

Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais
Postgraduate Course in International Humanitarian Law

EVALUATION BY COMPLETION OF DISCIPLINE
Geopolitics of Armed Conflicts

Original theme:

The global geopolitical scenario and contemporary armed conflicts.

Delimited theme:

***The geopolitics of the conflict between Israel and Hamas - past grievances,
present stakeholders, future development.***

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February / 2024

INTRODUCTION

On the morning of October 7, 2023, a flood falls on the Gaza Strip. The Al-Aqsa Flood (in Arabic عملية طوفان الأقصى) is the name given to the coordinated air, land and sea attack of at least 2,200 missiles and 1,500 infiltrated militants from the Hamas organization in the territory known as “the largest open-air prison in the world”. Approximately 1,200 people died in the attack, and in less than two hours the Israel Defense Forces declared a state of war alert. More than four months have passed and this war has already resulted in the deaths of approximately 400 people in the West Bank, around 1,400 Israelis, and 29,000 Palestinians in Gaza (source: Aljazeera). More than half of the homes in Gaza have been destroyed (360,000 units), 85% of the population is internally displaced, and every hour 42 bombs fall on people who are already in a situation of extreme vulnerability. This is the current conflict between the State of Israel and the organized armed group Hamas, and this essay aims to analyze the actors involved in the war in question as well as its geopolitical consequences.

The Israel-Hamas War is an offshoot of the Israel-Palestine conflict, a military, ideological and religious confrontation that has permeated world history, especially in the last century, but whose ideals go beyond the clash between the civilizations involved. Despite its complexity, there is one word that can sum up this remarkable clash: LAND. This is a conflict over territory, and not just any territory. Located between Jordan and the Mediterranean Sea, next to the Suez Canal and in the heart of the area known as the Middle East, the disputed territory is a figurative bridge between the two hemispheres of the planet, in addition to containing the city that gave rise to the three largest monotheistic religions of the last millennia, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. For 81.8% of the world's population, this is sacred territory, but not only that. In the political game in which we find ourselves, many actors hide their cards; controlling this land is holding the wild card.

1. TECHNICAL DEFINITIONS

First, the theoretical and legal definitions. The “Israel-Hamas War” is by its legal nature a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) due to its correspondence with the criteria present in Article 1 of the 1977 Additional Protocol II, which states:

1. This Protocol, which develops and supplements Article 3 common to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, without altering their present conditions of application, applies to all armed conflicts not covered by Article 1 of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, of the Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I) and which are taking place *in the territory of a High Contracting Party between its armed forces and dissident armed forces or other organized armed groups* which, under responsible command, exercise control over a part of their territory which enables them to carry out sustained and concerted military operations and to implement this Protocol.

Source: International Committee of the Red Cross

In this excerpt, it is possible to observe the designation of the conflict between a High Contracting Party (the State of Israel) and dissident armed forces or other organized armed groups (Hamas). The very definition of Hamas as an organized armed group (OAG) can be found in Article 1: a group that has i. control over a part of the territory of the State in question; ii. a responsible command; and iii. that allows them to carry out military operations in such territory. Although this conflict fits into the IKA category and the two actors involved in it have been identified, the definition of these actors in other terms is controversial and complex. On the one hand, there is a State that for some is a safe haven, a home and a holy land, and for others an illegitimate state, the result of contemporary colonization. On the other hand, there is an organization that, even here being

classified as GAO, is considered by many to be terrorist (as is the case in the United States since 1997), while for others it is a “movement”, an uprising, a Third Intifada. In order to maintain the objectivity of this essay, its main participants will be understood as a State (Israel) and an organized armed group (Hamas), in an attempt to avoid the ideological biases that exist in so many discussions on the subject.

2. OLD RESENTMENTS: BEHIND THE SCENES OF THE CURRENT CONFLICT

Creation of the State of Israel and subsequent conflicts

The history of the creation of the State of Israel and the delimitation of its borders is in itself long and stormy. Until 1917, the region of Palestine was governed by the Ottoman Empire, which was defeated during the First World War by the United Kingdom. Between the 1920s and 1940s, there was an intense flow of Jewish immigrants to the region, persecuted mainly by the German Nazi regime, which led to the escalation of tension between them and the Arab population (mostly Muslim) living in the area. Due to the violence, in 1947 the United Nations voted to divide Palestine into two territories (Arab and Jewish), with Jerusalem being declared an international city, but the theoretical division was never put into practice. In 1948, the flow of Jewish migrants to the region was so great that the United Kingdom withdrew from the site of its then colony and Jewish leaders declared the creation of the State of Israel, to the discontent of the Palestinian people who lived there.

The declaration of the creation of the State of Israel brought with it an attack by five Arab countries and the event known to the Palestinian people as Al-Nakba, The Catastrophe, in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their homes and the borders drawn by the UN began to take on a new shape, with Jewish-Israelis occupying most of the territory. Wars followed in 1956, 1967 and 1973, the latter exactly fifty years before the recent Hamas attack.

Below are some maps and tables that exemplify the changing borders between the Jewish and Palestinian states (source: AlJazeera):

1917

Pre-British Mandate Palestine



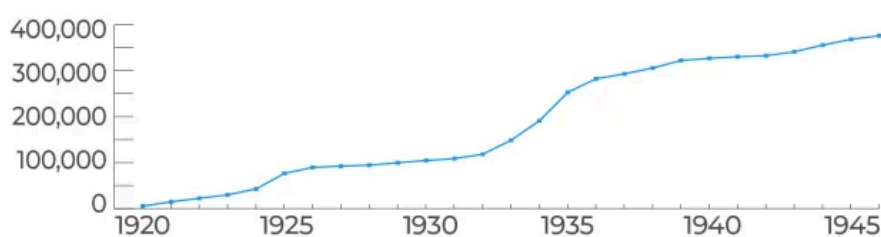
Source: McCarthy, The Population of Palestine (1990)

Caption: Population in the territory of the present-day State of Israel during the Ottoman Empire, 1917.

1920-1946

Jewish immigration to Palestine

An estimated **376,415 Jewish immigrants, mostly from Europe**, arrived in Palestine between 1920 and 1946 according to British records.



Year	Authorized Jewish Immigration
1920	5,514
1921	9,149
1922	7,844
1923	7,421
1924	12,856
1925	33,801
1926	13,081
1927	2,713
1928	2,178
1929	5,249
1930	4,944
1931	4,075
1932	9,553
1933	30,327
1934	42,359
1935	61,854
1936	29,727
1937	10,536
1938	12,868
1939	16,405
1940	4,547
1941	3,647
1942	2,194
1943	8,507
1944	14,464
1945	12,751
1946	7,851



Source: A survey of Palestine (1946)



Caption: Jewish migration to Palestine between 1920 and 1946: an estimated 376,415 Jews were in the territory, coming mainly from Europe.

1947 UN Partition Plan (Resolution 181)

- Arab State | 45%
- Jewish State | 55%
- Jerusalem under international control



Caption: United Nations partition plan between the Jewish and Palestinian states. This conceptual plan was never put into practice.

1948 Palestinians expelled

- Palestinian
- Israeli
- Armistice "Green" Line
(Created in 1949)



Caption: Al-Nakba, displacement of Palestinians, who mainly occupied the regions known as the Gaza Strip, in the south, and the West Bank.



Caption: In green, Palestinian occupations; in white, Jewish occupations.

Through the history of conciliatory attempts and the maps presented above, it is clear that there is an unequal division in the lands occupied by the majority Jewish and Palestinian populations. Despite religious narratives about holy lands, the confrontation between these two peoples has intensified because of the territorial dispute that configures the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas.

3.CURRENT STAKEHOLDERS: What are the pieces on the board??

3.1. Middle East: sub-regions and actors

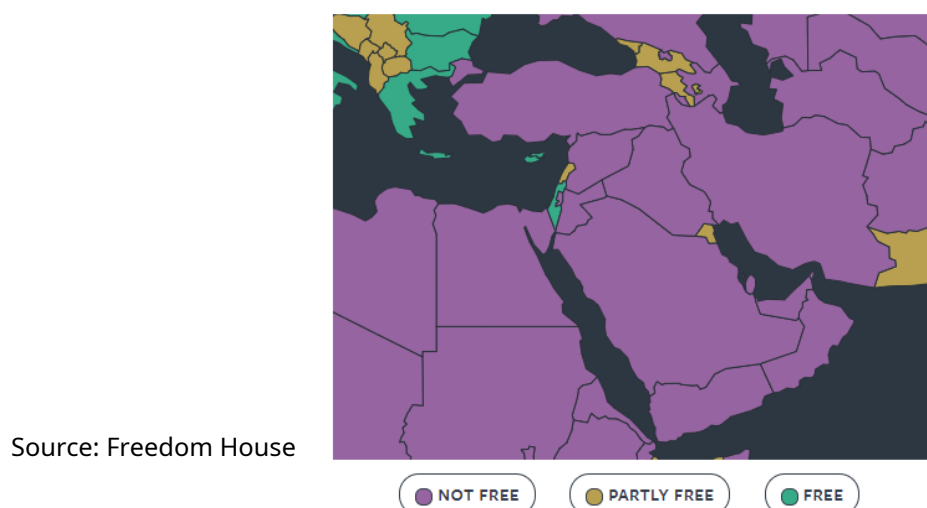


Above, it is possible to recognize the area known as the Middle East, composed of 18 countries (not counting Palestinian territories). Although the term “Middle East” is commonly used, there are numerous discussions about its actual categorization, since this term was imposed on the area mainly by Europeans (mostly British) who wanted to cross from the West to the East and “in the middle” of the journey came across such territories. In international relations and political science, a region should not only share its location on the globe, but a common experience, an identity. The problem is that the inhabitants of the “Middle East” themselves do not call it this way and there are subareas recognized by international organizations, such as the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Palestine); the Persian Gulf (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Yemen); as well as “isolated” countries: Egypt, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. These terms are more precise in their regional characterization because they share particular experiences.



Source: made by the author.

Some pertinent information to understand the geopolitics of the region is to note the high political, social and economic instability present throughout the area. According to the organization Freedom House, there is no country there that is considered free (categorization made taking into account political rights and civil liberties), with the possible exception of Israel.



The focus of this essay is on the Levantine region, where Israel and Palestine meet, but it is essential to consider the geopolitical interests of each of the neighboring states. Political instability, as shown on the Freedom House map, means that many countries refrain from publicly declaring their support for Israel, Palestine or Hamas. "The Arab states are driven by their own concerns for stability," Andre Bank, a Middle East researcher at the German Institute for Global and Regional Studies, a Hamburg-based think tank, told DW in an interview. Support for the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip signifies, in Israel's Manichaean eyes, rivalry with its sovereign state. Due to Israel's geopolitical interests in the region and its role as an economic partner, protests in favor of a ceasefire and in support of Palestine are rare in the major cities of the Gulf and Egypt, although there are exceptions (such as Bahrain), and there are pro-Palestinian demonstrations in Syria (which has a dense population of Palestinian origin, descendants of Al-Nakba) and Türkiye.

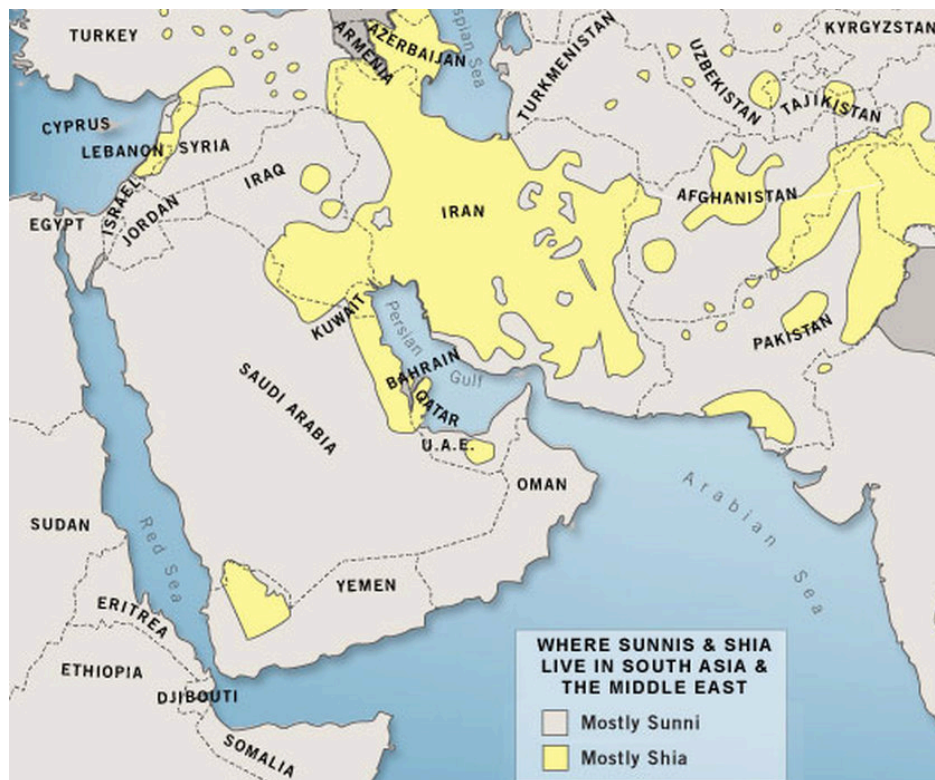
Furthermore, the economic factor cannot be ignored in the globalized world in which we live. Of the 15 largest oil producers in the world, 7 are in the Middle East, mainly in the Gulf region and northern Iraq. States whose main economic source is resource exploitation are called "rentier states", and there is an intrinsic relationship between rentierism and the lack of democratic representation; Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are 100% rentier and 100% autocratic, for example. This issue enters the geopolitical game since there is an interest in the region on the part of other actors who are not oil producers, in addition to the fact that the export of almost 17 million barrels per day (source: Strauscenter) is mostly done through the Strait of Hormuz, a maritime entry point to the region of great interest to external actors, such as the United States.

3.2. Iran: A key player in the game

On the other hand, it is also extremely important to understand that the pieces of this game are moving in an attempt to 'suffocate' one of the main antagonists in the region: Iran. An outspoken supporter of Hamas, Iran is a major opponent of Israel and finds itself in a 'suffocating' position in relation to its neighboring countries due to its composition.

population, its geographical location and international agreements, as will be explained below.

First, the Middle East is a predominantly Muslim region, and Islam is divided into two subgroups: Sunni and Shiite, with the majority (85%) being Sunni. Iran is a Shiite-majority country and a major oil producer - rentierism sustains the Islamic regime - and is being 'strangled' on all sides by peoples who differ in their beliefs and political views.



Source: Vox.

Secondly, in 2020 there was a series of agreements signed between Israel and several Arab states aimed at normalizing relations between them, known as the Abrahamic Pact. The pact consists of a general declaration and bilateral agreements between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Morocco, and the name of the agreements was given in reference to the supposed common ancestor of Jews and Arabs, the biblical Abraham, and as an expression of brotherhood between the nations. These agreements were mediated by the United States and achieved something of extreme geopolitical importance: the control of a circle of alliances that causes the maritime suffocation of Iran. This political partnership means that Israel and the United States have alliances with the three sea exit points of the antagonistic country:

The Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Bab Al-Mandab. With this siege in place, the Abrahamic Pact made a reality of a security architecture for the Eastern Mediterranean, the possible maritime exit for Iran and the organized armed groups it supports, such as Hamas and Hezbollah, who would have to cross into Israel. The agreements were nothing more than a containment strategy, and the result was growing discontent in Iran and Hamas.

3.3. Distant actors and their influence

Moving away from the region where the conflict is taking place, three major powers stand out in this scenario: the United States, China, and Russia. The first has already been mentioned here as a key player in the Abrahamic Covenant process, but its influence goes further: after Israel, the US is the largest country in the world in terms of Jewish population (7.5 million), which represents a considerable percentage of its voters and taxpayers. The US is an outspoken supporter of Israel, having allocated \$14.5 billion to its military campaign in the current conflict in November 2023 alone.

Meanwhile, Russia is leaning toward supporting Iran, having hosted officials from both the country and Hamas for meetings in Moscow last year. Although it also has ties to Israel and a war of its own to worry about, after Iran's support of combat drones and military equipment in the war in Ukraine, it is possible that it will become involved on that side of the conflict.

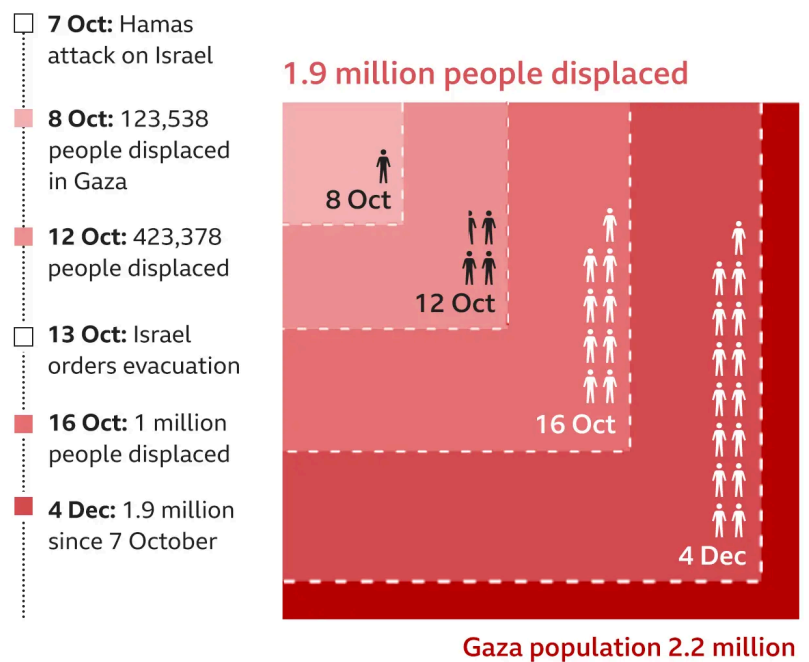
Finally, a possible wild card: China. Many have seen it as a possible mediator, given that it recently mediated negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and is close to the former, but with the US on the other side of the board, it is not known for sure to what extent it will be the external intervener in the game. Furthermore, it is by no means neutral due to its interest in the region to continue the Belt and Road Initiative. We will have to wait and see how the negotiations unfold to see which side of the scale weighs more.

4. DEVELOPMENT OF POSSIBLE FUTURES

With such a complex and volatile conflict at stake, it is extremely difficult to predict what the next move will be. The Middle East region is a recurring stage for international and internal armed conflicts, this one perhaps being one of the oldest on record.

Initially, the concern is the possible involvement of other regional actors in the war, either with political and/or military support, or by the war spreading beyond the borders of Gaza and beyond the borders of Israel. The immediate neighboring countries (Syria, Jordan and Egypt) are the most threatened by this possibility.

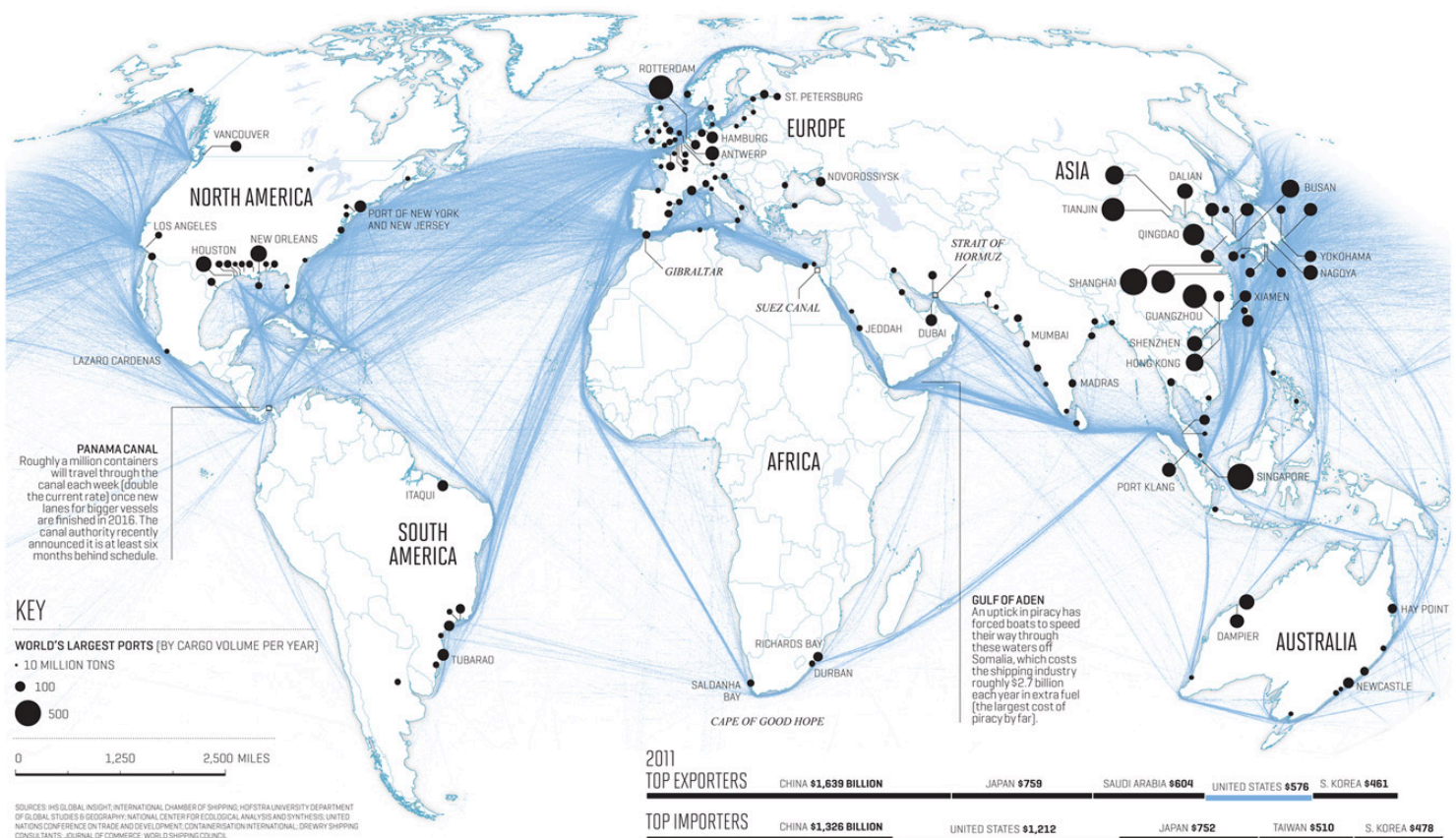
Secondly, it is necessary to consider the social and humanitarian consequences of the Israel-Hamas War. The crisis that is already occurring is generating internal and external movement of its population, remembering that despite its small territory, Gaza is one of the most densely populated areas on the planet: with just 45 km² it contains 2.2 million people. Of these, 85% are IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons) and once they pass the dams in the Strip, it is possible that many will try to cross to Egypt, Syria and Jordan by land, or even to the European Union by sea, as happened during the war in Syria in 2015.



Source: UNRWA

BBC

Thirdly, the importance of the geographic location of the conflict site for world trade. It is important to note that the Gaza Strip is only 200 km from the Suez Canal and its access to the Red Sea, which, by the way, already has a strong military presence: Houthi soldiers from Yemen have been targeting US and Israeli vessels in the area since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas conflict. The Canal is extremely important for world maritime trade routes, with an average of 56 ships passing through it every day.



Caption: Sea routes that pass through the Suez Canal. Source: Vox.

Finally, even though Israel and Hamas are direct adversaries in the conflict, we cannot forget the role of the powers that move many pieces on this board, mainly the United States, China, Russia and Iran. Some possible questions are: Could this war expand into a proxy war between the US and Iran? What is the role of the member countries of the European Union in the conflict? And of supranational agents such as the UN? What will happen if other organized armed groups, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, decide to participate in the conflict? There are many possible moves, and consequently, many possible futures.

CONCLUSION

Analyzing an armed conflict from a geopolitical perspective means trying to understand that, regardless of how its political institutions function, a large part of a state's power lies in its geography. Seas bring people together, mountain ranges separate them, rivers unite them, and deserts divide them. It is not necessary to fall into deterministic conceptualizations and believe that a 'geographical imposition' defines the destiny of a nation, but there are undoubtedly favorable solutions and inconvenient possibilities depending on where a country is located on the globe.

Talking about the current Israel-Hamas War is not something that can be done lightly. This development of the Israel-Palestine conflict is perhaps the most complex conflict in recent centuries, as it combines a territorial dispute with ethnic and religious disagreements in one of the most heated regions on the planet. Much has been said about this war from an ideological perspective, and this essay was written in an attempt to investigate what is happening through a geopolitical approach, that is, to identify the actors involved in this dangerous game and the influence of their geolocation on their interests and actions.

What is happening in the Gaza Strip today can be seen as a practical exercise of what theorists of classical geopolitics predicted almost a century ago in their conceptualizations of Global Theories of Power: Mahan, when he emphasized the importance of maritime control, Mackinder on land control, and Severson on airspace control. For 16 years, Israel has been carrying out a siege around Gaza in which it controls these three elements, earning it the title of "the largest open-air prison in the world": the people who are there, mostly refugees and survivors of the 1948 diaspora, have nowhere to leave, even with bombs falling on their heads every hour. The attack on October 7 by Hamas was, for its supporters, a gigantic feat because they managed to break through the blockade and enter the airspace with missiles and the ground space with their armed members.

As mentioned above, there is no simple solution to this conflict. Some call for the division of the State of Israel between the two nations, others call for humanitarian intervention, and there are those who have already given up hope of ever seeing this disputed territory exist in peace. A civilizational fault line is becoming increasingly clear in the midst of this desolate scenario. We can only hope that, regardless of who calls the shots, the next move will be more conciliatory than destructive.

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