

Price of normalizing ties with Israel heavy now

Netanyahu to drag US to all fronts for his own gain

INTERVIEW The world is following the news of the Israeli massacre in Gaza with great concern and various degrees of awe.

However, Israel, United States, and their allies are trying to distract the people from asking the important questions. They want to give Iran a greater role in the narrative than it truly has, hoping that the incorporation of this new boogeyman will justify their increasing involvement in the Gaza war and the brewing conflicts in Yemen, in particular, and the Middle East, in general. What is being ignored is that individuals and groups have minds of their own and do not follow a country blindly in the same way that the US follows Israel blindly.

The following is part of Al-Monitor's interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian on January 23, 2024, translated into English.

AL-MONITOR: There is a lot of buzz about convening a conference or a potential international process that could pave the way for the establishment of a Palestinian state following the conclusion of the Gaza war. Will Iran participate in such a conference or international process?

AMIR-ABDOLLAHIAN: Post-war Gaza is a burning issue. This topic has been on everyone's minds for weeks. But we believe that when it comes to post-war Gaza, the Palestinian leaders should take center stage, while others lend their support. It is crucial to foster Palestinian-Palestinian dialogues where they reach a consensus on how to govern Gaza and the West Bank.

Allowing others to call the shots for the Palestinians will not yield favorable outcomes. However, it is important for others to rally behind the Palestinian decision. By Palestinians, I refer to all Palestinian factions with their diverse perspectives.

Of course, we must consider one more step ahead: the Palestinian people should also have the right to choose how Gaza and the West Bank should be managed and how Palestine should be governed. Their chosen model should be developed with the assistance of the United Nations.

Does Iran oppose or support the normalization of Saudi Arabia's relations with Israel if it helps pave the way for the establishment of the Palestinian state and the process we are discussing?

We had a discussion about this with the Saudis. The Saudis assured us that Palestine is their utmost priority. Regarding the normalization of relations, Israel's recent actions have complicated the matter and made it challenging for any country seeking to normalize ties with the Israeli regime.

Now, there is a pressing question in our region: normalization with whom? With the regime that has killed 25 thousand women, children, and civilians? With the regime against which protests have erupted on the streets worldwide, including America and Europe, condemning its genocide? The ongoing genocidal actions of the Israeli regime are vastly different from those of pre-October 7. A country aiming to normalize relations with Israel under the current situation will have to pay a heavy price.

Let me ask about Iraq. Once again, that country has become a battleground between Iranian-backed Iraqi militias and American forces. Do you still insist, in your discussions with the Iraqi government, on the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq? Can you shed light on what seems to be a concerning dispute in Iran-Iraq relations?

Tehran and Baghdad share robust ties. We have a close bond between the two nations since the downfall of Saddam

Hussein. If I say that there are cordial and exceptional relations between the two countries, I would be stating the truth. However, over the years, we have had an issue regarding the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Despite our historical and positive relations with the Kurds and Iraqi Kurdish leaders, terrorist groups have been exploiting the Iraqi Kurdistan Region as a launching pad for attacks against Iran. We have repeatedly conveyed this concern to the central government and authorities of Iraqi Kurdistan, even warning them that if they fail to secure our shared borders, we will exercise our right to legitimate defense within the framework of international law. We respect Iraq's sovereignty and territorial integrity, and there is a security agreement in place between us on this matter. We have not launched attacks on Iraq, but we have targeted the Mossad headquarters in the Kurdistan region. The officials in the central government and Baghdad comprehend this very well. Therefore, while we maintain a strong and exceptional relationship with Iraq, we will not compromise our national security for anyone. However, the issue regarding the US and Iraq is something that the Iraqis themselves must decide.

You've already mentioned the back channels used to relay messages to the US. Can you provide more details

on whether you've directly or indirectly received or sent messages to the Biden administration regarding de-escalation?

Over the past 110 days or so, there have been exchanges of messages between Iran and the United States concerning regional developments and the situation in Gaza. Last week, during a meeting with British Foreign Minister David Cameron in Davos, I candidly expressed that the joint US and British attack on Yemen was a strategic blunder. It is evident that the recent actions of the Israeli regime in Gaza have all been carried out with full American support. The United States has facilitated these actions by providing weapons, giving political and international backing, and sending American military and security advisors. Consequently, America is deeply involved in the war alongside Netanyahu in Gaza and the West Bank. However, Israel has not achieved anything substantial. Despite extensive US support, Hamas has not been defeated or disarmed, and no captives have been released through military force.

For Netanyahu, personal survival is also a crucial factor. If America halts the war today, Netanyahu will be unable to resume it tomorrow. Therefore, Netanyahu attempts to make America engaged in other fronts as well. We observe his efforts to involve America on all fronts for his own

benefit.

Hence, we caution the Americans to be wary of Netanyahu and the Zionists' manipulative tactics. Their game is one of war.

Of course, diplomatic channels remain open for message exchanges between America and us. Additionally, Switzerland, which looks out for America's interests in Iran, serves as an official diplomatic channel for our communication. These message exchanges help foster a better understanding of the situation. We have no intention of expanding the scope of the war.

It is evident that the safety of shipping and navigation in the Red Sea and the surrounding region is in our best interest. A significant portion of our trade and oil transportation is conducted by sea. The region will not benefit from further conflict. However, the war in Gaza must cease. When I refer to war, I am specifically addressing the killing of women, children, and civilians. The continuation of this genocide does not bode well for America's so-called prestige. I genuinely doubt that the White House can justify the support it provides to the killing of 14 thousand children and infants. Supporting the Israeli regime to the extent of endorsing their genocide is incongruous with the values the United States espouses unless we assert that the White House is held hostage by Tel Aviv.

You mentioned that Iran has no intention to escalate tensions in the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf due to its shipping interests. What measures do you take to de-escalate the tensions? Have you communicated or will you communicate with the Houthis to cease the attacks?

Around three weeks ago, one of the Yemeni leaders named Abdulsalam, who acts as their negotiator with Saudi Arabia, visited Tehran. Firstly, there is a misconception among the White House and American officials; Some American officials believe that we have a remote control for the Houthis, Hezbollah, and Hamas. In reality, they make their own decisions. They each have their own motives and considerations. Being Arabs and Muslims, they take steps to support the Palestinian Arabs and Muslims. This is influenced by the cultural and religious dynamics of our region.

To be honest, we greatly admire their bravery. They choose to stand against the Israeli oppression in Palestine and support the Palestinian people. This decision comes at a great cost and requires immense courage from them. The Yemenis inform us that they value the safety of navigation and shipping. However, in their support of the Palestinian people, they have decided to halt all Israeli ships and any ships heading to Israeli ports.

The United States and Britain have made a grave mistake. While Saudi Arabia and Yemen are on the verge of reaching a final agreement after a decade of war, with various war fronts still active, the United States and Britain have opened a new war front in the Red Sea and Yemen. This means that these two countries are moving to increase and spread tensions. The Yemenis have nothing to lose. For 10 years, Saudi Arabia stood against them with all its resources. Britain played a significant role in the war against Yemen as well. Hence, we believe that war is not the solution. Netanyahu cannot destroy Hamas and free its captives through genocide and the killing of innocent children and women.

It is crucial for everyone to strive for an end to the war. You might wonder if the conflicts on other fronts would cease if the war in Gaza ended. Two days prior to the recent humanitarian ceasefire, I had a meeting with Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah in Lebanon. I informed them about the upcoming establishment of a humanitarian ceasefire lasting several days. I asked him whether Lebanon would continue its attacks in support of Gaza if the ceasefire is implemented. He replied, "No, we will stop if the attacks on Gaza stop." Throughout the entire six days of the humanitarian ceasefire, Lebanon did not fire a single shot. Therefore, we must address and put an end to the root cause of all these conflicts.



An Israeli tank takes position at the western entrance of Khan Yunis' refugee camp as Palestinians flee with a few belongings to safer areas further south in the southern Gaza Strip on January 26, 2024.
AFP