DAILY COMMENT

HOW TEN MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS ARE CONVERGING INTO ONE BIG WAR

The U.S. is enmeshed in wars among disparate players in Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

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Demonstrators in the Houthi-controlled capital of Sanaa, Yemen, march in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Photograph by Mohammed Huwais / AFP / Getty

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On Friday, a day after the U.S.-led attacks on dozens of Houthi military sites in Yemen, President Biden took a few shouted questions during a

campaign stop at the Nowhere café, in Emmaus, Pennsylvania. “Do you have a message for Iran?” a reporter called out, as Biden waited for a smoothie. “I’ve already delivered the message to Iran,” he replied. “They know not to do anything.” Tehran, he added, did not want a war with the United States. Biden was then asked if he would order more strikes if Houthi rebels —armed, trained, and funded by Iran for years—did not end their drone and missile attacks on commercial and military ships in the Red Sea, a strategic waterway that bridges trade between Asia and Europe. “We will make sure we respond to the Houthis if they continue this outrageous behavior,” he replied.

Yet the U.S.-led strikes on the Houthis appear unlikely to curtail confrontations in the Red Sea—or tensions anywhere else in the Middle East. On Friday, the International Crisis Group warned that “a military response to Houthi attacks may have symbolic value for Western nations and may curb certain Houthi capabilities but will have limited overall impact. They could even make things worse.” The Yemeni rebels are “buoyed by popular support” for siding with Hamas in Gaza and gaining lopsided leverage over international commerce, the I.C.G. concluded. Nearly fifteen per cent of the world’s seaborne trade passes through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. The Houthi attacks, which have accelerated since November 19th, have already affected almost fifty nations, President Biden said in a statement on the U.S response.

American and British forces launched a hundred and fifty missiles and bombs that hit sixty military sites in more than two dozen locations in Yemen. Yet the Houthis reportedly still have the vast majority of their military assets. Like Hamas, the Houthis “feel empowered to have their way at a bearable cost,” the I.C.G. said. Both militias are pulling the world into their conflicts—and hyping their causes. On Sunday, the Houthis fired at a U.S. warship in the Red Sea. On Monday, they hit a U.S.-owned container ship. On Tuesday, the Houthis struck another container ship—and the U.S fired at four more sites where missiles were about to be fired.

The escalation—and the inherent dangers for the future—reflects a merger of crises in the Middle East. Ten conflicts among diverse rivals or in different arenas over disparate flash points and divergent goals are now converging. For all the recent punditry warning about a widening war, the trajectory has long been obvious. And for all the American warships, troops, and diplomats deployed in the Middle East over the past hundred days, the U.S. has produced little, if anything, beyond greater vulnerabilities. "The U.S. appears pretty disconnected from regional realities, which may have been an intentional approach to enable withdrawal," Julien Barnes-Dacey, the director of the Middle East and North Africa program at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told me. "But now that Washington has been sucked back in by the Israel war, it's looking pretty lost." The spiralling momentum "makes it all but impossible for the U.S. to unilaterally impose its will upon the region."

The confluence of conflicts is dizzying. Israel faces four distinct front lines. It has fought Hamas on the southern border since the October 7th attack that slaughtered twelve hundred. Meanwhile, Hezbollah has launched some seven hundred attacks from the northern border with Lebanon, in solidarity with Hamas. The two militant groups (one Sunni, the other Shiite) share strategic goals, but they have different domestic agendas. Hamas did not collaborate with Hezbollah on the offensive, according to U.S. intelligence. They had run largely separate campaigns against Israel—until now.

Israel also still has no peace with sixteen Arab governments. Recent progress on the Abraham Accords, designed to end seventy-six years of Arab-Israeli conflict, has been indefinitely stalled, despite desperate diplomacy by the Biden Administration. Saudi Arabia is the linchpin. For the guardian of Islam's holy places, making peace with Israel amid a war with Palestinians is untenable without a deal that includes statehood for their fellow-Arabs. Ninety-six per cent of Saudis now believe that all Arab states should terminate ties to Israel, according to a poll last month by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Forty per cent supported Hamas, up from ten

per cent in August.

U.S. intelligence has warned of growing Arab and Muslim support for Hamas, which is designated a terrorist group by the U.S. and Europe. At the Doha Forum last month, I heard from dozens of Arabs who condemned Hamas tactics and disagreed with its ideology, even as they admired or envied its determined resistance to Israel and defiance of U.S influence. “In this kind of a fight, the center of gravity is the civilian population,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin acknowledged in December. “And if you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat.” He noted, “It would compound this tragedy if all that awaited Israelis and Palestinians at the end of this awful war was more insecurity, more rage, and more despair.”

Israel’s fourth front is a shadow war with Iran playing out in Syria. It has launched hundreds of air strikes on Iranian weaponry, military facilities, and forces, as well as on Syrian targets. Those strikes have escalated since October 7th. Days after the Hamas atrocities, Israel bombed the international airports in Damascus and Aleppo. Israel’s greatest anxiety is Iran’s nuclear program, which has quietly accelerated since October 7th after slowing down over the summer, U.S. officials told me. Intelligence sources believe Tehran is closer than ever to having the capability to build a nuclear weapon, if it so chooses.

Meanwhile, the Houthis fight on three axes. They are a Shiite tribal movement that emerged in the nineteen-nineties to revive culture and faith. Over the past decade, they have seized the capital, Sanaa, and strategic territory along the Red Sea. The Houthis account for about a third of the thirty-five million people in Yemen, the Arab world’s poorest country. Their insurgency against a corrupt Sunni government became a regional conflict in 2015, when a Saudi-led coalition, facilitated by U.S. intelligence and weaponry, launched a naval blockade and more than twenty-five thousand air strikes on the Houthis. As Iranian military support for the Yemeni rebels simultaneously expanded, the conflict was increasingly framed as a proxy war

between Riyadh and Tehran. A U.N.-backed peace initiative between Yemen and Saudi Arabia, which began in April, has stagnated amid the Israel-Hamas hostilities. Until the Gaza war, Yemen's situation ranked as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world, according to the U.N. Refugee Agency. Hundreds of thousands have died, more than four million people have been displaced, and twenty-one million are dependent on humanitarian aid to survive. Five million face famine, and there are a million suspected cases of cholera. Meanwhile, Yemen's economy has collapsed.

The U.S. has been increasingly drawn into Yemen's crises. Under both Republican and Democratic Administrations, America has interdicted weapon shipments from Iran to the Houthis. Last week, naval forces captured a dhow carrying Iranian missile warheads bound for Yemen, but lost two Navy SEALs who were swept away by swells in the Arabian Sea. Separately, the Pentagon has carried out almost four hundred counterterrorism operations—killing more than a thousand people—on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. In 2002, the Houthis' founding slogan was "God is the greatest, death to America, death to Israel, curse the Jews, victory to Islam." Israel's bombardment of Gaza has inflamed public fury after the deaths of more than twenty-four thousand Palestinians, the majority reportedly women and children, and the destruction of half of all buildings in Gaza, while spawning famine conditions, homelessness, and poverty—all in a mere hundred days.

Over the past eight weeks, the Houthis have fired missiles and drones at Israel while launching thirty attacks on international shipping, including U.S. warships, off their shores. "We, the Yemeni people, are not among those who are afraid of America," Abdul Malik al-Houthi, the militia leader, said in a televised speech on January 11th. On X, Ali al-Qahoum, a senior Houthi official, boasted, "The battle will be bigger . . . and beyond the imagination and expectation of the Americans and the British."

On other front lines, U.S. forces are still deployed in Iraq and Syria to contain

remnant cells of the Islamic State, whose caliphate collapsed five years ago. They have felt the spillover from the Israel-Hamas war, too. Since mid-October, Americans have been targeted a hundred and thirty times by drones, rockets, mortars, and missiles—though not from ISIS. The attacks have been carried out by diverse militias in the so-called Axis of Resistance, a network spawned by Iran that includes major movements in four countries and cells in others. They have launched almost eighty attacks on the nine hundred U.S. forces in Syria, and more than fifty strikes on the twenty-five hundred Americans in Iraq. Dozens of Americans have been injured.

The U.S. is now hitting back. On Christmas Day, U.S. air strikes killed several members of Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iraqi extremist group, and destroyed three of its facilities. On January 4th, a U.S. air strike killed a ranking commander of another Iraqi militia, Harakat al-Nujaba. In the labyrinth of alliances in the Middle East, however, both militias are also a wing of the Popular Mobilization Forces, an array of Shiite militias officially under the command of the Iraqi Army, which the American forces have deployed to assist in the ongoing campaign against ISIS. Baghdad condemned the assassination as a "flagrant violation" of its sovereignty and security. The next day, Prime Minister Shia' al-Sudani called for American forces in Iraq—which in turn oversee the U.S. troops in Syria—to leave, albeit without a date.

Last but not least are the tensions between Washington and Tehran, which date back to the 1979 Islamic Revolution and have only intensified over the decades. The U.S. holds Iran responsible for the deaths of hundreds of U.S. forces in Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In the Israel-Hamas war, they now face each other with existential stakes for their allies, with spillover into other parts of the region. Overnight Monday, Iran fired missiles near the U.S. consulate in Erbil as well as a military base used by U.S. forces. The Revolutionary Guards claimed that the operation targeted a Mossad spy center in northern Iraq "responsible for developing and launching espionage operations and planning terrorist activities in the region, especially against Iran." The State Department called the attacks "reckless." The tragic irony is

that both Washington and Tehran want to avoid further conflict. “We’re not looking for a war,” John Kirby, the strategic-communications coördinator for the National Security Council, told reporters on Tuesday. “We’re not looking to expand this.”

The merger of multiple wars was almost inevitable, Dan Kurtzer, a former U.S. Ambassador to Israel and Egypt who was involved in the U.S. peace process under both Democrats and Republicans, told me. The dearth of viable ideas and -isms has created space for extremist movements to fill a void, sometimes by default. “Those movements have gained legitimacy at the expense of very ineffective secular movements,” he said. “One long trend is a growing sense that Islam has better answers to the problems in the region than secular non-Islamic states.”

Another factor is the maturity and the depth of the non-state actors. Israel fought four wars with neighboring Arab governments between 1948 and 1973. Since then, however, all its conflicts have been with militias—the Palestine Liberation Organization, Hezbollah, Hamas, and now the Houthis. The militias in the Axis of Resistance have been around for two generations. Their fighters are now battle-hardened and better armed, capable of making their own weaponry. If the Axis simultaneously unleashed their collective might on Israel, they would have “overmatch,” or capabilities to prevent an adversary from fully defending itself.

A third factor is the failure of U.S. foreign policy. From the Second World War through the nineteen-nineties, military deployments were usually accompanied by diplomatic initiatives. But the U.S. response to threats since the 9/11 attacks, in 2001, has been to act militarily. “This is larger than the Gaza war or the Houthis firing missiles,” Kurtzer said. “Diplomacy has been thrown under the bus.” As a result, people across the region have increasingly seen American involvement through the barrel of a gun, with dwindling credibility for its diplomacy. “It’s been like your car falling apart,” he said. “First the carburetor goes, then the oil, the fluids, and the wires. And then

you're stuck sitting on the side of the road."

In a last-ditch effort to pressure the Yemeni rebels, the United States formally added Ansar Allah, the official name of the Houthi party, to the list of "specially designated global terrorist groups" on Wednesday. It also imposed sweeping sanctions on a militia that controls the most territory in the poorest country in the Middle East. "These attacks fit the textbook definition of terrorism," Jake Sullivan, the national-security adviser, said. "They've endangered U.S. personnel, civilian mariners, and our partners, jeopardized global trade, and threatened freedom of navigation." The sanctions, which will have some "carve-outs" for humanitarian assistance, will not go into effect for thirty days to allow countries and non-government agencies to decide what to do about shipments ordered or en route. And, if the Houthis ended their attacks, the U.S. would be willing to review the designation, the Administration said. But the Houthis—like other groups in the Axis of Resistance—have vowed not to stop until the Gaza war is over. And that's nowhere in sight. ♦