

## Further thoughts

Donald Trump and Joe Biden have got what they most want: each other as the opposing candidate come next November. Pundits issue ritual warnings about it being early days yet — and then go on to overinterpret the results from the Iowa caucuses and the primary in New Hampshire, to be followed by the upcoming one in South Carolina. Trump and Biden are more or less certain to be the candidates, but otherwise, political volatility is even greater than normal: both men are of an age when death or disability may intervene.

Biden is locked into three wars — Ukraine, Gaza, and Yemen — any one of which might produce a devastating crisis. I try to keep in mind that three US presidents were seriously damaged by events in the Middle East: Jimmy Carter (Iran hostages), Ronald Reagan (Iran-Contra), and George W. Bush (Iraq war). Biden could easily be the fourth. Biden would like Trump as an opponent because of the significant number of college-educated Republicans who may refuse to vote for him. This could well turn out to be true, as exit polls in New Hampshire found that four out of 10 of those who voted for Nikki Haley said their chief motive was dislike of Trump. Only 64 percent of Republican primary voters say that they were certain Trump supporters come November, while 87 percent of Democrat primary voters — many of them unhappy with Biden over immigration and Gaza — said they will still vote for him.

Democrats draw comfort from such figures, but there is an element of wishful thinking in this. Back in 2016, Hillary Clinton's campaign believed that distaste for Trump would win the election for her — and this turned out to be calamitously wrong. A legal conviction of Trump before election day might help, but he has so far been expert in using his multiple court appearances to dominate the news agenda and portray himself as the victim of unjust persecution. He may be able to go on milking his legal troubles for publicity and sympathy right up to presidential election day.

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Yemen's Ansarallah movement, also known as the Houthis, displays missiles and drones at a military parade in Sanaa, Yemen, on September 21, 2023.

GETTY IMAGES



USS Carney firing interceptors at missiles and drones launched from Yemen over the Red Sea on October 19, 2023.

US ARMY

## Joe Biden's stark choice

## Cease-fire in Gaza or regional war in Middle East

By Medea Benjamin & Nicolas J.S. Davies

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## OPINION

In the topsy-turvy world of corporate media reporting on US foreign policy, we have been led to believe that airstrikes on Yemen, Iraq, and Syria are legitimate and responsible efforts to contain the expanding war over Israel's slaughter in Gaza, while the actions of the Houthi government in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iran and its allies in Iraq and Syria are all dangerous escalations. In fact, it is US and Israeli actions that are driving the expansion of the war, while Iran and others are genuinely trying to find effective ways to counter and end Israel's invasion of Gaza while avoiding a full-scale regional war. We are encouraged by Egypt and Qatar's efforts to mediate a cease-fire and the release of hostages and prisoners of war by both sides. However, it is important to recognize who are the aggressors, who are the victims, and how regional actors are taking incremental but increasingly forceful action to respond to genocide.

A near-total Israeli communications blackout in Gaza has reduced the flow of images of the ongoing massacre on our TVs and computer screens, but the slaughter has not abated. Israel is bombing and attacking Khan Yunis, the largest city in the southern Gaza Strip, as ruthlessly as it did Gaza City in the north. Israeli forces and US weapons have killed an average of 240 Gazans per day for more than three months, and 70% of the dead are still women and children.

Israel has repeatedly claimed it is taking new steps to protect civilians, but that is largely a P.R. exercise. Israel is still using 2,000-pound and even 5,000-pound "bunker-buster" bombs to dehouse the people of Gaza and herd them toward the Egyptian border, while it debates how to push the survivors over the border into exile, which it euphemistically refers to as "voluntary emigration." People throughout the Middle East are horrified by Israel's slaughter and plans for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza, but most of their governments will only condemn Israel verbally. The Houthi government in Yemen is different. Unable to directly send forces to fight for Gaza, they began enforcing a blockade of the Red Sea against Israeli-owned ships and other ships carrying goods to or from Israel. Since mid-November 2023, the Houthis have conducted about 30 attacks on international vessels transiting the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. None of these attacks have caused casualties or sunk any ships.

In response, the Biden administration, without congressional approval, has launched at least six rounds of bombing, including airstrikes on Sanaa, the capital of Yemen. The UK has contributed a few warplanes, while Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and Bahrain also act as cheerleaders to provide the US with the cover of leading an "international coalition".

President Biden has admitted that US bombing will not force Yemen to lift its blockade, but he insists that the US will keep attacking it anyway. Saudi Arabia dropped 70,000 mostly American (and some British) bombs on Yemen in a seven-year war, but utterly failed to defeat the Houthi government and armed forces.

Yemenis naturally identify with the plight of the Palestinians in Gaza, and a million Yemenis took to the streets to support their country's position, challenging Israel and the US. Yemen is no Iranian puppet, but as with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran's Iraqi and Syrian allies, Iran has trained the Yemenis to build and deploy increasingly powerful anti-ship, cruise, and ballistic missiles.

The Houthis have made it clear that they will stop the attacks once Israel stops its slaughter in Gaza. It beggars belief that instead of pressing for a cease-fire in Gaza, Biden and his advisers are instead choosing to deepen US military involvement in a regional Middle East conflict. The US and Israel have now conducted airstrikes on the capitals of four neighboring countries: Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Iran also suspects US and Israeli spy agencies of a role in two bomb explosions in Kerman in Iran, which killed about 90 people and wounded hundreds more at a commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the US assassination of Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani in January 2020.

On January 20, an Israeli bombing killed 10 people in Damascus, including five Iranian officials. After repeated Israeli airstrikes on Syria, Russia has now deployed warplanes to patrol the border to deter Israeli attacks and has reoccupied two previously vacated outposts built to monitor violations of the demilitarized zone between Syria and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Iran has responded to the terrorist bombings in Kerman and Israeli assassinations of Iranian officials with missile strikes on targets in Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan. Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian has defended Iran's claim that the strikes on Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan targeted agents of Israel's Mossad spy agency.

Eleven Iranian ballistic missiles destroyed an Iraqi Kurdish intelligence facility and the home of a senior intelligence officer, and also killed a wealthy real estate developer and businessman, Peshraw Dizayee, who had been accused of working for the Mossad, as well as of smuggling Iraqi oil from Kurdistan to Israel via Turkey.

The targets of Iran's missile strikes in northwest Syria were the headquarters of two separate ISIS-linked groups in Idlib province. The strikes demolished both buildings at a range of 800 miles, using Iran's newest ballistic missiles called Kheybar Shekan or "Castle Blasters," a name that equates today's US bases in the Middle East with the 12th- and 13th-century European crusader castles whose ruins still dot the landscape. Iran launched its missiles not from northwestern Iran, which would have been closer to Idlib, but from Khuzestan province in southwestern Iran, which is closer to Tel Aviv than to Idlib. So, these missile strikes were clearly intended as a warning to Israel and the US that Iran can conduct precise attacks on Israel and US "crusader castles" in the Middle East if they continue their aggression against Palestinians, Iranians, and their

allies.

At the same time, the US has escalated its tit-for-tat airstrikes against Iranian-backed Iraqi militias. The Iraqi government has consistently protested US airstrikes against the militias as violations of Iraqi sovereignty. Prime Minister Sudani's military spokesman called the latest US airstrikes "acts of aggression" and said, "This unacceptable act undermines years of cooperation ... at a time when the region is already grappling with the danger of expanding conflict, the repercussions of the aggression on Gaza."

After wars in Afghanistan and Iraq killed thousands of American troops, the US has avoided large numbers of military casualties for the last 10 years. The last time the US lost more than a hundred troops killed in action in a year was in 2013 when 128 Americans were killed in Afghanistan.

Since then, the US has relied on bombing and proxy forces to fight its wars. The only lesson American leaders seem to have learned from their lost wars is to avoid putting US "boots on the ground." The US dropped more than 120,000 bombs and missiles on Iraq and Syria in its war on ISIS, while Iraqis, Syrians, and Kurds did all the hard fighting on the ground.

In Ukraine, the US and its allies found a willing proxy to fight Russia. But after two years of war, Ukrainian casualties have become unsustainable, and new recruits are hard to find. The Ukrainian parliament has rejected a bill to authorize forced conscription, and no amount of US weapons is likely to persuade more Ukrainians to sacrifice their lives for a Ukrainian nationalism that treats large numbers of them, especially Russian speakers, as second-class citizens. Now, in Gaza, Yemen, and Iraq, the US has waded into what it hoped would be another war free of US casualties. Instead, the Israeli assault on Gaza is unleashing a crisis that is spinning out of control across the region and may soon directly involve US troops in combat. This will likely shatter the illusion of peace Americans have lived in for the last 10 years of US bombing and proxy wars, and bring the reality of US militarism and war-making home with a vengeance.

Biden can continue to give Israel carte blanche to wipe out the people of Gaza and watch as the region becomes further engulfed in flames. Or he can listen to his own campaign staff, who warn that it's a "moral and electoral imperative" to insist on a cease-fire. The choice could not be more stark.

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