



## Understanding the Middle East Through the Animal Kingdom

My guess is that the next week or so is likely to be the most important in the Gaza war since Hamas launched it on Oct. 7.

The U.S. will probably retaliate against pro-Iranian forces and Iranian agents in the Middle East that Washington believes are responsible for the attack on a U.S. base in Jordan that killed three soldiers on Jan. 28. At the same time, we could get a Gaza cease-fire deal, with an exchange of Israeli hostages held by Hamas for Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. And Secretary of State Antony Blinken is going to try to bring to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel an option: normalization with Saudi Arabia in return for a commitment to engage with the Palestinian Authority on a long-term plan for a Palestinian state.

How all of these are going to interact, I do not know. Personally, I sometimes prefer to think about the complex relations between these parties with analogies from the natural world.

The U.S. is like an old lion. We are still the king of the Middle East jungle — more powerful than any single actor, but we have so many scars from so many fights that we just can't just show up, roar loudly and expect that everyone will do what we want or scamper away. We are one tired lion, and that's why other predators are no longer afraid to test us.

Iran is to geopolitics what a recently discovered species of parasitoid wasp is to nature. What does this parasitoid wasp do? According to Science Daily, the wasp “injects its eggs into live caterpillars, and the baby wasp larvae slowly eat the caterpillar from the inside out, bursting out once they have eaten their fill.”

Is there a better description of Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq today? They are the caterpillars. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is the wasp. The Houthis, Hezbollah, Hamas and Kataib Hezbollah are the eggs that hatch inside the host — Lebanon, Yemen, Syria and Iraq — and eat it from the inside out.

We have no counterstrategy that safely and efficiently kills the wasp without setting fire to the whole jungle.

Hamas is like the trap-door spider. The way trap-door spiders operate, according to a nature site, is that “the spider leaps out at great speed, seizes its prey and hauls it back into the burrow to be devoured, all in a fraction of a second.” Trap-door spiders are adept at camouflaging the doors of their underground nests, so they are hard to see until they're opened.

Finally, Netanyahu is like the sifaka lemur, which I got to observe in Madagascar. Sifakas are primates that use bipedal sideways hopping as a primary means of walking. They advance by moving sideways, waving their arms up and down, which makes them appear to be moving even more than they are. That's Bibi, always shifting side to side to stay in power and avoiding going decisively backward or forward. This week he may have to.

Sometimes I contemplate the Middle East by watching CNN. Other times, I prefer Animal Planet.