

Gaza War: New Opportunities and Challenges for Iran

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ABSTRACT *The Iranian decision not to immediately retaliate against Israel for the assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran on July 31, 2024, in part reflects a concerted effort by regional, Chinese, Russian, and Western diplomats to convince Iran that de-escalation and diplomacy was the wiser course. It also reflects recognition by the new administration of President Masoud Pezeshkian – whose inauguration preceded the Haniyeh killing by only a few hours – that such a military retaliation would likely provoke a massive Israeli response backed by the U.S. and other Western allies that would doom Iran’s chances of re-engaging with the West and relieving onerous economic sanctions. A wider conflict between Israel and Hezbollah across the Israel-Lebanon border does not appear to have changed this calculus for Iran, which is confronting severe domestic economic problems and a growing gap between the regime and society. Still, any progress in improving U.S.-Iran relations will have to await the results of U.S. presidential elections.*

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In choosing to assassinate Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, the Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appeared to have several motivations: to kill a senior figure in an organization it regards as a grave threat, to prolong the war in Gaza by complicating ceasefire talks, and to humiliate the Islamic Republic by exposing serious security lapses as Iran inaugurated a new president.

As a potential bonus for Netanyahu, an Iranian retaliation for Haniyeh's death could open Iran to a significant Israeli response, bolstered by U.S. and other Western military might, that would further weaken the country Israel perceives as its most dangerous foe. As of this writing, it is unclear whether Israel will achieve these goals.

In the immediate aftermath of the assassination on July 31, 2024, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei took to the social media platform X and vowed that “following this bitter, tragic event which has taken place within the borders of the Islamic Republic, it is our duty to take revenge.”¹

The military wing of Hamas said the killing would “take the battle to new dimensions and have major repercussions.”² Qatar, a key intermediary between Hamas and Israel in seeking a Gaza ceasefire, condemned the murder of Hamas' political leader and chief negotiator as a “dangerous escalation”³ and said that it would set back the off-and-on diplomatic efforts to stop the war.

The U.S., meanwhile, rushed more military assets to region⁴ to protect Israel in the event Iran attacked, perhaps by staging a reprise of the missile and drone barrage Tehran unleashed in April to retaliate for Israel's killing of seven Iranian military officers in Damascus. An unnamed U.S. official warned of a “cataclysmic” response should Iran strike Israel and cause casualties.⁵ Israelis and Iranians spent anxious days and nights watching the skies and waiting for missiles to fall. Lebanon, too, went on high alert, fearing a new flare-up that could further damage the battered country. The Haniyeh killing came only hours after Israel assassinated a senior Hezbollah commander, Fuad Shukr, in the Southern suburbs of Beirut in retaliation for a Hezbollah rocket that killed 12 children in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.⁶ Early on the morning of August 25, 2024, the Israelis and Hezbollah unleashed a larger-than-usual exchange of rocket and missile fire which Hezbollah indicated was revenge for Shukr's death, but that episode appeared to be contained.⁷

As the weeks went by after Haniyeh's killing, the Iranian call for revenge appeared to morph into something less urgent and apocalyptic. Instead of an immediate military escalation between Israel and Iran, there was a dramatic ramp-up of diplomacy—condemning Israel for the assassination and urging Tehran to refrain from exacting retribution.

The U.S., Israeli, Hamas, Egyptian, and Qatari negotiators resumed and

intensified talks aimed at achieving a temporary ceasefire in Gaza as the death toll in this latest and most deadly phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict exceeded 40,000.⁸ Pressure also appeared to mount on Netanyahu from his own population to take a deal, free still-living Israeli hostages, and allow tens of thousands of displaced Israelis to return to their homes in the North and the South.

It remains unclear if a durable ceasefire can be achieved. Netanyahu appears to have raised new conditions for continued Israeli control over the Egyptian border with Gaza, a corridor bisecting Gaza, and other measures that Hamas has trouble swallowing.⁹ Tensions have also risen with Lebanon, where Israel booby-trapped Hezbollah communications devices and assassinated senior Hezbollah commanders in September.¹⁰ It is also unclear if and for how long Iran will forswear a kinetic response to Haniyeh's killing. However, there have been several developments in recent weeks that make a diplomatic exit strategy –or at least avoiding a wider war– more plausible than they seemed on July 31.

Arab Neighbors, Europe, Russia, and China Urge Restraint

A week after Haniyeh's assassination in Tehran, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held an emergency meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The 57-member body issued a blistering statement that held "Israel, the illegal occupying power,

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fully responsible for this heinous attack."¹¹ Host Saudi Arabia, which barely a year ago restored diplomatic relations with Iran following an eight-year rupture, called the assassination a "blatant violation" of Iranian sovereignty.¹²

Jordan's Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi, flew to Tehran –the highest-level Jordanian official to visit Iran in two decades.¹³ Safadi, who met with Iran's newly inaugurated President Masoud Pezeshkian, warned against further escalation in a region already shaken by the conflict in Gaza and clashes between Israel and Hezbollah across the Lebanese border.

Jordan is also worried about more attacks on U.S. soldiers, such as those stationed at a little advertised base in Jordan near the border with Syria and Iraq. Three Americans at the base, known as Tower 22, were killed by an Iran-backed Iraqi militia in late January 2024, touching off retaliatory U.S. strikes on Shi'ite militants in Iraq and Syria.¹⁴ Jordan, a majority of whose population is of Palestinian descent, has also had to contend with rising levels of unhappiness and protest at the monarchy's unwillingness to suspend a 1994 peace treaty with Israel

Given the right-wing nature of the Netanyahu government, Israel might use Iranian attacks as a rationale for a much larger response than in April, when Israel hit a small radar facility near an Iranian nuclear installation in Isfahan

over Israel's bloody response to the October 7, 2023 attacks.¹⁵

Western countries, too, reached out to Iran to urge restraint. British Prime Minister Keir Starmer called Pezeshkian to call for calm¹⁶ as did French President Emmanuel Macron.¹⁷ The French and British foreign ministers also visited Israel to lobby for redoubled efforts for a ceasefire. Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz notably said he expected “the international coalition led by the U.S., UK, and France to join Israel not only in defense but also in attacking significant targets in Iran” should Iran strike Israel.¹⁸

Pezeshkian, in his election campaign and inaugural speeches, emphasized his desire to improve Iranian relations with Europe, which have been strained by Iran's support for Russia in Ukraine as well as Iran's repression of domestic dissent, most notably the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement against enforced hijab. Pezeshkian has also suggested Iran would resume talks with the U.S.¹⁹

to seek relief from U.S. secondary sanctions, which were reimposed after the Trump Administration quit a laboriously negotiated nuclear deal in 2018. An escalation of the Middle East conflict would dash these possibilities before they could even begin to materialize and force Western countries to side with Israel against Iran and its partners, Hamas and Hezbollah.

Iran's chief foreign allies –Russia and China– also exerted pressure on Tehran not to escalate tensions. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi called Iran's then-acting Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri on August 12, 2024. He said Beijing “categorically condemns the recent terrorist attack in Tehran and believes that this act is a serious violation of fundamental principles of international law and an attack on Iran's sovereignty and honor.” Wang then “underscored the need for the international community to make efforts to stop the hostilities and provide the necessary conditions for establishing a permanent and comprehensive ceasefire in Gaza.” China, he added, would “maintain close communications with Iran in order to preserve peace and stability in the region.”²⁰ As Iran's top trading partner and a rare country that is willing to flout U.S. sanctions to purchase Iranian oil, Wang's words have considerable clout in Tehran.

Meanwhile, Russia, embroiled in its own quagmire in Ukraine, also cautioned Iran not to escalate. Russian President Vladimir Putin dispatched his former Defense Minister, Sergei



After Iran announced that it had launched an attack on Israel with drones, explosions were seen in the skies over Jerusalem on April 14, 2024.

MOHAMMAD
HAMAD / AA

Shoigu, to Tehran on August 5, 2024. Shoigu reportedly told Iranian officials that any response to the Haniyeh assassination should be limited and should not cause civilian harm.²¹

Iran's Vulnerabilities as Pezeshkian Begins a New Administration

The Haniyeh killing and the Israeli operations against Hezbollah came at a time of deep vulnerability in Iran. The country's economy has long been fragile, with high inflation and unemployment. Despairing that the situation will improve anytime soon, young Iranians with advanced degrees and special skills –such as doctors and nurses– have been fleeing the country at record rates.²² Large

swathes of the population –particularly women, ethnic minorities, and young people– are also increasingly alienated socially and culturally from the system, which continues to enforce harsh Islamic laws on public conduct at the same time that a privileged elite privately enjoys lavish lifestyles and benefits from connections linked to sanctions-busting and other corrupt activity.

The death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter accident on May 19, 2024,²³ thrust the regime into a new conundrum. Raisi, though unpopular in Iran and scorned abroad for his record as a prosecutor who approved the summary execution of thousands of political prisoners at the end of the Iran-Iraq war, had been groomed by the supreme leader for

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the presidency and was also thought a likely successor to Khamenei, who is 85.²⁴

After Raisi's death, the regime scrambled to replace him in snap elections. An initial round of voting attracted the lowest voter turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic, with a mere 39.9 percent of those eligible.²⁵ Only the decision to allow one quasi-moderate to run sparked some minimal interest. Pezeshkian, a cardiologist who served as health minister under former President Mohammad Khatami, made it into a second round of voting in part because of competition from multiple conservative candidates in the first round. Pezeshkian then defeated Saeed Jalili, a failed nuclear negotiator and extreme ideologue who was mocked by many in the electorate as an Iranian Taliban.²⁶

Pezeshkian's ascendance, however, was by no means a panacea for what ails Iran. Days into his administration, he was criticized for assembling a cabinet including many holdovers

from Raisi and for failing to keep his promises to appoint many younger and more diverse figures.²⁷

The killing of Haniyeh hours after the Hamas leader had met with Pezeshkian and Khamenei was a particular humiliation that exposed both the apparent penetration of Iran's security apparatus by hostile agents and the failure of its April 14, 2024, strikes on Israel—in retaliation for the assassination of Iranian officers in Damascus—to establish deterrence. Concerns mounted that Iran would launch a more punishing strike in coordination with Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and the Houthis.

However, several commentators warned the regime that a large-scale military response to Haniyeh's killing would ensnare Iran in an Israeli trap.²⁸ Given the right-wing nature of the Netanyahu government, Israel might use Iranian attacks as a rationale for a much larger response than in April, when Israel hit a small radar facility near an Iranian nuclear installation in Isfahan. Indeed, Iran hawks who have consistently urged Israel and the U.S. to strike Iran's nuclear infrastructure resumed their calls to do just that.²⁹ Any Iran-U.S. military confrontation would also undercut any opportunity to resume negotiations over Iran's nuclear program and the U.S. sanctions.³⁰

Making a virtue of necessity, Iran leaned into the ongoing Gaza ceasefire diplomacy as a reason to hold off on retaliating for the Haniyeh assassination, even though the ceasefire

talks appeared to be making minimal progress. Iranian officials, in contact with Qatari mediators, said they would await the results of talks before deciding on any response.³¹ Iran was also reluctant to jeopardize the safety of Iranian pilgrims marking the Shi'ite holiday of Arbâeen in Iraq.³²

Haniyeh's killing reopened questions about Iran's so-called "forward defense" strategy, which is based on the notion that supporting militant non-state actors in Iraq, Yemen, Palestinian territories, and the Levant would safeguard the Iranian homeland. Instead, it has sucked Tehran deeper into regional conflict and exposed Iran itself to foreign attack.

A Way Out of the Labyrinth

To begin to emerge from the nightmare that has engulfed the region since last October, a Gaza ceasefire is obviously optimal. This needs to be accompanied by other steps to stabilize the region and return its focus to economic development and opportunity instead of war.

Prior to the Hamas attack on Israel, there were a number of positive regional developments including a ceasefire between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis in Yemen and the restoration of diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The U.S. and Israel were also pushing for formal relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but the Saudis have made clear that this is conditioned on a Gaza ceasefire and a viable plan

for a Palestinian state –something Israel continues to reject. The next U.S. administration, whether it is headed by Kamala Harris or Donald Trump, needs to rethink the U.S. strategy toward the region in a comprehensive way.

Clearly, the Palestinian issue –which has long been subordinated to other concerns– has been thrust back onto the table in a dramatic fashion. More and more countries –including European ones– have recognized a Palestinian state and Palestinians themselves have begun to work on renovating their institutions of governance. The Palestinian Authority (PA), however enfeebled it has become, remains the only recognized entity that can help construct and preside over a Palestinian state. Mahmoud Abbas, the PA's aged president, should agree to step down following a short transition period, and allow Palestinians to choose a more popular, younger, and less corrupt leader, perhaps from among Palestinian prisoners freed by Israel in any ceasefire deal.

There then needs to be an international campaign to push for Palestinian self-governance, accompanied by a massive surge in humanitarian assistance to Gaza and an end to Israel's seizure of West Bank land for Jewish settlements.

The next U.S. administration must adhere to U.S. law requiring recipients of military aid to observe at least minimal standards of conduct in conflict. The U.S. should also support international courts' investi-

gations of alleged Israeli war crimes and crimes against humanity to allow Washington to more credibly assert global leadership in upholding human rights.

While a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may seem even more distant and illusory after the events of the past months, no one has yet come up with a viable substitute that addresses the root causes of the conflict. If Israel is unwilling to offer equal rights and opportunities to the Palestinians under its control, it must find another way to satisfy Palestinian aspirations for self-government, sovereignty, and dignity if both sides and the region at large are ever to enjoy lasting peace.

A New U.S. Strategy toward Iran

Another priority to stabilize the region is a different U.S. approach to Iran. Since the 1990s, the U.S. administrations have sought to “contain” the Islamic Republic, but the policy has failed to deliver positive results. Iran, while beset with many internal problems, is more influential than ever in the region, having profited from the U.S. toppling of Saddam Hussein to imbed itself deeply in Iraq. It has forged new ties with the Houthis in Yemen, strengthened relations with Syria and Hamas, and remains closely allied with Hezbollah, the strongest military, political and economic force in Lebanon.

Iran has also advanced its nuclear program, reacting to the ill-advised

U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as well as Israeli sabotage of nuclear facilities and assassinations of Iranian scientists. Iran now has 30 times more enriched uranium than it did when it was still complying with the JCPOA; it could enrich enough fuel for several bombs in a matter of weeks.³³ Iran has also severely cut back on monitoring of its facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency, meaning that the world might not know in a timely manner if material or machines were diverted to make weapons.

The Biden Administration tried to revive the JCPOA but ran out of time before the Iranian presidential elections in June 2021 put in place a harder-line team. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further jeopardized the effort as the Russians appeared to prefer a sanctioned Iran to one that might resume trade with the West. Since then, the U.S. has reached some minor de-escalatory understandings with Iran and traded prisoners.³⁴ But especially since last October 7, the Gaza war has taken precedence, and U.S. domestic politics have made it toxic for either political party to openly advocate engaging with Tehran.

Another aspect of U.S. policy that requires urgent rethinking is the effort to create an anti-Iran military alliance in the region. This accelerated under the Trump Administration, which moved Israel from the U.S. European to U.S. Central Command, joining Egypt and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Trump

also launched the so-called Abraham Accords under which the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan normalized diplomatic relations with Israel.³⁵ The Biden Administration endorsed this approach and has sought to entice Saudi Arabia to recognize Israel in return for beefed-up U.S. security guarantees and assistance in building a civilian nuclear program.

Some analysts saw the coordinated U.S.-led response to Iran's April strikes on Israel –which included Jordan and reportedly, Saudi assistance– as “proof of concept”³⁶ of an emerging anti-Iran military alliance. But without a Gaza ceasefire and efforts to address Palestinian needs and aspirations, Arabs will continue to hedge their ties with Iran, their relations with Israel will remain fragile and Saudi Arabia, as the guardian of Islam's holiest sites, is unlikely to establish formal diplomatic relations with a Netanyahu-led government that includes extremists seeking further control over Muslim shrines in Jerusalem.

Iran, too, needs to readjust both its rhetoric and policy on Israel, the Palestinian issue, and the U.S. Iranian rejection of Israel's right to exist has only fueled Israeli hostility and facilitated Israeli and U.S. diplomacy against Tehran. In the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the Gaza war, the Iranian government signed off on several communiques that affirmed the need for a Palestinian state alongside Israel.³⁷ Iran should fully embrace this internationally

Israeli society must also come to terms with the failure of its governments to fully integrate into the region while repressing millions of Arabs and seizing more and more Palestinian land

recognized concept instead of continuing to call for “death” to the Israeli state.

Iran's allies, Russia and China, can also do more to support Middle East diplomacy despite their differences with the West over other issues. In the short term, both have benefited to some extent from the Israeli atrocities in Gaza, which have exposed the egregious double standards adopted by many in the West on issues of human rights. But China, in particular, needs a stable Middle East because of its deep economic ties to Iran and Arab states as well as its desire to trade more with Israel. China has made some efforts to facilitate Palestinian unity, brokering an agreement between Fatah and Hamas in July 2024.³⁸ But it can do more to pressure Hamas and Iran to accept a non-violent path toward Palestinian sovereignty.

Israeli society, still traumatized by the events of last October 7, must also come to terms with the failure of its governments to fully integrate into the region while repressing mil-

With self-described “Zionist” Joe Biden on his way out of the White House, the next president may be less willing to risk American lives in support of a country that wants to be seen as a democracy even as it denies rights to millions of human beings under its control

lions of Arabs and seizing more and more Palestinian land. 57 years of occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, coupled with a refusal to recognize Palestinian rights even as the Palestinian National Council in 1988 recognized Israel, fueled the fury that motivated Hamas to murder peaceful kibbutzniks and concertgoers last year.³⁹ Strong support from the U.S. empowered Israel to respond brutally and to continue to act with impunity toward Palestinians. But Israel’s killing of so many civilians and the extreme damage it has done to Gaza’s infrastructure could ultimately undermine that support in a way that threatens Israel’s future far more than a now depleted Hamas.

U.S. support for Israel has affected presidential election politics and there were strong criticisms of the Biden Administration’s policies voiced outside the Democratic Party convention in Chicago in late August.⁴⁰ While no Palestinians were

allowed to speak in the main hall, nominee Harris called “the scale of suffering [in Gaza] ... heartbreaking,” and committed if elected to finding a solution that would allow “the Palestinian people [to] realize their right to dignity, security, freedom and self-determination.”⁴¹

The return of students to U.S. campuses this fall will undoubtedly be accompanied by more protests against continued U.S. arms deliveries to Israel. More Americans of all ages are also likely to object to the rising risk of American forces being dragged into a new conflict in the Middle East. For decades, Israeli leaders have told Americans that if they were provided with sufficient weaponry, they would fight their enemies on their own. But Israel has become dependent not just on U.S. arms but on U.S. aircraft carriers, submarines, missile defenses, and personnel to defend it against the consequences of its own actions.

With self-described “Zionist” Joe Biden on his way out of the White House, the next president may be less willing to risk American lives in support of a country that wants to be seen as a democracy even as it denies rights to millions of human beings under its control. ■

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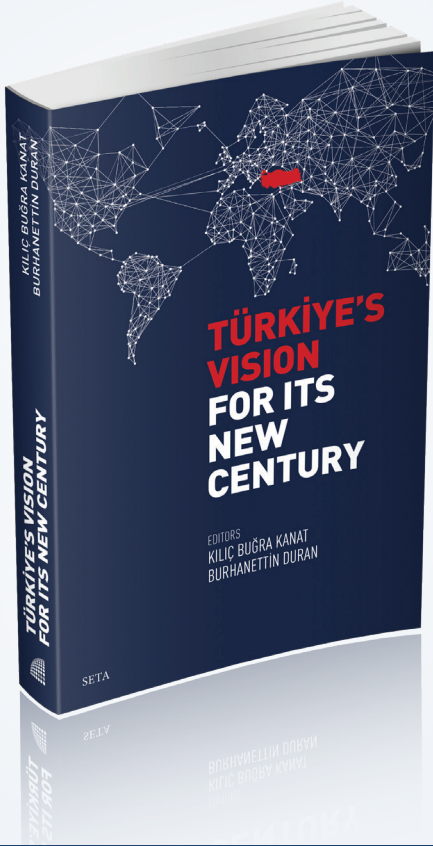
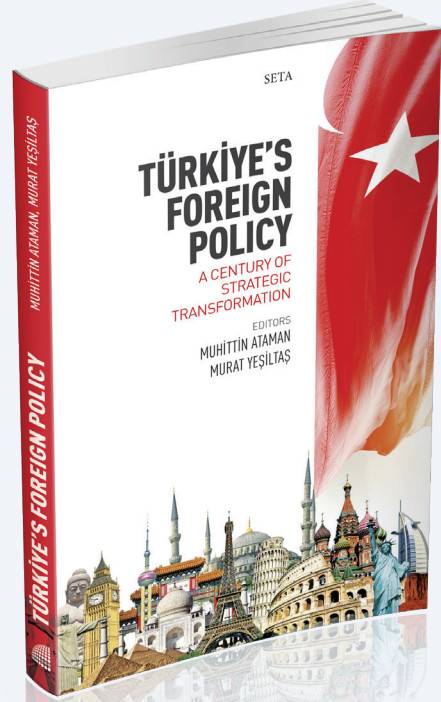
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TÜRKİYE'S FOREIGN POLICY

A CENTURY OF
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