



Iron Swords II: This Is a New Regional Order. It Must Include the Demilitarization of Political Islam

by Col. (Res.) Shay Shabtai

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 2,218, October 15, 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In the coming years, global attention to the Middle East will diminish except in extreme crisis situations. The Israel-Saudi-moderates coalition will mainly bear the burden of stabilizing regional security. The current crisis, in which the United States is aligning with Israel in full capacity, must be used to establish - at both the ground and the political levels - the principle of stopping political Islam from controlling any military capabilities. The campaign to defeat Hamas is a step in this direction.

The strategic mistake committed by Hamas and the strategic failure of Israel on October 7, 2023 are the accelerators for regional change that will take place over the next few years.

The only player who understands this and is no longer thinking in terms of previous wars and the previous regional order is the United States (and possibly Saudi Arabia as well). The Israeli leadership and its enemies, Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran, are still stuck in the inertia of the old way of thinking.

At the basis of the expected profound change in the Middle East are global processes leading to the diversion of international attention away from the Middle East except in extreme crisis situations. The most significant of these processes is the growing struggle for global influence in general and in the Asia-Pacific region specifically by China and the United States. Chinese President Xi Jinping has set a

goal for China to be militarily prepared to take over Taiwan, and American intelligence suggests that his target date is 2027. This will be the guiding concern for American strategy in the coming years, regardless of the identity of the sitting president. This does not necessarily imply an imminent conflict, but it does mean that American political and military attention will increasingly shift to this matter.

The second significant process is the possibility of a strategic crisis between Russia and Europe (NATO without the United States). The war in Ukraine has become a “sunk cost” for both sides, and unless something unexpected happens, it will not change the balance of power between them. Both sides are still trying to achieve their goals in the conflict, but it is evident that the strategic significance of those goals is diminishing, except for the Ukrainians who are caught in the middle (a lesson for Israel as well). Putin is likely in his last decade and is concerned about his legacy, and there is much he needs to address. Russia is starting to rebuild itself militarily in terms of equipment, manpower, and doctrine. This poses a significant threat to Europe - especially considering the decreasing attention from the United States, which currently provides the main security umbrella for Europe.

In this situation, all the players – Americans and Europeans on one side and the Chinese and Russians on the other – will lose interest in the Middle East over the coming years. They will continue to see it as a battleground for competition and intervene in extreme crisis situations, but with much less purpose than they have today.

In this scenario, the stability of the Middle East region will increasingly depend on the coalition of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other moderate states. Building this coalition is one of the motivations behind the United States’ efforts to promote peace and security arrangements between Riyadh and Jerusalem and the urgency with which they are pushing for them.

These processes appear to create opportunities for Iran and its coalition as international pressure on them diminishes, allowing them greater freedom of action. However, it also carries inherent risks for Iran that may shape its behavior. In an era where the potential for nuclear crisis between the superpowers is on the rise, the last thing these powers want is a nuclear-armed irresponsible state. This could lead to further regional proliferation, as cautioned wisely by Muhammad bin Salman. Therefore, the response of the superpowers to Tehran’s efforts to obtain nuclear capability might be extremely harsh and painful for Iran.

Additionally, China's economic and civil proactive involvement in various regions has significant deficiencies, as demonstrated in Central Asia and Africa, that might distance Iran from full cooperation. These are two factors that will influence decision-making within the Iranian leadership and may make them more cautious.

As US Vice President in 2014, President Biden and his close adviser Anthony Blinken witnessed Israel's inability to achieve a clear strategic achievement during Operation Protective Edge in Gaza. Many in the American establishment, particularly US Central Command (CENTCOM), also remember Israel's incomplete success in the Second Lebanon War. Based on this experience, the United States has embarked on two efforts: to conduct Strategic Communication efforts accompanied by the deployment of forces to prevent a comprehensive regional crisis and prevent miscalculations by the Iran-Hezbollah axis.

Assuming the crisis remains confined to Gaza, the second effort is to create conditions for minimizing civilian casualties while allowing the IDF to operate freely against both military and political Hamas. The American efforts include a close mentoring of Israeli leadership involving daily conversations with the Israeli prime minister, defense minister, and Chief of the General Staff to ensure the right decisions, implementation efforts and long-term success.

From its behavior, it can be sensed that Saudi Arabia understands its new role in the coming years and is beginning to implement it during this crisis. While Turkey and Qatar are stuck in the old way of thinking that supports Hamas, and Egypt is justifiably concerned about the potential effects of a large influx of refugees from Gaza, it seems that Saudi Arabia is already contemplating its position within the context of the new regional architecture.

This is a significant moment to positively shape the new order in the Middle East. The United States and Europe know they will downgrade their influence efforts in the region in the coming years, and Saudi Arabia understands that it will need to pay a higher price for its stability.

In this situation, Israel needs to establish a new principle for regional stability: to separate political Islam from its military capabilities, meaning the demilitarization of political Islam. The connection between political Islam and weaponry is the central factor contributing to the lack of regional stability and the prevalence of violence and terrorism in the global arena. This connection should be severed both at the level of neutralizing the military capabilities of terror organizations and,

more importantly, by distancing political Islamic actors from exclusive control over state level military systems. While this principle may not apply in every case (as in Turkey and Tunisia), it generally holds true. Examples include Iran, Lebanon, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan, where this principle is evident and serves as a general guideline.

This is the true meaning of the comparison now being made between Hamas and ISIS (beyond the parallel indulgence in vicious brutality). Following the September 2001 attacks and the emergence of the Islamic State over the past decade, this premise was identified by the United States, Europe, and regional countries, but it was primarily directed at global jihadist organizations. Extensive efforts were made to break the connection between individuals with political Islam ideologies and weaponry. However, the current crisis, combined with Iran's ongoing malign influence, demonstrates that any connection between political Islam and military capabilities leads to inherent instability and, under certain circumstances, extreme violence. The horrifying events in the Gaza border communities are just the latest illustration of this.

Political and social Islam movements can participate in the democratic political process, but should completely disassociate from military responsibilities and focus on societal and economic issues. Political and constitutional mechanisms should be established to keep it from taking direct control over armies and security organizations. China and Russia, which are both fundamentally opposed to interfering in other countries' internal affairs for clear reasons, are nevertheless also concerned about a well-armed political Islam, especially if it possesses nuclear weapons. They would probably tacitly accept and even uphold this principle. The United States and Europe would intervene in the region in extreme crises based on this principle, for example in a scenario in which the Islamic regime in Iran pursues a nuclear bomb over a short timeframe.

To give substance to this principle, it is essential that Israel deal decisively with Hamas. Eliminating its military capabilities in Gaza and removing its political leadership, while keeping the civilian echelons of the Gaza Strip and avoiding unnecessary harm to civilians, should be the first implementation of this principle.

Col. (Res.) Shai Shabtai is a senior researcher and the deputy director at the BESA Center and an expert in national security, strategic planning, and strategic communication. He is a cyber security strategist and consultant to leading companies in Israel.