

# Israel's War and the Siege of Arab Regimes

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Until the eve of October 7, 2023, the Palestinian question seemed an issue of the past relegated to the background of actors' priorities in the Middle East region. Israeli leaders believed they had managed the Gaza situation by maintaining a blockade for over 16 years. However, Hamas launched a sophisticated operation, "Al-Aqsa Flood" that shattered this status quo. In response, Israel, with support from the United States and some European governments, launched not only a destructive war in the Gaza Strip but also a regional war, involving Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Iran, to reshape the Middle East. This regional war has revealed the erosion of Arab regimes and the pivotal role of armed non-state actors in shaping the regional order.

Israel's wars exposed Arab regimes' domestic and regional vulnerabilities. Syrian territories have been attacked by Israel amid exceptional silence by the Assad regime until its demise at the end of 2024 (Hassan 2024). Following the regime's fall, Israel seized the moment to expand its military occupation into the buffer zone of the Golan Heights in a historical land grab of Syrian territories. Arab regimes, which survived the 2011 Arab uprisings based on support from foreign patrons, are increasingly unable to conduct independent foreign policy. Egypt and Jordan have faced external pressure from US and EU patrons, on which they long relied for aid and sup-

port, to align their policies with the US agenda supporting Israel. In the meantime, their foreign policies are far from representative of their domestic populations, which overwhelmingly support the Palestinian cause. The gap between regimes and their people has significantly widened, and where the people mobilized (or even attempted to mobilize) for the Palestinian cause, regimes have mostly suppressed any expression of pro-Palestinian feelings (Valbjørn, Bank, and Darwich 2024, 12–14). A survey conducted in 15 Arab countries showed that 92 percent of respondents believed the 'Palestinian cause is a cause for all Arabs and not the Palestinian people alone', up from 76 percent in 2022 (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies 2024).

Non-state actors emerged as resilient actors capable of manoeuvre, learning, and adaptation. Despite Israel's exceptionally offensive war in Gaza, depopulating cities and flattening much of the territory, its strategy has proven ineffective at eradicating Hamas (Wermenbol 2024). Even after 15 months of total war, Hamas managed to inflict casualties on the Israeli military. This forced the Israeli army to return to areas of Gaza that were thought to be cleared of fighters. In the meantime, Hamas changed its tactics shifting from open combat to guerilla tactics, which reveal the group's evolving strategies and resilience (Mehvar and Khmour 2024). In

Lebanon, even though Israel achieved several tactical wins over Hezbollah, including the assassination of its leader Hassan Nasrallah and numerous key leaders in addition to the pager attack, Hezbollah demonstrated resilience through its drone and missile attacks on northern Israel and key cities, such as Haifa and Tel Aviv, while successfully repelling Israel's ground operation. As the cease-fire in Lebanon was concluded, it has become evident that Israel was unable to achieve its key goal: pushing Hezbollah north of the Litani river to secure northern Israel and allow displaced Israelis to return home. And Hezbollah is far from destroyed.

Some non-state actors, which were peripheral to the broader Middle East conflict — such as the Houthis in Yemen and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq — have played a larger role and deepened their regional influence. The Houthis have disrupted shipping with connections to Israel traveling through the Red Sea, forcing them to reroute around Africa, putting further pressure on Israel. The US-UK coordinated attack on Yemen seems far from successful in intimidating the Houthis or bringing any stability to the Red Sea maritime route (Şeker 2024). Kataib Hezbollah, a group currently linked to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, has shown exceptional autonomy beyond its role as an Iranian proxy by attacking US bases in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan against the wishes of the ICGC.

By taking action against Israel, these non-state actors have won the “hearts and minds” of their local populations as well as regional publics. They emerged as the symbol of defence of Palestinian rights and Arab dignity, a picture that Arab regimes can no longer represent. Hamas, whose popularity had been

decreasing before October 7, has re-invented its regional image and enhanced its ideological and political relevance. According to the various polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR) in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip between December 2023 and September 2024, there remains a majority that continues to view Hamas' decision to carry out the October 7 attack as ‘correct’, although that majority is now a minority in Gaza in the poll conducted in September 2024.<sup>1</sup> At the regional level, Abu Ubaida, the longtime spokesman for Hamas's Al-Qassam Brigades — a mysterious figure, always masked in a red kaffiyeh, known as Al-Mulatham (‘the masked’ in Arabic) — has emerged as a cultural, political phenomenon over social media, street art, and banners (Agathocleous and van Veen 2024). Hezbollah, whose popularity in the Arab world was tarnished as a result of its support for the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, was able to regain some of its previous image as a defender of the Arab cause at the regional level. The Houthis have equally gained supporters across the Arab world, transcending sectarian divisions (Jalabi 2024), and its military spokesperson — Yehia Saree — became a widely popular figure. PSR polls found that residents of Gaza and the occupied West Bank ranked the Houthis' response to the Israel-Hamas war as the most satisfying among regional actors.

As Arab regimes have become more rigid, unable to conduct independent foreign policies or appeal to their people, non-state actors emerged as competitive actors seeking to fill this void by challenging external interventions in the region, while building deeper and wider societal support and conducting foreign policies that yield popular support. ♦

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pcpsr.org/en/node/991>

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