

A Simple View of the Arab-Israeli War

by George Friedman - October 7, 2024

Last week, I wrote [an article on the two wars raging in Eurasia](#). It was “idiosyncratic” in that, unlike other columns circling the mediasphere, it focused on how ground combat in the Middle East evolves into conventional war, and how a conventional war demands the movement of forces that could implicate other nations, particularly Russia. The crux of my argument was that airstrikes, however intense, rarely result in capitulation. Even in World War II, intense, coordinated airstrikes against Germany did not, on the whole, reduce Nazi resistance. It cleared the table for ground attacks by the Western allies and the Soviets, who eventually overran Germany. Air power mattered, but when it came to ending the war, ground operations mattered more.

Over the past week, as the conflict reached the one-year mark, Israel has overwhelmingly used aerial operations, hammering Lebanon and testing Iranian intentions. (Iran responded with an aerial bombardment in kind.) Here again: All of this has value, but none of it is able to eliminate an enemy or overtake cities that contain command centers, intelligence and weapons. Destroying what remains of Hamas or Hezbollah by air will not cripple their ability to wage war. If it didn’t work against Nazi Germany, it certainly won’t work against a decentralized insurgent force.

This unsophisticated view applies to Israel’s enemies too. To win, Hamas and Hezbollah have to focus on Israel’s ability to fight, and what Hamas has done heretofore has been counterproductive in that regard. It tipped its hand by showing the threat it can pose without crippling Israel’s ability to fight.

Israel’s apparent war plan, then, raises an important question. Is Israel fighting to protect itself or to defeat its enemies? Both are reasonable choices, but how the Israelis answer that question will define their military strategy. The key to war is knowledge of what victory looks like, and the key to victory is to render the enemy helpless. The only sure way to achieve this is to envelop and crush the enemy. By themselves, missiles can’t do that. Militarily, this is something Israel should bear in mind as ground troops advance in Lebanon.

Politically, the clock is ticking. Russia – directly or indirectly the United States’ adversary in the Ukraine war – has an interest in how the Arab-Israeli war plays out. Russian President Vladimir Putin has already discussed visiting Qatar, which has a reputation for being interested in aligning with

Russia. (Qatar has confirmed its interest but has issued no dates for a Putin visit.) Russia has much to gain from the United States' prolonged involvement in a conflict that has already spread to another country.

Wars that go on too long tend end with a lot of casualties and unexpected costs – if they end at all. War is complex, and combatants must simplify the fight to a ruthless focus on defeating the enemy.

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