

Papiers d'actualité / Current Affairs in Perspective

N°9 | December 2023

On the horrifying war in the Middle East


Fondation Pierre du Bois
pour l'histoire du temps présent

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Hamas 'October gamble

"This battle is not only that of the Palestinian people, or that of Gaza," wrote the chairman of Hamas's political bureau Isma'il Haniyeh, in [a statement to the press](#) while his organization launched operation *Al-Aqsa Flood* on the morning hours of 7 October. His organization might have taken lead, but "it is the battle of the entire Arab-Muslim community," writ large. Within the next hours, Hamas fighters and members of affiliated groups went on a rampage that killed over 1,200 Israelis – a majority of whom were citizens, kidnapped 240 others back to the Gaza Strip, and fired over 3,000 rockets onto major Israeli population centers.

That Hamas succeeded in breaking down of the world's most heavily fortified borders, and effectively conquer scores of Israeli army bases, agricultural settlements and regional towns was so surprising it was scarcely conceivable. But the fact that they were ultimately beaten back by the Israeli army, and that it promptly went on a bombing campaign which has yet to finish, nearly two months later, isn't. So what were Hamas leaders in Gaza, Mohammed Deif and Yahya Sinwar, thinking? What might they have hoped to achieve? Was there a strategic plan behind the attacks or were they just an act of desperation? Another passage in Haniyeh's statement suggests the former: "I appeal to our Resistance [groups], to our West Bank, to our people, to our Resistance abroad, to our strategic allies, to all the children of this [Arab-Muslim] community: this is your day. We have an appointment with victory, to work together for this grand victory." It is possible that Hamas meant for the *Al-Aqsa Flood* to initiate a wider struggle, one in which not only would Palestinians participate, but also, significantly, "strategic allies" as well.

On November 3, 2023, almost a month later, the most important strategic ally of Hamas [finally spoke](#). Chairman of the Lebanon-based paramilitary Hezbollah since 1992, Hasan Nasrallah is widely acknowledged to be one of the most powerful political figures in Lebanon, and a major geopolitical figure in the Middle East. His speech was a watershed moment in the trajectory of the current war and was befittingly attentively listened to throughout the region. Nasrallah praised the *Al-Aqsa floods* as "an act of heroism" and a "major historical event" in the project of liberating Palestine.



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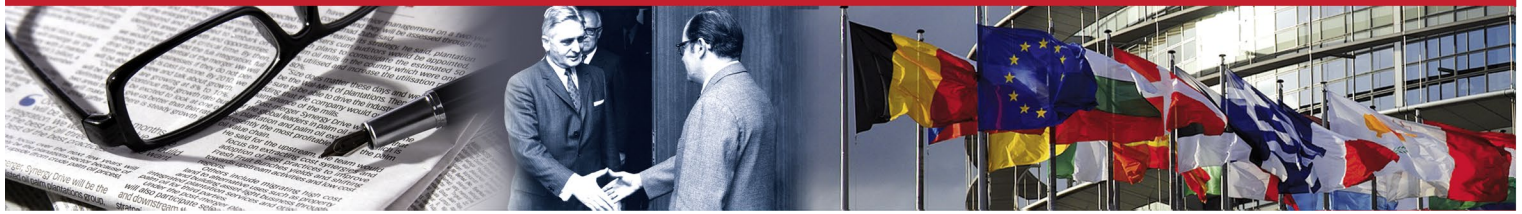
The operation “shook the occupying, usurping Zionist regime”. He praised perseverance of Gaza’s civilians at the face of Israeli retaliatory bombardments, taunted Israel’s weakness, and issued threats against the United States. Then came a twist and a turn. Nasrallah distanced himself from Hamas. “The decision was 100% Palestinian,” he said: he had no foreknowledge of the planned attack. “It came as a surprise” to himself – a fact about which he was not angry, he quickly added – and to other Palestinian factions. The coup de grace to Hamas’ hopes was delivered with characteristic shrewdness. “Some claim that we are about to engage”, Nasrallah said. But “we have already been engaged in this battle since October 8”.¹

It is true that in the three weeks between Nasrallah’s speech and the outbreak of the war, Hezbollah had been engaging the Israeli army in a limited tit-for-tat, using artillery and mortar fire to target outposts and military positions. This was generally understood to be a place-holder tactic until a basic decision was made by Hezbollah’s leadership. One can easily see how seriously the Israelis took this possibility: in the days following 7 October, the Israeli army deployed tens of thousands of soldiers along the Israel Lebanon border, and moved up tanks, artillery shells, and ammunition sufficient to withstand a major confrontation. Rather than a declaration of war, however, Nasrallah issued a de-escalatory move. Hezbollah will not expand these relatively limited military operations into a full-out attack against Israel. Early interpretations of Nasrallah’s speech bore themselves out in the subsequent weeks of November: both sides had maintained a tense balance of limited engagement.

Two months into this horrific war, it is important to remind ourselves that during the first few weeks, it had every potential to escalate much further. That it progressed into what it is today, an a-symmetrical confrontation between the Israeli army and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, was by no means a foregone conclusion. Like Hamas, Hezbollah is a radical military organization whose long-term military goals include the elimination of the State of Israel. Alongside Iran, the Assad regime, the Houthi rebels in Yemen, and a few smaller radical Islamist paramilitaries, they form the “axis of resistance”, a loose confederation of anti-American and anti-Zionist actors which included commitments to come to each other’s aid in case of an attack – as happened during the Syrian civil war. And, like Hamas, Hezbollah’s responsibility towards the civil population under its control is not rooted in international law nor is it subjected to Lebanon’s democratically elected institutions. Hezbollah could well have lent crucial help to its besieged ally by committing itself to a full-fledged war with Israel. Had it done so, however, the war probably would have escalated into a major international war. It would have likely meant the near total destruction of Lebanon by Israeli and American air and sea bombardments, massive rocket fire raining down on Israeli towns and cities, and the death of tens of thousands of more innocent civilians in the Middle East. It is a curious fact of history that Nasrallah played an active role in averting this horrifying escalation.

It is no less interesting to follow the evolution of Iran’s statements since the war started on 7 October. On 23 October, some two weeks after Israel started bombing the Gaza Strip with unprecedented intensity and six days after the bombardment of Al-Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza City, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amirabdollahian, [warned](#) that “all options will be on the table,” if “Israel’s massacres of civilians and the targeting of hospitals and populated areas” do not immediately stop. “Any error in calculations, committing genocide and forced displacement will lead to repercussions,” he vowed.² But Israel’s bombardment and land invasion have not relented, and the argument that it constitutes an Israeli-led genocide against Palestinians in Gaza has become near [ubiquitous](#) among pro-Palestinian activists. Where were the repercussions that Iran promised?

Only three days after his first statement, the Iranian foreign minister’s rhetoric underwent a rapid and perceptible change. In an emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly on 26 October, Amirabdollahian gave



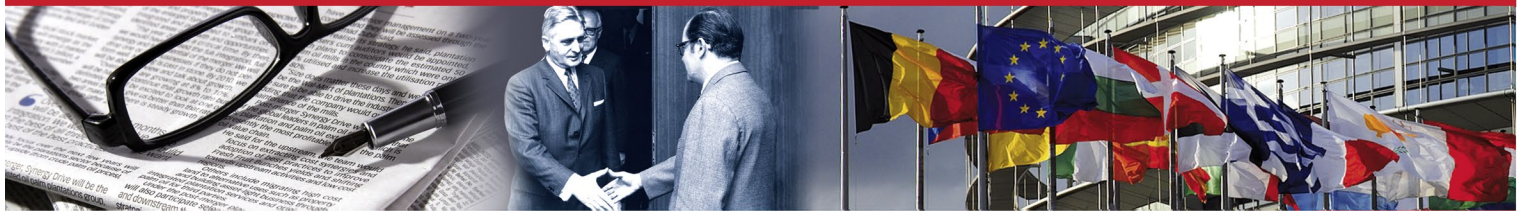
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public assurances to Palestinians that Iran has “always had political, media and international support for Palestine.” The fact he failed to mention his country’s military support at a time when Hamas needed it most was not lost on his listeners. No less significantly, the minister explicitly denied an 8 October report in the [Wall Street Journal](#) according to which Iran had directly participated in the planning and green-lighted Hamas’ attack on Israel. “They are not receiving orders from us,” said Amirabdollahian. “What happened, what was carried out by Hamas, it was totally Palestinian”.ⁱⁱⁱ A little over a week later, in early November, Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, hosted Isma’il Haniyeh. There, according to anonymous briefings to the press by Iranian Foreign Ministry officials, the old Ayatollah explicitly [told](#) Haniyeh: “you gave us no warning of your Oct. 7 attack on Israel and we will not enter the war on your behalf.” He went so far as to demand that Haniyeh silence those voices within Hamas who were publicly calling for Iran and Hezbollah to join the battle against Israel in full force.

Several factors must have contributed to the decision of these two key Middle Eastern actors not to commit themselves to this fight. Probably most important among them is the swiftness and comprehensiveness of the American response. In the days following 7 October, the US [sent one and then another aircraft carrier](#) attack force to the eastern Mediterranean, strengthened its coordination with the Israeli army in its CENTCOM military headquarters, pledged \$10 billion to Israel in special military aid, and coordinated a string of high profile visits by top US officials. By contrast, the lack of coordination between Hezbollah, Iran, and Hamas meant that, within days of 7 October, the element of surprise was gone. The Israeli military called up 360,000 reservists, cleared all the Israeli settlements near the border, placed the whole country on high alert, and transported massive amounts of artillery, tanks and ammunition to both the Gaza and Lebanon borders. No less important was the political stance adopted by western European governments. Their involvement played a particularly important role in deterring Iranian involvement: France and the United Kingdom promised that they would reintroduce crippling international sanctions on the Iranian economy through a “snapback” clause in the Iran Nuclear Deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA) should the Iranians choose to intervene.^{iv}

Whether or not the Al-Qassem brigades truly carried out their attack without any prior consultation with any of their allies, Hamas found “that they are almost completely isolated,” [wrote](#) Ha’aretz journalist and political commentator, Jack Khoury. Haniyeh’s call to arms on 7 October, and Hamas’ hopes that the *Al Aqsa Floods* would trigger a regional mobilization against Israel, fell completely flat. With the movement out maneuvered so comprehensively, public criticism of Hamas began surfacing in some outlets in the Arabic press. In 25 October, Tariq Al-Homayed, the former editor-in-chief of the Saudi daily newspaper *Asharq Al-Awsat*, wrote a particularly scathing public “[Message to Yehya Sinwar](#),” Hamas’ military field commander in Gaza. “Today, Yahya Sinwar, your head could well be the price for extinguishing the fire in Gaza. [...] are you willing to sacrifice yourself for Gaza and the Cause, or are you ready to suck them dry?”, he wrote, publicly accusing the Hamas leader of being willing to sacrifice untold thousands of Gazans in order to protect himself from the ramifications of his actions. Al-Homayed compared Sinwar to Yasser Arafat and found him wanting. Arafat showed true leadership when he fled from Beirut to Tunisia in 1982 in the face of an Israeli invasion, but Sinwar is choosing not to, Al-Homayed hinted. “Your departure from Gaza might not change anything,” Al-Homayed conceded, because “the Israelis are mad [...] drunk [...] like the Americans after 9/11.” But fleeing the stop, he reasoned, was still the right thing to do. It “would give you the high ground and leave them [the Israelis] in an awkward position”, and “save innocent lives”.



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Hezbollah and Iran's tepid response, the American hug, and the expressions of support by key governments in Western Europe have all emboldened Israel. Amid growing concerns about the humanitarian condition in Gaza, the Israeli army spent November encircling the city of Gaza in a ground maneuver and expanded its airstrikes. It raided hospitals and bombarded schools, signaling to Gazans that no place was off-limits. Israeli public opinion [overwhelmingly supports](#) the war's stated objectives of ousting Hamas, even though criticism of the Israeli government is [at an all-time high](#) and most prioritize the release of the hostages in a prisoner exchange deal above the military elimination of Hamas.

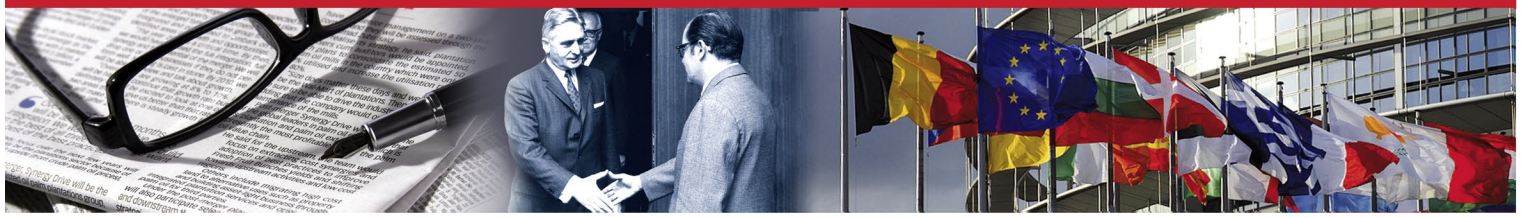
In the meanwhile, it is the citizens of Gaza who bear the brunt of Hamas' failed gamble. According to a 5 November [report](#) by the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Israeli bombardments from 7 October to 6 November have claimed 9,770 lives, including 4,008 children and 2,250 women, and have buried an estimated 2,260 others under rubble, including 1,270 children. An additional 24,808 people are reported wounded. An estimated 1.5 million civilians were internally displaced within the Strip; 717,000 were sheltering in UN compounds, 122,000 in hospitals, churches and public facilities, and 110,000 in non-UN schools.

These horrifying numbers grew apace in the second month of the war, even though it included a week-long ceasefire. As of 5 December, OCHA [estimates](#) that more than 15,523 Palestinians have been reported killed in Gaza and 128 in the West Bank, around 41,316 are wounded, 1.87 million internally displaced peoples are in the Gaza Strip, and some 46,000 housing units have been destroyed. Israel's [decision to stop all food, water, and fuel](#), and [its repeated cutting off of telecommunications](#) mean that drinking water, medical equipment, life-saving medicines and food are all extremely scarce. Fuel shortages have incapacitated Gaza's sewage system and are [causing the spread of diseases](#). Desperation, helplessness, fear, insomnia [and the seemingly endless deaths of friends and family](#) at the hands of the Israeli army and of armed settlers fuel [heartbreaking stories](#).

Cacophony and escalating rhetoric

Once these large strategic strokes have fallen – neither Iran nor Hezbollah seem on the verge of joining the war, and Hamas, isolated, has been invaded and is being decimated in Gaza – Media organizations across the region and the world have slowly settled into their usual positions. This time has been doubtlessly made worse by the sheer intensity of the fighting and bombing and by the ever-present social network algorithms which have fueled [conspiracy theories](#) amongst both [Israelis](#) and [Palestinians](#). Whereas in the first few days following Hamas' attacks, analysts in Arabic language news networks such as *Al-Arabiyyah*, *Al-Arabi al-Jedid*, and *Sharq al-'Awsat* took an ambivalent stance towards Hamas's actions, acknowledging its undeniable military success but also critical of its kidnapping and targeting of Israeli civilians, the focus quickly switched to the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, the mass killing of Gazan civilians in Israeli air-bombardments, and the targeting of hospitals, schools, and mosques by Israel.

For its part, Israel redeployed its expensive and astoundingly unsophisticated propaganda services – the infamous *Hasbarah*. Heavy-handed and manipulative, Israeli *hasbarah* included campaigns that underplayed the humanitarian catastrophe its invasion has engendered in Gaza and [propped-up factually incorrect and sensationalist details](#) about the massacres in the Kibbutzim. They have repeatedly and intentionally identified criticism of Israeli actions as antisemitism, and are now using the ["#Me Too Unless Ur A Jew"](#) hashtag on X to harness allegations of the rape of



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Israeli women by Palestinians during the 7 October attacks to demand international feminist organizations to issue condemnations. Israeli officials in the UN have outdone themselves when they picked [an ugly spat](#) with the UN secretary General, Antonio Guterres, who dared say that the Hamas attacks on 7 October “had a context” which should be talked about, too. At the same time, civic societies and private Israelis have carried out [much more effective public campaigns](#), calling for the release of the Israeli prisoners as part of a prisoner swap deal with Hamas and for a ceasefire.

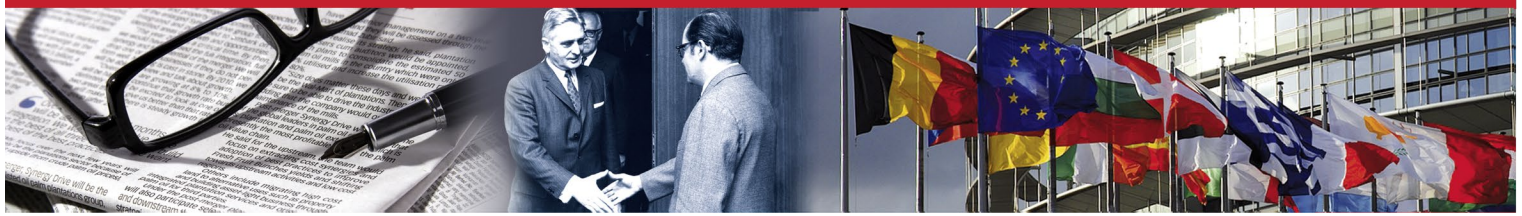
Pro-Palestinian activism is, by comparison, noticeably more resonant, more bottom up, springing from a broad array of grass root activists and sympathizers. Mass rallies have taken many major cities in the world, calling to stop the Israeli invasion and bombardment of Gaza. Over time, as the bombing continued, a sense of helplessness led some to escalate their anti-Israeli rhetoric. Islamists’ Cold War Era depictions of themselves as anti-imperialists and anti-colonial movements have found new traction among the younger generations of leftist activists in the USA, who are willing to overlook much in order to [rebrand Hamas](#) the legitimate “armed wing of the unified Palestinian resistance”. This unprecedentedly charged fight for the moral high-ground and for public opinion has seen both sides claim exclusive victimhood and veering to apologetics, manipulations, and even implicit endorsements of violence and killings, if it implicates their own side in any wrongdoing.

The Great Wall of Jericho

On 30 November, 2023, Ronen Bergman and Adam Goldman published [an article](#) in the New York Times that is sending shockwaves throughout Israeli political and intelligence bodies. In it, they describe how senior Israeli intelligence and army officials have obtained a 40-page document, code-named “Jericho Wall”, detailed Hamas’ preparations and battle plans that were carried out almost to the letter during 7 October. The document circled widely among Israeli military and intelligence leaders and was discussed thoroughly in a long email-chain that ended up in the journalists’ possession. They show how this evidence of an imminent and elaborate attack was dismissed because Israeli officers believed that an attack of that scale and precision was way beyond Hamas’ capabilities.

In the meanwhile, top government officials – Netanyahu chief among them – have been preparing their defenses in anticipation of the inevitable commissions of inquiry. Netanyahu, always on the look-out for potential danger, has engaged in typical maneuvers almost from the get-go. “All the security officials, including the head of military intelligence and the head of the Shin Bet, assessed that Hamas had been deterred and was looking for a settlement,” he tweeted hours after being confronted by journalists in a 29 October press conference. “This assessment was submitted again and again to the prime minister and the cabinet by all the security forces and the intelligence community, up until the outbreak of the war,” Netanyahu insisted. Critics rightfully saw this as Netanyahu directing the blame to the military at a time of war. The next morning, engulfed in public fury, he deleted the tweet.^v

These two examples are instructive of Israel’s mindset prior to 7 October. The Hamas action was so surprising to the Israelis because it overturned a growing sense – bolstered by the latest bombardment of Gaza May 2023, in which Israel fought Islamic Jihad forces in Gaza while Hamas stood by and chose not to get involved – that Hamas could be tamed like the PLO had been. “Hamas is restrained, and it is wary of provoking” Israel, as national security adviser, Tzachi Hanegbi, [said](#) as late as 1 October, only six days before Hamas’ attack. Hanegbi was, in truth, only reiterating the general sense among Israeli political and military elites that Hamas realized the odds were stacked against it and was on a trajectory towards moderation.



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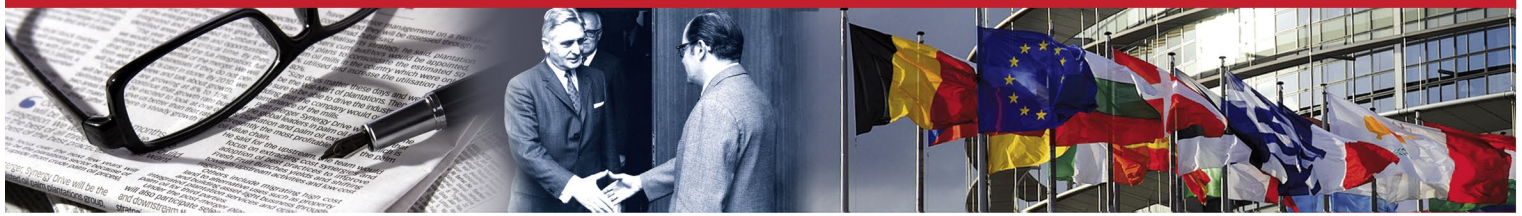
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This belief was closely related to another belief known as “the conception” in Israeli public discourse. “The conception” was a hegemonic tenet of Israeli politics about the occupation, and one of the key reasons why Israel’s peace coalition of the 1990s had collapsed. It was why the right-wing Likud party was able to abolish the Oslo process and rebrand the two-state solution as delusional at best, and nefarious at worst. It was why Israel’s right wing had dominated the political sphere since the end of the second intifada. It maintained that Israel could rely on military might, on [spectacles of disproportionate use of force](#) and on technological innovation to subjugate Palestinian resistance and to eliminate the everyday friction of the occupation. A key part of minimizing average Israelis’ everyday experience of the occupation was played by Israel’s military-technological complex and Israel’s massive apparatuses of intelligence, surveillance and incarceration. Israel’s right wing successfully sold the public for two decades the promise that achieving security and prosperity was possible without having to deal with the continued occupation of Palestinian territories.

The gigantic systems that Israel had erected around Gaza are a case in point. In late 2021, Israel announced with some fanfare [the completion of an underground iron and concrete wall](#) around the Gaza Strip. Spanning from Kerem Shalom passage in the south to the Zikkim beach in the north, and going scores of meters down into the ground until ground water level, the underground wall was one of the largest construction projects in the country’s history. It cost Israeli taxpayers around one billion dollars, necessitated the construction of six new concrete factories along the route, and saw more than two million cubic meters of reinforced concrete being poured into the sand. Such an amount of concrete, “would have been sufficient to pave a road from Israel to Bulgaria”, according to an Israeli ministry of defense official.^{vi}

This underground wall was supposed to block Hamas’ offensive tunnelling operations in the wake of the 2014 war. It was only one part of the multifaceted border systems that Israel had been building for decades around Gaza. Above it run two border fences – one of them electric, built by Itzhak Rabin’s government in the 1990s – and a patrol road servicing remote controlled Ford Pickup trucks mounted with surveillance technology and weapon systems. After the 2005 evacuation from the Gaza Strip, Israel added to these an intrusion tracking dirt road, a kill-zone area hundreds of meters thick where shrubbery are destroyed through chemical means, a series of earth mounds and bunkers, and remote-controlled observatory and shooting towers, operated from nearby command centers. In 2019, Israel also completed [a sea-barrier](#) along in the northern sea border that sets Gaza’s seaboard apart from that of Israel’s. Here, too, Israel deployed remote controlled machine guns, cameras and sensors designed to detect movement. The physical makeup of the sea barrier consists of three layers – an underwater layer, above which a 200-meter outcrop of armourstone was built and above that a third layer of barbwire.

These expensive high-tech systems have been overcome by a few thousand men bearing AK-47s with buggy vehicles, cheap drones and moto-powered hand gliders at their disposal. But nothing, it seems, has changed. What Idan Landau [called](#) Israel’s military “techno-fetishism” – “the gushing over technological inventions in themselves and regardless of whether their efficiency has been demonstrated, or even proven superior over non-technological alternatives” – continues unabated. It would appear that it would take more to shake an economic incentive structure in which the government subsidizes the high-tech and arms industries through large-scale contracts. The careers of hardliner Israeli politicians such as Benjamin Netanyahu are difficult to understand if one does not understand how technological advances had permitted the minimization of risk to soldiers, who have been removed from the



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battlefield through remote controlling and automated weapons systems. “All this makes the peace process, or even just talking every now and then to lower tensions, an unprofitable business,” as Landau wrote.

It seems that the Al-Aqsa floods did not “shake the Zionist regime” as much as Nasrallah would like his listeners to believe. Although it is hard to see how Netanyahu’s political career continues after this, a significant change of political course in Israel seems highly unlikely. The “conception” still reigns supreme among Israelis, and the US, the only international actor capable of emitting effective pressure on Israel, is in on it. Rather than attempt to force Israel to consider a possible political way out of the war, the Biden administration took the opportunity of special congressional funding to [go ahead with another of its military technological innovations: laser](#). A sales brochure by a major Israeli defense contractor, Rafael, [maintains](#) that “Increasingly sophisticated airborne threats — including mortars, rockets, and UAVs as well as swarms of mini-UAVs — are being faced by both military forces and population centers. Since current Kinetic interceptor systems are expensive and not always sufficient to counter some of these threats, powerful new solutions are required that meet the needs of this new reality.”

What is lost in all this talk about [lasers](#), [high-power microwaves](#), AI powered facial recognition software, and offensive cyber is that we have been in this arms-race before. The powerful and rich have long relied on technology to keep unjust social arrangements in place and to shield themselves from the rage of the poor and powerless. This has always worked right up until the moment it did not anymore. Military technology has never been an alternative to justice. It won’t be now, either.

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ⁱ Sayyed Nasrallah: “The Al-Aqsa Flood” is a major jihadi operation that established a historical stage in the region / English version title: Sayyed Nasrallah

Warns: All Scenarios Open for Our Front, We're Ready (Videos), *Al Manar*, 03 November 2023.

English: <https://english.almanar.com.lb/1962919>

Arabic: <https://www.almanar.com.lb/11179951>

ⁱⁱ Iran Warns US, Israel over regional repercussions over Gaza 'genocide', TRTWORLD, 23 October 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ Iran does not want Israel-Hamas conflict to spread, foreign minister says, *Reuters*, 29 October 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-does-not-want-israel-hamas-conflict-spread-foreign-minister-2023-10-29/>

^{iv} Zvi Bar'el, “[Iran is Wary of Crossing Red Lines and Could Leave Gaza to Fight Alone](#)”, *Ha'aretz*, 24 October 2023.

^v Netanyahu slammed for post blaming intelligence chiefs for Oct. 7 failure; apologizes, *The Times of Israel* 29 October 2023.

^{vi} Yoni Mendel, If Israel seeks life and not death, it must change its attitude towards the Palestinians, *Haaretz*, 2 November 2023. Hebrew.