

U.S. Policy in the Post-October 7 Middle East: Looking Back, Looking Forward

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Brief Analysis

Three former U.S. officials discuss the challenges—and opportunities—that will greet the next administration in year two of the post-October 7 era.

On October 2, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Dennis Ross, Dana Stroul, and David Schenker. Ross, the Institute's William Davidson Distinguished Fellow, served in senior Middle East posts with four presidential administrations. Stroul is the director of research and Kassen Senior Fellow at the Institute and former deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East in the Biden administration. Schenker is the Institute's Taube Senior Fellow, director of its Rubin Program on Arab Politics, and former assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs in the Trump administration. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

Dennis Ross

On October 6, 2023, the Biden administration no doubt viewed the Middle East as a region on the precipice of profound transformation toward peace and stability. A normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Israel seemed within reach, and officials saw the region's relative calm as an opportunity for lasting change.

Yet Hamas's attack on October 7 was transformative in a horrifically different way, traumatizing Israeli society and throwing the Middle East into violent chaos. President Biden stood with Israel in the aftermath, and although bilateral differences emerged during the resultant war, the United States continued to staunchly support its ally.

A year later, Hamas has been reduced to a nonmilitary threat, Israel has withstood two direct attacks by Iran, and Hezbollah's leadership cadre has been decimated. The threat of further escalation looms large, and ending the conflict will be no simple task. Yet achieving that goal would bring new potential for profound regional transformation—most notably the chance to wrest control of Lebanon from Hezbollah and get Israeli-Saudi normalization (and the complementary U.S.-Saudi defense treaty) across the finish line.

To realize these diplomatic opportunities, U.S. officials must encourage Israel to channel its tactical and operational military gains into strategic political success. They must also convince Iran that Washington is willing to impose a high price if the regime and its proxies continue sowing misery in the region.

A year from now, when nations mark the second anniversary of the October 7 attack, the region could be transformed dramatically for the better—but only if the United States meets this moment with a concerted, whole-of-government approach. This means focusing on multiple goals: expanding Arab-Israel peace, diminishing the threat from Iran, freeing Lebanon from Hezbollah domination, and meaningfully addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Making such strides in the Middle East would also bolster U.S. credibility on the global stage—a critical component of effective competition with China in the longer term. In contrast, if the United States fails to seize the opportunities presented in the coming months, it risks marking another year of tragedy that serves no one but those who seek to perpetuate instability.

Dana Stroul

The U.S. approach to the challenges of the past year has effectively balanced consistency and flexibility. The Biden administration has steadily supported Israel's right to defend itself, and it remains committed to finding a diplomatic solution and de-escalating tensions. Against a rapidly evolving regional backdrop, it has continued to pursue regional integration, both by keeping Israeli-Saudi normalization on the table and by facilitating greater integrated defense between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

At the same time, the administration has shown remarkable flexibility in its application of U.S. military force. Robust efforts on multiple fronts have illustrated America's truly global reach, its commitment to the sanctity of alliances, and its adaptability in defending the liberal international order. To wit, Washington has simultaneously supported the Israel Defense Forces, taken unilateral action against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps elements in Iraq and Syria, convened a coalition to counter Houthi maritime disruption, made significant adjustments to aircraft carrier deployments, continued supporting Ukraine against Russia, and staved off Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. The United States must continue demonstrating such flexibility in the coming months. Yet it must also reexamine the flawed assumptions that prevented it from anticipating the many "black swans" of the past year.

In addition, the administration has repeatedly taken steps to address the conflict's humanitarian dimensions, such as appointing highly capable diplomats to focus on this issue, dropping aid directly into Gaza, constructing a new pier to facilitate deliveries, and tirelessly pushing to open additional entry points for critical supplies. Although more work must be done on this front, Washington has achieved important successes on the ground with the help of its partners—from preventing famine to conducting a remarkable polio vaccination campaign.

Looking forward, the United States has a crucial role to play in defining what postwar Gaza will look like politically. Israel's current approach runs the risk of defining achievements purely in military terms, neglecting the human-centric approach that must prevail once the fighting stops. Answering these postwar questions will determine whether Jerusalem ultimately succeeds in its strategic objective of preventing Gaza from posing an existential threat to Israel down the road.

David Schenker

It is difficult to overstate how much October 7 is transforming the Middle East. For Israel, the trauma of the attack spurred several profound changes. The complacency that enabled the attack to succeed has vanished, and Israel's military and security services have pivoted to a more proactive and aggressive posture. In the face of very real and urgent existential threats, the country has become much more risk-tolerant in how it meets those threats, and much less sensitive to international criticism of its tactics.

Despite some signs of daylight between Jerusalem and Washington, however, the United States has largely stayed in lockstep with its closest regional ally by continuing to offer staunch support. Both allies also agree on a guiding principle for "the day after," namely, that Hamas can no longer govern

Gaza once the dust settles. Yet the answers to other postwar questions are less clear—aside from the broad realization that Washington will need to play a strong role in helping to shape whatever happens in Gaza. For now, U.S. and Israeli officials need to focus on how to translate battlefield victories into tangible political gains that serve key strategic goals.

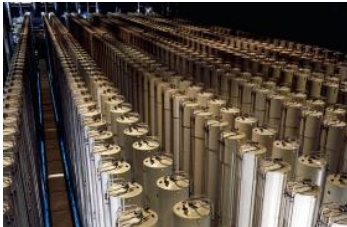
With the U.S. presidential election just one month away, the next administration will bear many of the longer-term burdens created by recent regional developments. This includes having to answer several big questions: How should the United States address the threat from Iran, its regional proxies, and its nuclear program? How will it meet the continued Houthi threat to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea? How should it allocate assets and forces to the Middle East while still prioritizing the strategic threat posed by China?

Yet the next president will also have some significant opportunities. For example, Israel's devastation of Hezbollah's leadership and military infrastructure provides a chance to rebalance Lebanese politics. Working with France and, more important, courageous and committed Lebanese partners, Washington should capitalize on this moment to reassert the state's authority.

Other opportunities will arise from the fact that Arab states are realizing the benefits of greater integration with Israel—particularly the merits of a common defense against the aggression and destabilization favored by Iran and its proxies. A year from now will hopefully see a larger defense coalition in the Middle East, as well as new signatories to the Abraham Accords. Alternatively, if the next administration retrenches, the region's trajectory could be bleak.

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