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The Rise of Hamas: from regional to world-wide implications

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The geopolitical, operational and digital threat landscape changed dramatically with the Hamas (Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya, Islamic Resistance Movement; meaning zeal, passion) attack on Israel on the 7th of October 2023. In the deadliest Palestinian militant attack in Israel's history, 1.600 Hamas fighters from Gaza Strip rampaged through parts of southern Israel. In a coordinated simultaneous land, sea and air attack, Hamas struck killing 1.200 and injuring 3.400 Israelis and foreigners before retreating to Gaza Strip with 229 hostages.

Despite its reputation for maintaining the region's best fighting force and world's best intelligence capability, Israel failed to prevent and pre-empt the catastrophic attack. Israel's humiliation by Hamas has led to unprecedented aggression. Israel's overwhelming response has transformed the Middle East. On the one hand, the cycles of threat have exacerbated the tit-for-tat violence and incubated a new generation of fighters. On the other, the decades of strategic and surgical attacks by Israel have neither contained the threat nor pacified the population.

In its most recent iteration of brutality, Hamas mimics Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Despite steadfast US-led Western support to Tel Aviv, public, political, and diplomatic support for Palestinians and a two-state solution according to international law is surging, taking into consideration the legitimate political aspirations of the Palestinian people. Unlike ever before, the mounting death and injury of Palestinians and destruction and damage to their properties have led to protests and rallies worldwide. Time is running out for the Israeli offensive by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu; his short-sighted tactical divide-and-conquer approach has jeopardised both deterrence and defence.

Another very important impact of the Israel-Hamas war has been the freezing of the normalization process between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel, an event of historical magnitude that was on the horizon just before the beginning of hostilities. However, despite this setback, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has stated that he aims at resuming the normalization with Israel as soon as the war is over, again, only if a Palestinian state is on the table.

Russia is the international actor that might gain from this conflict, especially in the likelihood of a prolonged war, as Western public opinion and policymakers are now heavily focussed on the Middle East, sidelining the war in Ukraine. Moreover, the Russian government (that does not consider Hamas a terrorist organization) is trying to portray itself as a more-balanced international actor, in order to court the so-called "Global South" that does not subscribe to pro-Israeli Washington-aligned positions.

The Israel-Hamas War has again highlighted a mutating world:

- Russia, Iran, Qatar, Syria, Turkey, North Korea, Malaysia support Hamas;

- Muslim and Arab communities in their homelands are startled while they feel mobilised in the diaspora;

- Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia on the one hand publicly identify with the Arab street, on the other fear the Muslim Brotherhood, from which Hamas derived;

- Iran has just normalised its relationship with Riyadh, but its possible pre-eminence in the region is feared by major capitals in the Mashreq;

- At the same time Hezbollah is pressuring Israel, while the USA deployed preventively two aircraft carrier battle groups off the Lebanese coast and Iran is employing, for the time being, a controlled involvement strategy.

The issues that are looming in the background concern: a possible escalation on the Lebanese border and a possible conflagration in a regional war with one actor having nuclear weapons and another a nuclear potential.

Hamas, in the classic Muslim statecraft tradition, has built up in the years its support in the ummah, taking central stage of the global jihad movement when its well-known chief Khaled Meshaal called for protests worldwide on the first Friday after the attack making a call, "To all scholars who teach jihad... to all who teach and learn, this is a moment for application".

Palestine has always featured prominently in Al Qaeda and Islamic State statements, reinforcing their radicalising message. A Palestinian, Abdullah Azzam, was close, although not always in agreement, to Hamas: his ideas influenced in several concepts the Hamas covenant, while he co-wrote with Osama bin Laden Al Qaeda's founding charter. Ranked as a martyr by Hamas (although probably killed by Aymar al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's second general emir), Azzam inculcated the passion in the foreign fighters to fight Israel and free Palestine, especially after the end of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1989). Azzam's slogan was "Jihad and the rifle alone: no negotiations, no conferences and no dialogues". In fact, Azzam's vision came to consider the war in Afghanistan as the first step of a wider conflict aimed at freeing Palestine from Israeli occupation.

The Palestinian tragedy, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and US invasion of Iraq represent the ideal conflict triad that helped ignite and maintain the worldwide jihadi ideology with immediate echoes in the digital space, that is dominated by the loss of dignity and suffering of the Palestinians. Despite deniers, until there is an equitable and thus permanent solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, an anti-US/Western/Israeli/Jewish narrative is very likely to drive radicalisation and diffused violence.

Predictably, also in this war the digital front has been almost instantly weaponized by both Israel and Palestine. Disinformation has therefore been an important feature of the Israeli-Hamas war. It can be used to shape public opinion abroad, with polarising effects not only in the West but also in Southeast Asia, where the religious overtones of the conflict are more keenly felt.

An important impact of this conflict regarding the digital aspect has been the use of social media as war means. Platforms like X, Facebook, TikTok and Instagram have featured the concerted use of fake news, bots, and deep fake videos to influence policy decisions and sow divisions in the opposing camp. The rising importance of the digital arena as a theatre of war has been demonstrated by the personal meeting between Elon Musk (the owner of X) and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, where the two discussed strategies to tackle the rising of anti-Semitic content on the platform.

Rejecting in principle dialogue and negotiation, Hamas' attack inspired and influenced the political calculus of three coalitions of threat groups (Al Qaeda, the Islamic State with their affiliates as well as Shia militias, i.e., Hezbollah, Ansarullah and Iraqi Islamic Resistance). Like after the infamous Blackwater incident that led to the first battle of Al Falluja (April 2004), where Sunni and Shia groups united against the US-led coalition forces, now these threat entities have converged to fight their common global enemy, at a low-level operational level, for the time being.

More specifically, regarding the "Shia threat", the current war has highlighted the multi-dimensional and multi-domain threat posed by these non-state actors. Both Hezbollah and Iranian-backed Iraqi militia groups (under the Islamic Resistance of Iraq umbrella) have relied on drones, including cost-effective loitering munition drones, to strike at Israeli and American assets in the operational theatre, learning from the experience in the Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine wars and adding another means in asymmetric warfare. This aerial threat culminated in the attack against the American military outpost in Jordan (Tower 22), which killed three US servicemen on January 28th. Again, bridging the "Sunni-Shia divide", jihadist actor could learn from the use of drones by Iranian-backed groups. In fact, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, is, according to the most recent report by the UN Security Council,

currently developing "establishing a specialized drone unit, with operational training from the Houthis."

The Houthi movement, with a wide arsenal of drones and ballistic missiles at its disposal, has confirmed its preference towards attacking targets with a strong economic component. The hijacking of ships in the Red Sea, like the seizure of the Israeli-owned MV Galaxy Leader, is in fact a serious threat to international commerce in the area and adds a maritime dimension to the conflict. The Houthi's modus operandi is perfectly represented by its multiple attacks on Saudi oil facilities during the civil war in Yemen, that caused energy price increases in the region and beyond. This, together with political and strategic considerations, has brought to first Operation Prosperity Guardian (a 20-countries US-led coalition to better patrol the Red Sea route and protect merchant shipping, December 2023) and then the US-UK strikes against Houthi's military infrastructure (January 2024). The Houthi attacks with drones and ballistic missiles are already starting to create negative consequences from an economic standpoint, with shipping delays and increased commercial costs, potentially damaging several Mediterranean NATO countries in case of a prolonged confrontation in the Red Sea. Therefore, several EU nations are planning a European mission (Operation Aspides) aimed at guaranteeing freedom of navigation for all the commercial vessels passing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

Taking into account the mentioned radicalisation potential of the conflict and its cross-border and cross-religious connections, it is worthwhile considering as worst-case scenario the probability of another global wave of terrorism, that could be even more threatening that the two earlier waves by Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. A critical actor in this scenario is Iran, an emerging major Indian Ocean power, that has successfully continued to bridge Sunni and Shia groups against the USA and their friends: unless it restrains its sponsored irregular formations, it may contribute to a dangerous regional escalation.

Even without this threat scenario, many intelligence agencies around the world have warned of the rising tensions following the outbreak of the war, which might be a catalyst for violent actions: lone-actor terrorism is regarded as the most serious risk, fostered by extremist propaganda online. A rather articulate warning on the matter came from the German security service (BfV, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution), highlighting the risk of rudimentary attacks against soft targets.

This complex threat matrix is epitomized by the October 2023 Brussels attack, where a lone actor with a known history of radicalization and claiming affiliation with Islamic State (but with no proven link to the organization), indiscriminately killed two Swedish tourist in the Belgian capital. Indeed, one thing are the ideological positions against the Zionist enemy by AQ and IS and another is the very scant record of their attacks against Israel. Nevertheless 11 countries temporarily reintroduced border controls in the Schengen zone, seven of which linked the measure to the worsening Middle Eastern situation.

Another domestic threat that should not be overlooked is the one posed by the extreme far-right, a milieu that has many shapes and forms in the West but often has anti-Semitism as a common feature.

Today, global leadership is paramount to mitigate the potential global expansion of threat. Israel's Gaza war has the potential to draw in Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, Iran and, in an extreme scenario, Russia. This leadership has to find equitable political solutions and sustainable investments in order to end the turmoil created in 1916 and marked by wars since three quarters of a century.

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