



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Strategic Digest

Vol. 6 | No. 2 | 16 January 2024

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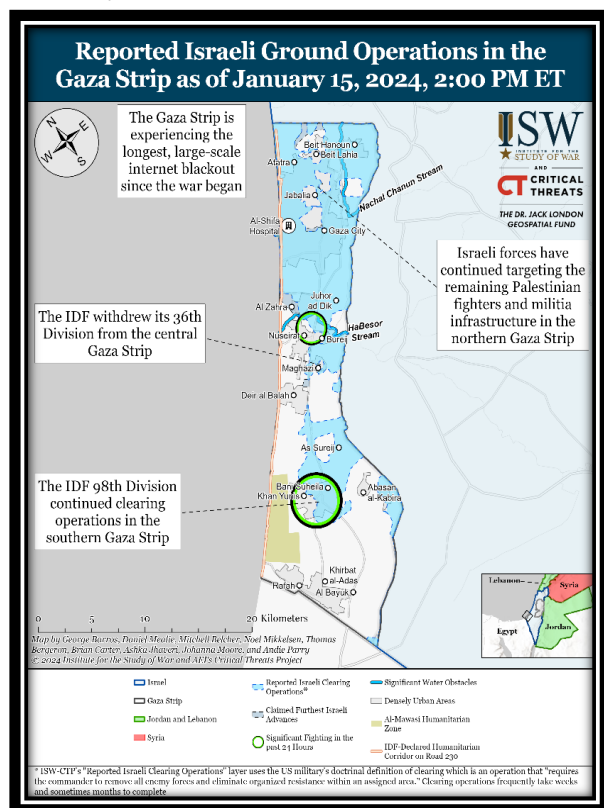
Israel-Hamas War at 100 Days

The Israel-Hamas War completed 100 days on 14 January 2024. The 7 October 2023 Hamas attacks have been termed as the deadliest day in Israeli history since the Holocaust, with more than a thousand Israelis killed on that single day. While over 100 hostages have been freed, 136 hostages still remain in the custody of Hamas. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has called for their immediate and unconditional release.

Israel’s military action in response to the Hamas attacks has resulted in the estimated death of over 23,000 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in its situational report of 11 January 2024 noted that there were more than 1.8 million internally displaced people (IDP) in the Gaza Strip and that more than 1.4 million were sheltering in around 150 UNRWA shelters. 146 UNRWA employees have been killed since the beginning of hostilities. ICRC Director General Robert Mardini on 11 January 2024 stated that not enough aid was entering the Gaza Strip.

As for the situation in the West Bank, the UN Office for the Coordinator of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) stated that between 7 October 2023 and 10 January 2024, 331 Palestinians were killed. OCHA noted that 2023 was the deadliest year for Palestinians in the West Bank since casualty figures began to be recorded by the organisation in 2005.

Even as UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazarini in a statement on 14 January noted that the war in Gaza was ‘staining our shared humanity’, the Israel



Defence Force (IDF) insisted that it was doing everything in its power to speed up the supply of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip. The IDF detailed the various steps it has taken since hostilities began to minimise civilian casualties, including humanitarian corridors for the civilian population to flee from the north of the Strip to humanitarian safe zones in the south, air dropping of leaflets warning residents to flee ahead of operations, among other steps.

The IDF charged Hamas with operating from inside civilian facilities like hospitals, schools and mosques and showed documentary evidence of Hamas military infrastructure in these facilities in the areas captured by it. On 17 December 2023, the IDF revealed that one of the largest tunnel networks of Hamas was discovered just 400 metres

from the Erez crossing, which facilitated the entry of Palestinians with work permits into Israel. The underground tunnel network was found to be over 2.5 miles long. On 8 January 2024, the IDF revealed the largest weapons production facility of Hamas in the central Gaza neighbourhood of Bureij.

The IDF military top brass held a situational assessment in the southern Gaza neighbourhood of Khan Younis on 7 January. Apart from the IDF Chief of Staff Lt Gen Herzi Halevi, other military commanders who took part in the assessment included the head of the Israeli internal security agency Shin Bet, the commanding officer of the Southern Command and the head of the Intelligence Directorate, among others.

Gen Halevi on 13 January noted that the focus of the IDF was on dismantling Hamas infrastructure in central and south Gaza and stated that the IDF has ‘completed the dismantling of the Hamas’s military frameworks in the northern Strip.’ He noted that four IDF combat divisions were operating in the Gaza Strip. Gen Halevi further noted that southern Lebanon was also a combat zone and that Hezbollah risked turning the entire state of Lebanon into a combat zone if it continued with its cross-border provocations. The IDF conducted intermittent air and artillery strikes against Hezbollah and Syrian targets during the past two weeks.

There has been a steady stream of high-level interactions between the Israeli and US military leaders in recent weeks, with the US Defence Secretary, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff and the US CENTCOM Commander visiting Israel for operational updates.

In other developments, South Africa filed a case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on 29 December 2023 accusing Israel of engaging in ‘genocidal acts’ in Gaza. When hearings were held on 11 and 12 January, South Africa requested the court to order Israel to suspend its military activities and take reasonable measures to prevent genocide.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a statement marking the 100 days of the war insisted that Israel ‘will not stop until we achieve victory’ and termed Hamas as the ‘new Nazis’.

Red Sea Gauntlet- Shipping Bottleneck Intensifies

A ballistic missile fired by Houthi militants struck a U.S.-owned container ship off the coast of Yemen on January 15. As per the statement by the US Central Command, there were no injuries and no “significant damage” to the ship, which continued with the scheduled voyage. The strike on the ship, MV Gibraltar Eagle, occurred two hours after another ballistic missile fired toward the southern Red Sea “failed in flight” and missed its target. The twin attacks showed the Houthis’ intention and ability to continue their assaults on commercial shipping in the Red Sea, days after the United States and Britain began conducting airstrikes against the group aimed at deterring the maritime attacks.

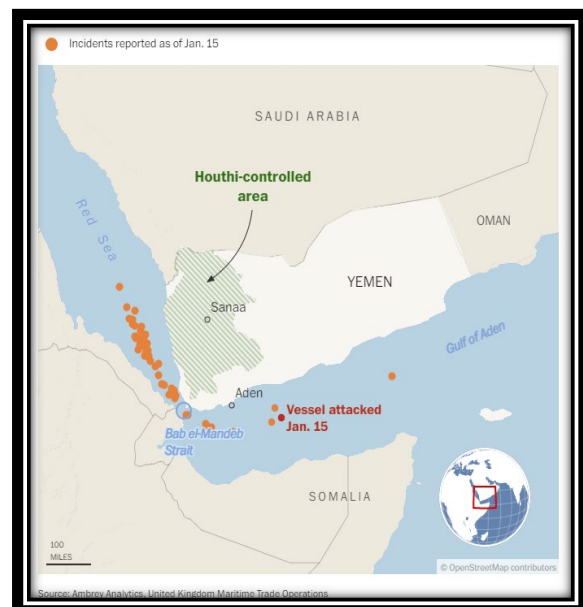
On January 12, The US and UK militaries struck over 60 targets at 16 sites in Yemen in a massive retaliatory strike using warship- and submarine-launched Tomahawk missiles and fighter jets which included Houthi's "command-and-control nodes, munitions depots, launching systems, production facilities and air defence radar systems" used for attacking merchant ships in the Red Sea. In a "follow-on action" on January 13, the US Navy destroyer USS Carney struck another Houthi-controlled site in Yemen using Tomahawk land attack missiles.

Houthis had vowed that the U.S. strikes would "not go unanswered or unpunished." A Houthi military spokesman confirmed that the group had targeted an "American ship in the Gulf of Aden" with missiles on January 15. "We consider all American and British ships and warships participating in the aggression against our country as hostile targets," he said. The Houthis would continue maritime attacks "until the aggression stops and the siege on Gaza is lifted," he said, adding that any further attacks on Yemen by the United States and Britain "will not remain without response and punishment."

Houthis seem to be undeterred by the strike. The group survived after fighting several wars against Yemen's central government in the early 2000s and absorbed years of airstrikes by a Saudi-led coalition over the last decade during Yemen's continuing civil conflict, emerging stronger than before. U.S. officials also admit that Houthi still retain about three-quarters of their ability to fire missiles and drones at ships transiting the Red Sea. Many of their weapons systems are on mobile platforms and can be readily moved or hidden, the officials said.

The Houthi attacks over the past three months have collapsed the volume of cargo transiting the Suez Canal, as shipping companies have diverted their vessels through the Cape of Good Hope, resulting in delays of almost 14-20 days and also higher freight and insurance costs. It is estimated that the volume of containers transported through the Red Sea in December measured half of what it was the previous December. Soaring shipping costs and a spike in oil prices have ignited concerns about a potential revival of inflation pressures worldwide.

With intensifying tensions due to attacks by US allies, there has been grown concern about more indiscriminate attacks on shipping around Bab al-Mandeb in both in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Earlier on January 6, Container shipping giant Maersk announced it would divert all vessels around Africa instead of using the Red Sea and the Suez Canal for the "foreseeable future". Post-attack on Houthi sites in Yemen by US Forces, US CENTCOM had warned vessels to stay away from Yemen Coast for 72 hours. Later after the attack on MV Gibraltar Eagle, the US



Department of Transportation issued an updated alert advising its merchant vessels to avoid the Southern Red Sea until further notice.

Due to the enhanced threat on shipping, QatarEnergy, the world's second-largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, has stopped sending tankers via the Red Sea although production continues. At least four tankers used to carry Qatari LNG were held up after the attack on Yemen by the U.S. and British forces. The Al Ghariya, Al Huwaila and Al Nuaman had loaded LNG at Ras Laffan in Qatar and were heading to the Suez Canal but stopped off the coast of Oman on Jan. 14, according to LSEG shiptracking data. The Al Rekayyat, which was sailing back to Qatar, stopped along its route on Jan. 13 in the Red Sea. Bernard Wael, CEO of British Oil Major Shell, speaking at the World Economic Forum in Davos on January 15, confirmed that his company had suspended Red Sea shipments.

Amid uncertainty over how long the attacks will last, manufacturers and retailers already are feeling the economic fallout. Automakers Tesla and Volvo said in recent days that they would idle plants in Germany because of a parts shortage linked to the disruption.

Taiwan's Presidential Election- An Assessment

On January 13, Taiwan elected Lai Ching-te, aka William Lai Ching-te, as its new president. Lai was the ruling Democratic Progressive Party's (DPP's) candidate. With his win, it was the DPP's third consecutive presidential victory since 2016, when the incumbent President Tsai Ing-wen won the presidential election, repeating it in 2016. Since Taiwan's first direct presidential election in 1996, it is the first time that a party has registered three uninterrupted presidential victories. Securing around 40.1% of the total votes, Lai defeated Kuomintang's (KMT) candidate Hou Yu-ih, who received 33.5% of the votes. The Taiwan People's Party's (TPP) candidate, Ko Wen-je, received 26.4% of the votes. Lai's running mate, Hsiao Bi-khim, a DPP politician who served as Taiwanese Representative, de facto ambassador, to the USA from 2020–2023, bagged the vice presidential job. Both of them will assume their respective offices on May 20, 2024.



Lai's victory margin is convincing. After the rout in the 9-in-1 elections (local elections) at the hands of the KMT in November 2022, Lai's victory was an impressive political comeback on the DPP's part. However, compared to the 2020 elections, when Tsai received 57.1% of the votes and won by an almost 20% margin, the DPP's vote share witnessed a whopping fall of

around 17% votes and a much-reduced victory margin of around 7%. Besides, this election was truly a triangular contest in which the TPP's Ko received 26.4% of the votes, whereas in 2020, the third candidate, the People First Party's (PFP) James Soong, received only 4.26%. Thus, had the KMT and TPP succeeded in stitching an alliance as they tried, the outcome may have been different.

The fall in the DPP's vote share is noteworthy because it has lost the legislative majority in simultaneously conducted elections for the Legislative Yuan (LY, parliament). It had a legislative majority in 2016 and 2020 (after 2004, Taiwan saw a fractured legislature for the first time in this election). In the just-concluded legislative elections, the KMT has emerged as the single largest party with 52 seats. The DPP has gained 51 seats. Eight seats have gone to the TPP. Thus, the KMT and the TPP together have 60 seats out of 113 seats in the LY and are in a position to deny the speaker post to the ruling DPP. Notably, the KMT's strength has increased from 38 seats in 2020 to 52 in 2024, whereas the DPP's tally has decreased from 62 in 2020 to 51 in 2024.

While the DPP has accomplished a feat by retaining the presidential office for the third straight term, Taiwan's overall political landscape has turned out to be fairly fractured. Hou's and Ko's combined strength of 59% votes will show in Taiwan's legislative functioning. As the winner of the presidential race, the DPP will continue to project its position on cross-strait relations as the Taiwanese position. However, the lack of a legislative majority will bedevil its claims.

China dismissed the outcome of Taiwan's Saturday elections, saying its ruling Democratic Progressive Party does not represent mainstream public opinion after it failed to win a majority in the presidential and legislative votes.

China's foreign ministry and embassies around the world this weekend warned countries against supporting Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and condemned foreign governments that congratulated the island's president-elect Lai Ching-te. China expressed severe displeasure over congratulatory statements about Taiwan's election from the US, UK and Japanese officials.

Just a few weeks before Taiwan's election, Chinese leader Xi Jinping had called the unification of Taiwan a "historical inevitability". Yet, the election of DPP's Presidential candidate, for a third time in a row, confirms that Taiwan has moved even further away from China and its dream of unification. Taiwan's voters ignored China's warnings that a vote for the Democratic Progressive Party was a vote for war.

Before the election, in editorials and official comments, Chinese officials painted Mr. Lai as a villain, calling him a stubborn "Taiwan independence worker," a "destroyer of cross-strait peace" and potentially the "creator of a dangerous war." However, in a news conference after his victory, he said he would seek a balanced approach to cross-strait relations including "cooperation with China," following the path of his predecessor, Tsai Ing-wen. Whether China will be satisfied with this reassurance remains uncertain.