



Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies NSW

**July 2024**

# **Current Geostrategic Issues Report**

## **Elections and Political Trends**

In elections in Europe and elsewhere over the last couple of years, parties of the far right, such as the Alternative for Germany, have been increasingly prominent, in some countries for the first time since the Fascist era ended in 1945. Italy and Hungary are now led by right wing anti-immigration nationalists and right wing groups did well in the European parliamentary elections in June. But the trend is not universal.

In the 2024 Indian elections (19 April – 1 June), the right wing Hindu nationalist government led by Narendra Modi was returned but with a significantly reduced majority.

In Britain on 4 July, the Conservative government of Richi Sunak was defeated in a landslide by the centre left Labour Party led by Sir Keir Starmer.

In France, support for the far right has surged across the country as the policies of centrist president, Emanuel Macron, have fallen into disfavour. Yet, despite the success Marine Le Pen's far right National Rally in the European parliamentary elections in June, this did not translate to the domestic scene in the final round of the National Assembly elections in France on 7 July. National Rally slipped to third place behind the leftwing Nouveau Front Populaire which won 182 seats and President Macron's centrist block which won 168 seats. National Rally won only 142 seats. No party, however, won the majority needed to govern in its own right, so a period of instability may ensue as parties attempt to form coalitions. A minority government or coalition government may result.

In Iran, an Islamic theocracy, a snap presidential election was necessitated by the death on 19 May of the former president, Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline theocrat, in a helicopter crash. In the final round of voting on 5 July, the sole moderate candidate permitted to run, Masoud Pezeshkian, won and has promised reform, including better relations with the West.

In the United States, though, it is looking likely that ex president, Donald Trump, will win the presidential elections in November and will reintroduce his right wing America first policies in foreign affairs, trade, immigration and social issues.

## **The War in Ukraine**

A month ago, with the war in Ukraine in its third year, it was looking as if Russia was slowly gaining the upper hand on land. The situation is less clear now as American, and to a lesser extent European, munitions are now flowing through to the Ukrainian front line and more aid has been promised, including at the NATO 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary summit on 10 July.

On the ground, fighting along the whole front remains fierce and Russia has seized a few more villages in the Donetsk Oblast near Chasiv Yar, but its new offensive in the northeast towards

Kharkiv has been blunted. Neither side seems able to concentrate the combat power [munitions and troops] that would be needed for a decisive breakthrough anywhere along the front.

On the maritime front, Ukraine is continuing to maintain its dominant position in the Black Sea where nearly half of the Russian Black Sea Fleet has been destroyed by Ukrainian missiles and sea drones since the war began. Fleet headquarters and the remains of the previously formidable Black Sea Fleet have been forced to relocate from Sevastopol to the port of Novorossiysk, over 300km away on the Russian mainland. Novorossiysk itself continues to come under Ukrainian missile and drone attack forcing Russia to disperse some naval ships within the Black Sea and Sea of Azov. These naval successes have enabled Ukraine to maintain the export of grain by sea, which has been vital for Ukraine's struggling economy and for food security in Africa and the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Russia has continued harassing missile and drone strikes on Ukrainian cities and key infrastructure (energy grid and ports), exploiting Ukraine's degraded air defence umbrella. On 9 July for example, Russian troops rained missiles down on five cities across Ukraine, reportedly killing 41 civilians and injuring at least 70 more. A Kyiv paediatric hospital where children undergo cancer treatment was among the buildings struck. While 30 of 38 missiles were downed by Ukraine in this particular attack, lack of adequate air defence measures, including fighter aircraft, remains a major issue for Ukraine. If Ukraine is to win, it will be vital to get the long promised US F16 fighter jets in the air as soon as possible, along with the Mirage 2000 fighters that France promised on 6 June.

In response to such Russian attacks, Ukraine continues to launch missile and drone attacks on Russian cities near the Russia-Ukraine border and has deployed hundreds of long range drones to attack infrastructure targets deep inside Russia. Attacks on Russian oil refineries have shut down around 14 per cent of Russia's refining capacity, impacting Moscow's highly lucrative trade in refined oil products. Feeling the strain, Russia is testing a system of 21st century 'barrage balloons' below which nets are deployed in an attempt to counter the Ukrainian drones.

NATO officials assess that Russia may be able to sustain its war economy for another 3 to 4 years.

### **Conflicts in the Middle East**

The Hamas, incursion into Israel on 7 October 2023 has led to conflict in Gaza, on the West Bank, on the Lebanon Israel Border, in Iraq and Syria, in the Red Sea, and in Iran. Over the last month, however, the international focus has been on Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon.

### **Gaza**

Israel began a ground offensive in Gaza on 27 October with a view to destroying Hamas and rescuing as many hostages as possible. Initially, the Israeli Defence Forces focused on northern Gaza, especially Gaza City. Once the north had been subdued, the IDF then moved to southern Gaza, especially Khan Yunis. The IDF then cleared central Gaza and now is assaulting Rafah in the far south on the Egyptian border, which had been the last remaining Hamas stronghold. Hamas, however, reemerged in the last three months in previously cleared areas of north and central Gaza. Hence, the IDF had to return to these areas starting with northern Gaza. After heavy fighting, especially in Jabalia refugee camp, northern Gaza was cleared again, so the IDF focus shifted to central Gaza once more, especially the Nuseirat refugee camp, concurrent with the continuing assault on Rafah which seems to be nearing completion now.

While these IDF ground operations have been underway, the international community has become appalled by the ongoing loss of civilian life and mass destruction of civil infrastructure which have accompanied the IDF assault on Gaza. Peace negotiations led by the United States, Egypt and Qatar have continued culminating in a plan being championed by the US. On 11 June, the United Nations Security Council voted to support a US resolution backing a ceasefire plan for the war in Gaza.

The two protagonists, however, did not accept the proposal. They remain far apart on their fundamental demands: for Israel, it is the complete destruction of Hamas as a political and fighting force; for Hamas, it is the complete withdrawal of Israeli troops from occupied Palestinian lands. Last week, Hamas expressed a willingness to compromise on the timing for an Israeli withdrawal and the talks recommenced on 10 July on this basis, but Israel so far has shown no commensurate flexibility.

Notwithstanding these diplomatic activities, the war continues apace. Israel has been methodically clearing Rafah, sector by sector, first the eastern sector, then the central sector and now the remaining western sector. With Rafah surrounded and isolated, the IDF has been able to occupy and secure a buffer zone along the full length of its southern border with Egypt. This is considered important to prevent resupply of Hamas with war matériel from the Sinai.

Nevertheless, Hamas still keeps popping up in previously 'cleared' areas across the enclave and the IDF is forced to respond. It has renewed its offensive in north and central Gaza as well as continuing it in southern Gaza. On 9 Jul, an Israeli air strike on a multistorey house in Al Nuseirat in central Gaza killed 17 people, including 14 children and a woman; and, in southern Gaza, an Israeli air strike that hit tents of displaced families outside a school where people had gathered to watch a soccer match killed at least 29 people. On 10 July in northern Gaza, Israeli tanks were reported advancing through Gaza City with residents ordered to evacuate the city and fleeing under fire.

The humanitarian situation in Gaza by 10 July remained extreme. The Israeli siege of Gaza had been further tightened; 38,243 Gazans had been killed (of whom more than half were women and children) since the war began, according to the Hamas run health ministry; health and social services were in disarray; key civil infrastructure had been largely destroyed; and children were dying of malnutrition as famine spread across the enclave.

The war in Gaza has evolved into urban guerrilla warfare which both sides may be able to sustain indefinitely at different levels of intensity, unless a peace agreement can be reached.

### **Wider Conflicts in the Area**

Israelis are also clashing with Palestinians on the West Bank, with Hezbollah on the Lebanese border and with Yemen's Houthis whose missiles can reach Israel. The danger of triggering a wider war in the Middle East involving Iran directly remains and threatens to draw in the US and its allies.

### **West Bank**

On the Israeli occupied West Bank, over which the IDF provides security, clashes between Palestinian youths, Israeli settlers and the IDF have continued over the past month. According to UN data, since 7 October, more than 500 Palestinians have been killed. This loss of life has attracted international concern. Adding to that concern, Israel has announced a succession of plans to build new homes in settlements in the West bank. This is one element of a campaign to accelerate settlement expansion aimed at cementing Israeli control over the territory and

preventing the establishment of a future Palestinian state as part of 'two state' solution. On 4 July, the approval of a further 5,300 new homes was announced.

### **Lebanon**

The militant Shia organisation in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah, is part of the Lebanese government and does not want war with Israel at this time. Nevertheless, it has been assisting Hamas by exchanging sufficient artillery and rocket fire with the IDF since 7 October to keep substantial IDF forces pinned on Israel's Lebanese (northern) border and forcing the evacuation of some 60,000 Israeli settlers from the border area. Israel's response has forced some 100,000 Lebanese citizens also to flee the border area. Further, Israel, using surgical missile strikes, has assassinated several key Hezbollah leaders in Lebanese towns well away from the border. Over the past month this exchange of fire has intensified. Israel says 17 of its soldiers and nine civilians have been killed since 7 October; whereas the UN puts the Lebanese death toll to date at 400.

It has become increasingly clear and has been confirmed in recent days that, as soon as the situation in Gaza has been resolved, Israel is determined to drive Hezbollah forces well back from the border area – to create a Hezbollah free buffer zone on the Lebanese side so as to allow Israeli settlers to return to their homes along the border in relative safety.

Should the IDF invade Lebanon, the IDF would find Hezbollah a far stronger and more capable opponent than Hamas. It might also lead to a wider war in the Middle East, drawing in both Iran and the United States. To avoid a wider war, US officials are seeking to reach a diplomatic solution

### **Yemen and Red Sea.**

Yemen's Houthis are Shia rebels supported by Iran, who now govern much of western Yemen bordering on the Red Sea. Incensed by Israel's attack on Gaza and in support of Hamas, since November they have been using Iranian supplied missiles and drones to attack commercial shipping in the Red Sea, the Bab el Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden – in effect closing the Suez Canal through which some 12 per cent of global maritime trade travels.

After more than 60 merchant ships had been attacked, including the deaths of three crewmen, by March, the danger to crews and cargoes and increased insurance costs forced most shippers to avoid the Suez Canal and to choose the longer route via the Cape of Good Hope. Possibly as a result, there have been fewer attacks since March.

On 27 March, it was announced that the Houthis had reached a political deal with Russia and China to provide safe passage for vessels under their jurisdiction. Safe passage has also been provided for grain shipments from Ukraine destined for Sudan and other famine areas in the Middle East and Africa.

An international naval coalition led by the US has been seeking to provide protection for commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The naval ships continue to successfully intercept many of the missiles and drones fired at the commercial vessels, but unless the Houthi bases are destroyed, the Houthi attacks are likely to continue. To this end, US and UK air force and naval strikes on Houthi rebel launching sites, arms caches, headquarters and the like in Yemen are continuing, but a ground assault on the bases does not appear to be in prospect. In a major assault on 30 May, the US and UK conducted strikes against 13 Houthi targets across Yemen, killing 16 people and injuring at least 35 others.

Since March, there have been fewer suitable commercial ship targets for the Houthis in the Red Sea, the Bab el Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden. Accordingly, the Houthis, frequently coordinating attacks with the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, have fired missiles and drones at naval and commercial shipping at sea and in Israeli ports, such as Eilat and Haifa. Mostly, little damage has been caused.

Those nonexempted commercial ships that have braved the Red Sea route, however, often have come under attack. Most missiles and drones fired at them have been intercepted by naval escorts before reaching the target ship. A few ships, though, have been less lucky.

On 26 April, two Houthi missiles hit Panama flagged oil tanker Andromeda Star, in the Red Sea causing minor damage. Indian Naval Ship Kochi rescued 30 of her crew members. Later the ship continued towards her next destination.

On 29 April, Houthis attacked the Malta flagged merchant vessel MV Cyclades with antiship missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, causing minor damage. The Houthis also conducted a drone attack on the Portugal flagged MSC Orion that day, striking her in the Arabian Sea around 600km off the coast of Yemen.

In May, five commercial vessels were confirmed to have been struck by Houthi missiles and/or drones, despite the Houthis claiming several more. In June, 10 vessels were confirmed as having been hit, although the Houthis claimed to have targeted many more. Several of the ships confirmed hit suffered significant damage, including fire. One crewman was badly injured. Few other crew injuries were reported.

On 12 June, however, the Liberian flagged and Greek owned cargo ship Tutor was struck twice in the Red Sea. The Houthis stated that attacks were carried out using ballistic missiles, drones and an unmanned surface vehicle, their first successful use of such a device. The ship began to take in water, and the crew abandoned ship, save for one member who was confirmed missing. Its sinking was confirmed on 19 June, with the missing crew member believed to have been killed.

The Palauan flagged LNG carrier Asya Energy managed to sail through the Red Sea without any incident on 18 June, marking the first time an LNG carrier had sailed successfully through the Babel Mandeb since January 2024.

## **Sudan**

Sudan is a country of 50 million people and a civil war there, which has been ongoing for 15 months (since 15 April 2023), has created a humanitarian crisis on a scale comparable to or exceeding those in Ukraine and Gaza. The civil war is between rival factions in the Sudanese military government – the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) under General Abdel Fattah al Burnham and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka ‘Hemedti’. Most fighting has been concentrated around the capital, Khartoum, and in the Darfur region in the country’s west. By March 2024, conservative estimates put the number killed at 14,000 – 15,000 with 33,000 others injured. On 2 May, a US Senate hearing estimated that 15,000 – 30,000 had been killed, but considered this an underestimate saying the real death toll could be as high as 150,000. As of 5 July, 7.7 million had been internally displaced, >2.1 million had fled the country as refugees, and perhaps up to 25 million (half the population) were facing starvation. Despite its own problems, Ukraine donated 7665 tonnes of wheat to Sudan in March.

On 9 March, the UN Security Council called for an immediate ceasefire in Sudan to coincide with the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and to allow aid to get to the 25 million people in desperate

need of food – the humanitarian response now being at breaking point. All parties were called on to seek a sustainable resolution of the conflict through dialogue. This call was ignored by the belligerents.

As of 5 July, the war has continued unabated with the RSF having the upper hand in Darfur and Khartoum, with the SAF operating from Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast and seeking to challenge the RSF in its strongholds. The humanitarian situation remains dire.

### **New Caledonia**

Tensions in the French territory of New Caledonia remain high driven by the desire of the indigenous Kanak people for independence from France, whereas the predominantly right wing settlers desire to retain the present constitutional arrangements.

Following earlier unrest and rioting in May, on 26 June, a fresh surge of unrest hit New Caledonia, with several buildings in Noumea set on fire overnight, including a police station and a town hall. The new spike in violence came as France prepared to vote in National Assembly elections. It was feared that the outcome could affect the currently vexed question of New Caledonian independence should a right wing government be elected and oppose change to the present constitutional arrangements. Given the relative success of left and centre parties in the French election, the Kanak fears may be put on hold for the present.

### **Global Climate Change**

Global climate change, which poses an existential threat to humankind, is continuing unabated relentlessly. Global average temperatures have been at or above the Paris Agreement target of 1.5oC for twelve months in a row. June 2024 was the Earth's hottest June on record with deadly heatwaves spanning large parts of the northern hemisphere where, in places, the temperature exceeded 50 degrees Celsius. For example, in Saudi Arabia, some 1,300 people died last month from heat related diseases during the Hajj pilgrimage with temperatures in Mecca climbing to 51.8 degrees Celsius. With chances of mitigating climate change diminishing, learning to live with these changes is becoming a massive challenge with major geostrategic implications.

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