliance Perspective

Former Ambassador Michael Harari, Policy Fellow, Mitvim

The main attention in Greece and Cyprus was focused on Turkish President Erdoğan's historic visit to Athens, and on the rapprochement between the two countries. The Greek media is cautious, and perhaps understandably skeptical, about the "honeymoon" between the two countries, and its practical consequences. Cyprus has watched the thaw in Ankara-Athens relations with great interest, and is likely wondering whether it will come at its expense. The Cypriot media has discussed such a possibility, but the political level has not.

Public discourse in Cyprus regarding the Gaza war focused on Britain's use of its military bases on the island (which are under UK sovereignty) to transfer equipment and weapons to Israel. The opposition raised the issue with the government, which provided a laconic response saying Cyprus is not a participant in the conflict. The government is right, since according to the constitution, the Cypriot government has no authority over activities at the two British bases on the island, and London usually informs the Cypriots of its actions, but without asking their permission. This has no practical significance other than serving as an excuse on the part of the opposition, mainly the Communist Party, to criticize the government.