

# Netanyahu Bent on Setting Middle East Ablaze and Dragging Washington Into Larger War?

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Global Research, August 13, 2024

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#)

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*For a long time, Israel and Iran have been waging a so-called “[shadow war](#)”. As I [wrote](#), for years a complicated game has been played out between Washington and Tel Aviv in which the latter, time and again, threatens to attack Iranian nuclear sites while the former avoids opposing such a plan too much (publicly) whereas at the same time signaling this would be an unnecessary not to say dangerous move that it does not approve of at all (and will not support it).*

Sometimes, the United States itself also signs that it possesses the ability to prevent any Iranian counterattack in case the Jewish state strikes. In 2012 it blocked the Strait of Hormuz. Washington has supported its Israeli ally for years and for years it has denounced the Islamic Republic as a “threat” to Israel and other states in the region. And yet the US has consistently feared that any Iranian response to an Israeli attack could destabilize the entire area, there being uncertainties about the Iranian nuclear program. The whole game, you see, has been about managing such tensions. The problem is that the situation might be becoming unmanageable by now – and the assassination of Hamas Leader Ismail Haniyeh in Iran is the latest sign of it.

Last week, in his newsletter, Prof. John. J. Mearsheimer [described](#) the policies Israel is pursuing as “directly at odds” with the incumbent US administration (although it remains unclear [who is running the US now](#)) – the latter wants to avoid an escalation into a regional war involving Lebanon and Iran into which it would be forced to take part. Mearsheimer is a University of Chicago Political Science Professor, and a prominent American scholar of international relations. He argues, to exemplify the above point, that the current Democrat presidency in Washington “desperately wants” a ceasefire in Palestine, whereas Netanyahu’s government is “committed to making sure the negotiations for a ceasefire fail” (and thus fair they have indeed failed).

More importantly, Mearsheimer makes the point that avoiding a direct war with Iran is one of the Biden’ administration goal, while Israel, on the other hand, has tried to “drag” Washington into precisely such a war twice already (on April 1, by [attacking the Iranian embassy in Damascus](#) and, more recently, on 31 July, by assassinating Ismail Haniyeh). Other points of divergence for the scholar include Netanyahu’s desire to “provoke a war” with Hezbollah. Basically, Washington has “a deep-seated interest” in some degree of stability in the Middle East, and Netanyahu, on the other hand, is “[willing to set the region ablaze](#),” in the words of Alon Pinkas, Israeli diplomat [writing](#) for Haaretz.

The aforementioned diplomat argues that Netanyahu has gone “rogue” and so has Israel, by

defying “international law and norms of international behavior.” He goes so far as to claim that, for the last 15 years, the Jewish state has had no foreign policy, properly speaking, and that is because of Netanyahu. This situation, more recently, has strained Israel’s relationship with its American ally, and has brought about some degree of mistrust. The Israeli leader, for example, clearly [lied to Biden](#) about the hostages situation, prompting the latter to tell him, in a very American way, “stop bullshitting me”

It is easy enough to blame Netanyahu for all of Israel’s sins and for the humanitarian disaster in Palestine and it sure is equally easy, for some, to portray Washington as committed to ensuring the Middle East remains stable. Reality is a bit more complicated than that. Israel has targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure and has denied Arab Palestinians their full ethnopolitical rights for a very long time; for decades, it has illegally occupied Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights, in Syria – to name just a few examples. The United States in turn seems to lack a clear stance on the Middle East, [unable to decide](#) whether it should [“leave” the region or “stay” there](#).

I’ve [written](#) before on the core geopolitical contradiction within the Atlantic Superpower’s foreign policy, namely its attempt to behave as both a “sea power” (as [envisioned](#) by Alfred Thayer Mahan) and as a “land power” (to use [Mackinder’s](#) dichotomy). Washington basically wants it all. Unable to exercise [restraint](#), the US seems to be “stuck” with pivoting away from the Middle Eastern region (towards the Pacific) while simultaneously keeping troops there, which can only invite tension, without effectively “constraining” their Iranian rival. Iran in fact has emerged as [the main winner](#) of this US disaster in Iraq.

Despite all the American rhetoric about a “War on Terror” it is an undisputed fact that the [main actors](#) who have actually cooperated to combat terrorism in the Levant have been [Iranian](#) and [Russian forces](#) as well as [Hezbollah](#) itself. They have done so by fighting ISIS (also known as Daesh) in Syria, for instance, for over a decade. The same actors have [guaranteed the safety of Christians and other religious and ethnic minorities](#) in a region where Wahhabi radicals such as the infamous Daesh were beheading, [enslaving](#) and [kidnapping](#) many of them. The US on the other hand provided military aid to insurgents in Syria, including radicals and terrorists.

On top of that, for years, the US Caesar Act has been used as a weapon against the Syrian economy and its reconstruction, thereby also impacting Lebanon. This is the context that has enabled Iran to project its influence with its [“oil diplomacy”](#) (and has also further empowered Hezbollah) amid the local [energy crisis](#).

It is not that Washington is interested in a “stable” Middle East at all. It certainly has sought to destabilize the region – but, here is the catch, just not too much. In the same way, it has been actively provoking the Russian Great Power since the nineties (with the different stages of [NATO expansion](#)) and all the way to the 2014 Maidan and onwards. It wanted to encircle and contain Russia, but – again – just not too much. The problem with managing tensions in such a way, is that sometimes, tensions will burst and escalate (as they did [in 2014](#) and [in 2022](#) in Eastern Europe), thereby spiraling out of control in unpredictable ways. Netanyahu is sure enough bent on setting the Middle East ablaze – but the American superpower is the one who has been supplying him with the fuel for the fire and ironically is also the one who now does want to see a fire out of control. Such policy could indeed be described as irresponsible.

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*This article was originally published on [InfoBrics](#).*

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