

Middle East Tensions Grow

Impact of Israeli Genocidal War in Gaza on the Middle East

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THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION army is continuing more than 100 days after its outbreak to wage a genocidal war against the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip. This immediately followed the October 7th Hamas attack, which led to the death of [1,139 persons](#), including 695 Israeli civilians, 373 members of the security forces and 71 foreigners.*

Contents

- [Syria](#)
- [Iraq](#)
- [Yemen](#)
- [Lebanon](#)
- [Conclusion](#)

The 2.4 million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip are living under a constant Israeli bombardment of unprecedented violence. By mid-January 2024, according to the lowest estimates, over 24,000 Palestinian have been killed by Israeli strikes. The vast majority of victims are women and children. This is without forgetting the 10,000 others missing under the rubble, presumed dead. More than 1.9 million Palestinians are displaced within the Gaza Strip, representing over 85% of its total population. In many ways this is a new *Nakba*. The 1948 *Nakba* resulted in over 700,000 Palestinians being driven out by force from their homes, becoming refugees. This process has continued until today.

As of now regional tensions continue to intensify without transforming (yet) into a wide and violent war, although tensions have increased dramatically since the beginning of January. Faced with the violence of the Israeli occupying army and supported by its Western imperialist allies, the people of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon the face the growing risks of a more deadly regional conflagration.



Syria

Since October 7th Israel has repeatedly targeted Syria with targeted assassinations of significant personalities. South of Damascus, Israeli missiles assassinated Brigadier General Razi Mousavi, a key commander of the Quds Force, the foreign operations branch and elite unit of the Revolutionary Guards (the ideological army of the Islamic Republic of Iran). Iranian leaders have promised a response to the December 25th assassination. A few days later, on January 8, Hassan Akkacha, a Hamas member responsible for firing Hamas rockets from Syria towards Israel, was killed by the Israeli occupation army operating in Beit Jinn, an Israeli town located southwest of Damascus. Between October 12 and January 8, no less than 18 Israeli strikes repeatedly targeted the Damascus and Aleppo airports. They also struck positions and installations of Hezbollah and pro-Iranian forces in the Damascus region.



Although dictator Bashar al-Assad has rhetorically declared solidarity with the [Palestinians](#), the Syrian regime seems to possess neither interest nor capacity to directly participate in a response to the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip. This is historically in line with the Syrian regime's policy since 1974 to try avoiding any significant and direct confrontation with Israel. Further, condemnation by Syrian officials of the Israeli war will not lead to any form of military or political support for Hamas. There will be no strengthening of relations between the two actors, no return to the pre-2011 set-up, which was cut after the Palestinian movement voiced its support for the Syrian uprising.

While the Syrian regime restored ties with Hamas in summer 2022, that took place through Hezbollah mediation. Future relations between Syria and Hamas will be mainly governed through interests structured by and connected to Iran and Hezbollah.

Meanwhile there has been an intensification of violence in the north of Syria. Northwestern Syria has become a focal point of conflict marked by a surge in bombing by Russia and Syria. This escalation follows a devastating attack on a military academy graduation ceremony in the city of Homs, claiming the lives of at least [89 individuals](#). The incident, involving explosive-laden drones, probably originating from neighboring areas controlled by the Turkish authorities or Hayat Tahrir Sham (HTS), has set the stage for a series of heightened bombardments.

The attack in Homs served as a pretext for the Syrian regime and its Russian ally to escalate military actions in the region and has led to severe humanitarian consequences. Since early October, more than 100 people have been killed — almost 40 percent of them children — and over 400 others have been injured. Because of the shelling and bombing by Damascus and Moscow's armed forces,

120,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, according to the [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs \(OCHA\)](#).

The Turkish military has expanded its operations, targeting areas controlled by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). This strategic move came in the aftermath of a suicide attack on October 1st at the entrance to the Interior Ministry in Ankara; two policemen were injured. A group affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) claimed responsibility. This prompted swift and decisive action by the Turkish government. Notably, [on October 17th](#) Turkey's parliament voted to extend its mandate, allowing their armed forces to launch cross-border operations in Syria and Iraq for two additional years.

Numerous airstrikes and drone attacks since October 2023 have deprived large segments of the population in the northeast of electricity, water, heating, and related services, whether temporarily or throughout the coming cold winter months. By the end of December, Turkish warplanes and drones launched a series of airstrikes on northeast Syria, targeting oil sites and vital infrastructure facilities. The attacks led to power outages in several cities and in the countryside of Jazeera Canton, reducing the production capacity of electrical stations by 50%. The Turkish attacks have killed at least [176 civilians](#) and injured 272 others in 2023. By mid-January, Turkey carried out a new series of airstrikes against the northeast of Syria and northern Iraq.

This overall escalation of bombing in northern Syria is intricately tied to an effort to exploit the ongoing international focus on the Israeli war on Gaza. Key state actors involved — including Turkey, Russia and the Syrian regime — are strategically capitalizing on the heightened global attention garnered by the Israeli war. This calculated maneuver allows them to operate with a perceived degree of impunity in the northern theatre.

Exploiting the chaos, U.S. military bases in Syria — and Iraq -- have become targets of increased drone and rocket attacks orchestrated by Iranian-affiliated groups. The U.S. Department of Defense announced on January 10th that U.S. troops and bases in Syria and Iraq have been attacked [127 times](#) since October 17th. These heightened attacks have been a direct response to Washington's support for Israel's military action in the Gaza Strip. It is a way for them to further both their political and local objectives. Since the end of October, U.S. airstrikes have been systematically targeting several facilities utilized by pro-Iranian militias *and* Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in eastern Syria.

Iraq

In Iraq, tensions have also arisen between U.S. armed forces and pro-Iranian militias. U.S. forces struck an Iraqi security headquarters in the heart of the capital, Baghdad, on January 4th. This killed two members of the al-Noujouba faction of the pro-Iranian militia group Hashd al-Chaabi. Among the militiamen murdered, Commander Abou Taqwa, was accused by Washington of being actively involved in attacks against U.S. military bases in Iraq. As Hashd al-Shaabi is officially integrated into the Iraqi national army, the Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs strongly condemned the attack.

The office of Prime Minister Mohammad Chia al-Soudani, for its part, described the January 4th strike as a dangerous escalation. It announced the formation of a bilateral committee responsible for taking steps to definitively end the presence of the international coalition forces (led by the United States).

This is not the first time that the Iraqi ruling political class has called for the departure of U.S. forces. After the 2020 U.S. assassination of Kassem Soleimani, head of the Iranian al-Quds force of

the Revolutionary Guards in Baghdad, interim Prime Minister Adel Abdel-Mahdi had asked Washington to establish a plan to withdraw its troops. That request was categorically rejected by the U.S. State Department.

The Iraqi Parliament had also formulated a bill requiring U.S. withdrawal, but the resolution was non-binding. Officially, the 2,500 U.S. soldiers in Iraq provide assistance, advice and training to the Iraqi armed forces. Their presence was at the invitation of the Iraqi government, which had requested assistance to combat the so-called Islamic State (IS) jihadist group in 2014, but it was also part of the strategic agreement signed in 2008 between the former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki -- now part of the pro-Iranian Shia Coordination Framework -- and Washington. The deal was then approved by the Iraqi Parliament. For its part, Washington wants to maintain its military presence in both in Iraq and Syria.

Yemen

Likewise, on the Yemeni side, tensions have been mounting between the Yemeni political and armed movement of the Houthis and the U.S. armed forces and its allies. Since October 7, in solidarity with the Palestinians, the Houthis have increased attacks in the Red Sea against ships considered linked to Israel. For instance, on November 19, they seized a merchant ship, the *Galaxy Leader*, owned by an Israeli businessman, with its 25 crew members. The Houthis have stated on numerous occasions that they will stop these attacks only with the end of the Israeli war against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

Faced with this situation, at the beginning of December Washington set up a multinational naval force to protect merchant ships in the Red Sea, through which 12% of world trade passes. The main objective is to guarantee one of the most essential shipping corridors for international trade. On the last day of 2023, ten Houthi militants were killed when the U.S. military claimed to have sunk three ships in response to attacks on a Danish carrier's container ship. It was the first deadly strike against the Houthis since the multinational naval force was set up. A few days afterward, the United States and the United Kingdom carried out a new series of airstrikes against the Houthis. Additionally, Washington imposed sanctions targeting the Houthis' financing circuits, targeting several people and entities in Yemen and Turkey. Between November 18 and January 13, more than 27 commercial boats traveling in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden have been attacked by the Houthis.

Lebanon

While Lebanon has been the target of Israeli missiles since the beginning of the Israeli war on Gaza, risks of a larger confrontation between Hezbollah and Tel Aviv has increased after the Israeli assassination of Saleh al-Aroui, the number two person on the Hamas political bureau and a founder of its military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades. This occurred in the southern suburbs of Beirut on January 2nd. Two other Hamas officials, Samir Fandi and Azzam al-Akraa, as well as four others affiliated with the movement — but also with the Lebanese Jamaa Islamiya (a branch of the Muslim Brotherhoods in Lebanon) — were also killed in this attack.

Hamas leader Aroui had been based in Lebanon since 2018. Imprisoned twice, he spent a dozen years in Israeli jails before being released in April 2010. He was one of the privileged interlocutors of Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah.

Next to be assassinated by an Israeli drone in south Lebanon was Wissam Tawil, a commander of the Al-Radwan Force, a military unit of Hezbollah. He was the most senior Hezbollah military official killed since October 8. In reaction, Hezbollah targeted military bases in the north of Israel.

Israeli attacks have caused the deaths of around 160 Hezbollah members between October 8 and mid-January 2023. Air and drone strikes by the Israeli occupation army on villages in southern Lebanon have also led to the forced displacement of more than 76,000 people from their homes as well as damaging large areas of agricultural land.

For the time being the assassinations of Arouri and Hezbollah commander Tawil have not altered the position of the Lebanese Islamic party nor its main sponsor, Iran. Reluctance to launch a more intense military response to the Israeli war comes from their desire to preserve their own political and geopolitical interests. Hezbollah continues to serve as a “pressure front” against Tel Aviv, as expressed in speeches by Hassan Nasrallah. Similarly, Iran does not want its crown jewel, Hezbollah, to be weakened. Iran’s geopolitical objective is not to liberate the Palestinians but to use these groups as leverage, particularly in its relations with the United States. In this context, Hezbollah is sticking to “calculated and proportional reactions” against Israeli attacks.

The threat lies in the probability that Israel will continue its assassinations and attacks on Lebanese territories. A section of the Israeli ruling class wants, through the Israeli war on Gaza, to force Hezbollah to withdraw 10 kilometers from the border, that is, north of the Litani river. This would represent a political and military gain for Israel.

The escalation of Israeli attacks in Lebanon is connected to Israeli’s new military phase. Withdrawing five brigades, composed mostly of reserve soldiers, from Gaza at the beginning of the year is part of Israeli strategy of “low-intensity war.” The objectives include tightening control over most of the Gaza Strip that has fallen under its sway, destroying the network of underground tunnels and eradicating all remaining resistance. The increased threats and attacks in Lebanon reveal Hezbollah’s missed opportunity to force Israel to fight on two fronts. This is turning against them.

Conclusion

While the genocidal war against Palestinians locked into the Gaza Strip continues unabated. Israeli government leaders have announced that the war will continue “throughout” 2024. Israeli impunity is a permanent threat to the regional working classes and continues to increase the dangers of a regional war. Similarly, U.S. led Western imperialisms is only deepening the misery of local popular classes through support to Israel, regional authoritarian states and continued bombings.

In this situation, what can the left and progressive actors do?

It is important to reiterate our opposition to the Apartheid, colonial and racist Israeli state while continuing to defend the right of Palestinians to resist against such a criminal regime. Indeed, like any other population facing the same threats, Palestinians have such rights, including by military means. Similarly, Lebanese have the right to resist Israeli military aggression and war. This should not be confused with support for the political perspectives and orientations of the various Palestinian and Lebanese political parties, including Hamas and Hezbollah. That is also true for all kinds of military actions these actors might take. That is particularly true of actions that lead to the indiscriminate killing of civilians.

The main task for the left remains developing a strategy based on a regional solidarity from below. That means opposing the Western states and Israel on the one side while also opposing regional

authoritarian states (whether Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, UAE, etc.) and the political forces linked to them. Based on class struggle from below, this strategy is the only way to win liberation from these regimes and their imperialist backers (whether the United States, China or Russia). Through that struggle, Palestinians, Lebanese and those in other countries must also embrace the demands of all those that suffer national oppression — like the Kurds and others who suffer forms of ethnic, sectarian, and social oppression.

Joseph Daher, January 15, 2024

*It should be noted that Israeli civilians on October 7, 2023 were also killed by Israeli occupying forces, including by firing tank shells at houses where Israelis were detained.

P.S.

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