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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Hearing on Israel and the Middle East at a Crossroads: How Tehran's Terror Campaign
Threatens the U.S. and our Allies

The Year of Mourning: Considerations for U.S. Middle East Policy Twelve Months After October 7th

BY

Jonathan Lord

*Senior Fellow and Director, Middle East Security Program
Center for a New American Security*

I. Introductory Remarks

Chairman Burchett, Ranking Member Phillips, distinguished members of the subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. This is the second opportunity I have had to come before this august body as an expert witness, and it is my honor to do so, especially alongside such esteemed colleagues. First, allow me to express my best wishes to Chairman Wilson. My thoughts are with him and his family, and I pray he has a full and speedy recovery.

The last time I appeared before this subcommittee, we discussed the deeply sobering subject of Bashar al-Assad's horrific crimes against the Syrian people, and what more might be done to hold him accountable and assist Syrians in need. Today's subject is similarly challenging—both as a problem for policy and as an issue that carries great emotional weight. I pledge to you that I will attempt to speak to the difficult issues before us with nuance, respect for complexity, and with compassion and sensitivity, while sharing my unvarnished views and offering my best advice for policy and legislative recourse.

It is in the same spirit of patriotic service to our nation, irrespective of political affiliation, that compelled you to represent and serve your fellow Americans here in Washington, that drives me in my research as the Senior Fellow and Director of the Middle East Security program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), to pursue bipartisan solutions to our national security challenges. As a policy, CNAS does not take institutional positions, so my testimony today will reflect my personal positions and perspectives, based on my professional experience.

While I have been proud to work at CNAS for over two years, I am even prouder of the work I did in this building for three and a half as a Professional Staff Member of the House Armed Services Committee. In that capacity, I worked closely with the members and staff of this committee in a bipartisan fashion to pass three National Defense Authorization Acts, in which we, together, oversaw Israel's transition from EUCOM to the Central Command area of responsibility, reauthorized support for Iron Dome, created new authorities to advance and accelerate U.S.-Israel cooperative defense innovation, and build on the Abraham Accords to support Israel's military integration into a Middle East regional security architecture with the DEFEND Act.

I am immensely proud of the work we accomplished in those bills, and even prouder of the way we achieved it: working together, in a bipartisan way, in faithful service to the American people. I'll always be grateful for the opportunity to have done so.

My testimony today will be guided by the spirit of comity and bipartisanship that has long undergirded the critical work of this subcommittee. I firmly believe there has, and continues to be, a bipartisan through-line in American foreign policy in the Middle East:

- the continued provision of unwavering support to our close partner-nation, Israel;
- the continued integration of Israel into the broader region;
- resolution of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict, that delivers peace, security, dignity, justice, and self-determination for all;
- and the deterrence, containment, and, if necessary, confrontation of an Iranian regime that continues to meddle with and undermine the stability of its neighbors; supports violent proxies, partner-forces, and terrorist groups; proliferates weapons to enemies of peace and adversaries of democracy and the rules-based order; threatens harm and plots against Americans; and advances the development of a nuclear program toward the creation of an Iranian nuclear weapon—a weapon which Democrats and Republicans agree that Iran must never be allowed to obtain.

In the Middle East, the events of the last eleven months have been wrenching, beginning with Hamas's savage attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. The brutal and destructive war between Israel and Hamas that has followed continues to generate growing instability and deadly violence in the West Bank. The steady escalation of violence throughout the region by Iran's proxies and partners continues to displace tens of thousands in northern Israel, hold the maritime domain under threat in the Red Sea, and has risked the lives of U.S. servicemembers. The last eleven months have been a cavalcade of misery, which mercilessly continues and shows few signs of abating. This testimony summarizes U.S., Israeli, and Iranian policies and events prior to and after October 7. It includes recommendations for U.S. policy and encourages lawmakers to come together with the executive branch in a good-faith effort to reach consensus on a bipartisan approach to advancing U.S. national security objectives, and those of our partners and allies in the Middle East and beyond.

II. October 6

Iran's Security Policy

Iran's effort to generate an "Axis of Resistance" began in 1979 as the Islamic Republic sought to project power, reduce the U.S. military presence in the region, and influence diaspora Shia communities.¹ The network of Iran-backed proxies and partners Tehran has since fostered in Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain have projected Iranian power and destabilized large swaths of the Middle East.² The *2024 Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* describes this web of proxies as "a loose consortium of like-minded terrorist and militant actors" Tehran uses to shield itself from direct military confrontation with and encourage attacks against its adversaries.³

In addition to playing a significant role in Iranian political and economic affairs, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) coordinates Tehran's support for these proxy groups, including Hamas and Hezbollah, and works to ensure overall regime security. The IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) is responsible for organizing external kidnapping, assassination, and surveillance operations in addition to facilitating illicit oil sales and weapons transfers to Iranian proxies and state actors like Russia and North Korea.

⁴ This interconnected web of nonstate actors and allies also allows Tehran to skirt international sanctions by employing a flotilla of covert oil tankers, funneling money through shell companies, and coordinating with proxy groups to conduct business with other sanctioned entities.⁵

Since their formations in 1987 and 1982, respectively, Hamas and Hezbollah have both received a steady and significant flow of Iranian funds and weapons to fuel their terrorist activities in the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria, and abroad. Experts assess that Hamas today receives \$70m-\$100m per year and Hezbollah an estimated \$700 million annually from Tehran.⁶ While the support that these proxies receive from Iran is significant, it is also important to note that Tehran's relationship with each of these groups is particular and nuanced. While Tehran encourages Hamas, Hezbollah, and Ansar Allah (literal translation: "Supporters of God," commonly known as the Houthis) to engage in terrorist and governance projects by supplying them with thousands of rockets, fostering their domestic weapons manufacturing capabilities, and providing training to key leaders, these proxies should not be viewed as extensions of the regime established solely to carry out Tehran's bidding.⁷ For example, while Hezbollah also receives a significant amount of support from Iran, it acts largely as an independent, self-sufficient entity which coordinates directly with Tehran on occasion—for example, to engage in international arms, oil, and drug smuggling operations or to carry out complex external operations like the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires—but also invests significant resources in a shadow governance project in Lebanon.⁸ The Houthis have a much looser, unstructured relationship with Tehran.⁹

Aside from its long history of supporting both Sunni and Shia nonstate actors across the region, Iran also regularly engages with a variety of other allies to further sow discord with the West and pursue its own strategic objectives. China purchased more than 90 percent of Iranian crude oil exports in 2023, transported by a "dark fleet" of tankers responsible for moving billions of dollars in illicit oil every year.¹⁰ Russia's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine prompted closer strategic cooperation between Moscow and Tehran; Iran began supplying Russian troops with thousands of battlefield drones in return for delivery of advanced Russian fighter jets and air defense technology.¹¹ U.S. Navy vessels have intercepted several shipments of Iranian weapons bound for the Houthis in Yemen, often containing both Iranian and Russian-spec missiles.¹²

Growing trade and cooperation between Iran and North Korea, including a recent visit by a North Korean delegation to Tehran, has also raised fears that the two states could share advanced missile and even nuclear technology.¹³ Since the United States's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the Iranian nuclear program has continued apace as Tehran continues to resist monitoring measures, significantly decreasing the country's estimated breakout time down to just a few weeks.¹⁴ Following a failed attempt at reviving the nuclear deal in 2021 and 2022, intelligence officials noted that Iran has not officially resumed its weaponization program, but the country's development of nuclear technology is accelerating at "a worrisome pace," according to CIA Director William Burns.¹⁵

Israel's Security Policy Prior To October 7

Prior to the events of October 7, Israel has for the past decade engaged in a shadow war with Iran and its proxies. During this *miarechet beyn ha'milchamot* (or *MABAM* for short), or "campaign between the wars," Israel escalated strikes on the Iranian threat network surrounding it from occasional to periodic to regular intervals.¹⁶ The targets of Israel's strikes were often shipments of advanced weapons that originated in Iran, transiting Syria, on their way to Hezbollah in Lebanon. As the IRGC-QF sought to export the

capability to produce advanced rockets and precision missiles to its proxies, by building production facilities in Syria and Lebanon, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) prioritized these targets and the Iranian personnel managing them. While the IDF struck often, Iran has persisted in its effort, and is effective in both supplying and divesting to its partners the capability to produce its own rockets, precision missiles, and one-way attack drones. Hezbollah is now estimated to have an arsenal of 150,000 projectiles, ranging from mortars to precision-guided missiles.¹⁷

Beginning with the breakdown of Israel-Palestinian peace talks at Camp David in 2000, and the onset of the Second Intifada, Israel has operated under a loose, ill-defined national security paradigm that nominally sought to manage the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by imposing a unilaterally defined peace on the Palestinian Territories. This paradigm, informed by an ideologically extreme and strategically-detached vision of a one-state solution, collapsed on October 7, 2023. After the collapse of the peace process, and the wave of terror and violence that followed, the overriding narrative in Israel was that Israelis lacked a partner for peace. This notion had a formative role in the cohering of the last Israeli national security paradigm, which embraced conflict management over conflict resolution.

The policies that flowed from this paradigm sought to unilaterally impose a peace on Palestinians using the asymmetric power of the Israeli state.¹⁸ Israel began construction of a separation barrier in 2002, which was meant to stop the infiltration of suicide bombers from the West Bank into Israel, but also imposed a physical border which included Israel's settlement blocs, separated Palestinian communities from each other, and made travel within the West Bank onerous for its Palestinian inhabitants.¹⁹ While Israel withdrew its military and settlements from Gaza in 2005, settlement expansion in the West Bank grew precipitously during Israel's last national security paradigm period, as did settler violence against Palestinians, reaching record levels in the last four years.²⁰

For the last decade, beginning in a previous government led by current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel adopted a policy meant to contain and pacify Hamas, which took control of Gaza in a violent coup against the Palestinian Authority in 2007. In this policy of "buying quiet," Israel coordinated with Qatar to enable the flow of billions of dollars into Gaza in an effort to keep Hamas contented and otherwise occupied with its management of the Gaza Strip.²¹ Israel's policy toward Hamas in Gaza was in part rooted in a latticework of intelligence assessments and assumptions, known in Israel as *conceptzia*. This *conceptzia* held that Hamas was deterred from launching a major conflict with Israel and was satisfied with the status quo. While Israel's government has not yet begun a commission of inquiry to assess its failures leading up to October 7, evidence strongly suggests that Israel's political, military, and intelligence leaders continued to hold fast to its *conceptzia* on Hamas, even in the face of mounting intelligence and warning that it was wrong or no longer accurate.²²

Israel's most recent national security paradigm is not the first in Israel's history that asserted a conflict management approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict. The "Ben Gurion Doctrine," which characterized Israel's approach to national security for roughly Israel's first three decades, also took a conflict management approach, assessing that peace with Israel's neighbors was desirable, but not likely for the foreseeable future.²³ However, Israel's recently collapsed national security paradigm differed from Ben Gurion's in critical ways. While Israel's original security paradigm held peace with its Arab neighbors as its elusive goal, the more recent one generated security policies that seemed designed to forestall an Israeli-Palestinian peace process resulting in a two-state solution. In 2004, a senior Israeli official described Israel's disengagement from Gaza as a means to freeze the peace process and prevent the formation of a Palestinian state.²⁴ The IDF's military activities in the West Bank, meant to target terrorists, have also targeted and weakened the Palestinian Authority's (PA) institutions of governance and security, reducing the influence and capacity of the PA to serve as the recognized representative of the Palestinian people.²⁵ Similarly, the Israeli government's policy of "buying quiet" from Hamas, assisted in preserving Hamas's control of Gaza, creating a de-facto counter-weight to the PA, and a division in Palestinian leadership that further complicated efforts to negotiate a two-state solution.²⁶

U.S. Middle East Policy Prior To October 7

Prior to Hamas's terrorist attack on October 7, 2023, the Biden administration's policy in the Middle East was primarily focused on achieving Israel's continued integration into the region by building on the success of the Abraham Accords signed in 2020. In July 2022, President Biden and then-Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid adopted the Joint Declaration on the U.S.-Israel Partnership, known as the Jerusalem Declaration. The Jerusalem Declaration affirmed continued U.S. security assistance for Israel, the pursuit of normalization of Israel's relations with its neighbors, the intention to hold conversations on improving Israeli-Palestinian relations, and pledged that Iran will never be allowed to acquire a nuclear weapon.²⁷ While State Department-led diplomatic efforts centered on building regional cooperation through the Negev Forum, the White House was reportedly focused on the negotiation of a landmark trilateral agreement that would normalize Israel-Saudi relations in exchange for a host of U.S. security concessions for Saudi Arabia.

The agreement had the potential to advance to some degree the resolution of the Israel-Palestinian Conflict through a two-state solution.

Following the breakdown of U.S.-Iran negotiations in August 2022 to return Iran to compliance with the JCPOA, U.S. attention turned toward the expansion of sanctions on Iranian entities in response to the regime's violent crackdown on internal protests following the brutal beating and death of Mahsa Amini, a 22 year-old Iranian Kurdish woman, by regime forces, for refusing to wear a hijab. Additional sanctions would follow as Iran began to provide Russia loitering munitions for use in its illegal war of aggression in Ukraine. In 2023, the Biden administration reportedly attempted to indirectly negotiate a reduction of tensions with Iran, using Oman as an intermediary, to reduce the risk of regional escalation and to press Iran into "pausing" its enrichment of uranium.²⁸ In September 2023, the United States successfully negotiated the release of five Americans wrongfully detained in Iran in exchange for Iranian prisoners and the return of previously frozen Iranian funds, though the funds remain frozen in Qatar.²⁹

III. On and After October 7

Operation Al Aqsa Flood

October 7, 2023, was the bloodiest day in Israel's history and the worst attack on Jews worldwide since the Holocaust.³⁰ Hamas in Gaza launched an attack into Israel, for which it had begun planning as early as 2021.³¹ On that day, approximately 3,000 Hamas fighters, drawn largely from Hamas's Qassam Brigades and elite Nukba Forces, broke through the barrier separating Israel from Gaza in over a dozen places. Targeting the cameras and remote-weapons systems on the barrier first, they entered Israel with minimal detection. Others entered Israel very conspicuously on gliders, but also met no resistance from the IDF. Under the cover of a massive rocket barrage emanating from the Gaza Strip, these forces entered Israel and perpetrated a murderous rampage, killing men, women, and children, soldiers and civilians alike. Acts of sexual violence by Hamas during its assault have been documented as well.³² By the time the IDF had succeeded in subduing the attackers, they had killed 1,200 people and had taken 250 hostages back to Gaza.³³

Iran's Destructive Role

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei did not directly order Hamas's October 7 attack, though he did provide the group with at least \$222 million between 2014 and 2020, shoring up Hamas with the financial resources it needed to launch its attack on southern Israel.³⁴ Tehran's long-standing support for other proxies—chief among them Lebanese Hezbollah and, to a lesser extent, Yemen's Houthis—have resulted in a conflict which has expanded well beyond the borders of the Gaza Strip. Hezbollah and the IDF have exchanged near-daily rocket, drone, and missile fire across the Israel-Lebanon border, killing at least 100 Lebanese and 26 Israeli civilians, respectively, and several dozen Israeli soldiers and at least 438 Hezbollah fighters.³⁵ Additionally, fighting has displaced some 60,000 Israeli and 90,000 Lebanese civilians who have been unable to return to their homes near the border since war began nearly 12 months ago.³⁶ To protest the Israeli military's presence in Gaza, the Houthis began targeting commercial vessels in the Red Sea in November 2023, reducing marine traffic through the Suez Canal by more than 50%.³⁷ The Islamic Resistance in Iraq started targeting American forces in Iraq and Syria in October 2023, their campaign culminating in the death of three U.S. troops when a hostile drone struck Tower 22, a Jordanian military outpost, in the middle of the night.³⁸

While the war between Israel and Hamas began as a conflict geographically constrained by the borders of the Gaza Strip, Tehran has worked continuously to embolden Israel's enemies to take advantage of the chaos spreading throughout the region. According to an April 2024 *New York Times* report, Iran has been facilitating a covert weapons smuggling route spanning several Middle Eastern countries for about two years, employing intelligence operatives, Bedouin smugglers, and criminal gangs to "flood the West Bank" with arms and ammunition in an attempt to destabilize Israel.³⁹ One of Hamas's ultimate goals on October 7 was to extend its incursion to the West Bank and link up with local Palestinian militias there.⁴⁰ The group nearly succeeded; in fact, one group of Hamas militants made it as far as Ofakim, a small Israeli town equidistant from the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.⁴¹

Amidst the general chaos of overlapping conflicts in the Middle East, Tehran has not forgotten about the West. Since the killing of former IRGC-QF commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020, Iran has orchestrated dozens of assassination, kidnapping, and surveillance plots against Iranian dissidents, political figures, journalists, Israelis, and Jews located in Western countries, with at least 10 taking place on American soil in the past four years.⁴² The April 2024 Worldwide Threat Assessment released by the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency warned that Iran is likely to continue targeting current and former U.S. officials to retaliate for Soleimani's killing,

indicating that this is likely to be a persistent security threat.⁴³ On September 10, 2024, a grand jury indicted Pakistani national Asif Merchant with attempting to commit an act of “terrorism transcending national boundaries” and “murder-for-hire as part of a scheme to assassinate a politician or U.S. government official on U.S. soil.”⁴⁴ According to Merchant’s criminal complaint, in the weeks after travelling to the United States from Iran, he offered to pay a confidential source \$100,000 to serve as the hitman in a number of assassination plots.⁴⁵ Several U.S. sources later revealed that the targets of the plot included President Joe Biden, former President Donald Trump, and former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley.⁴⁶ According to a criminal complaint filed in April 2024 by dissident Amir Abbas Fakhravar against the Islamic Republic Iran, FBI agents arrested an IRGC operative in the United States in early 2024 who had “planned to surveil Mr. Fakhravar and his family, locate them, execute Mr. Fakhravar’s wife and child—while forcing Mr. Fakhravar to watch their executions—and then murder Mr. Fakhravar.”⁴⁷ Naji Ibrahim Zindashti, described as an “Iranian narcotics trafficker,” was indicted in January 2024 for his role in a 2020-2021 plot to assassinate two Maryland residents, one of whom was a recent refugee from Iran.⁴⁸

Over the past twelve months, Tehran has also continued to deepen its ties with Russia, China, and North Korea. U.S. intelligence officials concluded that Russia acquired and used North Korean ballistic missiles in Ukraine in late December 2023 and was seeking to purchase similar close-range ballistic missiles (CBMs) from Iran.⁴⁹ Moscow acquired those CBMs in September 2024, prompting a new round of U.S. economic sanctions targeting Russian-Iranian weapons proliferation and smuggling mechanisms.⁵⁰ In May 2024, open-source analysts revealed the location of a Russian arms factory producing Iranian Shahed-136 unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) using components from a sanctioned Chinese company for use in Russia’s war in Ukraine.⁵¹ The Ukrainian foreign ministry reported on September 13, 2024, that since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion two and a half years ago, the Ukrainian army has downed more than 8,000 Shahed drones launched by Moscow, highlighting the scale of the industrialized military cooperation between the two countries.⁵²

Israel at War, Strategically Adrift

Since October 7, Israel has been in a state of war against Hamas in Gaza, which has succeeded in destroying Hamas’s organized military structure but has come at an excruciating cost to Palestinian civilians in the Gaza Strip. While it is not clear how many civilians have perished in the war, civilian harm has been immense, with many dead and injured, most Palestinians displaced from their homes, with insufficient access to food, water, and essential services.⁵³ Though Israel has borne the brunt of international criticism at this civilian harm, it is critically important to note that Hamas purposely positions itself and its military infrastructure in close proximity to, and oftentimes within Palestinian civilian infrastructure, such that any Israeli military action would come at a cost to civilians, which Hamas weaponizes in the information space to attempt to constrain and isolate Israel.⁵⁴

Israel has achieved significant tactical success against Hamas, but strategic victory appears elusive at best. After almost one year of fighting, the IDF has destroyed Hamas’s organized military battalions, which were positioned throughout the Gaza Strip. The IDF holds key terrain in Gaza’s south and center and continues to execute clearance operations in areas previously cleared of Hamas in and around Gaza’s three major population centers of Gaza City, Khan Younis, and Rafah.⁵⁵ While the IDF has succeeded in killing the majority of Hamas’s military leadership—including Mohamed Deif, Hamas’s most senior political leader in Gaza—Hamas’s current political leader and the chief architect of the October 7 attack, Yahya Sinwar, remains at large.⁵⁶ Through a negotiated pause in fighting last year and IDF rescue and recovery missions, 154 hostages have come home from Gaza, both living and dead, though 101 hostages remain in Gaza, 35 of which are known to be dead.⁵⁷

In the past year, violence and insecurity has spread throughout the West Bank, abetted by extremists in Netanyahu’s cabinet, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir. Both are ideologically extreme, Jewish ultra-nationalists who hold outsized influence on security and settlement policy in the West Bank and have used it to essentially export the chaos and insecurity in Gaza to the West Bank. They are overt in their political goal of expanding Israeli settlement throughout the West Bank and returning Israeli settlements to Gaza, annexing both territories to Israel and permanently ending the possibility of a two-state solution. In the past year, Finance Minister Smotrich has repeatedly withheld customs revenue owed to the PA, and has only relented under significant U.S. pressure. He has resourced and supported settlement expansion, while Minister Ben Gvir has taken action to arm and empower settlers and to protect them with ideologically supportive police and military units—even as they have committed acts of violence and incitement against Palestinian communities.⁵⁸ Since last October, to quell the violence, the IDF has had to commit more and more of its forces to security operations in the West Bank, while it has fought a war in Gaza and attempted to deter and prevent Hezbollah from engaging in greater aggression in Israel’s north.⁵⁹ The missions on multiple fronts have overwhelmed the IDF’s force structure and created a manpower crisis within Israel’s military. To address the shortfall in troops, Israel’s Ministry of Defense recalled

Israelis to service who had previously completed and been released from military service.⁶⁰ The Ministry of Defense has also controversially turned to African asylum-seekers in Israel, who have fled conflict and persecution in their own nations, offering them assistance in obtaining permanent residency in Israel, in exchange for military service in Gaza.⁶¹

Israelis within and outside government have recognized the absence of Israel's strategic direction in this war. Prime Minister Netanyahu has been unwilling to articulate a "day-after" strategy or vision, even after public criticism and pressure to do so from his own Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant.⁶² Instead, Netanyahu continues to insist the war must continue until Hamas is destroyed. Yet paradoxically, in order to destroy Hamas, there must be a viable alternative to fill the governance and security vacuum left behind by Hamas's attrition at the hands of the IDF. Otherwise, Hamas will continue to regenerate its ranks and perpetuate an insurgency, feeding off the chaos and the suffering of Gaza's desperate population. Hundreds of thousands of Israelis, dissatisfied with Netanyahu's approach, have regularly taken to the streets to protest and pressure him to prioritize the pursuit of a ceasefire that returns the remaining hostages.⁶³

U.S. Policy: Support Israel, Help Palestinians, Deter Regional Escalation, Negotiate a Hostage Release/Ceasefire

Following the events of October 7, U.S. policy has coalesced around four lines of effort: 1) ensuring Israel has what it needs to militarily defend itself, 2) expanding humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza, 3) deterring escalation from Iran and its proxies, and 4) advancing a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas that includes the release of the hostages in Gaza. After the attack by Hamas, President Biden immediately offered rhetorical support to Israel, indicating through two speeches that the United States would support Israel fully in its moment of crisis.⁶⁴ He visited Israel in October, becoming the first U.S. president to visit Israel in a time of war.⁶⁵ These demonstrations of U.S. support, very well-received by the Israeli public, were followed up with major, continuous transfusions of military assistance to the IDF. Since October 7, the United States has rushed approximately \$7 billion-worth of military aid to Israel.⁶⁶ Last October, President Biden submitted to Congress a supplemental budget request, which including funding to support Israel and humanitarian efforts in Gaza. Congress passed measures that appropriated the requested funds in April.⁶⁷

The Biden administration has worked to ease the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza by working with Israel, partners and allies, international organizations, as well as unilaterally to deliver humanitarian aid into Gaza. U.S. efforts included the temporary establishment of an off-shore pier by CENTCOM. The Joint Logistics Over the Shore (JLOTS) capability succeeded in enabling the delivery of over 8,100 metric tons of aid to Gaza before concluding its mission this summer.⁶⁸

For the past eleven months, the Biden administration maintained a large U.S. military presence in the Middle East to deter escalation against Israel from Iran and its proxies as the IDF is largely consumed with its operation in Gaza. While the U.S. military's regional posture has been massive by any measure, violence in the region has steadily crept upward over the last year, including aerial attacks from Hezbollah, Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria, the Houthis, and from Iran itself, targeting Israel, U.S. forces, and commercial shipping vessels in and around the Red Sea.⁶⁹

Finally, U.S. officials have attempted to achieve a pause in fighting in Gaza between Israel and Hamas in exchange for the release of hostages, using Qatar and Egypt as mediators. Negotiations succeeded late last year in achieving a pause in fighting that enabled the release of 105 hostages. Efforts to achieve another ceasefire deal thus far failed to yield an agreement.⁷⁰ U.S. mediators sought to reduce the escalating violence between Israel and Hezbollah, which risks expanding into another war which neither Israel nor Lebanon can afford.⁷¹ The Biden administration has reportedly also sought to engage Israel and Arab partners in "day-after" planning that would begin the process of rebuilding Gaza, restore and strengthen legitimate Palestinian governance and security institutions, and facilitate Israel's continued integration into the region, and normalization with new and emerging partner nations in the Middle East.⁷²

IV. Recommendations for Navigating the Crossroads: a Bipartisan Middle East Strategy

The Middle East is indeed at a crossroads—in more ways than one. It is perhaps such a historically-contested place because it sits at the crossroads of the world; a strategically important piece of key terrain that has connected Europe, Asia, and Africa throughout human history. Its importance has only grown in the modern era, particularly since the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the discovery of oil in the early 20th century. Regardless of which region the United States chooses to prioritize its resources and focus, the Middle East will remain of vital importance to U.S. national security interests.

Besides sitting at the geographic crossroads, the Middle East is at another crossroads—a geopolitical moment of sustained tension and consequence which requires unflinching, thoughtful and unified American leadership. Israel is consumed by a conflict against Hamas in

Gaza that it did not choose, yielding devastating consequences on millions of civilians. Iran and its proxies and partners opportunistically seek to flare the level of regional violence, the consequences of which have rippled across the globe. The growing violence risks igniting an unthinkable destructive regional conflict that serves no one's interests. Iran continues to methodically advance toward a nuclear weapon through the stockpiling of highly enriched uranium. It has solidified its "axis of upheaval" with Russia, China, and North Korea, combining their nations' respective resources and competitive strengths to produce and proliferate deadly drones and missiles, evade western sanctions, and bolster their resilience all in an effort to dominate their respective regions and undermine the rules-based order which has allowed the United States and free nations around the world to succeed and prosper since the end of the Second World War.

The stakes are as high as they have been and the cost of failure unthinkable. Because of this, policymakers and legislators must put the synthesis of a viable, bipartisan Middle East strategy above politics and petty partisan reproach. Reaching bipartisan consensus on the present and future of U.S. policy in the region is attainable and very much worth pursuing. Below are two thematic areas to consider as points of departure to support the creation of a bipartisan Middle East strategy to meet the moment:

Restoring Israel's Security and the Path Back to Two States: A Bridging Paradigm

Both Republican and Democratic administrations have sought to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians through a two-state solution. President Biden has repeatedly affirmed the need for the two-state solution, as did President Trump, with his administration's pursuit of "the deal of the century."⁷³ However, the immediate challenges in Israel and the Palestinian Territories, both political and practical, make an immediate pivot to a peace process unrealistic. In Israel, the trauma of the October 7 attack persists as an everyday reality as over 100 men, women, and children remain hostage to Hamas in Gaza. In the wake of October 7 and the ongoing war, most Israelis doubt they can live in peace with a Palestinian state.⁷⁴ Israel's current government continues to hold fast to the policies of a failed security paradigm that sought détente with Hamas and the dissolution of the PA. Though Israel's government lacks popular support, it has not made any effort to change course. It continues to pursue policies that have exacerbated the insecurity on Israel's borders in service to maximalist territorial claims, informed and supported by ultra-nationalist ideologues. Irrespective of whether Israelis support the creation of a Palestinian state, Israel needs a functioning and legitimate Palestinian entity to govern and secure the West Bank and Gaza, as Israel does not have the military capacity to re-occupy Gaza and the West Bank while defending itself from Hezbollah and Iran. The PA is heavily weakened, both by internal corruption and two decades of Israeli policy.

Washington should articulate and support a bridging strategy that assists Israelis in taking critical steps in service of their own security, that also support better outcomes for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. The restoration of functional and supported Palestinian institutions of governance and security in the Palestinian Territories better enable Israel to focus on the more strategic threats it faces from Hezbollah and Iran, while closing two fronts Iran has used to weaken and consume Israel's military resources. By doing this, it can begin to welcome greater engagement and support from Arab states and normalization, leading to better coordination against shared threats emanating from Tehran and its proxies and partners. These steps, while necessary for a return to a viable two-state peace process, are more immediately necessary to stem the instability and risk Israel faces from being militarily overwhelmed. In time, with stability, security, and quality of life restored, a return to a conflict resolution paradigm that results in a negotiated peace may seem less daunting. This bridging paradigm concept is the subject of a forthcoming CNAS report. The pillars of a bridging paradigm include:

- Recalibrating Israelis' understanding of their strategic security interests toward the pursuit of stability in the West Bank and Gaza, in coordination with Palestinian governance and security institutions, so Israel can focus its resources on confronting and overcoming strategic threats posed by Iran, in coordination with the United States and Arab partners
- Recapitalizing Palestinian governance and security by engaging Palestinian civil society in coordination with European and Arab partners to identify new leadership and a succession plan for PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Congress could authorize a robust security cooperation mission to build the capacity of the Palestinian Authority Security Forces (PASF).
- Leveraging regional partners in multilateral regional security and economic efforts to stabilize the conflict and restore political and structural conditions to enable a viable, eventual return to a two-state peace process
- Restoring economic opportunity and quality of life in the Palestinian Territories through the introduction of capital investment and revitalized schools with curricula supportive of tolerance and peace

An Iran Policy Reset

The partisan politicization of the U.S.-Iran policy debate has devolved into over-simplified pabulum, devoid of the necessary nuance and complexity it requires. Policy options have been boiled down into partisan caricatures of “war-mongering” or “appeasement.”¹ To effectively confront the challenge posed by Iran, and to serve as an effective and credible coordinator and leader of our partners and allies in Europe and the Middle East, we must wipe the slate clean and begin anew. Whether or not one supported the JCPOA, looking ahead, a deal modeled on the basis of removal of specific sanctions in return for Iran’s nuclear compliance seems unworkable in a reality in which the United States and our partners in Europe are regularly foisting new sanctions on Iran for its support for terrorism, domestic repression, and proliferation of arms to Russia for its illegal war in Ukraine. Alternatively, virtually every facet of the Iranian state and economy is impacted by sanctions. We must face the fact that sanctions are a tool, and not a policy all their own—and that tool is becoming less effective over time. Beyond the diminishing returns of new sanctions, Iran has sought to make its economy more sanctions-resilient, while working with Russia and China to skirt the sanctions regime. The White House and Congress should work together to identify new ways to hold Iranian regime decisionmakers accountable and to impose painful costs on them for their decision to pump the billows of instability in the Middle East by continuing to arm and empower the Houthis and their other proxies and partners with arms and lethal intelligence.

A new Iran strategy must recognize the threat posed by Iran’s collaboration with Russia, China, and North Korea, and identify new ways to confront, challenge, and overcome the compounding threat of America’s adversaries. How might the United States animate its own partnerships and alliances around the world in service of this effort? How might legislation support such and empower it? These are the issues and challenges of dealing with Iran that require a bipartisan, consultative approach between our legislative and executive branches. The United States must have a policy grounded in American resolve and our collective leadership to succeed. The pillars of a new Iran strategy should include:

- Coordinating and planning with European and Middle Eastern partners on an approach to Iran that best leverages snapback sanctions, before the JCPOA provision expires in October 2025
- Identifying a spectrum of tools of U.S. power, drawn from across Title 10, 22, and 50 authorities, to hold Iranian decisionmakers directly responsible for decisions that foment instability in the Middle East region and beyond
- Identifying ways to impose costs on Iran’s partners Russia, China, and North Korea that expose and exacerbate the seams in their shared interests. For example, Congress could create an authority that scales and speeds the process of sharing captured Iranian weapons with Ukraine to be used against Russian aggression.

V. Conclusion: *Shnat Ha’avel* – The Year of Mourning

It is customary in Judaism that when someone dies, we mourn them. Typically, Jews mourn for seven days, commonly known as “sitting *shiva*.” There are mourning rituals that extend thirty days: *shloshim*. However, when Jews lose a close loved one, like a parent, they mourn for a year: *shnat ha’avel*, “the year of mourning.” For those who lost their loved ones on October 7, 2023, the end of the year of mourning is approaching. While 1,200 people lost their lives in Hamas’s unspeakable crime that day, the past year has only brought continued misery and death for Israelis, Palestinians, and others throughout the region. But soon, the first of the mourners will end their ritual and attempt to move forward. This act serves to remind me that following even the most unimaginable tragedies, there is opportunity for renewal, growth, and a better future. Similarly, in the wake of October 7, the ongoing Israel-Hamas War, and the regional insecurity enabled by Iran, America’s policy and legislative leaders too, must look forward and seek renewal. Together, you can advance a strategy to secure America’s national security in the Middle East, and those of our partners and allies.

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