

Israel-Hamas war: Fallout beyond Gaza



People gathering in Tel Aviv on Thursday to show solidarity and remember the victims of the Hamas massacre on Oct 7. The war adds to the burden on Washington and calls into question its ability to fulfil all its global commitments. PHOTO: REUTERS

Among other things, US attention could be deflected away from the Indo-Pacific.

Jean-Loup Samaan

Day by day, the repercussions of the surprise attack by Hamas on Israel last Saturday are unfolding. It is impossible to predict how a conflict that is only beginning will end. Yet, there are several lessons that can already be learnt at the international level. Beyond the gruesome assault, Hamas has already achieved one goal: hijacking the Palestinian cause and accelerating the weakening of President Mahmoud Abbas' Palestinian Authority (PA). The legitimacy of the 87-year-old Palestinian leader has eroded over the years, and Hamas has made no secret of its desire to replace him. Its high-signature terror attacks are aimed at just that – pushing Hamas to the forefront of the struggle against Israel, thus making the PA more irrelevant. By doing so, however, the militant organisation has all but ended any hope for a resumption of the peace process.

Meanwhile, the biggest unknown remains the possibility of a new front with Lebanon. The Lebanese militia Hezbollah is a partner of Hamas, but not an ally. Hezbollah has stayed out of the fight each time Hamas and Israel have gone at each other. But less than 48 hours after last weekend's attacks, Hezbollah fired rockets at Israeli security positions in the north. Its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, threatened more violence if Israel invades Gaza.

This is a daunting prospect for Israel: Hezbollah is a better and bigger organisation than Hamas. Its stockpile of rockets and ballistic missiles could overwhelm Israel's air defence system, a nightmare scenario for Israeli military planners. Keeping Hezbollah honest is a major reason two American carriers have been dispatched to the eastern Mediterranean.

The war has implications beyond the Levant. The first is the de facto suspension of the normalisation process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, although it is doubtful that this was Hamas' main goal.

Given the sophistication of the attacks, preparation surely took months, and therefore preceded the discussions of a Saudi-Israeli normalisation. Moreover, while negotiations are on hold, they may eventually resume. Saudi Arabia's statement in the wake of the attacks did not condemn Hamas, and effectively laid blame on the Israeli occupation, disappointing Tel Aviv. Fundamentally, however, the war does not change the motivations

of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to recognise Israel.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of the signatories of the Abraham Accords in 2020, took a stronger stance and explicitly denounced Hamas as being solely responsible. Hamas is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, which Abu Dhabi considers a terrorist organisation. The Emirati support for Israel may be put to the test when a ground invasion of Gaza starts and the Palestinian death toll rises. But for now, Israel's new Arab partners do not want to compromise the achievements of the past three years.

In fact, the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran may be the one to unravel in the aftermath of the conflict. The two regional rivals signed a deal mediated by China in March. Both sides pledged to stop interfering in regional crises. From the outset, there were doubts that Iran would honour its promise, and its influence on Hamas has led to speculation about its direct involvement in the attacks, although both US and Israeli intelligence say no evidence of this has yet been found.

However, Washington has said that Tehran is indirectly responsible. Iran has provided Hamas with weapons systems and military training for two decades. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps almost certainly knew of the Palestinian plans, and supported them.

At minimum, it indicates that Iran has no desire to change its regional policy. That realisation will shatter the few remaining hopes of de-escalation between the Gulf Arab states and Iran. Over the longer term, it may provide Saudi Arabia with a bigger motive to normalise ties with Israel. All the talk about rapprochement in the wake of the Saudi-Iran agreement has been shelved.

U.S. REMAINS INDISPENSABLE

The war also reveals that for all the talk of an American retrenchment from the Middle East, the United States is the only global power that matters in the conflict. Russia is unsurprisingly absent, as most of its resources are absorbed by the Ukraine war. President Vladimir Putin's silence reflects both the downturn in ties between Tel Aviv and Moscow, as well as Russia's dependence on Iran. European governments expressed their solidarity with Israel, but failed to reach an agreement about whether to suspend the European Union's financial aid to Palestinian organisations.

China's muted response is the most important indicator of US primacy. After years of speculation about China's challenge to the US in the Middle

East, Beijing's reaction to the crisis was underwhelming. Chinese diplomatic statements followed a familiar pattern: emphasising neutrality while calling on both sides to exercise restraint. If the current conflict is the worst Middle Eastern crisis since the Yom Kippur War, the comparison is revealing: In 1973, both the US and the Soviet Union played a central role in forcing an end to the conflict. China neither has the influence on Iran or Hamas that the Soviet Union had on Egypt and Syria, nor does it want to play that role.

In that context, the US' immediate support to Israel is a reality check for those who doubted American resolve in the Middle East. The deployment of naval force aside, it is very likely that the US will also provide additional missile defence support, and other weapons, to Israel. While much has been made of the US domestic political situation's impact on foreign policy, Israel occupies a different place. There may be challenges to continuing support for Ukraine among American lawmakers, but it is telling that Republicans are rushing to resolve the issues created by the self-inflicted wound that was the ouster of Speaker Kevin McCarthy. Mounting criticism of House inaction in the wake of the attacks is a key catalyst, though not much has happened yet, apart from generating more heat within the party.

More importantly, the US' backing of Israel follows other regional adjustments in previous months, such as the deployment of additional fighter jets to increase the American military presence in the region – the US Central Command has about 40,000 troops on station in the Middle East.

At the beginning of his presidency, Mr Joe Biden clearly hoped to stay away from the Middle East after two decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. This hope has vanished. The Israel-Hamas war adds to the burden on Washington caused by the protracted conflict between Russia and Ukraine, and calls into question its ability to fulfil all its global commitments.

In that sense, the latest outbreak of violence in the Middle East has ramifications for this part of the world.

US officials like to say they can "walk and chew gum at the same time". But with US debt reaching an unsustainable level – and with a Congress opposing new federal funding – the administration will have to choose its priorities. The conflict between Israel and Hamas could deflect – again – US attention from the Indo-Pacific, and perhaps further embolden China.

• Jean-Loup Samaan is a senior research fellow at the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore.