

Article

Caught in a Bind: Iran in the Wake of the Gaza Conflict

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Abstract

Tehran's influence in the Middle East has continued to rise with the outbreak of Israel's war on Gaza. However, even as Tehran advances, it appears to be caught in a bind. While its biggest regional adversary is veritably tied down by the limits of its ethnocentric state system, the Islamic Republic of Iran too appears to have reached the limits of asymmetric warfare with the increasing danger that it may be sucked into a bigger regional conflict. This article argues that the overt manifestation of the shadow warfare which Tehran and Tel Aviv had been waging for the last several years has potentially made the neighbourhood far more dangerous than before. The Gaza conflict has pushed Iran, as much as Israel, into a bind. Iran risks being drawn into a regional war, neutralising all the advantages gained so far, and one that might even endanger its regime security. The article also assesses where India fits in this tense stand-off between its two partners in a period of instability and conflict.

In the last fifteen years, as the USA has been systematically reducing its footfall in the Middle East, the shadow of Iran has tended to grow — notwithstanding the impact of the sanctions imposed by Washington on account of its nuclear programme, its economic predicament, and periodic domestic turmoil. Tehran's influence in the region has continued to grow following Israel's seemingly unwinnable war on Gaza. But as on other occasions in the past, even as Tehran advances, it appears to be caught in a bind. While

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its strongest regional adversary is veritably tied down in Gaza, the Islamic Republic may have reached the limits of asymmetric warfare with the growing danger of being drawn into a wider regional conflict.

This article argues that the overt manifestation of the shadow warfare, which Tehran and Tel Aviv have been waging for the last several years, has made the neighbourhood far more dangerous than before. In the first part the article lays out the nature of the shadow warfare between Israel and Iran as they adjust with the scaling down of US presence in the region. It then goes on to show how the Gaza conflict not only constitutes a setback for Israel, but has also created a sliver of opportunity for Iran. It further argues that by finally dragging the Israel-Iran antagonism out in the open, the Gaza conflict has pushed Iran as much into a bind as it has Israel — with both risking getting sucked into a regional war. For Iran, a wider war would neutralise all the advantages gained so far, and one that might even endanger its regime security. A final segment explores the policy options for India amidst this tense stand-off between its two crucial partners.

The War of Shadows and the Abraham Accords

In the wake of the 9/11 tragedy, a section of the American establishment had begun to favour a gradual pull-out from the Middle East. This body of opinion grew as the enormity of American misadventure in Iraq became evident. From the time of the Obama Administration, steady withdrawal from the Middle East has featured on the agenda of every US President.¹ Even as the pace of American draw-down has tended to vary over the years, the intent is very clear, particularly to countries of the region. Accordingly, various countries — (Iran, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — have been trying to grapple with their respective places in the power matrix of the region — a phenomenon that began to manifest even before the political turmoil associated with the Arab Spring.²

Among the steadiest beneficiaries of this process was, arguably, the Islamic Republic of Iran.³ Tehran's tried and tested policy of supporting proxy militias has come to serve as a kind of force multiplier in the region, expanding her sphere of influence considerably. Iran had been cultivating militias in third countries all the way back to 1982 when it began investing in the Hezbollah of Lebanon by providing funds, arms and ammunition, and training;⁴ it started investing in the HAMAS from the late 1980s, providing arms, funds and eventually training as well.⁵ Both of these organisations were crucial to the defensive strategy of Tehran, which saw the USA — the *Shaitan-e Bozorg* (the Greater Evil) — as its principle point of threat in the neighbourhood. Whenever it came under pressure from

the US, it tended to target America's greatest ally in the region, Israel — the *Shaitan-e Kocheh* (the Lesser Evil) — using Hezbollah and the HAMAS as its 'proxy' outfits.⁶ From around 2006, Iran began successfully cultivating Shi'i militias in Iraq in order to keep the American presence there on its toes, eventually culminating in the rise of a network of such groups collectively known the Quwwat al-Hashd al-Sha'abi (Popular Mobilisation Forces or PMF).⁷ While some of these outfits have been funded by Iran at some stage and there have been fallouts at others (such as the Badr militia of Moqtada al-Sadr), other outfits like the Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Asa'ib Ahl al-Huq, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, etc., have remained firmly aligned with Tehran over the last 10 years, and have even joined hands for operations in Syria.⁸ One of the last major additions to this network of allies is the Houthi militia of Yemen. An outfit predominantly of the Zaidi Shi'i (with whom the Ithna 'Ashari Shi'i of Iran never had any love lost), the Houthi militia began to enjoy serious Iranian logistical, funding and military support only after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia began intervening in the power struggle in Yemen.⁹ Given the decisive nature of Tehran's support, the Houthis have in the past, mounted attacks against Saudi Arabia at the beckoning of Iran. Collectively, this network of Iran's allies is known as the Mehvar-e Moqawwamat (Axis of Resistance); it targets Iran's adversaries, either to tie them down, or harass them, while allowing Tehran the element of deniability.¹⁰

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The tactical advantage this gave Iran was considerable, for it virtually created a land bridge for Iran right up to the Mediterranean Sea. As the late commander of the Niru-ye Qods (Qods Brigade), Qassem Soleimani had once said, it was possible for him to have breakfast in Tehran, drive to Baghdad for lunch, and end up having dinner in Damascus.¹¹ He could also have added the possibility of having an early morning breakfast the morning after in Beirut. The network of allies has not only been funded, armed, equipped and trained by Iran, evidence is mounting that Iran has also passed critical military technology (potentially including, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, i.e., UAV or drones) which has not only enhanced the firepower and military capabilities of each of these militias, but also the capability of Iran to strike at virtually any country in her neighbourhood.¹²

Most of Iran's neighbouring countries are disturbed by this steady ascendancy of Iran, but Israel happens to be the only power that has grown increasingly determined to militarily thwart that prospective domination. As a consequence, the two countries have engaged in shadow warfare in the region through the last decade.¹³ In this shadow war,

the most demonstrable actions are often pre-emptive, and almost invariably carried out by Israel — either in imminent anticipation of an attack, or to pre-empt the creation of pockets of strength or even military bases of Iran (mostly of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, i.e., IRGC). Thus, Israel has captured arms consignments destined for Hezbollah or HAMAS. It has carried out pre-emptive strikes in Syria and Lebanon targeting Iranian military presence, or taking out strike capabilities being developed by Iran in third countries (Iraq, Lebanon, Syria) that could be used to launch attacks against targets on Israeli soil.¹⁴ Israel also carried out targeted killings of IRGC functionaries, nuclear scientists, etc., but unlike the Americans, has officially maintained a studied silence on the matter. Iran, on the other hand, has generally issued a firm denial. Cyber-attacks on each other's infrastructure also bore the putative signature of each, but targets were never intended to bring about a general and total breakdown of the antagonist's system which could have triggered a military response.

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As the shadow war was being waged and Iran's influence continued to grow, many of Iran's neighbours in the region and sections of the US establishment began to agree that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015 negotiated by the Obama Administration had let Iran off lightly. The JCPOA, purported to contain Tehran's nuclear ambitions, was premised on the assumption that if removal of the international sanctions regime against Iran was made conditional on Tehran halting its alleged bid for a nuclear weapons programme, the Islamic Republic would accept the deal, and that would help reduce its threat potential.¹⁵ However, even as Tehran accepted a cap on its nuclear programme, its missile development programme had accelerated and posed a major security risk for its neighbours. This prompted the Trump administration to renege on the JCPOA in 2018, and restore many of the sanctions on Iran once again.¹⁶ The Trump administration, though, was determined not to get stuck in the Middle East, and began to encourage its allies in the region who had concerns about Tehran's ascendancy to close ranks against Iran. It was largely as a result of this nudge that Bahrain and UAE established full diplomatic relations with Israel in September 2020, and began working towards normalisation of relations with the Jewish state. Dubbed the Abrahamic Accords, underlining their common adherence to faith and tracing its common origins back to the Biblical figure of Abraham, these were considered to be the beginning of the process of integration of Israel into its geographical neighbourhood in the face of the common antagonist from the other side of the Persian Gulf.¹⁷ The US was also trying to persuade

Saudi Arabia to follow the same path of normalisation as a sort of insurance against the kind of attacks that Iran-backed Houthis had carried out in 2020 on Saudi oil installations.¹⁸

The Abraham Accords presented Tehran with a major challenge in its regional policy. The prospect of Israel successfully befriending the majority of Arab Gulf states for the first time since its creation in 1948 raised the prospect of complete diplomatic isolation for the Islamic Republic. This threatened to neutralise the back-channel diplomacy that Riyadh and Tehran had embarked upon courtesy mediation by Pakistan and Qatar, resulting in the rapprochement of March 2023

through the good offices of China.¹⁹ Talks had begun in the US and Israel on the creation of a security architecture that was meant to include Israel and UAE, and even Saudi Arabia once it had normalised its relations with

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Israel. The proposed India-Middle East Economic Corridor was meant to be the economic foundation beneath this overhaul of the strategic landscape of the region.²⁰ Were this to actually materialise, it was hoped, the combined might of Israel and the Gulf states would constitute a sufficient deterrent to Iran's inclination for misadventure. Of course, if Riyadh were to establish normal relations with Israel, that would remove the ground from beneath the feet of Palestine as an Arab cause, which in turn would have made the prospect of the creation of a Palestinian state disappear altogether.²¹ The conflict in Gaza looks like having changed all that for the time being.

The Gaza Conflict: A Window of Opportunity for Tehran?

On October 7, 2023, HAMAS militants crossed into southern Israel from the Gaza Strip, killing more than 1,200 and abducting around 251 Israelis.²² In a disproportionate act of collective punishment, Israel has been bombarding Gaza since and has launched an incursion into the Gaza Strip determined to physically eliminate HAMAS. The number of casualties in Gaza stood at 37,943 when this article went to press in July, of whom nearly two-thirds are reported to be women and children whose chances of being HAMAS militants are slim.²³ Much of Gaza is now in ruins, and the United Nations (UN) has warned that famine is round the corner as the population is left scrounging for food, and often settling for animal feed. All infrastructure needed for daily life in the territory has collapsed.

While the Israeli government is under tremendous international pressure, especially from the US, to be mindful of collateral civilian damage, and has even been accused of

orchestrating a genocide, Israeli society is seething with rage and has been expressing pretty broad-based support for the declared cause of elimination of HAMAS. A large section of the Israeli people seem to be of the opinion that there is little prospect of peace with Palestinians — be it within the frame of a one-state solution or that of two states. There was, thus, little public criticism in Israel of the manner in which the Gaza incursion was being prosecuted by the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF), in utter disregard for Palestinian lives, until the eve of Rafah offensive.

In the process, Israel has lost much of the goodwill it had gained among its neighbouring countries over the past several years. The so-called Arab Street has never condemned Israel this hard since 1967. Egypt, the first Arab country to forge normal ties with Israel as early as 1979, has been especially squeamish about Israeli rejection of the principle of equivalence in its reprisal.²⁴ Even Jordan, which normalised its relationship with the Jewish state soon after the Oslo Accords of 1994, has been quite vocal in its denunciation of Israeli treatment of the civilian population of Gaza.²⁵ The buzz in the diplomatic circles is that Riyadh has put all talks of normalisation on hold for the time being, fearful of the backlash in domestic politics if it abandoned the single cause that most Arabs have held in common so far.²⁶ Even the UAE, which refused to jeopardise the newly established relationship with Israel and denounced HAMAS as a threat to the stability of the Middle East, condemned the manner in which Israel had chosen to ignore the principle of equivalence in its acts of reprisal, causing misery to the civilian population of Palestine.²⁷

However, blinded by rage, Israel has been unmindful of the opinion of its prospective Arab allies and their citizens. Its actions have not only galvanised Arab public opinion in the region, but also a broad spectrum of global public opinion against its conduct in the Gaza conflict. If Israel pleads being a victim of bad press, as it has done in the past, this time at least the claim will not ring particularly true.

Given this context, as the Iranian media has noted since the Gaza conflict began, the only components of the broader Arab society that are appearing to take on the bully in the bloc are those that are a part of the Axis of Resistance.²⁸ Hezbollah has been mounting guided rockets and artillery barrages on the occupied Shebaa farms since the very next day after the HAMAS attacks, and has been carrying out intermittent attacks on Israel since then, ostensibly in solidarity with HAMAS. The present round of hostilities, involving 4,400 rocket, missile and airstrikes between the two combatants,²⁹ have forced nearly 100,000 people in Lebanon and almost 96,000 people in Israel to evacuate their settlements near the borders.³⁰

The Houthis also began to periodically target Israel, but more by targeting shipping in the Red Sea (in particular, the region of the chokepoint of Bab al-Mandab) operating under Israeli flag, or those bound for Israel or belonging to any country friendly towards her. Between October 2023 and March 2024, the Houthis carried out nearly sixty such attacks before a UN resolution was passed against their activities in January 2024, and coordinated military strikes were undertaken by the US and its allies at particular sites in Yemen to neutralise Houthi offensive capabilities.³¹ While the number of strikes has declined in the last few months, there is no reason to assume that their entire strike capability has been completely neutralised.

In Iraq, Iran-backed outfits of the Kata'ib Hezbollah, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Asa'ib Ahl al-Huq, Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada, etc., have recently broken away from the PMF by forming the Muqawwamat al-Islamiyah fi al-Iraq (Islamic Resistance in Iraq or IRiI) in solidarity with the Hezbollah in the Gaza conflict. They have not yet attacked Israel from Iraqi soil, but have sent combatants to support the Hezbollah over the last few months.

Mainstream Iranian dailies, especially those close to the regime, have been highlighting Israel's conduct during the conflict as a vindication of Iran's critique of the 'Zionist entity,' and have been carrying tales of exploits of the Axis of Resistance on the front pages.³² On October 30, 2023, Iran's Rahbar (Supreme Leader) Ali Khamenei called for solidarity among Muslim nations against Israel, warned them against normalisation of relations with Tel Aviv, and even called for stoppage of trade in oil with European countries that support her.³³ Since then the Supreme Leader in his weekly addresses, the Iranian President and other functionaries of the Islamic Republic have regularly used the Gaza conflict to criticise Arab attempts at normalisation of ties with Israel as a betrayal of the Arab people of Palestine, and have played up Tehran's own support for the Palestinian cause as befitting true Muslims.

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The window of opportunity for a diplomatic offensive provided by Israel's Gaza misadventure was, thus, being seen by Iran as *carpe diem* to attack Arab countries that had established diplomatic relations with Israel, or were thinking of doing so, in a bid to isolate Israel in the region. However, Iran was also determined to avoid the escalation of the Gaza conflict into a regional war. Tehran had no desire to turn the shadow war with Israel into a real confrontation. The April 2024 incidents took the conflict into a domain they had not anticipated.

Out of the Shadows but Not Quite in the Sun

On April 1, 2024, Israel took out a senior Iranian commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, in a targeted strike, flattening in the process the Iranian consular building next to the Embassy in Damascus.³⁴ This was the first ever strike by either side in their ongoing shadow war on what was technically a sovereign territory of one of the antagonists that made Iranian retaliation almost absolutely certain. Iran accomplished this by a barrage of ballistic missiles and armed drone attacks on April 13, 2024, directly targeting Israel.³⁵ While Iranian assault produced almost no casualty or damage to speak of, the mere fact that Israel was directly attacked necessitated an Israeli reply which was delivered by means of an Israeli strike against a radar installation in Esfahan on April 19, 2024.³⁶

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The tit-for-tat strikes between Tehran and Tel Aviv have brought the region closer to a regional war. In anticipation of such escalation, the Biden administration dispatched two aircraft carrier strike groups (headed by aircraft carriers USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and USS Gerald R. Ford), to the eastern Mediterranean to deter any misadventure by Iran or any of its allies, within a fortnight of the atrocities committed by HAMAS.³⁷

It is noteworthy, though, that despite the routine demonisation of each other, neither Israel nor Iran seem to be keen on broadening the theatre of conflict. Indeed, by itself, the Israeli attack on Brig. Gen. Zahedi could be said to have constituted an extreme act of provocation. But, seen as a part of the shadow war between Tel Aviv and Tehran, it is one of many in the last several years in a third country (i.e., Iraq, Syria and Lebanon).³⁸ In fact, the April 1st attack could be construed as a desperate warning sign from Tel Aviv that if Iran instigates its proxies to raise the level of confrontation to a higher notch, Israel would also be willing to push it higher still by attacking Iran directly. Indeed, a red-line was crossed when the consular building was attacked because it was sovereign Iranian territory. This raised suspicion in Tehran (and elsewhere) that Israel actually wanted to drag Iran into the conflict. But it was in another sense a measured escalation, because any direct and unprovoked attack on Iranian soil would have guaranteed dragging Iran into the conflict, which presumably the Israeli establishment wanted to avoid at a time when much of its forces were already tied down in Gaza.

Similarly, from the moment of the attack on the Damascus consular office, Tehran was vowing retaliation as its strategic deterrence had clearly been found wanting. But in repeatedly warning that a reprisal was on its way, Tehran was dead certain to lose the element of surprise that is crucial in a conflict. Clearly, pragmatists in the Tehran establishment had prevailed over the hardliners, and signalled Iran's intention to retaliate so that Israel would actually be prepared to deploy sufficiently effective counter-measures, and thereby prevent the conflict from spiraling out of control. Even Tehran's retaliation on April 13, 2024, with a barrage of 170 armed drones, 120 cruise missiles and about 20 ballistic missiles, constitutes an act not so much of war as of measured escalation.³⁹ Given the fact that the drones and the cruise missiles had to cover a distance of over twelve hundred miles, there was ample time for these to be spotted and neutralised in third-country (Iraqi and Jordanian) airspace. Moreover, the ballistic missiles used were the slowest available and not the supersonic ones that Tehran has, which would have proven difficult for the Israeli iron dome to shoot down amidst a barrage of slow-moving projectiles. It clearly shows that Iran too was engaging in measured escalation. In its turn, when Israel decided that it had to retaliate to the April 13th strike, it took out a low significance and easily replaceable radar installation (replaced the very next day) in order to signal their desire to let the matter end there. Iran reciprocated by saying the attack had actually come from subversives within Iran itself, and had caused little or no damage, hence no reply was warranted.⁴⁰

The approach of measured escalation is consistent with Iran's posture from before April. In fact, as Hezbollah's operations against Israel continued to increase as late as March 2024, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdullahian in one of his last foreign missions before dying in a helicopter crash in May, actually had to persuade Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, to openly announce that Iran would not have to involve itself in the event of any serious escalation by Israel against Hezbollah.⁴¹

Iran's wariness about a prospective war with Israel is partly because of the state of its economy that has been on the brink time and again, and would be unlikely to survive a full-fledged war, however brief.⁴² It was also partly on account of the domestic turmoil that has been plaguing Iran from 2022 over the thorny issue of *hijab* laws, which poses perhaps the gravest threat to the stability of the Islamic Republic since 1979.⁴³ In fact, after Iran's attack against Israel, as Israel vowed revenge, social media posts showed graffiti appearing on walls in Tehran urging Israel to strike Iran, "and we shall do the rest."⁴⁴ Thus, despite the prolonged nature of the shadow conflict, and frequent transgressions of so-

called redlines, clearly the principal actors in the conflict are determined to not descend into a full-fledged regional war.

And yet, pulling back into the shadows would not be the same again. Israel and Iran, both having struck directly against each other, are now rewriting their defence strategies. Israel now knows that Iran's ballistic missile arsenal is a greater threat to its national security than earlier thought. Even though the attack was thwarted by Israel, its iron dome missile defence system would probably have been overwhelmed on April 13th had US, UK, France and Jordan had not stepped in (with additional intelligence inputs from UAE and possibly also Saudi Arabia). That also pretty much rules out an effective one-time targeted strike without risking a larger regional conflict. So, from this point on, whether Tel Aviv would be operating on a shorter fuse than before would be noteworthy.

Similarly, Iran knows that in the event of a direct confrontation in the future, Israel's Arab allies may choose to stand by Tel Aviv owing to their antagonism with Tehran. This could make Tehran use its proxies directly against its Arab neighbours also, like the Houthi attack on the Saudi Aramco oil installation back in 2022. Thus, in the event of a direct confrontation between Iran and Israel, if Tehran here onwards proactively deploys its proxy militias to tie down the neighbouring Arab states, any potential conflict could risk spiraling out of control once the proxies start playing their own games (as the Houthis most likely did in targeting shipping near Bab al-Mandab this time round).

In the light of the attack by Israel on Esfahan, Iran would now be working towards an even earlier time for break out as a nuclear-capable power.

When the Obama administration concluded the JCPOA in 2015 to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons credibility, Iran had a break-out time of around 11 months. A year after Trump pulled out of the agreement in 2018, Iran slowly but steadily began to remove the restrictions and the verification regime that JCPOA had put in place. By 2020-21, the break-out time is believed to have reduced to a few months only. It would not be far-fetched to guess that in the light of the attack by Israel on Esfahan, Iran would now be working towards an even earlier time for break out as a nuclear-capable power. If Iran actually revises its nuclear policy and decides to become a nuclear capable power, as Kamal Kharrazi, former Foreign Minister and advisor to Supreme Leader 'Ali Khamenei, has recently indicated,⁴⁵ a dangerous neighbourhood would get just that more dangerous. Thus, the next war of shadows between Israel and Iran may not end as quietly as this one.

Policy Options for India in the Short Run

India's position on the Gaza conflict and the various developments that have followed has been one of extreme caution, given the delicate balance New Delhi has maintained between the two principal antagonists and in the larger neighbourhood.

India's relationship with Israel has improved steadily since the 1990s, and has grown exponentially in the last 10 years. Apart from the considerations of technological cooperation in diverse fields ranging from irrigation to desalination of sea water, India has begun to purchase heavily from the Israeli defence industry in a bid to modernise the Indian military.⁴⁶ Hence, unlike in the past, India has occasionally stood with Israel — as after the HAMAS outrage of October 7th, when Prime Minister Modi denounced HAMAS attacks in the strongest terms and expressed solidarity with Tel Aviv.

However, New Delhi balanced this by voting with the rest of the world for a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds at the United Nations,⁴⁷ and then voting for the inclusion of Palestine as a member state.⁴⁸ It thereby sent a signal to both Palestine and the Arab states that New Delhi has not changed its historic stance in favour of the Palestinian cause. This does not jeopardise India's standing with Israel in any way, because evidence suggests that while Tel Aviv would love to have its friends vote in its favour, it does not hold it against those who do not, if they make it up in other ways such as when India abstained from voting against the resolution calling for an arms embargo on Israel.⁴⁹ Thanks to the uptick in India's policy towards Israel in the last several years, India's votes in the UN would thus not lose her a friend.

On the other hand, India has historically had good ties with Tehran from before 1979, and has, by and large, continued to maintain positive relations principally out of considerations for energy security. Indian refineries have been more suited to the crude of the northern reaches of the Persian Gulf. As a result Iran was among India's principal suppliers of crude right down to 2018-19 till when nearly a fifth of all India's crude imports came from Iran, barring a brief decline during 2012-15 due to the US sanctions regime.⁵⁰ Faced with the prospect of being debarred from the US market on account of having trading connection with the Iranian oil sector, Indian petrochemical, banking and insurance companies were reluctant to participate in the Iranian trade at the expense of a much more valuable relationship with USA. India thus began to reduce its dependence on Iranian imports till 2015, with some difficulty in sourcing crudes from elsewhere.⁵¹ The imports rose for a few years thereafter. In 2018-19, India's imports from Iran, primarily crude oil, was a little over USD 17 billion. However, following the fresh sanctions on Iran

imposed by the Trump administration in June 2019, India's trade in 2019-20 fell by nearly 90 percent to USD 1.4 billion.

New Delhi has repeatedly made it clear that close ties with Iran are in India's national interest, including the need to have a stable Afghanistan and wider geo-strategic interests. It is largely out of geostrategic considerations regarding Afghanistan that India has remained committed to the development of the port at Chabahar. Hence after almost ten years of very tardy progress, India has returned to the project in May 2024, committing herself for the next 10 years.⁵² More importantly, in an unusual display of firmness in the face of American censure for entering into ties with the Islamic Republic, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has made it very clear that India will be mindful of its own understanding of the matter, and not toe the American line.⁵³

This was a welcome assertion of India's strategic autonomy, which was rapidly losing credibility in Tehran as India's energy policy began to be calibrated to the US position on account of the sanctions regime.⁵⁴ Over the last two decades, despite the steady diminution of India's engagement with Iran under American pressure, pragmatists in the Tehran establishment have persistently tried to use India as a counterweight to China, to prevent any one foreign country from gaining undue influence in the country.⁵⁵ Indian foot-dragging on Chabahar had angered Tehran sufficiently to cut India out of the railway project connecting Chabahar to Zahedan. However, the pragmatists have so far managed to shut China out of Chabahar port and preserve it for India, resulting in Prime Minister Modi's discussions with President Raisi on the side-lines of the BRICS summit at Johannesburg in August 2023, which paved the way for this long-term agreement. It would seem that hard-liners, represented by President Raisi, wanted a clear statement on where India stands in the light of the Gaza conflict. Hence, what seems to be a coded message was delivered to India when Iran released a joint press statement with Pakistan during Raisi's visit to Islamabad mentioning the need for a peaceful settlement of the Kashmir issue; something Tehran is accustomed to raising whenever it needs to communicate its displeasure. However, equally suggestively, when Raisi specifically mentioned Iran's support for those fighting against oppression, like Palestine, he refrained from any mention of Kashmir in a clear snub to Islamabad.⁵⁶ The successful conclusion of the Indo-Iran deal on May 13, 2024, thus, was very well-timed, underlining New Delhi's

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continued commitment to its old friend Tehran, despite the latter's recent confrontation with India's other ally in the region — Israel.

Iran's desire to remain invested with India, however, should not be allowed to stop the measured yet forward position India has taken with respect to the menace caused by Houthi activities against shipping in the Red Sea, particularly in the vicinities of the Bab al-Mandab. Rerouting caused by Houthi attacks on merchant marine has affected global prices dramatically. It has affected Indian trade with Europe, US East Coast and Latin America as well.⁵⁷ Cost of doing business has risen sharply for India.⁵⁸ While refraining from joining any multilateral military alignment to tackle what is being dubbed 'the Red Sea Crisis', the Indian Navy (IN) has engaged in the protection of merchant marine by deploying more than 10 warships, two of them primarily for anti-piracy operations and the rest for anti-drone support, backed up by surveillance aircraft.⁵⁹ These deployments currently extend to the northern coast of Somalia, from Bab al-Mandab onward in the Red Sea, and also in the north and central Arabian Sea. Then IN has been successful in salvaging vessels and/or crew from drone attacks, in addition to undertaking regular anti-piracy operations. However, unlike the US and its allies, India has not gone after any inland Houthi sites, and has refrained from interfering with larger Iranian geopolitical ambitions. It is largely to the credit of this successful tightrope walking by New Delhi so far that 5 Indian members among the crew of a merchant vessel linked with Israel that was seized by the IRGC, were released after diplomatic channels became active.⁶⁰ India should continue to protect its own commercial and other interests from getting caught in the crossfire but not venture much farther than New Delhi has chosen to do so far.

Conclusion

The conflict in and over Gaza is far from coming to an end. From the looks of it, Israel does not have a game-plan for the day after. Given the wanton destruction it has carried out, it has virtually guaranteed for itself an insurgency of sorts in Gaza, if not also in the West Bank, for the foreseeable future. Should that actually transpire, Israel and the region around it are not likely to settle down in the near future. Tehran is also precariously positioned on the verge of going nuclear, and somewhat wobbly as a result of growing domestic dissent. The chances of a larger conflict by miscalculation in the region remain higher than they were before October 7, 2023. It remains to be seen if the death of the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in May 2024 and the change of guard in Tehran will be used to bring about a change of policy, steering Tehran away from further escalation.

There are occasions when observers of India's foreign policy have rightly criticised New Delhi for sitting on the fence. This is not one of them. Given the intricate nature of the problem between Israel and Palestine, and the complicated nature of Iran's entanglement with the issue, no settlement of the issue is likely in the short run, and a conflict may very easily break out in the short to medium term. There are no sides that can be chosen in this conflict that would work to New Delhi's advantage. It is better to sit this one out.

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