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Israel Resumes Gaza Military Operations: Humanitarian Situation Turns Grim

Israeli military operations in the Gaza Strip resumed on 2 December with the Israel Defence Force (IDF) targeting Hamas and the Islamic Jihad organisations. The IDF contended that Hamas violated the operational truce that had been in place since 24 November to enable the release of hostages captured by Hamas during its daring cross-border raid on 7 October. More than 250 Israelis and citizens of other nationalities were captured by Hamas during that raid and taken back to the Gaza Strip. As of the second week of December, more than 130 hostages continue to remain in Hamas captivity, including 11 women and children.

The operational pause was used to enable the supply of much-needed aid to the beleaguered civilian population of the Gaza Strip. The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in its Situation Report of 12 December noted that nearly 1.3 million of the population of the Gaza Strip constituted of internally displaced people (IDP) who were sheltering in around 155 UN facilities. It pointed out that 135 UNRWA workers have been killed in Israeli attacks since the beginning of hostilities and that more than 100 UN facilities have been damaged.

The head of the UNRWA, Philippe Lazzarini, addressing the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva on 13 December stated that the situation in Gaza was a 'living hell'. The southernmost part of the Gaza Strip, Raafah, which usually held around 280,000



people, was now sheltering more than a million people in increasingly chaotic humanitarian conditions. He asserted that international humanitarian law cannot be selectively applied or reinterpreted by the protagonists of the conflict. Lazzarini also wrote to the President of the UNGA on 7 December detailing the humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip and called for an immediate ceasefire.

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, in an unprecedented move on 6 December, wrote to the President of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) urging the UNSC to help avert a humanitarian catastrophe. He wrote this letter invoking Article 99 of the UN

Charter, a rarely used provision. Guterres noted that the existing situation in the Gaza Strip may aggravate existing threats to the maintenance of international peace and security. Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen condemned Guterres' action, calling his letter akin to supporting the Hamas terrorist organisation and condoning the rape and murder of innocent Israeli civilians.

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 12 December, acknowledging the letters of both the UN Secretary-General and Lazzarini, voted overwhelmingly in favour of a resolution which demanded immediate ceasefire. It reiterated its demand that all parties comply with their obligations under international law, including international humanitarian law, notably concerning the protection of

civilians. The resolution demanded the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, as well as ensuring humanitarian access. 153 countries voted in favour of this resolution, including India. The resolution though did not name Hamas or any other terrorist organisation.

Israel meanwhile accused the Hamas of firing rockets from inside the humanitarian zone declared by the IDF inside the Gaza Strip. The IDF noted that since 28 October, when the zone was declared near the western edge of the Gaza Strip, more than 100 rockets have been fired from this zone towards Israel. The IDF also noted that one-third of these rockets fell inside Gaza, endangering the Palestinian civilian population.

Israeli security operations inside the West Bank also gathered momentum. The UNRWA on 14 December noted that 271 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli security forces in the West Bank this year. It noted that this made 2023 the deadliest year for Palestinians of the West Bank. The Hamas-controlled Health Ministry in Gaza meanwhile on 14 December stated that the death toll in the enclave reached nearly 19,000 people.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on 14 December. The White House stated that the NSA discussed with Israeli officials the transition to “lower intensity” military operations by Israeli forces. In the aftermath of the meeting, Sullivan told reporters that the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) should ultimately govern both the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Sullivan though reiterated that the PNA would need to be “revamped and revitalised”. He also subsequently met Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas.

On the issue of the two-state solution, though, Israeli officials including President Isaac Herzog pushed against the goal. The Israeli position is against the US efforts to focus attention on the elusive goal after hostilities between Israel and Hamas end. Prime Minister Netanyahu on his part insisted on 13 December that “nothing will stop” Israel from continuing the war in the Gaza Strip until it achieved victory against Hamas militants.

Putin’s West Asia Outreach: Overview & Analysis

Russian President Vladimir Putin undertook a state visit to the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on 6 December 2023 intending to strengthen ties and dispel the perception of isolation portrayed by the West. Putin’s trip to West Asia came against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war, a conflict that has played into his geopolitical aims by distracting Western leaders from the war in Ukraine. It also offered Russia a new opportunity to appeal to the global public, given the widespread sympathy in many nations for the Palestinian cause.

In the discussions between UAE President Sheikh Mohamed and President Putin in Abu Dhabi, the focus was on the ties between their two nations. The significance of reinforcing dialogue and cooperation to promote regional stability and progress was emphasized by both sides. The two leaders also discussed issues of mutual

interest, including the Israel-Hamas war, Russia-Ukraine war and COP28. UAE stands as Russia's primary trading partner in the Gulf region, constituting 55% of the total Russia-Gulf trade. Bilateral trade has seen significant growth, approaching nearly \$10 billion and is anticipated to rise further. Moscow has extended support for the UAE's inclusion in the BRICS group of nations. The UAE, alongside Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, and Argentina, is set to become a member of BRICS on 1 January 2024 officially.



On the same day, Putin made a state visit to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman expressed the collaborative efforts between Saudi Arabia and Russia in working towards stability in the West Asian region. Putin highlighted the significance of exchanging opinions about regional developments. He emphasised the stable and positive relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia across political, economic and humanitarian sectors. Both countries discussed cooperation in the fields of energy, space, nuclear energy and OPEC.

In the present context, Putin's visit to the Gulf is of significant importance, considering an International Criminal Court warrant for his arrest related to alleged war crimes in Ukraine. Putin's move comes amid growing discontent among West Asian countries with the US's handling of the Gaza war, leading to a desire to recalibrate relations with Washington under President Joe Biden. Putin is seeking to enhance its regional influence by aligning with key players like UAE and Saudi Arabia in advocating for a Gaza ceasefire and a sovereign Palestinian state. Simultaneously, declining oil prices prompted efforts by OPEC Plus, involving Arab states and Russia, to boost crude prices. While Saudi Arabia and the UAE can weather lower prices with substantial sovereign wealth funds, Putin sought oil and trade deals during his visits to address revenue needs for the Ukraine war and domestic challenges.

Meanwhile, Russia has managed to navigate economic sanctions from the US and EU by directly exporting oil to countries like India, while European nations covertly purchase Russian oil, partially mitigating the impact of sanctions. Fueled by its wartime economy and the indigenous military-industrial complex, Russia has proposed its largest-ever defence budget. In West Asia, Putin has engaged with allies, with a focus on trade, oil and the Israel-Hamas war during his visits to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Russia-Iran relationship has remained strong as evidenced by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit to Moscow on 7 December 2023. Both leaders discussed bilateral issues, including economic interactions and regional and international issues, especially the deteriorating situation in Gaza. The meeting, part of a series focused on West Asia, took place a day after Putin visited the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Although the leaders did not mention their countries' increasing military

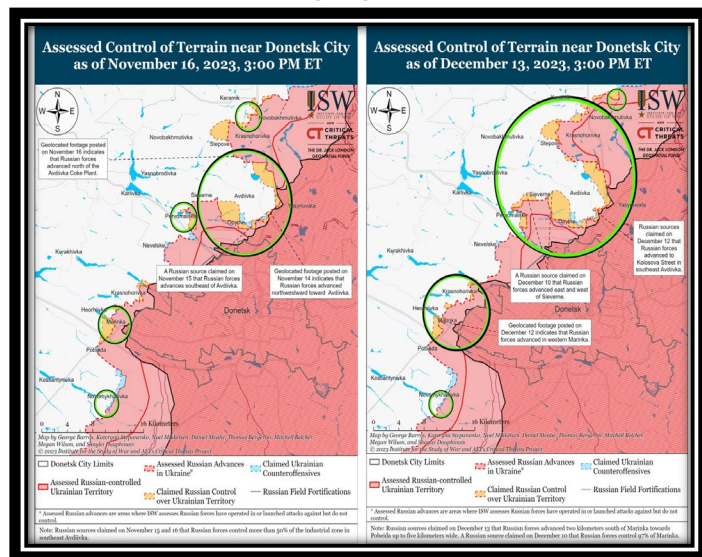
cooperation, the US has expressed concern over Iran allegedly supplying large quantities of drones and weapons to Russia for use against Ukraine. Raisi described the situation in Palestine and Gaza as genocide and a crime against humanity, expressing concern that the US and the West support it.

These visits by Putin came at a time when the Israel-Hamas war was seemingly escalating. Therefore, it may be considered as a Russian way to complicate the US geopolitical options both in European theatre as well as in West Asia. Moreover, Putin is actively seeking to foster relationships with the Gulf States as part of his broader strategy to establish global alliances with non-Western nations. This effort is aimed at showcasing what he perceives as the inadequacy of attempts by the US and its allies to isolate Russia through sanctions related to the conflict in Ukraine.

Ukraine War Update, 16 Nov – 16 Dec 2023

During the past four weeks, the war in Ukraine has turned into an attritional battle of slow and creeping incremental gains with barely any change in the territorial lines. With land battle becoming entrenched, aerial attack through drones, missiles and artillery has taken prominence. While Moscow launched missile and drone attacks assaults on Ukrainian cities, Kyiv has employed both Western missiles and home-grown technology to strike far behind the front lines — in Russian territory, in Crimea and on the Black Sea.

Even though the embattled frontier has barely shifted, there has not been a significant decline in the intensity of engagement at the tactical level. Russian forces have been staging fierce assaults around Avdiivka and have also launched simultaneous offensives across eastern Ukraine. Russian forces have likely committed to offensive operations in multiple sectors of the front during a period of the most challenging weather of the fall-winter season due to frost, snow and much in an effort to seize and retain the initiative.



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Ukrainian forces, by contrast, appear to be using this period of challenging weather and ongoing Russian offensive

operations to establish and consolidate defensive positions to conserve manpower and resources for future offensive efforts. At the same time, Ukrainian forces are resisting furiously, while probing for openings in a southern counteroffensive and conducting river crossings near the southern port city of Kherson.

As of 15 Dec 2023, Russian forces are pursuing offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and

southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and western Zaporizhia Oblast. Ukrainian forces, on the other hand, have continued to retain their presence on the East bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson along with an offensive posture along the Robotyne-Verbove-Novofedorivka axis.

As the war with Russia grinds on with a stalemated battlefield, war fatigue in the West is becoming increasingly evident. The optimism in the West of a year ago, following the initial successes of an initial Ukrainian counter-offensive, has mostly evaporated. The high hopes for Ukraine's subsequent summer offensive have not met expectations. Analysts have argued that the Russian offensive efforts in fall 2023 could be an opportunistic reaction to a perceived wavering of Western support for Ukraine.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the prospects for additional aid for Ukraine are worsening as the conflict in the Middle East has begun to distract attention from Ukraine. While the US has been, thus far, Ukraine's greatest saviour with military aid, Anxiety is mounting in Ukraine as disagreements in Washington continue to stall billions of dollars of urgently needed wartime assistance.

Congress already has allocated \$111 billion to assist Ukraine, including \$67 billion in military procurement funding, \$27 billion for economic and civil assistance and \$10 billion for humanitarian aid. Administration officials have warned that the United States will run out of money to support Ukraine by the end of the year unless Congress approves more. The effect is being felt at the front as America tries to stretch its dwindling funds.

On 12 December 2023, President Volodymyr Zelensky travelled to Washington to persuade US Congress to pass a \$60bn aid package that has stalled amid a row over US border security. In his address to US lawmakers, President Zelensky said that his country would never give up in its fight to expel invading Russian forces, but he warned that without more aid, the conflict would turn far more brutal. However, Zelensky's fervent plea failed to secure a breakthrough.

A large-scale cyberattack hit Ukraine on 13 December 2023, crippling Kyivstar, the country's largest mobile phone provider, and knocking out service to more than 24 million subscribers. Kyivstar said that the entirety of its network had been brought down. Monobank, a Ukrainian online financial services provider witnessed "massive" distributed denial-of-service, or DDOS, which temporarily impacted and limited its operation. PrivatBank and Oschadbank, two major Ukrainian financial institutions, reported that part of their ATMs and card terminals had been affected by the Kyivstar outage. Some other Ukrainian companies reported that their systems were also targeted, though it was not clear if these incidents were connected to the hack of Kyivstar. A Russian hacking group, believed by Ukraine to be working with Russia's military intelligence, has claimed responsibility for this cyberattack.

In a major positive development for Ukraine, the European Union agreed to start membership talks during its summit meeting in Brussels on 14 December 2023. However, the bloc couldn't reach an agreement during the summit talks for a new \$54 billion long-term package of budget support for Ukraine.