

THE MIDDLE EAST IN THE FACE OF A PERFECT STORM – THE REGIONAL IMPACT OF ISRAEL-HEZBOLLAH CONFLICT –

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The signing, in 2020, of the Abraham Accords and the events that followed fuelled the hope that developments in the Middle East could be marked by a cooperative relationship between the main regional rivals, but the fateful day of 7 October 2023 reshaped this space in a manner that inevitably led to a return to a state of confrontation. Thus, tensions in the region are raising fears that a major conflict, with international repercussions, is more a matter of “when” rather than “if” a major war will occur. This is due to the fact that, in the current tense regional context, the marking of about a year of the Hamas-Israel conflict largely coincides with the shift of the Israeli state’s focus on the Hezbollah group, the low-intensity conflict between the two actors turning into one that has literally shaken not only Lebanon, but the entire region.

Keywords: conflict; Middle East; security; military/intelligence operations; MENA;

THE MIDDLE EAST – BETWEEN COOPERATION AND CONFRONTATION

More than a decade after the demonstrations and revolutions commonly known as the “Arab Spring” (Cordesman, 2020, p. 2), the Middle East is going through one of the most complicated stages (Simon, 2021), as a result of an interesting mix of elements influencing its evolution: alliances have been remodelled, the economic dimension is changing, while efforts aimed at resolving conflicts in the region seem far from achieving their goals. In other words, political, economic and social transformations, to which are added major challenges in the security field, make the region currently the hot spot on the world’s political map. A powder keg close to the point of explosion, in the context in which the actions of regional actors further fuel tensions, tensions that in recent months have reached a dangerous point, generating fears that the region is on the edge of the abyss.

From the perspective of reshaping alliances, the most relevant developments are related to the Abraham Agreements, signed in 2020 (The Abraham Accords, 2020), which represented a historic moment in the relations of the Israeli state with the Arab countries with which it signed normalization agreements, meaning the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. The importance of normalizing Israel’s relations with the aforementioned states transcends the dimension of bilateral ties, being a moment with major implications for the entire Middle East and beyond.

A first aspect worth mentioning is the fact that the change in relations between Israel and the Arab states signatory to the Abraham Accords has modified the “radiography” of the MENA region, in the sense that it has put an end to the decades-long consensus among Arab states that any opening towards the Israeli state that implies a normalization of relations should come in the context of previously reaching a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Hence the interpretation of the signing of the Abraham Accords as a turning point in developments in the Middle East, being the first time that a number of Arab states prioritized their national interests, i.e. obtaining benefits in the economic and security fields, as a result of easing tensions at the regional level, to the detriment of fuelling them, and the implicit cancellation of any option that would support cooperation in the region.

But beyond the economic aspects, which aimed to open Israel up to the Arab countries that signed the normalization agreements, meaning the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, and vice versa, their opening up to the Israeli state, which should have ensured economic benefits through joint infrastructure projects, cooperation in the field of renewable energy, tourism and cultural exchanges, the major interest of these countries was claimed by the security field (Even, Fadlon, Guzansky, 2020). In the sense that, beyond the non-military dimensions of the advantages that the normalization of Israel's relations with the aforementioned Arab states should have brought, the main concern of the signatory countries of the Abraham Accords is related to Iran, a state which, through *proxy* actors used at the regional level and Tehran's foreign policy directions, has generated fears regarding its ambitions in many countries from this complicated space. Among them are those signatories of the Abraham Accords, especially the Israeli state, countries concerned about Iran's nuclear ambitions, Tehran's options for action in the region and the fact that Iran, unstoppable in the earliest phase of its rise to regional power and possibly nuclear power, may become a much too inconvenient actor for the Sunni Muslim world and for Israel, in particular, so that in the more or less distant future, no conjunctural alliance or any other form of cooperation in the field of information exchange and in terms of military cooperation will be able to reduce the influence of the Iranian state in the region.

Thus, starting from fears regarding the growth of Iran's influence, the decision of the Arab states – the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan – to initialize the "*legitimization*" of Israel opened new horizons of cooperation in important areas, such as the economic and military, reducing the isolation in which the Israeli state has found itself at the regional level since its declaration of independence in 1948. Then, the fact that the Abraham Accords are considered a milestone in Middle East diplomacy is an indisputable matter (Ross, 2021), given that before the normalization of relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan, Israel was a signatory to only two formal peace agreements – with Egypt, signed in 1979 (Treaty between Israel and Egypt, 1973) and with Jordan, signed in 1994 (Treaty of Peace between the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the State of Israel, 1994).

Hence the interpretation that, after decades of deadlock in Israel's relations with Arab countries, its recognition by the signatory states of the Abraham Accords would commit the parties to a formula of cooperation never seen before, realigning the interests of state actors in the region, based on a pragmatic and strategic approach and less on one that was tributary to the "*traditional*" conflict in the region, which

maintained the enmity between Arab countries and the Israeli state at a level that affected stability and peace in the area.

Then, the Abraham Accords were followed by the "*grand reconciliation*" between Saudi Arabia and Iran brokered by China in March 2023 (Ottaway, 2023), when the regimes in Riyadh and Tehran decided to bury the hatchet of war and, implicitly, to put an end to a "*cold*" war-type confrontation that had been waged for decades, a war that kept the Middle East captive under the pressure of a regional competition modelled on the USA-USSR rivalry for global supremacy, which took place between 1946/1947 and 1991.

Subsequent discussions on the possibility of "*thawing*" Saudi Arabia-Israel relations, against the backdrop of common interests and regional geopolitical dynamics, gave the most optimists hope that the Middle East could take on a different face and that the state of tension and conflict in this space could be replaced by one of cooperation between the main regional international actors. The same ones which, until recent events involving the diplomacy, fuelled tensions in this area in a manner that has severely affected peace and stability in the region. Regarding the potential normalization of Saudi Arabia-Israel relations (Blanchard, 2024), two elements can be considered as reference points. First, the fact that both the Saudi monarchy and the Israeli state have common concerns regarding Iran's regional influence (exercised in particular through the actions of Tehran's *proxies*, the Hezbollah group and the Houthi rebels), as well as the Tehran regime's interest in nuclear weapons, despite the official Iranian position that supports a contrary situation.

But, unlike the signatory states of the Abraham Accords, Saudi Arabia, the pole of power of the Sunni Muslim world, conditioned the normalization of relations with the State of Israel on the resolution of the Palestinian issue, supporting the Saudi monarchy's commitment to *The Arab Peace Initiative of 2002* (Mekelberg, Shapland, 2018. pp. 7-8), initiative also known as the "*Abdullah plan*", after the name of the crown prince at the time, Abdullah, who devised a series of steps aimed at solving the Palestinian problem. Specifically, under the auspices of this initiative, Saudi Arabia offered Israel the option of normalizing relations with the Arab world in exchange for a solution to the Palestinian problem that would involve the much-discussed and analysed two-state solution, with the Palestinians occupying the territory within the pre-1967 borders.

The Saudi position has changed over time, however, as a result of two events of utmost importance: first, the change of the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia – in the person of Mohammed bin Salman starting with 2017, brought to the fore a (future)

pragmatic leader oriented towards the advantages of escaping from the pressure of extremely strict policies and decisions of the Saudi regime. Secondly, under the *de jure* leadership of King Salman and *de facto* of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has recently signalled that the Saudi kingdom would be willing to reconsider the aforementioned conditionality if negotiations with Israel had the potential to ensure the achievement of broader interests of the Saudi state (Al Jazeera, 2023).

Then, information appearing in the public space regarding the existence of non-public negotiations between the two states pushed the speculation even further and, despite the failure to reach an official agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, they indicated a possible evolution towards normalization of relations between the two countries. A situation that raised problems for the regime in Tehran, forced to (re)act in relation to a series of developments in strong contradiction with the Iranian strategic interests in the region, including the possible creation of a Saudi-Israeli “*common front*” against Iran’s influence and ambitions, including nuclear ones. Not coincidentally, the next event with a major impact at the regional level is the fateful attack on 7 October 2023 of Hamas against the Israeli state, an attack inevitably followed by the outbreak of a conflict between the two international actors (Hamas and Israel) and which had as its first immediate consequence the blocking of any normalization initiatives at the regional level (Ulrichsen, 2023).

THE 7 OCTOBER 2023 TURNING POINT OPENS A BLOODY CHAPTER IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The surprise attack of the Hamas terrorist group against Israel (October 2023), with the unique feature that it took place within the borders of the Israeli state, has seriously damaged the sensitive regional balance resulting from the efforts made in recent years by the states in this area concerned with the stability and security of the region. Inevitably, following the Hamas attack, the results of these efforts collapsed like dominoes under the pressure of the consequences of the actions of the Palestinian terrorist group, at the same time triggering a “*witch hunt*” that Israel formally assumed, the goal being to eliminate the terrorist threat coming from Hamas (Eiran, 2023). At the same time, the involvement of Hezbollah, Iran’s main *proxy* in the region, in the Palestinian terrorist group’s fight against the Israeli state, starting on 8 October 2023, put the Israeli state in the position of expanding military missions beyond the Gaza Strip and combining, in a complex formula, military and intelligence-type actions, the result being the decimation and beheading of the Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah.

Since, after the emergence of Hezbollah (1982), a group that assumed the fight against the Israeli state, military/intelligence actions against the Lebanese Shiite organization represented a major objective for Israel, the recent period has highlighted a certain preference of the Israeli state for the second dimension, without neglecting the military one (Elliott, 2024). In other words, pre-emptive strikes, which most often involved surgical airstrikes targeting Hezbollah military targets, meaning facilities, weapons depots, and arms supply convoys from Iran via Lebanon or Syria, have over time represented options that have brought Israel advantages in terms of material losses, and not only on the part of the Lebanese Shiite group.

Then, the war in Lebanon (12 July – 14 August 2006), represented a violent episode which was based on preventive actions initiated by the Israelis, while its conclusion left the issue between the two actors in an impasse that would not bode well for the more or less distant future (Byman, 2024). A fact validated by subsequent developments, which maintained the two regional international actors (Hezbollah and Israel) in a state of enmity, inevitably consumed in decades of armed confrontations of varying intensities and with varying frequencies.

Thus, the period that followed kept tensions on the border between Israel and Lebanon at a dangerous level, and after the conflict was triggered by Hamas, on 7 October 2023, Hezbollah decided to play a dangerous card, in the sense that it became involved, starting on 8 October 2023, in attacks on targets on the territory of the Israeli state, while trying to keep the level of actions against the State of Israel below a dangerous level, so as not to question the very existence of the Lebanese terrorist organization (Polak, 2024). But Hezbollah’s calculations did not coincide with those of the Israeli military and intelligence structures, which recently launched an “*assault*” against the members and commanders of the Lebanese Shiite group, which has recently suffered major losses, including at the highest level of leadership.

ISRAEL VS. HEZBOLLAH - A DANGEROUS ZERO-SUM GAME

The positioning of the two actors on one side and the other of the barricade represents a reality that emerges from the very birth of the Lebanese Shiite group, which was formed in the 1980s with the aim of fighting against Israel. In such a context, Hezbollah’s evolution was fuelled by hostility towards the Israeli state, hence the decades of tensions that in different guises and in different contexts reached dangerous levels that pushed the situation towards conflict, the case of the 2006 war, but also of the recent one, marked by an amplification of Israeli actions both in the intelligence and military fields.

Regarding the first dimension, the Israelis' preference for intelligence operations aimed at monitoring and infiltrating in order to counter Hezbollah activities is well known. The killing, on 30 July 2024, formally assumed by the State of Israel, of the so-called "*ghost of Hezbollah*" because of his extremely discreet activity, in the person of commander Fuad Shurk (Rasmussen, 2024), then the ingenious removal from the scene of a number of important Hezbollah operatives, by detonating their pagers (17 September 2024) and walkie-talkie communication stations (18 September 2024), actions that were attributed to Israel, which initially did not officially assume responsibility for them (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2024), the assumption coming not until 11 November 2024, reveals the Israelis' preference for actions that do not expose Israeli forces, which offers the important possibility of acting in secret and implicitly the option of assuming or not the responsibility for the respective actions by the leadership in Jerusalem.

Then, the military dimension represents a key element in Israel's fight against Hezbollah, and the elimination of the Secretary General of the Lebanese Shiite organization, Hassan Nasrallah, on 27 September 2024, following airstrikes that targeted the organization's headquarters located under residential buildings in the Dahieh suburb in the south of the Lebanese capital Beirut (Saab, 2024), while information appeared in the public space regarding the elimination of the one who was said to succeed Nasrallah, Hashem Safieddin (Christou, 2024), information unconfirmed by the group, indicates that, at least up to this point, the strategy used by Israel against Hezbollah, of the "*escalate de-escalate*" type, is showing its effectiveness.

Beyond the pragmatic aspects related to the concrete results of the actions taken by the Israelis in the intelligence and military fields, the recent developments involving the conflict between the two international actors – Israel and Hezbollah, reveal a return of the Israeli intelligence services to the leading position occupied prior to 7 October 2023, a date that marks a major failure recorded by Israeli intelligence as a result of the successful staging, by Hamas, of the most heinous attack on Israeli civilians on the territory of the State of Israel (Wyss, 2024).

Therefore, the resounding successes recorded by the Israelis in recent times against the enemies of the state, about which, despite the lack of clear information, there is certainty that they have more than prolific and ingenious intelligence work behind them, bring Israeli intelligence structures back into focus, but in a manner opposite to the perception created at the time of 7 October 2023, when the reputation of Israeli intelligence was strongly affected by the success and unpredictability of the Hamas attack. Now, in the context of Israel's recent actions, the undisputed aura of Israeli intelligence services before October 2023 has once

again become a reality that has brought back into focus the fearsome reputation they have for Israel's enemies, among which we can find, undoubtedly, Hezbollah.

Thus, in this life-and-death struggle, Israel positions itself pragmatically towards the Lebanese Shiite group, calibrating its actions and reaction to Hezbollah attacks according to the harsh rules of the zero-sum game, the same rules by which the Lebanese Shiite group establishes its position towards Israel. Inevitably, in such a context, the relationship between the two international actors can only remain stuck in the logic of confrontation, in which a military, strategic or political gain by one of the parties is perceived by the other as an unacceptable loss, hence the fuelling of a spiral of violence by the actions and countermeasures of both rival parties.

Then, the regional context does not currently offer other options for reducing tensions between Israel and Hezbollah, given that the Hamas attack in October 2023 has reshaped the Middle East in a way that a return to a *status quo ante* is impossible, the effects of the opening of the states in the area to cooperation and the level reached on this dimension in recent years being nullified by the return to a state of confrontation in the category of a zero-sum geopolitical game. Moreover, beyond the rhetoric of the Lebanese Shiite group that aims to hide the losses it has recorded, the reality is that Israel has achieved in few months a major advantage over Hezbollah that it has not been able to achieve in years, which makes it unlikely that the Israeli state will consider taking any step back and not make the most of the window of opportunity that has arisen in the fight against one of Israel's most prolific enemies.

THE ESCALATION TRAP

With a strategic stake that is far too high for the Israelis, while for Hezbollah it may also take on nuances related to the survival of the Lebanese Shiite group, the conflict between the two regional international actors remains caught in an "*escalation trap*", given that its dynamics, marked by complexity and unpredictability as a result of the elements it involves, remains a destabilizing factor in the region, with the possible deterioration of the situation to an extremely dangerous point, which would also imply a rapid and uncontrolled intensification of the situation (Stroul, 2024). And the reasons why the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel can be explained in terms of an escalation trap are more than obvious:

the history of enmity, confrontations and tensions means that the two actors can only communicate through the language of violence. And it is particularly related to the fact that the emergence of Hezbollah, in the early 1980s, was based on the idea of resistance against the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, so that,

from the moment of the appearance of the Lebanese Shiite group until today, the history of relations between the two actors has been based on tensions and confrontation. Moreover, if in the case of Israel, which has regular Armed Forces, things are clear on the military dimension, in that of Hezbollah the particularity is that members of this group have accumulated relevant military experience in the conflicts in Syria, to which is added the support received from Iran, the result being the transformation of Hezbollah into the most relevant militant force in the region;

geographical proximity and strategic pressure – Hezbollah’s positioning in southern Lebanon, which is in the area situated north of the Israeli-Lebanese border, as well as its operation in this area, reveals an extremely dangerous proximity between the two enemies, so that any action, incident or even miscalculation can be interpreted by both sides of the border in a bellicose approach, being perceived as a direct threat. Another aspect which complicates the security equation in this volatile space is the fact that Israel is extremely sensitive to any type of provocation from Hezbollah, as a result of the vulnerability it perceives in relation to the enemy due to the fact that the northern part of Israeli territory is inhabited by a civilian population, implicitly exposed to the threats generated by Hezbollah’s actions;

Iran represents another destabilizing factor, as Hezbollah is known to be a *proxy* for Tehran, with the Iranian state formally assuming enmity towards Israel and its influence in the region. Hence Israel’s strategy in the fight against Hezbollah, which is thought out in clear terms, in the sense that a weakening/annihilation of the Lebanese Shiite group is interpreted as being equivalent to weakening the Tehran regime’s ability to act in the region and to act to the detriment of Israeli strategic interests;

the risk of miscalculation remains one of the concerns of regional international actors and the entire international community, given that Israel’s military strategy reveals a preference for disproportionate military responses with the aim of deterring adversaries, hence the fear of a slide towards a major conflict in the region. On the other hand, Hezbollah has a reputation as a militant group built on resistance, which translates, in the simplest terms, into the fact that the Lebanese Shiite group will not give in to pressure from Israel, at least as long as it benefits from the support it receives from Tehran.

THE IMPACT OF DONALD TRUMP’S VICTORY IN THE US ELECTION ON THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HEZBOLLAH AND ISRAEL

The victory of the Republican candidate Donald Trump in the November 2024 presidential election in the United States of America will inevitably impact developments in the Middle East in a way that favours the Israeli state. Specifically, the deeply anti-Iranian approach during the first term in the White House is unlikely

to not put its mark on the US foreign policy during the second Trump Administration, which highlights a series of aspects that will have their effects on the Middle East in the years to come (Stack, 2024).

Thus, a first aspect is Washington’s unconditional support for Israel, or more precisely the continuation of that shown during Trump’s first term through decisions such as moving the United States Embassy to Jerusalem and recognizing Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. A strong support on the political dimension will undoubtedly reverberate in the military field, its continuation representing an element that will contribute to raising the profile of the Israeli state in the region and implicitly the capacity to act against regional enemies, which translates into a possible increase in Israel’s aggressiveness against Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies.

Inevitably, any pro-Israeli American support is interpreted in Tehran as additional pressure on Iran, especially since it is not excluded that the Iranian state will again come under a new set of sanctions that will further isolate this country on the international arena. The sanctions will economically cripple Iran, and their effects in the medium and long term bring into question the reduction of Tehran’s ability to finance and arm Hezbollah and other militias, which inevitably provides an important strategic advantage to Israel.

Last but not least, it is possible that the United States’ support for Israel will also involve regional actors, specifically Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries, which future US President Donald Trump may consider from the perspective of creating a united anti-Iran and anti-Hezbollah approach, by resuming efforts to consolidate the Abraham Accords and by promoting a regional coalition to act against Iran’s influence in the area through *proxy* actors and through Tehran’s direct actions.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account all these aspects, meaning the realities in the region, the appetite of some international state and non-state actors in this space for the use of armed violence in order to solve the problems they face, as well as the change in the White House in January 2025, create the premises for developments that generate concern. It is due to elements that influence each other on the model of the butterfly effect found in chaos theory, from international to regional, but with the inevitable focus on the results of the elections in the United States of America, which is expected to translate into massive support for Israel and pressure on Iran starting in January 2025, which could evolve to a point where the conflict between the two international actors – Hezbollah and Israel – moves to a higher level of confrontation.

In another scenario, the desirable one, the future leader in the White House will avoid antagonizing the two aforementioned actors, emphasizing the non-military dimension of containing Iran, which would mean economic solutions and sanctions.

In either situation, Israel will try to achieve military victories against Hezbollah and Hamas, taking full advantage of the identified window of opportunity – a Biden Administration on the verge of departure and a Trump Administration preparing to take office, from which Israel has more expectations in terms of support for sensitive regional files.

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