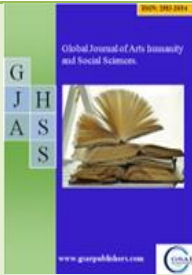
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The Two Closing Windows of Opportunity: The Pivotal Debate and the Road to War

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Abstract

On June 27, 2024, a historical and pivotal presidential debate took place between American President Joseph Biden Jr. and Former President Donald Trump. What made this debate pivotal is a somewhat strange reason: It led to Biden's withdrawal and the nomination of Vice President Kamala Harris. The repercussions of this withdrawal did not only affect American internal politics but also world politics and conflicts, namely the clash in the Middle East that we will discuss, in addition to other wars like the Russian-Ukrainian one. Hence, it is essential to ask questions regarding the real causes behind the events leading to war in the Middle East, as well as the possible scenarios and factors that may lead to an escalation—reaching large-scale wars in this region. Therefore, the objective of this work is to reveal the roots of the actual conflict between Israel and Iran and its proxies to highlight the possible outcomes.

Materials and Methods: This work employs a qualitative methodological approach, utilizing secondary data analysis and following deductive reasoning. Thus, it analyzes the events, showing the bigger picture before delving into the causes and possible scenarios, hence its importance in showcasing the strategic motives and implications.

As for the findings, they demonstrate how the window of opportunity is closing for both Israel and Iran before the American presidential elections. This is due to multiple reasons, such as the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and KSA, which has pushed Iran to attack Israel directly and through its proxies. As for Tel Aviv, it gained the initiative after suffering from Operation Al Aqsa Flood and has been conducting an aggressive war on Iranian proxies. The future of this war, especially against Hezbollah, may take different courses of action, highlighted in this work, each having certain outcomes and dangers.

Keywords: Debate; Israel; Iran; Hezbollah; Houthi; Hamas; Al Aqsa Flood.

INTRODUCTION

On October 7, 2023, Hamas and other Palestinian militants shocked the world when they stormed Israeli territory in a bold and unexpected manner using creative means such as hang gliders and motocross bikes. The operation, code-named "Al-Aqsa Flood," resulted in the killing of over 1,200 Israelis and the abduction of over 200 ("Al-Aqsa Flood," 2024).

Furthermore, the operation caused an internal conflict in Israel after PM Netanyahu and his government were accused of neglect and mishandling the situation. On a regional level, the conflict has

developed into war against Iranian-backed Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as a limited military conflict involving the Houthi militants in Yemen, after these factions targeted Israel using missiles—mostly Iranian-made. In addition, Iran launched two missile attacks against Israel. The first, in April 2024, was in retaliation to the Israeli bombing of an Iranian diplomatic complex in Syria, involving more than 300 projectiles (Diamond et al., 2024). As for the second, in October, it came as a retaliation for the killing of Hamas's leader Ismail Haniyeh, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah, and Iranian Brigadier General Abbas Nilforoushan (Gol, 2024).



In the midst of the rapidly developing events, it is important to ask the following questions: “What are the real causes of the events leading to war in the Middle East? And what are the factors and scenarios that could lead to a dramatic turn of events?”

Materials and Methods

In order to answer the aforementioned questions, this paper employs a qualitative methodological approach, utilizing secondary data analysis and deductive reasoning. Thus, it analyzes the events, showing the bigger picture before delving into the causes and possible scenarios.

We will start by stating some historical events that affected the current situation, particularly the “nuclear deal” with Iran in 2015 and, most importantly, Iran’s hopes to restore the deal during President Biden’s term. Then, we will discuss the closing window of opportunity after the presidential debate between Trump and Biden that resulted in the latter’s withdrawal from the race. Due to this change, Both Iran and Israel took aggressive measures to guarantee their strategic goals and interests would not be seriously affected in the near future. In addition, it is necessary to highlight the possible scenarios for the war in the Middle East, considering the dramatic turn of events.

The Nuclear Deal

Flashback to 2015, when the Obama administration—alongside China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the European Union—signed a historical deal with Iran named the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The most important points of this deal were as follows:

- Iran has the right to develop a peaceful nuclear program.
- The sanctions against Iran regarding its nuclear program should be lifted.
- A monitoring system is implemented to ensure the respect of this agreement.
- The accord limited the numbers and types of centrifuges Iran can operate, the level of uranium enrichment, as well as the size of its stockpile of enriched uranium (Robinson, 2023).
- Many of the JCPOA’s restrictions on Iran’s nuclear program have expiration dates. For example, after 10 years, centrifuge restrictions would be lifted, and after 15 years, so too would limits on the amount of low-enriched uranium Iran can possess (Robinson, 2023).

The Iranian leadership considered the deal a major triumph after years of suffering from sanctions that left the country in a dire social and economic situation. This even resulted in Iran halting the use of slogans such as “America is the great Satan,” a phrase commonly displayed on banners in Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, Sanaa, and even Beirut, where Iranian proxies operated freely. Then, the deal was “trumped!”

In May 2018, President Trump announced the United States’ withdrawal from the deal, calling it “horrible” (Bender et al., 2018), and reinstated aggressive sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Iranian High Hopes

Afterward, with President Joseph Biden Jr. in office, the Ayatollah had high hopes about reviving the good old nuclear deal in its original format, or, at least, a new format that permits Iran to complete its nuclear program, removing the sanctions and further expanding its regional influence. But as the Arab saying goes: “Winds blow counter to what ships desire.”

The truth is that in high politics as well as in strategic military, decisions are made according to the circumstances at the time of the decision-making. In this context, when Biden came back to the White House—as president this time—new factors emerged in the Middle East, affecting the nuclear file:

- Iran’s development of strategic missiles, especially ballistic ones.
- Threats against Saudi Arabia and the UAE by the Houthis, who attacked KSA’s majority state-owned petroleum and natural gas company ARAMCO.
- Most importantly, the Abraham Accords, signed in 2020 during Trump’s term in office, which normalized relations between Israel and four Arab countries: United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.
- Serious negotiations aiming to normalize the relations between Israel and the most important country for Muslims in the Arab world and beyond: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

For all the reasons stated above, Biden’s administration was not motivated to reinstate the “Obama deal” or negotiate a new deal with the Iranian government, especially with the rising tension between Biden and the young and motivated Saudi leader, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman Al Saud due to multiple issues, including:

- Biden ended the American support of the Saudi-led military offensive against the Houthis in Yemen in February 2021 (Knickmeyer, 2021).
- Biden’s harsh verbal attack against Saudi Arabia during his election campaign regarding the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.
- Bin Salman’s excellent ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin and their collaboration in the “oil prices” war between the West and Russia have become especially significant following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In addition, the Islamic Republic’s rulers had to deal with—and violently suppress—a serious uprising that threatened the clerics’ rule, especially since the revolt was driven by the cosmopolitan views of a globalized generation.

Iran’s Window of Opportunity

By the end of Biden’s term, and *prior to the famous debate* that took place on June 27, 2024, which prompted the Democratic Party to withdraw its support for Biden in favor of VP Kamala Harris, it became increasingly clear that Trump had the upper hand over Biden in the presidential race. Moreover, with the normalization

talks between Israel and Saudi Arabia reaching advanced stages, the “window of opportunity” was closing on Iran to reimpose the old “nuclear deal” or, at least, cut a new one. This created a sense of urgency that serious measures should be taken to force the US to sit on the negotiations table with the Islamic Republic.

In light of the aforementioned, Tehran’s plan consisted of creating a destabilization on multiple fronts to send a clear message to Washington that the Ayatollah could create serious threats against Israel, the freedom of navigation, and maybe other American “red lines.” In summary, Iran has the ability to destabilize the Middle East region and threaten American interests.

What happened next was a series of coordinated attacks on multiple fronts by Iran and its proxies:

- Hamas militants stormed Israeli military and security posts as well as civilian homes and events and launched multiple attacks using missiles, drones, and ground forces.
- On the next day, Hezbollah initiated an attack on Israel, launching hundreds of missile barrages, starting a war that developed into a massive Israeli operation against Lebanon, targeting Hezbollah’s top leadership and military infrastructure, in addition to a ground incursion.
- Houthis in Yemen started attacking civilian ships heading to Israel in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, which, again, sent a strong message to the United States and the West:
 - The attacks crossed one of the most critical red lines for the United States: the freedom of navigation.
 - The attacks have a significant negative impact on the global economy due to the fact that they cause a rise in shipping costs in one of the busiest regions in the world for maritime activity.
 - The Houthis launched multiple missile attacks on Israel, the United States’ strongest ally in the region.

Note that Israel has carried out significant air strikes against Houthis in Yemen, destroying critical military sites and infrastructure—Al-Hudaydah Port, oil facilities... These attacks were more damaging to the Houthis than the operations conducted by the allied navies led by the United States, which are mostly defensive.

- Iranian proxies in Iraq launched multiple attacks on American forces in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan in addition to attacks on Israel—189 attacks on U.S. forces from October 2023 till August 2024 (Knights & Smith, 2024).
- In January 2024, Iran's Revolutionary Guards announced that they attacked “the spy headquarters of Israel in Iraq’s semi-autonomous Kurdistan region” (Hafezi & Azhari, 2024). Note that this region is an important economic area of interest for the United States and the West.
- Also, in January 2024, nearly three months after the start of the Al Aqsa Flood Operation, Iran carried out an attack against Pakistan. In retaliation, Pakistan conducted

a tit-for-tat attack later that same month (Mao et al., 2024).

By activating all of these fronts, the Iranian government succeeded in pushing the United States into serious talks that consider Tehran’s influence in the region in any future normalization deals. In addition, this might pave the way for new negotiations regarding the nuclear program.

Israel’s Window of Opportunity

However, the Iranian window of opportunity was not the only one closing. After the Al Aqsa Flood Operation, as well as the attacks against Israel from multiple fronts, Netanyahu started feeling the weight of the consequences, internally and externally:

- The opposition in Israel has been growing strong, demanding that the government be held accountable and face legal and political consequences.
- The hostages taken by Hamas form a serious burden for Netanyahu’s government as the hostages’ parents and loved ones, as well as other citizens, have been putting significant pressure on the PM to reach a deal with Hamas.
- Due to Hezbollah’s attacks on Northern Israel, around 67,500 people have been evacuated (Berger & Levine, 2024) and displaced to other regions further south, placing additional pressure on the Israeli government, which has vowed to return them to their homes at all costs.
- Israel’s relations with numerous Western allies have been deteriorating due to the accusations against the IDF of attacking civilians and using excessive force in its operations against Gaza and Lebanon.
- Since the start of its war with Hamas, Israel has been facing issues with The International Court of Justice (ICJ), which culminated in the ICJ’s declaration in July 2024 that “Israel’s continued presence in the occupied Palestinian territory is illegal” (Berg, 2024).
- The growing tension between the Israeli government and the UN resulted in banning Secretary-General Antonio Guterres from entering Israel.
- The normalization talks with Saudi Arabia have been put on hold.

Nevertheless, what made Israel realize that, like Iran, its window of opportunity is closing was the famous debate between Trump and Biden—a turning point that could potentially change the fate of millions of people from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean.

After Harris’s nomination as the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate, the polls showed that the vice president had a good chance of stepping into the Oval Office as president, which was alarming for Tel Aviv. While Trump’s support for Israel in its conflict with Iran is unwavering and undebatable, the Israeli government has serious doubts about Harris’s future support, especially since she refused to attend Netanyahu’s speech to Congress in July 2024.

This closing window of opportunity, post-debate, resulted in Tel Aviv's sense of urgency to use the narrow timeframe before the American presidential elections to launch an unprecedented attack against Hezbollah.

Israel and Hezbollah's Most Aggressive War

While the declared short-term goal of this campaign is to return the displaced Israeli citizens to their homes in the north, the long-term goal, as it seems, is to deny Hezbollah the capability to threaten Israel in the future. To reach these goals, the IDF launched unprecedented air strikes, killing Hezbollah's top leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as well as most of the organization's top leaders. In addition, the scale of the destruction in Hezbollah-controlled areas is unbelievable, with a death toll reaching thousands of people in Lebanon.

Moreover, Israel's intelligence agencies conducted a complex operation, where communication devices—pagers and radios in particular—exploded in the hands, cars, posts, and homes of Hezbollah operatives, putting thousands of them out of combat.

Despite all of these operations, Hezbollah is still capable of launching daily attacks against Israel, using its Iranian missiles, which prevents the displaced Israelis from returning to their homes in the north.

Hence, as military science has taught us, boots on the ground are necessary to reach the objective. Therefore, the IDF has mobilized over four armored divisions to the border with Lebanon, and its special forces started conducting limited reconnaissance operations.

End State and Scenarios

The end state of the ground operation against Hezbollah is still ambiguous. While Tel Aviv officials stated that it is a limited incursion, the military indicators, especially regarding the size of the mobilized IDF forces, foretell a large operation.

Thus, two scenarios, out of many, come to the forefront regarding the aforementioned end state:

- 1- Enemy-based aim—destroying Hezbollah's ability to conduct future attacks: In this scenario, the IDF would have to conduct a large attack against a wide part of the Lebanese territory in order to neutralize a certain—high—percentage of Hezbollah's forces and military capabilities. Here, Israel's attack involves a long, high-cost war for both parties.
- 2- Land-based aim—securing a certain line to prevent Hezbollah from conducting future attacks: In this scenario, the IDF's ground forces would have to reach a certain line/area to create a buffer zone between Hezbollah's militants and the north of Israel. However, this scenario is probably not the best course of action for Israel for the following reasons:
 - a. Hezbollah's developed missiles, including ballistic, are capable of reaching Israel even from northern Lebanon, more accurately, from the north of the Bekaa region.
 - b. The IDF would have to permanently occupy the said buffer zone.

Conclusion

After suffering a painful attack from Hamas and missile strikes on multiple fronts, Israel managed to regain the initiative and move to the attack, destroying a significant portion of Hamas and Hezbollah's military capabilities, in addition to bombing Houthi infrastructure in Yemen.

Now, regarding the above scenarios of the IDF's war against Hezbollah, although they both aim at ensuring Hezbollah's inability to conduct future operations against Israel and the return of the Israelis to the north, the second scenario (securing a buffer zone) would have to be accompanied by an agreement between Israel and Hezbollah/Iran under international sponsorship, to guarantee this safe return and Israel's safety in the future. Hence, for all the above-mentioned reasons, the first scenario (destroying Hezbollah's capabilities) seems more likely in case such an agreement isn't reached.

As for the tit-for-tat attacks between Israel and Iran, obviously, they both aim at gaining more cards on any negotiation table in the future. Nevertheless, in case Israel realized that such negotiations would not be in its favor, the most dangerous scenario would be if Tel Aviv, during the closing window of opportunity, engaged in a large-scale war against Iran to destroy its military, nuclear, and economic capabilities, which may drag the region into a larger war, and that is what American diplomats are trying to prevent during this "closing window timeframe for all parties involved."

In all cases, despite the polls—that are never 100% accurate—the window of opportunity is closing on both Iran and Israel, and the pivotal debate that shaped the history of the Middle East will result either in a Trump administration that would totally support Israel, or a Harris administration that might not reach a deal with Iran, but it would try to reduce Israel's "freedom of maneuver," which is one of the most essential warfare concepts.

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