CHAPTER 3

Lessons from the Middle East's Unfinished War

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The conflicts in the Middle East that were triggered by Hamas' October 2023 attack on Israel continue to reverberate. Israel's military campaign, spanning seven fronts, has weakened Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran while contributing to the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Yet, Hamas endures as a dominant Palestinian actor, sidelining rivals, while Iran nears nuclear capability and extremists have gained ground in Syria. With unresolved tensions, looming threats, and shifting Western policies, the region remains unstable. This chapter examines the complex and varied consequences of these conflicts on regional security dynamics, highlighting key lessons and trends to inform policy responses and future strategies.

Press conference after the Arab-Islamic summit on the response to Israel's conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 11 November 2024. *Hamad I Mohammed / Reuters*

Seen from one perspective, the outcome of more than a year of fighting in the Middle East seems clear: Israel has surpassed expectations, decimating Hamas and Hezbollah, exposing Iran to further attack, and contributing to the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Seen from this perspective, Israel's campaign has been a vindication of its focus on and investment in military power and the sort of inventive intelligence work for which it is renowned. Israel has fought on seven fronts – Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen and the Red Sea – and prevailed.

Yet from another angle the picture looks very different. Hamas has not only survived but remains the dominant Palestinian political actor; its envoys have negotiated with Israel in Doha, its fighters mounted the spectacle attending the release of Israeli hostages, and its affiliates have been released en masse from Israeli prisons as the ceasefire has unfolded. Its domestic rivals, Fatah and the Palestinian Authority, have been cowed into silence or relegated to irrelevance. In Syria, the Assad regime was succeeded by UN- and US-designated terrorists, and in Lebanon, Iran is already working to rebuild its humbled proxy Hezbollah.[1] Iran itself is vulnerable, but is also on the cusp of developing nuclear weapons[2] – a dangerous combination portending further conflict. As for Israel, its once-touted regional partnerships have been strained, it has been isolated internationally, and its top leaders have been threatened with arrest in Europe and elsewhere. The Middle East landscape has undoubtedly changed, but precisely how is a matter of perspective.

Drawing conclusions regarding the regional war that followed Hamas' 7 October 2023 attack on Israel is difficult in large part because it is not over. Tenuous ceasefires took hold in Gaza and Lebanon in early 2025, but were not accompanied by diplomatic settlements essential to longer-term peace and stability. Violence resumed in Gaza in mid-March 2025, underscoring the fragility of the ceasefire and the absence of meaningful political progress. And further conflict is looming – both Turkey and Syria's new government are determined to see the power of Syrian Kurdish militias diminished; Yemen's Houthi rebels appear unlikely to give up their piracy in the Red Sea; and many Israelis perceive an opportunity to destroy Iran's nuclear program, the likes of which may not come again.

While conclusions may remain elusive, it is not too early to draw lessons from the conflict in the Middle East, and to consider the problems, opportunities, and trends that may stem from it in

the coming year. Indeed, it is vital to do so if regional and Western policymakers hope to extend and deepen the fragile calm now prevailing there.

Lesson 1: Terrorism Remains a Major Threat

Israeli officials had become inured to the threat posed by Hamas in the run-up to the 7 October attacks. There appear to have been two primary reasons for this. First, it had become conventional wisdom in the Israeli security community that Iran and its proxies – especially Hezbollah and Shia militias in Syria and Iraq – posed the greatest threat to Israel, and indeed the only existential threat to the state, period. Second, to the extent Israel's security establishment was focused on Palestinians, it was focused not on Gaza but on the West Bank, in large part because that territory, unlike Gaza, was home to thousands of Israeli citizens.[3] Moreover, Israeli officials labored under the impression that the Hamas leadership in Gaza had embraced a measure of pragmatism, and that they had reached a modus vivendi according to which Israel funneled Qatari cash to Hamas, which in exchange would refrain from targeting Israel. In 2021, the then-head of Israeli Military Intelligence reportedly asserted that Hamas had 'a growing commitment to governing,' and the then-deputy chief of staff of the IDF (and later chief of staff) Herzi Halevi said that 'Hamas has gone in the direction of an arrangement and calm.'[4] Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu went so far as to describe supporting Hamas as part of Israel's strategy to thwart a bigger threat – the establishment of a Palestinian state.[5]

It would be hypocritical of Western policymakers, however, to criticize Israel too harshly for the approach it took to Hamas. American policymakers have sought for the past two decades to refocus their attention from combating terrorism to countering 'great powers' such as China and Russia.[6] Former President Barack Obama went a step further, infamously seeking to convince Americans they faced a greater threat from slipping in the bathtub than they did from terrorism.[7] Yet US public opinion has remained stubbornly focused on terrorism: as of March 2024, 71 percent of Americans viewed international terrorism as a 'critical threat,' while only 63 percent and 50 percent said the same of Chinese and Russian military power, respectively.[8] Nor have Western policymakers shied away from the kind of bargains with terrorists that Israel made with Hamas – the US military works closely in Syria with the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units), which is for all intents and purposes a branch of the US-designated

terrorist group PKK. And in 2015 the United States struck a nuclear agreement with Iran that did not require the Iranian regime to abandon its support for terrorism, vaguely hoping instead that the deal would result in Tehran moderating its policies across the board despite facing no obligation to do so.

Israel's dealings with Hamas are indicative of two errors, in which it is hardly alone. First, it allowed its own agenda to dictate the seriousness with which it regarded threats, rather than allowing the evidence on threats to shape its security agenda. The warnings and red flags preceding the 7 October attack were there, but they were played down.[9] Second, it believed that its own pragmatism in dealing with Hamas was reciprocated – that is, that the Hamas leadership, like the Israeli leadership, was striking a deal because its priorities had shifted.[10] In fact, as Hamas official Khalil al-Hayya later noted, Hamas was deceiving Israel about its intentions as it prepared for war, and funneling the resources that it received via Israel from Qatar toward the same end.[11]

Lesson 2: The Iranian Model is Found Wanting

If Hamas surprised Israel with its brutal effectiveness on 7 October, Iran did the opposite. Prior to the war, the two most feared weapons in the Iranian arsenal were its proxies, especially Hezbollah, and its missile force, reputed to be the largest and most advanced in the region. Both had proven to be effective in the past; Hezbollah surprised the Israel Defense Forces with its capabilities during a 2006 war, Iranian proxies trained and aided by Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) frustrated far superior forces in Iraq in the 2000s, and Iranian drones and cruise missiles were used to devastating effect in a 2019 attack against Saudi oil facilities. Yet, these same tools failed Iran in its more recent conflict with Israel.

There are at least three reasons for Iran's ineffectiveness. First, Iran ceded the initiative to its own proxies. Iran bears ultimate responsibility for the events of 7 October – Hamas could never have mounted the attacks without Iranian training, funding, and arms – and reportedly knew about the plans in advance.[12] Yet the attacks themselves were seemingly the initiative of Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. Once the attacks occurred, however, Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies joined in, raising the stakes dramatically for both Israel and Iran. The potential to be dragged into war by its proxies, each of which has its own degrees of agency, has always been the major shortcoming in Iran's strategy of so-called "forward defense", which

has aimed to stoke proxy conflict on its adversaries' flanks to distract focus from Iran itself.

Second, Iran escalated against Israel despite the latter enjoying escalation dominance. As the conflict dragged on, Israel intensified its attacks against the forces arrayed against it not just in Gaza, but on other fronts, culminating in a strike on Damascus on 1 April 2024 that killed the commander of Iranian forces and proxies in Lebanon and Syria.[13] While many analysts expected that Iran, in keeping with past practice, would be patient in exacting its revenge, it instead chose escalation of its own, launching a barrage of drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles at Israel on 13 April 2024.[14] It proved to be a strategic error – Iran discovered that while its missile arsenal possessed value as a deterrent, it was far less effective when employed against a foe as advanced as Israel, and it invited further escalation from Israel for which Iran had no subsequent answer. Iran mounted a similar and equally ineffective attack against Israel in October 2024 following the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, only to see its air defenses and missile production capacity devastated in Israel's retaliatory strike.[15]

Finally, Iran erred in striking at Israel directly rather than via proxy as it had in the past. Prior to Iran's 13 April salvo against Israel, the two sides kept to an implicit bargain – neither openly attacked the other, but rather waged their war indirectly and in the shadows. US and Israeli officials often inveighed against this implicit arrangement, arguing that it favored the weaker Iran. Ultimately the taboo was broken by Iran itself, even though Tehran had done little over the preceding decades to prepare for conventional war, and had no air force, navy, army, or other conventional forces with which to wage one. The reasons for this shift are unclear, but possible explanations include internal agitation by elements of Iran's security forces against the more cautious approach; an emotional response to the killing of figures such as Nasrallah and Zahedi who were reputedly close to Iran's Supreme Leader; or, quite simply, Iran's belief in its own exaggerated claims and overestimation of its capabilities.

Lesson 3: Regional Integration and Leadership Still Have Far to Go

Prior to 7 October, the two most salient geopolitical trends in the Middle East were increasing regional integration stemming from the signing of the Abraham Accords and the subsequent development of security ties among some of the most important states in the region, and the growing regional and global ambitions of wealthy Arab

Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.[16] It was only weeks prior to the attack against Israel that Saudi Arabia, for example, hosted a global conference focused on achieving peace in Ukraine. The aftermath of 7 October illustrated the limits of these trends.[17]

Regional integration accelerated by the Abraham Accords was first and foremost an economic prospect, and secondarily related to security – but only some aspects of it. Israel and its new Arab partners saw clear mutual interest in expanding trade and investment relations, which even today stand to benefit the entire region in the form of increased regional economic growth and employment. Perhaps more significantly, they also expanded their military cooperation.[18] Their willingness to do so surprised many, and it showed its value over the past year and a half of war, particularly when the United States coordinated a region-wide defensive response to Iran's April and October attacks, which though aimed at Israel threatened the entire region.

Despite its importance and effectiveness, military coordination remained limited – it did not extend to a broader conception of shared security, even though it was grounded in a common desire to counter shared threats such as Iran, its proxies, and militant extremists. When Hamas attacked Israel, there was no evidence of security consultations between Israel and its newfound regional partners – although Hamas and its patron, Iran, were counted as foes by all. Nor was there meaningful coordination in countering the threats posed by Hezbollah or the Houthis; both groups were able to neutralize any effective Israeli-Arab coordination by claiming that their actions were taken in support of a Palestinian political cause, which it was in fact being set back with each passing day. Instead, the region fell back on an older model of military coordination, working closely with the United States on a bilateral basis but not with one another.

At the same time, despite the danger the outbreak of war posed to their interests, leading Arab states did not come forward with any meaningful diplomatic initiatives to quell the fighting or even to bolster any Palestinian alternative to Hamas. This is not to say that they were inactive; an 'Arab-Islamic Ministerial Delegation' visited Washington and other capitals in December 2023, and in September 2024 Saudi Arabia together with the EU and others organized a ministerial meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to launch a 'Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution.'[19]

None of these efforts yielded results, and they tended to downplay the role of Hamas and Iran in events and instead placed the onus for peace on Israel. An Egyptian statement, for example, described the aim of the December 2023 ministerial visit to Washington as urging the Biden administration 'to play a broader role in pressuring the Israeli occupation to implement an immediate ceasefire,'[20] never mentioning the 7 October attack that had occurred just weeks prior. The only Arab state playing a major role in the diplomacy that led to the Gaza ceasefire was Qatar, and that was only by dint of its close relations with Hamas – relations that Washington and Israel have made pragmatic use of, but which do not endear Doha to the West or to its neighbors. Egypt and the UAE, among others, played roles as well, but as in the past it fell to Washington to lead.

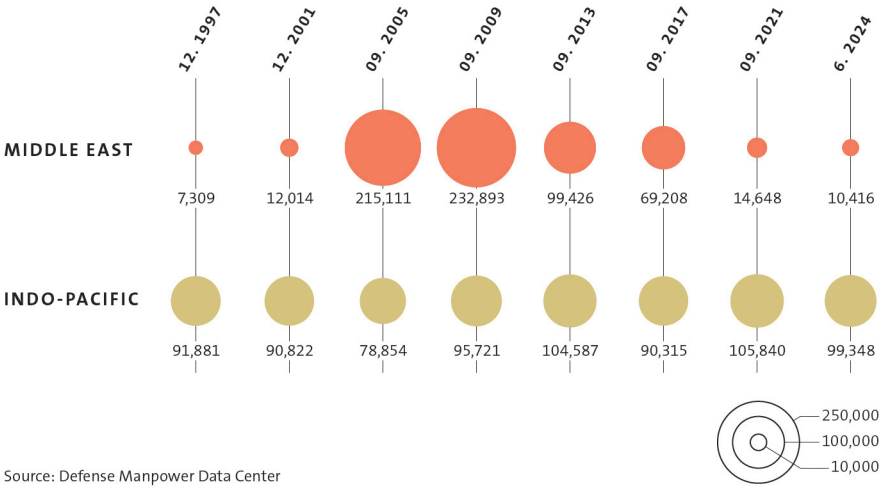
Lesson 4: The United States Remains the Only Significant External Actor

If leading regional states were largely absent from the diplomatic efforts to broker ceasefires in the Middle East, so too were the United States' geopolitical rivals, Russia and China. Indeed, both Moscow and Beijing played spoiler roles, albeit in different ways.

Russia has been, all things considered, a minor actor in the Middle East conflict. Its most significant contribution to events was likely its disinvestment in Syria due to its focus on the war in Ukraine, which almost certainly contributed to the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024. Prior to this, however, Russia engaged in far more extensive cooperation with Iran and its proxies than is commonly understood.[21] Moscow provided practical air defense assistance to both Syria and Iran, diplomatic support to Hamas and other Iranian proxies, and even material support to Yemen's Houthis.[22] While Russian support for the Assad regime appeared to have been motivated by the desire to hang on to the last vestige of Moscow's Soviet-era influence in a key region, the other aspects of Russia's regional policy were likely aimed squarely at undermining the dominant position of the United States.

China, for its part, engaged in a regional policy after 7 October that was equal parts performative and self-interested.[23] As US-China competition has intensified in recent years, Beijing has appeared to see every significant global conflict as a proxy contest with the United States – providing diplomatic and material support to Russia's invasion of Ukraine despite its previously cordial ties with Kyiv, for example. China's response to 7 October continued this trend, as Beijing sought

US-Troops in Two Theatres



Source: Defense Manpower Data Center

to harness the international opprobrium against the Israeli response and direct it against the United States, especially in the so-called "Global South." Beijing condemned Israeli actions in unstinting terms and generally refused to condemn or even criticize Hamas.

The Chinese and Russian roles in the conflict stand in contrast to that played by Washington. The United States engaged in diplomacy to bring about ceasefires in Lebanon and Gaza, and also dispatched forces to defend its regional allies and to defend interests shared with partners globally, such as freedom of navigation in the Red Sea. Beijing, in contrast, sought to cut deals with the Houthis to protect its own shipping[24] and may have provided the group with missile components.[25]

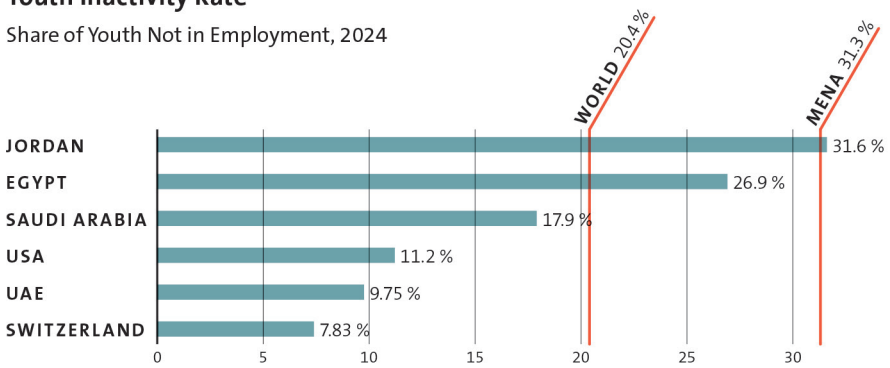
Yet the conflict also underscored the limits even of Washington's willingness and capacity to address crises in the Middle East. For example, the US Navy proved unable to stop Houthi attacks on commercial shipping, owing in part to a primarily defensive strategy. Perhaps even more significantly, the combination of conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East also raised questions about US capacity to supply two partners in high-intensity wars simultaneously.

Lesson 5: Tactical Thinking Reigned Among International Actors

From almost the first day of the Gaza conflict, the focus of the United States and other actors, both regional and international, was on achieving a ceasefire, both in Gaza and Lebanon. Far less evident was any serious

Youth Inactivity Rate

Share of Youth Not in Employment, 2024



Source: International Labour Organization

thinking, much less effort, focused on achieving longer-term stability in the region or addressing the issues that contributed to the outbreak of conflict in the first place. This stands in stark contrast with past American diplomacy. When the second intifada erupted in 2001, Washington produced not only the so-called 'Roadmap for Peace' in an attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it dramatically reshaped the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, built a new Palestinian Authority Security Force, and launched an institution-building campaign aimed at improving life for both Palestinians and Israelis.[26] Likewise, in the aftermath of the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, Washington engaged in an intensive and high-level effort to bolster pro-sovereignty forces in Lebanon.[27]

No such efforts were mounted this time, at least not at the level or with the intensity and resource commitments of past efforts. This stems from several factors: US and Western priorities are elsewhere, first and foremost in the Indo-Pacific and secondarily in Europe; the failure of past efforts weighs on American and Western policymakers; and American prestige in the region has declined even as Washington's role has remained indispensable. Yet such efforts are arguably needed now more than ever. On the one hand, there is danger that the economic, social, and political factors that contributed to regional uprisings in 2011 remain unaddressed, except in isolated cases. On the other hand, there is a greater opportunity today to effect change than at any point in the last several decades, as actors such as Hezbollah and Assad lose their grip on power or disappear entirely.

From these lessons, it is possible to anticipate what the coming months and beyond hold for the Middle East. At least five trends are likely to have the greatest impact in 2025.

Trend 1: The Conflict Continues

As of mid-March, violence had resumed in Gaza while a tenuous ceasefire continued to hold in southern Lebanon. Hope for the future is dim on both fronts, for three reasons. First, in Gaza, Hamas remains intact and apparently in charge – though seriously degraded – despite sixteen months of withering attacks by Israel. With Israeli forces withdrawing from Gaza's interior and no alternative security force has been willing or able to take their place in providing security in Gaza. With no alternative Palestinian government ready to return to the Strip, there are few obstacles to Hamas reconstituting itself with Iran's aid in the coming months. This outcome would represent a grievous failure for the Netanyahu government and portend an eventual resumption of the conflict.

Second, in Lebanon, Iran is likely already at work trying to rebuild Hezbollah, which though decimated has not been destroyed. Again, with Israeli forces withdrawing, there is no force apparently up to the task of confronting Iran and Hezbollah. The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) would require significant strengthening and a newfound willpower to take on this task, and UN peacekeeping forces have proven feckless to date. Hezbollah is a key strategic asset for Iran and while it may have underperformed in the recent conflict, Tehran will likely be more determined to rebuild it than its opponents will be to stop them.

This leads to the final and most serious likely locus of continued conflict in the region: Iran itself. Iranian aid will be key to rebuilding the military capacity of both Hamas and Hezbollah, and nothing in Iranian behavior suggests Tehran has been deterred from doing so. It is likely, if not probable, that Israel will conclude that the most effective way to prevent their adversaries from regrouping is to cut them off from their key source of support, namely Iran. Furthermore, many Israelis believe the current situation represents an unprecedented opportunity, as previous Israeli strikes have left Iran vulnerable, bereft both of defenses as well as retaliatory options. An Israel-Iran war is likelier in 2025 than at any time in the past several decades.

Trend 2: The Specter of Nuclear Proliferation

Iranian leaders likely understand their vulnerability as well as Israel does. Combined with the poor performance of their most capable military

Iran's Nuclear Progress

	November 2020	November 2024
Breakout time	3.5 months	One week or less
Weapons' worth of weapons-grade uranium Iran could produce in six months	2	16*
Low-enriched uranium stockpile**	2442.9 kg	2594.8 kg
Maximum enrichment level to date	20%	84%
20% enriched uranium stockpile	0 kg	839.2 kg
60% enriched uranium stockpile	0 kg	182.3 kg
Installed advanced centrifuges	512	11,731
Fordow enrichment capacity	940 SWU/year	2,698 SWU/year

* At the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant alone – buried deep underground – Iran could produce sufficent WGU for four nuclear weapons in two weeks.
** All the enriched uranium nubers are U mass equivalent; UF6 (uranium hexfluoride) mass would yield highernumbers.
*** Separative Work Unit

Source: Washington Institute

tools, whether proxies or missiles, this vulnerability almost certainly increases Iran's incentive to develop nuclear weapons. Were it to make the decision to build nuclear weapons, Iran could do so quickly – it could produce sufficient weapons-grade uranium (WGU) for a single nuclear weapon in just days, and for sixteen nuclear weapons in six months or less. Once it produced the WGU, Iran would require at least several more months[28] to turn it into a deployable nuclear weapon, but this may not matter. If Iran were able to move the WGU undetected, it could conduct weaponization activities away from the prying eyes of nuclear inspectors and Western intelligence, a task presumably made easier by Iran's decreased cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in recent years.

A nuclear-armed Iran would pose a grave threat to the Middle East and to the world. A nuclear weapon would serve as a powerful deterrent against attack, perhaps emboldening Iran to increase missile and terrorist attacks as well as its proliferation of advanced arms without fear of consequence. Possessing a nuclear weapon could strengthen the Iranian regime's grip on power or, just as concerning, could fall into uncertain hands should Iran descend into the political

chaos from which it seems ever a step away. Furthermore, Iranian development of a nuclear weapon would almost certainly prompt other countries in the region – Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt among them – to seek nuclear weapons of their own. Adding to the danger, Iran and perhaps others would be tempted to adopt a first-use nuclear weapons doctrine, given their small initial arsenal sizes, lack of secure second-strike capabilities, and lack of strategic depth.

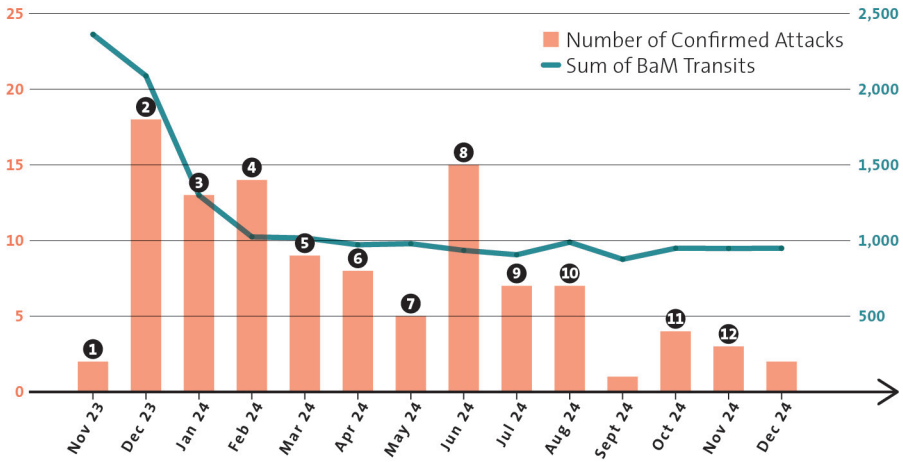
The increased likelihood that Iran might pursue a nuclear weapon – which even Iranian officials speak openly about now, despite the previous taboo on doing so – presents a double dilemma for Western policymakers. First, it increases the chances that Israel will strike Iran, or that the United States will consider itself to be forced to do so itself despite a desire to avoid further entanglement in Middle Eastern conflicts. Second, it raises questions concerning what, precisely, US and Western policy will be toward allies who seek to develop their own nuclear capabilities to match Iran.[29] The temptation in Washington will be to maintain a firm stance against nuclear sharing, but with American extended deterrence at its weakest in decades and with Russia, China, and perhaps others standing by as alternative nuclear partners, such an approach may prove futile to stop allied proliferation.

Trend 3: The Convergence of State and Nonstate-based Threats

While it is fashionable in the United States and Europe to speak of countering terrorism and countering great powers as two mutually exclusive national security orientations, the past 18 months of conflict illustrate why this tidy bifurcation is misleading. While it is true that Israel's adversaries in this conflict were primarily nonstate actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis, they were actors that had largely hijacked the states governing the territories in which they were based and were trained, funded, and equipped by external state actors pursuing their own interests. This phenomenon is of course not new. Iran has fought via proxy since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, and Russia has been employing mercenaries and other proxy groups in Ukraine, Africa, and elsewhere for years. Even China finds it convenient to operate its forces under the guise of fishing fleets, or to send commercial vessels to engage in sabotage far afield.[30]

The Houthis illustrate perfectly why non-state actors are so valuable to states such as Iran, Russia, and China in confronting the United States and its partners. For a relatively small cost, utilizing

Transit in Bab al-Mandeb and Confirmed Houthi Attacks on Commercial Ships



1. Houthis hijack the Galaxy Leader.
2. Maersk pauses transit through Red Sea/Gulf of Aden. US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian formed.
3. USA/UK strike Houthi targets. Oil tanker catches fire for 1st time due to Houthi attack.
4. EUNAVFOR Aspides launched.
5. First ship (the Rubymar) sinks. Another ship is damaged and requires salvage operation.
6. First Houthi UAV attack on an MSC ship in Indian Ocean.
7. Ships linked to owners/operators trading with Israeli ports become targets.
8. Houthi USV sinks bulker for first time (the Tutor). Houthi attacks leave a second ship drifting. MSC ship attacked in the Arabian Sea.
9. Crude tanker attacked with Houthi USV (the Chios Lion).
10. Houthis attack Delta-linked tankers, severely damaging the Sounion which requires salvage operation.
11. Houthis resume using outdated shipping data to attack commercial ships.
12. Houthis continue looking for ships with Israeli-links. The Anadolu S attacked.

Sources: Lloyd's List Intelligence and TWI's Maritime Incident Tracker by Noam Raydan and Farzin Nadimi

both Cold War-era arsenals as well as newer weapons provided by Tehran and perhaps others or even produced indigenously in some cases, the Houthis have been able to shut down commercial shipping through the Red Sea and Suez Canal, and draw the US and other Western navies into an expensive and largely futile struggle to reopen these waterways. The Houthi strategy takes advantage not only of the asymmetry in cost between their arsenal and that of a modern military, but of Western reluctance to do more than defend

against Houthi missiles and drones. The benefits in turn to the Houthis' patrons are manifold – American and European naval vessels are drawn away from other theaters, their munitions are endlessly and seemingly fruitlessly expended, public opinion in the United States and Europe risks turning further against military interventions, and the Houthis themselves consolidate their domestic position and score an enormous propaganda coup.

While Western countries will undoubtedly need to retain the ability both to fight terrorism and to counter state rivals, they will also need to cope with the intersection of the two.[31] The options for doing so are not attractive. The values by which Western countries operate do not permit them to replicate the tactics of their rivals, with the negative consequences they entail for regional stability and the welfare of people in the affected countries. Nor are Western countries generally keen to retaliate against nonstate actors' state patrons, as demonstrated in the case of the Houthis: despite knowing that Iran was providing vital assistance to the group's piracy, the United States and others imposed no costs on Tehran for its malfeasance. The best option remaining – albeit one that requires patience and resources – is to deny nonstate actors safe haven in the first place by strengthening legitimate states and their institutions.

Trend 4: Opportunities in the Levant

Fortunately, one positive outcome of the recent conflict is that the Middle East today presents unprecedented opportunities for filling ungoverned or poorly governed vacuums and denying room for Iranian proxies to operate. The two clearest such opportunities are in Lebanon and Syria.

In Lebanon, former army chief Joseph Aoun – no friend to Iran, close to the Saudis and to the United States – was elected president on the thirteenth attempt. Aoun likely succeeded only because Hezbollah in its weakened state was unable to mount effective opposition. After Aoun's election, Nawaf Salam was selected as Lebanon's new prime minister. Salam, most recently the President of the International Court of Justice, ran unsuccessfully for prime minister in 2022, losing to the pro-Syrian billionaire Najib Mikati. While Salam is not particularly close to the United States, he is regarded as far more pro-Western and closer to the Arab states than his predecessor. These changes, along with the death of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and the decimation of Hezbollah's ranks, set the stage for possible far-reaching reforms in Lebanon. However, as noted above, while Hezbollah may be in disarray, in remains formidable in the Lebanese

context. Relegating it permanently to the sidelines will require building up the formal institutions of the Lebanese state, particularly the LAF and the Internal Security Forces, and bolstering alternatives to Hezbollah within the Shia community of Lebanon.

In Syria, the Assad regime was swept aside after fourteen years of civil war by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), a UN- and US-designated terrorist group that nevertheless broke years ago from both Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State group. Assad's fall was made possible not only through years of sanctions and isolation, but by more recent events – the war in Ukraine which drew away Russian support, and the wider war in the Middle East which left Assad bereft of his Lebanese and Iranian allies. While Assad's fall has been greeted as welcome news in the West, HTS' ascent has been viewed warily given the group's make-up and ideology. While HTS leader (and self-proclaimed Syrian president) Ahmed al-Sharaa has reached out to the West and vowed to govern inclusively, his government seeks to apply Islamic law, does not reflect Syria's diverse ethnic and religious spectrum, includes in its ranks foreign jihadists, and is at odds with Syrian Kurdish militias allied with the West. Western governments have sought to engage al-Sharaa and HTS, but are mindful of parallels with the Afghan Taliban, whose promises to govern justly in hopes of attracting international aid and sanctions relief went unfulfilled.[32]

Though far from straightforward, the opportunities to restore a lost measure of sovereignty to both Syria and Lebanon and deny their use as way stations for the projection of Iranian power is without precedent. Seizing these opportunities will take not only time and resources, it will also require ruthless prioritization. American partners in the Middle East, perhaps including Israel, will likely urge Washington to overlook, for example, concerns about the inclusivity of the new government in Syria if it is willing to deny succor to Iranian forces. For its part, Washington may face a difficult choice between maintaining support for its longstanding Syrian Kurdish partners and cultivating good relations with the new government in Damascus – a decision which may be regarded as a geopolitical synecdoche for the broader tradeoff between strategies of counterterrorism and great power competition.

Trend 5: A Great Power, Over the Horizon

The opportunities in Syria and the Levant would have been welcomed by past US administrations, but arguably come at the wrong time for

Washington. Seizing both requires a willingness to engage and invest intensively in the Middle East. Idiosyncratic ideas such as a US takeover of Gaza aside, Washington appears headed largely in the opposite direction. The top US defense official for the Middle East has argued 'there are no vital or existential US interests' in the Middle East and has minimized the threat posed by Iran, which he asserted the United States counters only at the behest of Israel and Saudi Arabia.[33] The US Department of Defense is reportedly planning to withdraw troops from Syria and Iraq. While such attitudes are a break from the past, that is arguably the point – President Trump has voiced clearly his own disdain for US entanglements in the Middle East in the past, and many of his officials are determined to once and for all make the difficult choices they deem necessary for the United States to refocus its attention on other priorities, including first and foremost the Indo-Pacific.

To some extent the Trump administration's attitude is not simply a matter of choice. For several decades following the Cold War, the United States was able to act in the Middle East without significant worry about either peer rivals or the need to balance resources among different regions and conflicts. However, in recent years – as great power competition has returned and US capabilities have been allowed to decay – resource scarcity and competing priorities are real constraints on American policymaking. If in the past the United States possessed an excess of power (and perhaps spent it profligately), today it must husband its strength.[34]

This need not mean, however, the decline of American influence in the Middle East. The Biden administration demonstrated that the United States was able to surge forces into (and out of) the Middle East as needed, even against the backdrop of steadily declining force levels posted to the region. Furthermore, amid the noise of constantly shifting American policies on high-profile issues such as Iran and Israel, there has been an easily missed bipartisan policy signal – a steady effort to build the security capacity of key Middle East partners such as the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, and to improve coordination and cooperation among them. If successful, these efforts would ultimately aim to shift the burden of regional crisis management onto these partners, reserving US strength for high-end tasks, training, and strategic planning. The past 18 months of violent conflict demonstrates that this hoped-for future remains a distant one, but also suggests achieving it is possible. If regional states can

cooperate to defeat Iranian attacks, and their diplomatic accords survive the toxic and divisive atmosphere of this most recent conflict, then the ties United States and its partners have built are resilient indeed.

1 Dov Lieber et al., "Iran Is Funding Hezbollah via Suitcases Stuffed With Cash, Israel Warns," *Wall Street Journal,* 31.01.2025.

2 David Albright, "Going for the Bomb: Part I, Pathways and Timelines," *Institute for Science and International Security,* 07.11.2024.

3 For a further explanation, see Larry Hanauer / Michael P. Connell, "Political Priorities, Poor Intelligence Tradecraft, and the Suppression of Dissenting Views: Why Israel Failed to Warn of Hamas's October 7 Attack," *Institute for Defense Analysis,* September 2024.

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