



Experts weigh in: Can Iran and US cooperate amid turmoil in Mideast?



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INTERVIEW

One year after the onset of the war in Gaza, it is believed by many experts that the US and Iran are the two influential players in this conflict. For this reason, this question was raised in a conversation with several prominent Iranian and American experts: whether there is any scope for cooperation between the two sides to contain tensions in the Middle East.



A staff member removes the Iranian flag from the stage after a group picture with foreign ministers and representatives of United States, Iran, China, Russia, Britain, Germany, France and the European Union during the Iran nuclear talks at the Vienna International Center in Vienna, Austria July 14, 2015.

● CARLOS BARRIA/REUTERS



Both the US and its Western allies agree that the Gaza war must end, the path for humanitarian aid to the people of Gaza must be opened, and a ceasefire must be established.

There are two main perspectives on the current tensions: first, that Tehran and Washington - as the main supporters of the Resistance Axis and Israel, respectively - can pressure their allies to reduce tensions. And second, that Israel (an ally of the US) and the Resistance Axis (an ally of Iran) are proxy forces engaged in a proxy war to serve the interests of the US and Iran, respectively. In both perspectives, the role of Tehran and Washington in the current conflict is significant.

Proponents of the first perspective, who make up a large portion of observers and analysts, believe that Iran and the US, each for their own interests and motivations, are opposed to the escalation of tensions in the region. They argue that, having found themselves in a situation where their allies have become embroiled in a widespread conflict, the two sides can interact with each other to prevent the conflict from spreading further and even cooperate to achieve a ceasefire and halt hostilities.

Among the experts, Michael Wahid Hanna, a researcher at the Crisis Group think tank, and Ahmad Dastmalchian, Iran's former ambassador to Lebanon, believe that Iran and the US have different motivations for preventing the spread of war in the region, but since their goal is common, they can cooperate to reduce tensions.

On the other hand, there are experts who believe that the current war in the Middle East is, in fact, a confrontation between the US and Iran. Many conservative analysts and supporters of Israel in the US, as well as a number of conservative analysts in Iran, believe that Israel is responsible for protecting US interests and implementing US demands in the Middle East, while the Resistance Axis groups are Iran's arms for implementing Iranian demands. Whether Israel is an agent of the US in the Middle East or whether Washington is unable to control Israel due to the influence of the Israeli lobby is an issue that remains a subject of debate among American analysts. Thinkers like Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer argue that the US is unable to control Israel due to the influence of the Israeli lobby, despite its own wishes, while Jewish thinkers like Norman Finkelstein and Noam Chomsky argue

that Israel is an agent of US interests in the Middle East.

Among the experts, Hamidreza Azizi, taking into account recent developments, was somewhat closer to the view that, given Israel's recent successes in damaging Hezbollah in Lebanon, the US is satisfied with the current trajectory of events and the approaching goal of weakening Iran's allies in the region. Therefore, he believes that there is no possibility of interaction between Tehran and Washington to bring the region closer to reducing tensions and stopping the conflict.

Below are the answers of Michael Wahid Hanna, a researcher at the Crisis Group think tank, Sina Azodi, a professor at George Washington University, Hamidreza Azizi, a researcher at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, and Ahmad Dastmalchian, Iran's former ambassador to Lebanon, to questions on this topic.

Two parallel lines in one direction

Michael Wahid Hanna

Despite the contact between Iran and the US, it is a mistake to assume that the current situation in the region and the messages being exchanged mean that there is an opportunity for cooperation between the two countries. In reality, Iran and the US are working in parallel to avoid a comprehensive regional war.

I believe that the Biden administration has completely focused on reducing tensions in the region, and Iran is one of the main issues in this effort. Over the past year, there have been various forms of messaging and indirect communication between Iran and the US. The channels for communication between Iran and the US have been one of the most important tools for managing expectations regarding current issues in the region.

From Iran's perspective, there is hope that the Biden administration can control Israel, and on the other hand, the US is trying to convey the message to Iran that Tehran and its regional allies should reduce tensions and not exert more pressure for further retaliatory operations.

At the same time, it should not be forgotten that the calendar and political

climate in the US, just a few weeks before the elections, are a very important variable.

There is no doubt that the Biden administration wants to avoid a comprehensive regional conflict that would draw the US into the region, but in the electoral climate, it faces limitations in communicating with Iran.

No prospect for interaction

Hamidreza Azizi

From last spring to the present, we have moved from a space where interaction between Iran and the US was underway and there was a sense that Tehran and Washington were inclined to reduce tensions, to a space where tensions are increasing every day and there is no clear prospect for interaction between the two sides.

Considering all the circumstances, there is no room for dialogue and tension reduction between Iran and the United States. There are factors in both countries that make it impossible to have a conversation or negotiations between Iran and the US at present. On the American side, Washington's approach to Israel's actions in the region, not just in Gaza but also in Lebanon, has changed, especially given the reactions of American officials to recent events in Lebanon.

I believe that the US approach has changed compared to what we saw in the first few months of the Gaza war. Currently, the emphasis and efforts on the American side to establish a ceasefire and stabilize the situation no longer exist. There are two main reasons for this. First, given the developments over the past year in Gaza and the several rounds of negotiations that reached the brink of a ceasefire, it became clear to the US that Benjamin Netanyahu's domestic considerations as the Prime Minister of Israel mean that he does not want a ceasefire and intends to continue operations under any circumstances. Therefore, the levers that the US thought it could use to push Israel towards a ceasefire either failed or were never implemented, such as stopping arms shipments to Israel due to domestic considerations. The second factor was the developments over the past month, which have led to a significant shift in the US

approach to the war, and given Israel's achievements on the ground and the blows it has dealt to Hezbollah, this has created hope in Washington that the project the US has been pursuing for years in Lebanon, which it could not implement as it wanted, is now being achieved by Israel. Washington sees these developments as a means to weaken the Iran axis in the region.

As Netanyahu said after the assassination of Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, from the perspective of Israel and Washington, these events can be a move towards a new order in the region. Reports suggest that before the recent Israeli attacks on Lebanon, Biden's advisors gave Netanyahu the green light for these actions. It appears that these actions are being taken in the interests of the US. As long as Washington sees this potential in Israel to change the balance of power in the region in its favor, the US will not be inclined to reduce tensions.

In my opinion, on the Iranian side, given the situation of Iran's allies, particularly Hezbollah, it is such that showing a willingness to engage in diplomacy is interpreted as weakness, and therefore Iran, as far as I have observed, presents its messages to the West in the form of warnings rather than a willingness to interact. Iran openly states that if the war expands to Iran, it will respond extensively.

In my opinion, both sides are currently trying to change their red lines and draw new ones. As long as this process is underway and field developments are changing the political landscape, I don't think there is a real prospect for reducing tensions. The only area for interaction is the issue of Iran itself, and Washington's concern is that the war should not turn into a direct war between Iran and Israel.

Otherwise, the step-by-step operations that Israel continues to carry out against Iran's allies in the form of limited operations are supported by the United States. However, the disagreement is that if Israel responds strongly to Iran's recent military operations and this response goes beyond the usual rules of engagement, it may put the achievements Israel has made so far at risk, and more importantly for Washington, it may put US interests in the region at risk.