

Can U.S. Threats Prevent a Wider War in the Middle East?

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While Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has been frantically shuttling around the Middle East trying to stop the Israeli conflict in Gaza from exploding into a regional war, the United States [has also sent](#) two aircraft carrier strike groups, a Marine Expeditionary Unit and 1,200 extra troops to the Middle East as a "deterrent." In plain language, the United States is threatening to attack any forces that come to the defense of the Palestinians from other countries in the region, reassuring Israel that it can keep killing with impunity in Gaza.

But if Israel persists in this genocidal war, U.S. threats may be impotent to prevent others from intervening. From Lebanon to Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Iran, the possibilities of the conflict spreading are enormous. Even [Algeria](#) says it is ready to fight for a free Palestine, based on a unanimous vote in its parliament on November 1st.

Middle Eastern governments and their people already see the United States as a party to Israel's massacre in Gaza. So any direct U.S. military action will be seen as an escalation on the side of Israel and is more likely to provoke further escalation than to deter it.

The United States already faces this predicament in Iraq. Despite years of Iraqi demands for the removal of U.S. forces, at least 2,500 U.S. troops remain at [Al-Asad Airbase](#) in western Anbar province, [Al-Harir Airbase](#), north of Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan, and another small base at the airport in Erbil. There are also "[several hundred](#)" NATO troops, including Americans, advising Iraqi forces in [NATO Mission Iraq](#) (NMI), based near Baghdad.

For many years, U.S. forces in Iraq have been mired in a low-grade war against the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) that Iraq formed to fight ISIS, mainly from Shia militias. Despite their links to Iran, the armed groups Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and other PMFs have often ignored Iranian calls to de-escalate attacks on U.S. forces. These Iraqi groups do

not respect Iran Quds Force leader General Esmail Qaani as highly as they did General Soleimani, so Soleimani's assassination by the United States in 2020 has further [reduced](#) Iran's ability to restrain the militias in Iraq.

After a year-long truce between U.S. and Iraqi forces, the Israeli war on Gaza has triggered a new escalation of this conflict in both Iraq and Syria. Some militias rebranded themselves as the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and began attacking U.S. bases on October 17. After 32 attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq, 34 more in Syria and 3 U.S. airstrikes in Syria, U.S. forces conducted [airstrikes](#) against two Kata'ib Hezbollah bases in Iraq, one in Anbar province and one in Jurf Al-Nasr, south of Baghdad, on November 21, killing at least nine militiamen.

The U.S. airstrikes prompted a [furious response](#) from the Iraqi government spokesman Bassam al-Awadi.

"We vehemently condemn the attack on [Jurf Al-Nasr](#), executed without the knowledge of government agencies," al-Awadi said. "This action is a blatant violation of sovereignty and an attempt to destabilize the security situation... The recent incident represents a clear violation of the coalition's mission to combat Daesh (ISIS) on Iraqi soil. We call on all parties to avoid unilateral actions and to respect Iraq's sovereignty..."

As the Iraqi government feared, the Islamic Resistance in Iraq responded to the U.S. airstrikes with two attacks on Al-Harir airbase on November 22 and [several more](#) on November 23rd. They attacked Al-Asad airbase with several drones, launched another drone attack on the U.S. base at Erbil airport, and their allies in Syria attacked two U.S. bases across the border in northeastern Syria.

Short of a ceasefire in Gaza or a full U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Syria, there is no decisive action the U.S. can take that would put a stop to these attacks. So the level of violence in Iraq and Syria is likely to keep rising as long as the war on Gaza continues.

Another formidable and experienced military force opposing Israel and the United States is the Houthi army in Yemen. On November 14, Abdul-Malek al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthi government in Yemen, asked neighboring countries to [open a corridor](#) through their territory for his army to go and fight Israel in Gaza.

The Houthi Deputy Information Secretary Nasreddin Amer told Newsweek that if they had a way to enter Palestine, they would not hesitate to join the fight against Israel,

"We have fighters numbering hundreds of thousands who are brave, tough, trained and experienced in fighting," Amer said. "They have a very strong belief, and their dream in life is to fight the Zionists and the Americans."

Transporting hundreds of thousands of Yemeni soldiers to fight in Gaza would be nearly impossible unless Saudi Arabia opened the way. That seems highly unlikely, but Iran or another ally could help to transport a smaller number by air or sea to join the fight.

The Houthis have been waging an asymmetric war against Saudi-led invaders for many years, and they have developed weapons and tactics that they could bring to bear against Israel. Soon after al-Houthi's statement, Yemeni forces in the Red Sea [boarded](#) a ship owned, via shell companies, by Israeli billionaire Abraham Ungar. The ship, which was on its way from Istanbul to India, was detained in a Yemeni port.

The Houthis have also launched a series of drones and missiles towards Israel. While many members of Congress try to portray the Houthis as simply puppets of Iran, the Houthis are actually an independent, unpredictable force that other actors in the region cannot control.

Even NATO ally Türkiye is finding it difficult to remain a bystander, given the widespread public support for Palestine. President Erdogan of Türkiye was among the first international leaders to speak out strongly against the Israeli war on Gaza, explicitly calling it a [massacre](#) and saying that it amounted to [genocide](#).

Turkish civil society groups are spearheading a [campaign](#) to send humanitarian aid to Gaza on cargo ships, braving a possible confrontation like the one that occurred in 2010 when the Israelis attacked the Freedom Flotilla, killing 10 people aboard the Mavi Marmara.

On the Lebanese border, Israel and Hezbollah have [conducted](#) daily exchanges of fire since October 7, killing 97 combatants and 15 civilians in Lebanon and 9 soldiers and 3 civilians in Israel. Some 46,000 Lebanese civilians and 65,000 Israelis have been displaced from the border area. Israeli defense minister Yoav Gallant [warned](#) on November 11,

“What we’re doing in Gaza, we can also do in Beirut.”

How will Hezbollah react if Israel resumes its brutal massacre in Gaza after the brief pause is over or if Israel expands the massacre to the West Bank, where it has already [killed](#) at least 237 more Palestinians since October 7?

In a speech on November 3, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah held back from declaring a new war on Israel, but warned that “all options are on the table” if Israel does not end its war on Gaza.

As Israel prepared to pause its bombing on November 23, Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian held meetings in Qatar, first with Nasrallah and Lebanese officials, and then with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh.

In a [public statement](#), Amirabdollahian said,

“the continuation of the ceasefire can prevent further expansion of the scope of the war. In the meeting with the leaders of the resistance, I found out that if Israel’s war crimes and genocide continue, a tougher and more complicated scenario of the resistance will be implemented.”

Amirabdollahian already [warned](#) on October 16 that,

“The leaders of the resistance will not allow the Zionist regime to do whatever it wants in Gaza and then go to other fronts of the resistance.”

In other words, if Iran and its allies believe that Israel really intends to continue its war on Gaza until it has removed Hamas from power, and then to turn its war machine loose on Lebanon or its other neighbors, they would prefer to fight a wider war now, forcing Israel to fight the Palestinians, Hezbollah and their allies at the same time, rather than waiting for Israel to attack them one by one.

Tragically, the White House is not listening. The next day, President Biden continued to back Israel’s vow to resume the destruction of Gaza after its “humanitarian pause,” [saying that](#)

attempting to eliminate Hamas is “a legitimate objective.”

America’s unconditional support for Israel and endless supply of weapons have succeeded only in turning Israel into an out-of-control, genocidal, destabilizing force at the heart of a fragile region already shattered and traumatized by decades of U.S. warmaking. The result is a country that refuses to recognize its own borders or those of its neighbors, and rejects any and all limits on its territorial ambitions and war crimes.

If Israel’s actions lead to a wider war, the U.S. will find itself with few allies ready to jump into the fray. Even if a regional conflict is avoided, the U.S. support for Israel has already created tremendous damage to the U.S. reputation in the region and beyond, and direct U.S. involvement in the war would leave it more isolated and impotent than its previous misadventures in Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The United States can still avoid this fate by insisting on an immediate and permanent ceasefire and the withdrawal of Israeli forces from Gaza. If Israel will not agree to that, the U.S. must back up this position with an immediate suspension of arms deliveries, military aid, [Israeli access](#) to U.S. weapons stockpiles in Israel and diplomatic support for Israel’s war on Palestine.

The priority of U.S. officials must be to stop Israel’s massacre, avoid a regional war, and get out of the way so that other nations can help negotiate a real solution to the occupation of Palestine.

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Featured image: U.S. Air Force airmen hand off cargo to the Israeli military at Nevatim Air Base, Israel, on Oct. 15, 2023. Photo: Edgar Grimaldo/U.S. Air Force

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