



Israel's Post-October 7 Wars and the International Order

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This article analyzes some of the relationships between the struggle over the international order and the regional rivalries in the Middle East. Israel's wars in the Middle East since October 7 have manifested two processes of the "unification of fronts." One is global and the other is regional. On the global level, the Ukraine War, the Taiwan crisis and the Gaza War are all part of the escalating great power competition between the US and its allies versus the revisionist axis of Russia-North Korea-Iran-China. This axis aims to undermine US hegemony and the US-led liberal international order. The substantial US assistance to Israel since October 7 should be viewed in this context of the global conflict between the US-led West and the anti-US revisionist axis, even if Western criticism of Israel's conduct in Gaza increased gradually over time. On the regional level, the unification of fronts is expressed by the onset of a number of violent conflicts immediately following the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. These conflicts are part of the Iranian-led "resistance front" strategy to challenge American dominance in the Middle East and to weaken its key partner—Israel. In this context, a major—even if not the only—objective of the Hamas attack on October 7 was to disrupt the US-led normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The Iranian-led Axis of Resistance has taken advantage of a number of failed states in the Middle East. Finally, with regard to the populist challenge to the liberal order, President Trump introduces an approach which might be called an "illiberal peace," namely avoiding and ending wars without necessarily promoting liberal values such as human rights and national self-determination.

Key Words: the post-October 7 wars; Israel; USA; the International Liberal Order; Illiberal Peace; the West; Iran; Saudi Arabia; Hamas; the Revisionist Axis; China; Russia; failed states; global; regional; populism

The sudden collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 is a major blow to the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance, and is at least partly a result of the devastating blows inflicted by the IDF on the key members of the Axis: Hezbollah,

especially in the fall months (September-October) of 2024 and on Iran in the October 26, 2024 Israeli air attack. The regime change in Syria is also a major defeat for Russian influence in the Middle East as Syria was for

decades the key client of Moscow in the region, especially under the Assad dynasty (1971–2024), hosting a crucial Russian naval base. Despite the strategic importance of its military bases in Syria for the great-power aspirations of Russia, its ability to come to the aid of its Syrian client was severely constrained by its war on Ukraine. Thus, Moscow's ability to help its client in 2024 was much more limited than in 2015, when Russia's devastating bombing campaign saved the Assad regime from collapse during the revolt of the Arab Spring. Back then Russia was not engaged in a major war such as the Ukraine war, which currently limits its ability to intervene militarily in the Middle East. Saving the Assad regime a decade ago—together with Iran and Hezbollah—was useful for the great-power aspirations of Russia as well as for the consolidation of the pro-Iranian Axis, which fought Israel in the aftermath of the October 7 Hamas attack on the Western Negev.

Zelensky also said he was recommending that allies support the Israeli people

Such developments demonstrate the strong links between the global and the regional levels. On the whole, following the October 7 attack the US-led West stood with Israel, even if over time there has been growing criticism of Israel in the West with regard to humanitarian and political issues. At the same time, the anti-West Axis of China-Russia-Iran-North Korea stood—though in different ways and to varying degrees—with Israel's opponents. This paper analyzes some of the relationships between the struggle over the international order and the regional rivalries in the Middle East.

Another example of such relationships took place a few months earlier—on April 14, 2024. On that day an Iranian missile and drone attack on Israel was unprecedented in several aspects. First, its scope was massive. In addition, it was the first time that Iran attacked Israel directly from its territory (Vinograd, 2024). Finally, it

was the first time that an attack on Israel was defended by a Western-Arab coalition (Melman, 2024). This dramatic event sharpened the main attribute of the wars taking place in the post-October 7 era in the Middle East: “The Unity of Fronts” on two levels—global and regional.

On the global level, the current wars in the Middle East, similarly to the war in Ukraine and the threat posed by China to Taiwan, manifest the struggle between the US-led democratic camp and the anti-American revisionist camp led by Russia and China. This revisionist camp aims to weaken the liberal international order. Thus, shortly after October 7, during a national address, U.S. President Joe Biden drew a connection between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Israeli actions in Gaza, stating, “We are at an inflection point in history.” (Kempe, 2023). Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky also condemned Hamas, likening the group's tactics to those of Russia, saying during a visit to NATO's headquarters in Brussels that they “seek to hold free and democratic nations as hostages, and they want power over those who seek freedom” (Lamothe, Rauhala & O'Grady, 2023). Zelensky also said he was recommending that allies support the Israeli people (Rosenzweig-Ziff, 2023). As a global columnist of the Washington Post argued shortly after the October 7 attack: “The U.S. game plan for both Ukraine and Israel is essentially the same. It should support the partner countries that are the victims of aggression, give them the weapons they need to fight and build a diplomatic coalition around them.” (Rogin, 2023). A few months later, shortly after the Iranian attack and following quite a few months of delay, the House of Representatives approved a huge aid package of \$95 billion to the three threatened states (Cowan, Warburton & Zengerle, 2024).

On the regional level, the unification of fronts was derived from the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance”.¹ Iran took advantage of the expansion of the failed states phenomenon in the Middle East such as Iraq, Lebanon,

Yemen and Syria, in order to consolidate this axis. Under its encouragement armed militias took over parts of these states and they have been used by Iran to advance its regional objectives, including the struggle against Israel and the US. The failed states have also affected the rise of nationalist-populism in the West by “exporting” terrorism and migrants to the West. Populist entrepreneurs took advantage of such exports by claiming that only “strong leaders”—like themselves—can cope effectively with such challenges.

It is impossible to disconnect the linkages between the regional and the global contexts. Therefore, in order to understand the challenges—and potentially also the opportunities—confronted by Israel since October 7, we have to examine the key threats to the international liberal order in the last decade, including the aggressive steps by China and Russia, the expanding phenomenon of failed states, and the rising polarization of western societies, notably the US, which is closely related to the rise of nationalist-populism.

The Liberal International Order

In the aftermath of WWII, the US led the establishment of a liberal order, centered especially in the West, which included North America, Western Europe and also Japan. This order focused on democracy-promotion, free trade and building international institutions and multilateral arrangements. Yet, on the international systemic level—during the bipolar Cold War—the US focused on the Soviet power and threat. Thus, the US usually followed a realist strategy of balance of power—containing and balancing the Soviet Union and its clients, by forward deployment, high defense spending and establishing security alliances. The most notable of these alliances are with its liberal allies in Europe (NATO), the bilateral alliance with Japan but also with illiberal states in East Asia and the Middle East. On the basis of its Cold War considerations, the US even helped to topple democratically-elected governments

in Iran and Latin America (Miller with Ziv Rubinovitz, 2020)

When the Cold War ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US transformed its strategy as it became the global hegemon under unipolarity. The US has tried to expand the liberal order much beyond the West and democracy and free markets have flourished worldwide. The global changes made it possible for Washington to address much more seriously the domestic nature of its former two key rivals—China and Russia—aiming at the integration of the two powers into the liberal international order. Thus, the focus of US policy toward the two former rivals shifted from solely the issues of the balance of power (armament and alliances) and arms control to issues related to domestic politics and economic policies: democratization, globalization and economic engagement (Mandelbaum, 1997). In other words, the US aimed at liberal transformation—or convergence—of the key powers. Such a shift, and particularly the focus on the domestic nature of Russia and China, could be quite beneficial to the US view of the world order—liberal, capitalist, globalized and democratic. The US viewed such world order as not only profitable economically (enhancing free trade), but also beneficial for its national security (specifically the argument that democracies do not go to war against other democracies and also that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflicts).² Even if the balance of power changes some time in the future, according to the liberal belief, these liberalized states should not pose a security threat to the US.

However, these expectations have not materialized. Not only have China and Russia not become democracies, but each one of them has initiated offensive steps against its neighbors. Russia, which annexed Crimea already in 2014, escalated its offensive and invaded Ukraine in 2022. China threatens Taiwan and has taken over large parts of the South China Sea, which has huge strategic and economic importance. Russia

and China also cooperate with two other anti-Western authoritarian countries—Iran and North Korea. One key expression is the massive arms supply by the latter two to Russia during its war with Ukraine (Rathbone et al., 2024). While there is no formal alliance, there is coordination and shared interests against the common enemy: the US-led liberal order.

The Threat Posed by the Failed States

The second threat to the liberal order refers to the expanding phenomenon in the last two decades, especially in the Greater Middle East, notably after the failed post-9/11 US military interventions (Iraq, Afghanistan) and the “Arab Spring” uprisings (Syria, Yemen and Libya): more and more states have become failed states. A failed state is characterized by a malfunctioning of state institutions in many fields, but primarily in the absence of a monopoly over the means of violence in the sovereign territory of the failed state.³ Such a failure invites the rise of armed actors in the territory of the failed state. Not only are such actors not subordinated to the state authorities, but frequently they are loyal to foreign entities; thus, they might enable foreign intervention in the domestic affairs of the failed state. States lacking a common national identity provide fertile ground for the rise of such actors, which, in turn, might have trans-border links with neighboring states that share a similar sectarian identity.

Let’s take the case of Iraq as an example of a failed state, a neighbor’s penetration and the establishment of armed militias loyal to this neighbor: In 2003, in the aftermath of 9/11 the US invaded Iraq. Iraq is deeply divided among a Shiite majority, and large Sunni and Kurdish minorities. The Shiite majority traditionally suffered from discrimination by the Sunni minority, which ruled the country for many years. The American intervention brought about the breakdown of the Iraqi state, which became a failed state (Petersen, 2024). Following a process of US-led democratization, the Shiite majority became dominant. This was resisted

by the Sunnis, leading to a Sunni-Shiite civil war. Such developments produced two benefits for Iran: 1. The weakness of Iraq led to a change in the balance of power in the Gulf in favor of Iran. 2. Iran could take advantage of the trans-border identity ties between its own dominant Shiite majority and the newly dominant Shiite majority in Iraq. Thus, Iran could penetrate Iraqi domestic politics and use the civil war and later the rise of the Islamic State to establish armed militias composed of Iraqi citizens but loyal to Iran rather than to the Iraqi government.

The question is in what sense have these changes produced a rising challenge to the liberal order? Failed states are prone to civil wars, foreign interventions and the rise of terrorist organizations. As a result, these states tend to export migrants and terrorists. While there are other sources of migration to the West, the large wave of migrants from the failed states in the Middle East have an especially high salience, particularly following the 2003 US failed intervention in Iraq and the chaos of the Arab Spring. This is because the Iraq intervention and the Arab Spring generated a lot of attention in the West, as did the wave of migrants in their aftermath, including, for example, the decision of the German Chancellor at the time—Angela Merkel—to admit to Germany around a million or so refugees, mostly from some of the failed states of the Middle East. Such exports, in turn, provide some of the key factors for the emergence of the third challenge to the liberal order: the rise of illiberal nationalist populism in many Western countries, which serve as the core of the liberal order, most notably the US following the rise of Trump. The rise of populism also increases polarization in American society and thus potentially weakens its ability to lead the liberal order.

Iran’s Rapprochement with China and Russia: The Anti-American Axis in the Middle East

Even if Hamas’ attack on the Western Negev was not coordinated with the members of the

anti-American camp, and even if its precise timing was hidden from Iran, a key supporter of Hamas, there is no doubt that this camp gained a lot initially from the attack—until the recent major setbacks in Lebanon, Syria and Iran itself, especially since September 2024 and until the removal of Assad in December 2024. The initial gains of the Axis included, for example, the diversion of global attention from the aggressive moves of Russia and China in Ukraine and Taiwan. Similarly, the focus was removed, at least for a while, from the nuclear plans of North Korea and Iran.

Another great benefit of post-October 7 conflict for the revisionist camp refers to the suspension (at least until now) of Saudi-Israeli normalization, which seemed very close to materialization on the eve of the Gaza War. Normalization was designed to consolidate the Saudi position in the pro-American camp against the efforts of China, Russia and Iran to accomplish rapprochement with the Saudis (Anderson, Salem & Hansler, 2024). Somewhat similarly to the US-Soviet competition over the international alignment of Egypt in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia became the “great prize” in the struggle between the Western camp and the anti-American bloc. Beyond its vast oil resources, additional reasons for the centrality of Saudi Arabia include the economic modernization taking place in the country under its de-facto leader—Mohammad Ben-Salman. Saudi Arabia is also the home of the two holiest places in Islam. While the outcomes of the Arab Spring undermined stability in quite a few Arab states, Saudi Arabia manifests political stability, which, in turn, strengthens its leadership in the Middle East.

More generally, this struggle over Saudi Arabia is part of the global struggle between the camps on the affiliation of the “Global South.” This is a very large group, which is not aligned formally with any one of the competing global camps.⁴ Moreover, the “Global South” is a rather amorphous group, though the oil-rich Persian Gulf countries are among the most significant

members. Their financial resources, domestic stability and economic modernization, make them attractive for investments and trade, and thus their political power is also rising.

Similarly to the US-Soviet competition over the international alignment of Egypt in the 1970s, Saudi Arabia became the “great prize” in the struggle between the Western camp and the anti-American bloc.

Indeed the Middle East is becoming a central arena in the intensifying struggle over the “Global South.” At the beginning of 2023 it looked as though the anti-American camp was accumulating a number of achievements in the Middle East. The first one of them was the transformation of Iran into a major arms supplier to Russia as the latter became entangled in its war with Ukraine (Smagin, 2024). Such a rapprochement contradicted Israeli expectations that these two key supporters of the Assad regime would start to compete with each other over who would be the dominant force in Syria after they joined forces to save Assad during the Arab Spring. The recent collapse of the Assad regime might challenge the future of Russian-Iranian ties, but until this collapse it seemed that their relations were quite robust. The Russian-Iranian rapprochement joined the rising cooperation between China and Iran, which started in the economic domain and extended into the strategic area: diplomatic relations between the two countries were upgraded to a strategic partnership in 2016 and to a 25-year cooperation agreement in 2021 (Saleh & Yazdanshenas, 2023).

In 2023 China produced an additional achievement, at least a symbolic one, for the anti-American camp in the Middle East by brokering the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two traditional Islamist rivals in the Middle East: Iran—the leader of the Shiite camp and Saudi Arabia—the leader of the Sunni group. The implications for the US and for Israel

were potentially quite severe: the US might lose the great-power competition to its key rival—China—, which could replace the US as a key “honest broker”—a role which the US traditionally played in the Middle East (Pierson, 2023). China also recently hosted reconciliation talks between the two rival Palestinian groups, Fatah and Hamas, which may further enhance Chinese influence in the area, at least in the soft power domain as an actor which works to reconcile rivals, supposedly in contrast to the US which stands firmly behind one party—Israel, including arming it, and hasn’t thus far succeeded in advancing diplomatic solutions of reconciliation among adversaries. Even if the US remains the key broker in the region, these moves can be seen as accomplishments, though relatively modest ones, of a newcomer to Middle East diplomacy.

From the Israeli perspective, the apparent rapprochement between its major rival and the Saudis was potentially quite worrisome and could have established a new united Muslim front against Israel, or at least diminish the prospects of Saudi-Israeli normalization—the major goal of the Israeli diplomacy in the region.⁵

The American response to the accomplishments of its rivals in 2023 was a major acceleration of the earlier idea of Israeli-Saudi normalization. This normalization could draw on the experience of the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco. However, because of the centrality of Saudi Arabia in the Arab and Muslim worlds, only Saudi-Israeli normalization could signal the full integration of Israel into the Middle East and the Muslim world as a whole and cement the formation of a bloc of pragmatic, status-quo, economically modernizing countries, composed of the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Israel. Such a bloc could potentially balance the revisionist Axis of Resistance led by Iran and composed of its armed proxies in four failed Arab states: Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Following the recent blow to the Axis in Lebanon, Syria

and Iran, the regional balance of power has changed. The status-quo/modernizing bloc could become the leading force in the region, potentially also affecting the stabilization of some of the failed states such as Syria and Lebanon even though this is an extremely demanding task and its prospects of success are quite uncertain. However, the Muslim Brotherhood camp, which includes Turkey, Qatar and many of the victorious rebels in the Syria, is also rising in the aftermath of the defeat of the Baath regime in Syria. After all, Turkey was the sponsor and the protector of many of the rebels. Accordingly, their victory also enhances Turkey’s regional standing at the expense of the Iranian camp and of Russia.

Approaching the Saudis

The plan for Israeli-Saudi normalization took place—well before the recent upheaval in Syria—in a broad context of strengthening security relations between the US and Saudi Arabia in order to entrench the latter in the pro-American camp. This would have constituted a major accomplishment for the status-quo/pro-Western camp in the Middle East against the anti-US revisionist “Axis of Resistance” led by Iran.

The currently much weaker “Axis of Resistance” is composed of armed militias which are trained, armed and funded by Iran. The members of the axis have been resorting to violence against Israel, especially since the October 7 Hamas attack, and occasionally direct the violence also against the American military presence in the Middle East, especially in Iraq. The supreme objective of the axis is to turn Iran and its proxies into the dominant actor in the Middle East in the spirit of the Islamic Revolution of the late 1970s. The axis draws upon the common Shia identity of its members, even if from different variants of the Shiite sect and has thus mostly included Shiite groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. An additional source of the anti-Western axis is based on “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Uniting under their rejection of the state of Israel, Sunni

radicals, notably Hamas and Islamic Jihad, have joined the mostly Shiite axis.

The Saudi-American agreement was supposed to include American security guarantees, perhaps a security alliance with the Saudis and also advanced arms supply and assistance in the construction of a civilian nuclear reactor. The US was willing to offer far-reaching benefits to the Saudis so that they would continue to be part of the American-led group rather than join the Chinese-Russian camp and so that the Saudis would also normalize their relations with Israel. The Saudi condition was that Israel would make concessions on the Palestinian issue (England, 2024); but Ben-Salman, the de-facto leader of Saudi Arabia, seemed to be satisfied before October 7 with only limited concessions. These expected concessions were so limited that even the far-right Israeli government might have accepted them at that stage.

The Hamas attack on October 7 undermined all of that. Even though there were a number of reasons why Hamas committed such an attack (freeing Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails, the Jerusalem issue, notably the control of Haram El-Sharif/Temple Mount, the hardline policies of the far-right Israeli government in the West Bank), the timing of this barbaric attack was at least partly intended to prevent Saudi-Israeli normalization. Its goal was to derail the potential great Israeli accomplishment in achieving legitimacy in the eyes of the leading Arab and Muslim state, and thus, guaranteeing Israeli integration into the Middle East and the reinforcement of American status in the region. In other words, the Hamas attack served, in fact, the key objective of the global anti-American camp: to weaken American hegemony.

Minutes of Hamas' secret meetings, seized by the Israeli military and obtained by the New York Times, provide a detailed record of the planning for the October 7 attack. This record shows that the decision to attack was also influenced by Hamas' desire to disrupt efforts

to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia (Bergman, Rasgon & Kingsley, 2024).

In early January 2025 Israel is increasingly concerned that the Kremlin will provide Iran with the technology to turn its enriched uranium into a nuclear warhead.

The Anti-Israeli Policies of China and Russia

Following the Gaza War, the global division into two camps—the US-led liberal-democrat vs. the authoritarian anti-American—shaped considerably the positions of different states in relation to Israel and its war in Gaza. The anti-American group, including China and Russia, expressed critical positions toward Israel and its assault on Gaza, while avoiding criticism of Hamas, including not calling it a “terrorist organization.” (Myers & Frenkel, 2023). Criticism of Israel was also expressed in the deliberations of the UN Security Council and the various votes taking place there in relation to the war. The camp members also conducted a large-scale anti-Israel campaign on social media with occasional antisemitic expressions (Benjakob, 2024). Russia especially followed a pro-Hamas policy by hosting Hamas delegations shortly after the October 7 massacre. Moreover, following the mid-April 2024 escalation between Israel and Iran, it looked like Russia was planning to accelerate the supply of the advanced Sukhoi-35 jets to Iran and maybe also the advanced S-400 air-defense systems (the supply of the SU-35 has not yet materialized) (Warrick, 2024). Moreover, in early January 2025 Israel is increasingly concerned that the Kremlin will provide Iran with the technology to turn its enriched uranium into a nuclear warhead. The two countries are expected to sign a strategic cooperation agreement in January, just days before Trump's inauguration (Caspi, 2025).

Russia also provided targeting data for Houthi assaults on global shipping (Faucon & Grove, 2024). The Houthis are members of the

Iranian-led Axis of Resistance and their declared aim is to assist Hamas in the war against Israel. Indeed, well after the cease-fire was agreed between Israel and Hezbollah, the Houthis continued to fire missiles at Israel and Israel responded by bombing Houthi targets in the areas of Houthi control in Yemen. In addition, the BRICS Summit of October 2024 (led by China and Russia alongside India, Brazil and South Africa), hosted by Putin, adopted anti-Israeli resolutions.

In contrast, the US-led Western camp was shocked by the brutality of Hamas and expressed support for Israel's right to defend itself, even if conditioning it more and more on humanitarian moves such as reducing civilian deaths and providing aid to the population. The leader of the Western camp stood immediately behind Israel in aspects directly related to the conduct of the war: massive supply of arms and ammunition, the deployment of two aircraft carrier groups, a nuclear submarine and a Marine combat force to the Middle East in order to deter the Iranians from intervention and Hezbollah from escalating its aggression in the north of Israel (Scharf, 2023). The US also exercised its veto at least three times to prevent anti-Israeli resolutions in the UNSC. A tacit objective of the US, however, was to compel Israel to avoid initiating another front against Hezbollah. At the same time, the US and its allies took an active part in Israel's air defense, notably against the two Iranian missile attacks in April and October 2024 and also against the Houthis' missile attacks.

There has been criticism from some Israeli and American right-wing commentators on delays in the supply of some munitions required for the Israeli war effort in Gaza.⁶ On the whole, however, American support for Israel since October 7 has been consistent and unprecedented. Continuous arms supply for over a year surpasses, both in quantity and in duration, the important airlift during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Additionally, Biden's visit to Israel at the beginning of the war and

his encouraging address to the Israeli people, still in the shock phase of the brutal Hamas attack, was quite an uncommon diplomatic move (Neuman, 2023).

How Best to Explain Biden's High Level of Support for Israel?

The American support for Israel culminated during the Iranian missile attacks on Israel on April 14 and also on October 1, 2024. The US and its allies—the UK, France and Jordan—took an active part in downing the Iranian missiles and drones. The US also exerted pressure on Saudi Arabia and the UAE to supply Israel with intelligence about the onslaught (Winer, 2024). Thus, an active Western-Arab status-quo coalition has emerged during wartime—an unprecedented event in Arab-Israeli relations.

One explanation refers to the president's worldview: President Biden defines himself as a "Zionist." Another explanation is domestic politics: assuming that most of the American public was pro-Israel (at least at the beginning of the war, even if public support became weaker—especially among young Democrats—the longer the war lasted, with rising civilian casualties and a growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza) (Silver et al., 2024). Domestic politics also played a role because of the two-party competition in the US. Since the Republican party, and its leader Trump, presented themselves as wholeheartedly pro-Israel, Biden couldn't be too critical of Israel in order not to lose votes—even though on the other hand the Democratic party lost votes in 2024 elections among the radical left and among Arab-Muslim Americans, especially in a state like Michigan where there are a relatively high number of Muslim voters.

An alternative explanation refers to the struggle over the international order. In the eyes of the American administration, the war in Gaza joins the war in Ukraine and the Chinese threat to invade Taiwan. The three of them are "frontier wars" between two global camps struggling over the character of the international order. Within this global war, there was here,

in fact, a process of “unification of fronts.” On the Middle East front the Chinese-Russian-Iranian axis is fully invested in the weakening of Israel and of American standing in the region. Therefore, the administration had to support Israel similarly to their support for Ukraine against the Russian invasion of its territory and the deterrence of China against an invasion of Taiwan. Accordingly, the foreign aid package, approved in 2024, includes all three fronts. In sum, the two global camps don’t view the war in Gaza—and also the other post-October 7 Middle Eastern fronts—as a unique regional episode, but as part of the struggle over the global order.⁷

The administration’s globalist approach, namely viewing the various regional conflicts as part of the global struggle against the authoritarian axis, is manifested most dramatically by the continuous support for allied leaders who “failed in their roles or rejected policy suggestions and diplomatic efforts by the Americans.” (Wong, 2024). There are a number of leaders who fit this category, but the support for Prime Minister Netanyahu is especially salient in this respect because the war in Gaza “has been especially costly in terms of American and international public opinion.” (Wong, 2024). What is the explanation provided for this continuous support despite the high costs?: “US officials often justify their choices by saying they cannot alienate partners they need to counterbalance Russia, Iran, North Korea and especially China.” (Wong, 2024).

The Iranian Fire Ring

The Western-Arab assistance to Israel against the Iranian attacks can also be explained through the struggle over the international order. This event directs our attention to the second challenge to the international order: the expansion of the phenomenon of failed states in the Middle East and their exploitation by Iran. The success of this policy lasted until the recently major military accomplishments of Israel against Iran and Hezbollah in late 2024,

which also created some of the conditions (in addition to the entanglement of Russia in the Ukraine War) for the removal of the Assad regime in Syria, which had served for many years as the land bridge to transfer arms from Iran to its leading proxy—Hezbollah in Lebanon. Still, it is worth discussing the logic behind the establishment of the Iranian Axis of Resistance.

Even though most of the members of these militias are citizens of the local state, and at any rate, are not Iranian citizens, they are loyal to Iran rather than to the local governments.

Iran took advantage of two key characteristics of four failed states in the Middle East—Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen: State weakness and considerable Shiite (or Shiite-related) groups in states which hadn’t succeeded in building inclusive nations that are congruent with the boundaries of the sovereign territory of the states. Namely, in these failed states the loyalty of many citizens is first of all to their sectarian/ethnic group rather than to the nation-state as a whole (Miller, 2007).

Such a combination—of weak states and large Shiite groups—has made it possible for Iran to establish—or deploy—armed Shiite militias in the four countries. Even though most of the members of these militias are citizens of the local state, and at any rate, are not Iranian citizens, they are loyal to Iran rather than to the local governments. In this way, the “Axis of Resistance” was formed: Not as a classical inter-state alliance, but one state which enjoys the loyalty of armed militias in foreign states based on a shared identity (broadly defined) and on material assistance (funding, training and arms supply) by the leading state.

The strongest element in the axis, militarily and politically, was until recently Hezbollah in Lebanon, and alongside it also the Houthis in Yemen and the Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria (until the recent removal of Assad). In addition to these Shiite groups, radical Sunni Palestinians

joined the axis, most notably, Hamas, based on the common hostility to Israel.

As a result of the deployment of the Iranian-led axis throughout the Middle East, the Gaza War expanded after October 7 well beyond Gaza to become a regional war. Iran succeeded to form around Israel—until the recent military developments—“a ring of fire,” as stated by a former Iranian military leader—Qassem Soleimani. Thus, Hezbollah initiated a war from Southern Lebanon against the North of Israel a day after the Hamas attack on Israel; the Houthis have been harming maritime transportation to Israel in the Red Sea and sent rockets and drones to southern Israel; and militias in Iraq and Syria attacked American forces in the region but also Israeli targets, for example, firing from Syria against targets in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Iran also agitated for disturbances in the Israeli-controlled West Bank (Porat, 2024).

Iran itself moved from supporting its proxies to a direct attack on Israel, for the first time ever, in the April 14 missile attack on Israel following the targeted assassination in Damascus—the capital of the failed Syrian state—of senior officers in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. This operation was attributed, according to foreign sources, to Israel; and these sources claimed that it was not the first time Israel committed such an attack. The Iranians conducted a second missile attack on Israel on October 1, 2024, firing over 180 ballistic missiles, which caused some limited damage even though the Israeli air defenses were able to shoot down most of the missiles. Western powers, led by the US and including also the UK and France, helped Israel in its air-defense. Apart for supporting Israel’s right to self-defense and their interest in preventing escalation, which would entangle them in a major Middle East war, the Western powers view Iran, especially recently, as a member of the anti-Western axis (China-Russia-N. Korea-Iran) since it became a major arms provider to Russia in its war on Ukraine. This war is clearly seen in the liberal West as a major attack on the liberal international order. Accordingly,

Iran is viewed in recent years more clearly as a partner in posing this threat to the liberal order, as stated recently in an analytical article in the New York Times: “Iran’s open cooperation with China and especially with Russia has troubled Europeans, whose security is threatened by Russia’s aggression in Ukraine.” (Erlanger, 2024).

Populism and Isolationism of “America First”?

There are strong links, as was suggested, between two leading export domains of the failed states—migration and terrorism—and the rise of nationalist populism in recent years.⁸ This rise deepened the cleavages in Western societies and created a high level of polarization. Such polarization and particularly the rise of nationalist-populism, constitute the third major challenge to the liberal international order. The populists support the weakening of “checks and balances” in liberal democracies, namely, the weakening of the judiciary, the professional bureaucracy, the mainstream media, the academy and more (the so-called “deep state” in the eyes of the populists). The populists argue that only the election outcomes reflect the true “will of the people,” while the liberal elites are globalists and cosmopolitans who care about the whole world, but do not necessarily care about their own people (Müller, 2017).

Mass migration from the failed states (mainly from the Greater Middle East) as well as the export of terrorism, reinforced popular identification with the populists in Western countries. The migration has generated a wave of resistance in Western societies, rooted in fear of a threat to the character of the dominant identity—White Christian—and the traditional cultural attributes of Europe and the US. Many of the populists believe in the so-called “replacement theory,” namely that the liberal elites encourage non-White migration because the elites believe that the migrants will support them politically (Charlton, 2019). In this way, the elites deprive the “authentic” people of their well-deserved rule of the country.

Populists also use the widespread fear of the terrorism exported by the failed states, for their political purposes. The populists claim that only “strong leaders” from their own ranks (which are not constrained by the liberal checks and balances) are able to overcome this threat as well as the migration challenge.

With regard to the Middle East, and especially Israel, the main challenge posed by the populists is the tendency towards isolationism, mainly the “America First” approach of the American president, Donald J. Trump. The Trumpist approach is, at least to some extent, a continuation of the pre-WWII American isolationism (whose slogan was also “America First”). According to this approach, the US has, first of all, to take care of its own affairs, narrowly defined, and surely to avoid foreign interventions beyond the two vast oceans which provide the US with excellent defense. The most recent American military interventions—in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya—are viewed as major failures and thus only reinforced the isolationist tendency and the populist stream which leads it. Moreover, the growing polarization in American society, at least partly as a result of the rise of populism, could weaken America’s ability to lead the liberal order and thus also result in growing American isolationism (Giurlando & Wajner, 2023).

The US is the keystone of the liberal order, and it leads this order until today. The possibility, therefore, of American isolationism can severely harm the liberal world vis-a-vis its opponents in Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. One manifestation of the potential effects of this was the great difficulty faced by the Biden administration in enacting the aid package to the three “frontier states.” The key reason for this difficulty was the objection by the Trumpist isolationists in Congress to supporting military aid to Ukraine against Russian aggression. Even when the package was approved—despite the Trumpists’ objection—part of the aid to Ukraine was converted from a grant to a loan in order to appease the isolationists (Frum, 2024).

While the Israeli portion of the package (\$14 billion) was widely supported, American isolationism—especially a military disengagement from the Middle East—is still a real possibility, particularly under a Trumpist administration, even though the inclusion in the administration of some vehemently pro-Israel and anti-Iran hawks might block the isolationist direction in relation to Israel. At any rate, the argument in favor of at least some military disengagement from the Middle East is based on three considerations: First, from a realpolitik perspective, the focus is likely to be on competition with the key global rival of the US, namely China in the Indo-Pacific; secondly, the energy-independence of the US lessens the dependence on energy sources in the Persian Gulf; and, third, public disinclination for intervention in the Middle East following the troubling experience of the twenty-first century interventions in the Greater Middle East. Another reason might be the rising opposition among progressive American youngsters to support for Israel, as manifested in the recent campus protests. This element is not likely to affect the Trump administration, which is quite hostile to the progressive cause. Still, it does show the reluctance of many young people in America to support Israel and that might have some potential influence, even in the Trump administration.

American disengagement poses a great danger to Israel’s security. The post-October 7 wars show very clearly how much Israel depends on American security assistance: for the supply of sophisticated weapon systems, large amounts of munitions, major financial assistance and diplomatically—especially its veto in the UN Security Council to block anti-Israeli resolutions. There is no substitute for US aid and support. The Europeans are neither motivated nor able to replace the US in this respect. And for any Israeli leader who believed in the ability of Israel to maneuver between the great powers, the post-October 7 wars clarify that China and Russia are hostile and closely related to the

key Israeli opponent—Iran—as all three of them share the objective of undermining American hegemony and the international liberal order it leads.

With regard to the U.S., the current aid program expires in 2028 and it is questionable whether Trump's next program will be as generous as the current \$38 billion package (distributed over a decade). Beyond the aspect of isolationism, this is related to Trump's transactional economic conception that in every deal there should be a "winner" and a "loser" in financial terms—and he doesn't like to be on what looks like the "loser" side of the deal, which provides financial assistance for free. On the other hand, many supporters of Trump, including some of the most loyal of them, notably the Evangelists, are keen supporters of Israel and that might incline Trump to show great support for Israel, including financially. It is quite clear that he'll not be troubled so much by humanitarian concerns or by Jewish settlements in the occupied territories. However, Trump is very much interested in war avoidance during his administration, and definitely those wars which generate major media attention or disrupt American campuses. This might be called an "illiberal peace," namely peace which doesn't necessarily advance human and national self-determination rights of all people, such as the Ukrainians, Taiwanese or the Palestinians. Rather it will be peace based on the power of the regionally stronger parties such as Israel—supported by the US—in the Middle East. At the same time, Trump will be interested in ending wars and avoidance of new wars while he is in the White House.

What Israel Should Do

The liberal countries of the West, led by the US, are the key source of support for Israel. The problem is that with every passing day, more and more publics in Western countries view Israel as the aggressor in the context of the Gaza War, because of the deaths of civilians and the humanitarian crisis in the Strip. Trump might

not be bothered at all by such considerations. However, a substantial public in the US and surely in Europe is influenced by such concerns and Israel should take that into account when it looks into the future of its relations with the liberal world. In order to preserve such Western support and to extend cooperation with Arab states, Israel must behave carefully by following the laws of war and the humanitarian rules, avoiding as much as possible the killing of non-combatants, steering clear of an annexation of any Palestinian territories and also of establishing any Jewish settlements in Gaza.

A key challenge for Israel is the absence of "a day after" plan for Gaza. At the end of the war, Israel should establish—in cooperation with the US and pragmatic Arab states—a civilian administration in Gaza. Such an administration should include Palestinian elements from Hamas' rival, Fatah. Such an administration should express processes of change in a reformed and improved Palestinian Authority, so that it will accumulate renewed public legitimacy following years of corruption and illegitimacy. At the same time, the parties must agree on the principle of the two-state solution, even if its materialization will take a few years.

Such a plan should aid the integration of Israel into the Middle East via normalization, peaceful relations and economic-technological cooperation with the Saudi-led pragmatic Arab states. Since Iran and its proxies also threaten many of these states (even if they became much weaker in recent months), the cooperation with Israel can extend, even if not in a formal alliance, to military domains such as air and naval defense. The "absolute victory" of Israel will be its integration into the Middle East by joining a Western-Arab coalition, which will advance economic cooperation and joint defense, but also a political solution to the Palestinian issue in the next few years.

This will help to stabilize the Middle East and reinforce the ties of the moderate coalition, which focuses on economic modernization, with the West. A more stable situation might also

narrow the possibilities for Chinese-Russian penetration into the region. Rising economic development and opportunities could also limit the incentives for locals to join either the de-stabilizing migration to the West or terrorist organizations.

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Notes

- 1 On the “Axis of Resistance,” see Leonhardt, 2024.
- 2 On the Democratic Peace principle, see Russett et al., 1993.
- 3 See definitions of “Failed States” in *The Economist*, 2021.
- 4 For more on the Global South, see *The Conversation*, 2023.
- 5 Press reports suggest that the Gaza War is producing such a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. See Abi-Habib & Naar, 2024.
- 6 The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported in May 2024 that the proposed deal involved up to 6,500 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAMs)—guidance kits that turn unguided bombs into precision-guided munitions (Youssef & Lubold, 2024).
- 7 See the citations at the beginning of the article: Biden made a connection between the war in Ukraine and the Gaza War (Kempe, 2023); and Zelensky also condemned Hamas, likening the group’s tactics to those of Russia (Rosenzweig-Ziff, 2023).
- 8 See for example Vaughan-Williams, 2021; Kirchick, 2019, 51–58; and Singh, 2021, 250–269.