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Global Threat Forecast 2024

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SYNOPSIS

In 2024, the Israel-Hamas conflict will emerge as the preeminent threat to global security. An escalation of the conflict could spark a regional war and lead to a global recession. The West's support for Israel will fuel protests in the Muslim world, drive radicalisation and bring about terrorist attacks. Sunni and Shia groups will pose a common threat to western, Israeli and Jewish interests. Preventing the conflict from escalating and working towards a sustainable solution for the Palestinian people will require visionary leadership.

COMMENTARY

The Israel-Hamas war will define the global threat landscape in 2024. The fighting, with its geopolitical, economic and strategic ramifications, will divide the community of nations and their societies. More than any other armed conflict, the polarisation and fragmentation will threaten national and international security. Should the Israel-Hamas war escalate, it can plunge the global economy into a recession.

With western governments steadfastly backing Israel, public pressure is mounting on them to restrain the response of the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and its transgressions of humanitarian and international law. Muslim and non-Muslim communities continue to protest and to call for economic sanctions against Israeli and Jewish companies. With radicalisation and reciprocal radicalisation peaking, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia are on the rise.

Israel's overwhelming response to Hamas' brutal attack on 7 October 2023 is driving Muslim anger and hatred, bringing in state and non-state armed actors. In the new year, we can expect to see Sunni and Shia groups threatening western, Israeli and Jewish targets around the world.

The Background

The Middle East is currently facing a new threat of war. The Israel-Palestine conflict re-ignited on 7 October 2023 with the Hamas surprise attack on Israel. Hamas killed 1,147, injured 3,000 and abducted 240 Israeli civilians, military personnel and foreigners as hostages. The attack mirrored Al Qaeda and Islamic State attacks in its brutality. Most of the hostages remain in Gaza under the custody of Hamas and the Islamic Jihad. Israel's doctrine of deterrence, a key pillar of its military strategy, had failed. To reestablish its credibility, the IDF seeks to eliminate Hamas' military and governing capabilities both in Gaza and abroad.

To deter Iran and its proxies, most notably the Lebanese Hezbollah and Yemeni Ansarullah, from intervening, the US moved a nuclear submarine and two aircraft carriers to the Eastern Mediterranean besides deploying 1,000 military personnel in Israel. The US is steadfastly strengthening the defences of its allies and friends in the Gulf. The US is also installing the Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system in Saudi Arabia and Patriot surface-to-air missile systems in Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE.

Expected Developments in 2024

Four global trends will likely characterise the emerging threat landscape in 2024:

- (i) The Israel-Hamas war will escalate to a wider regional conflict with extra-regional actors getting involved;
- (ii) Sunni and Shia threat groups will be emboldened and will pose a common threat to US, European, Australian, New Zealand, Israeli and Jewish targets;
- (iii) Cyber-attacks by state and non-state entities (both terrorist and criminal) will target information infrastructures, including critical infrastructure; and
- (iv) Misinformation, disinformation and malinformation campaigns by both state and non-state actors will surge.

As of 25 December, the Hamas-run Ministry of Health in Ramallah, has estimated the number of Palestinian civilians killed by Israel's bombardment at 20,674, and 1.9 million out of 2.3 million displaced. The lack of electricity, fuel, food, clean water and sanitation is creating a humanitarian crisis despite the flow of assistance from around

the world. Given the scale of this humanitarian catastrophe, the global terrorist threat will spike in 2024 targeting western, Israeli and Jewish interests.

The Sunni movements will grow in strength, size and influence. Emboldened by Sunni ideologues and propagandists, threat groups will call for and conduct attacks against military and civilian targets. By invoking the Palestinian cause, the weakened Al Qaeda and Islamic State will revitalise.

Besides Al Qaeda, Islamic State and other likeminded threat groups, Iran-supported Shia militia groups worldwide, including Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemeni Ansarullah and Iraqi resistance fronts, will mount land, sea and air attacks. The security and intelligence community has already pre-empted dozens of planned attacks.

Israel's strategic plan is to restore its security by eliminating Hamas and other Palestinian threat entities in Gaza. However, these threat groups will re-emerge in the West Bank. In parallel, the displaced Hamas threat will likely expand and globalise with the Muslim Brotherhood as its support base. Muslim Brotherhood affiliates in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East will provide support to Hamas and other Palestinian threat groups.

With governments in the West steadfastly supporting Israel, Muslim migrant and diaspora protests will continue, and just like the Palestinian and Lebanese waves of terrorism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new wave will emerge.

The world witnessed two waves of attacks following Al Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on America and Islamic State's proclamation of a caliphate on 29 June 2014. Given the dozen attacks that have occurred since 7 October, a third wave of global terrorism is developing.

The pro-Palestinian campaign will be both violent and non-violent. Although unsuccessful in 2023, the campaign calling for a boycott of Israeli and Jewish products is likely to extend to western products in 2024.

State actors too are likely to take action against Israel the same way Malaysia banned from its ports, Israeli owned and flagged ships as well as ships travelling to and from Israel. Malaysia does not consider Hamas a terrorist group and Hamas chief of drone operations was killed by the Israeli Mossad in Malaysia.

Outside Israel, Mossad is likely to target Hamas, the Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and others providing support to Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas, among others.

In 2024, Israel is likely to fight on four fronts:

- (i) The southern front against Hamas, PIJ and other threat entities in Gaza.
- (ii) The northern front against Lebanese Hezbollah, an armed group comprising 65,000 fighters with 150,000 rockets supplied by Iran.
- (iii) With the digital front shaping the operational domain, both sides will flood the digital domain with content to advance their respective interests.
- (iv) The economic front is influenced by the loss of employment both in Gaza and Israel. The Ansarullah targeting ships in the Arabian and Red seas is likely to affect supplies to and from Israel and to the rest of the world as a fifth of the world's oil supply passes through the Straits of Hormuz.

Conclusion

The Israel-Gaza war could set the region aflame. As was the case during the Arab Spring, the popular anger of Arabs and Muslims over the failure of their governments to help the Palestinians, will destabilise their regimes. Although their citizens support the Palestinians, Arab governments are averse to the Muslim Brotherhood and do not support Hamas, its Palestinian branch.

The Hamas attack was intended to disrupt the rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf states and to provoke a war in the Middle East. It has succeeded in doing the former, at least for now, while a full-scale war involving regional and external powers is a possibility that should not be dismissed; this possibility besides other ongoing conflicts like the Ukraine war and US-China contestation over Taiwan.

Visionary leadership is needed to mitigate the expansion of the Israel-Hamas war. World leaders should work together to defend Israel's right to exist, to contain and dismantle Hamas, and to bring about a two-state solution in which the Palestinians and the Israelis can live peacefully alongside each other. As for Israel, unless it is prepared to work with the Palestinian Authority to establish a Palestinian State, western and Gulf support for Israel cannot be sustained.

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