

COUNCIL OF COUNCILS

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Session One

Stabilizing the Middle East:

Where Do We Go From Here?

The War That Remade the Middle East

How Washington Can Stabilize a Transformed Region

MARIA FANTAPPIE AND VALI NASR

Before October 7, it seemed as if the United States' vision for the Middle East was finally coming to fruition. Washington had arrived at an implicit understanding with Tehran about its nuclear program, in which the Islamic Republic of Iran effectively paused further development in exchange for limited financial relief. The United States was working on a defense pact with Saudi Arabia, which would in turn lead the kingdom to normalize its relations with Israel. And Washington had announced plans for an ambitious trade corridor connecting India to Europe through the Middle East to offset China's rising influence in the region.

There were obstacles, of course. Tensions between Tehran and Washington, although lower than in the past, remained high. Israel's avowedly right-wing government was busy expanding settlements in the West Bank, prompting anger from Palestinians. But U.S. officials did not see Iran as a spoiler; it had, after all, recently restored ties with various Arab governments. And Arab states had already normalized relations with Israel, even though Israel was not making meaningful concessions to the Palestinians.

Then Hamas attacked Israel, throwing the region into turmoil and upending the United States' vision. The militant group's expansive assault from

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the Gaza Strip—in which its fighters broke through a high-tech border wall, rampaged across southern Israeli towns, killed roughly 1,200 people, and took more than 240 hostages—made it clear that the Middle East is still a deeply explosive region. The attack prompted a ferocious military response by Israel that created a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, with large numbers of dead and displaced Palestinians, and raised the risk of a wider regional war. The plight of the Palestinians is again front and center, and an Israeli-Saudi deal is infeasible. Given that Iranian support accounts for Hamas's resilience and military abilities, Iran's own regional military capabilities now seem quite powerful. Tehran also seems newly assertive. Although not keen on a broader conflict, Iran has still basked in Hamas's show of force and, since then, upped the ante as Israel exchanged fire with the Lebanese militia Hezbollah and as other Iranian-backed groups lobbed rockets at U.S. troops.

The influence of the United States still looms large over the Middle East. But its support for Israel's war has decidedly compromised its credibility in the region. (That support has also damaged Washington's standing in the global South more broadly, especially as Israel's claim of self-defense turned into collective punishment of Palestinian civilians.) This means the United States will have to craft a new strategy for the Middle East, one that contends with the realities it has long ignored. Washington, for example, can no longer neglect the Palestinian issue. In fact, it will have to make resolving that conflict the centerpiece of its endeavors. It will simply be impossible for the United States to tackle other questions in the region, including the future of

Arab-Israeli ties, until there is a credible path to a viable future Palestinian state.

Washington must also address Tehran's rising power, which has rattled the Middle East. If the United States wants to bring peace to the region, it must find new ways to constrain Iran and its proxies. Just as important, the United States must reduce their desire to challenge the regional order. It will especially need a new deal that halts Iran's march to achieve the capability to make nuclear weapons.

To achieve these aims, the United States does not have to discard all that it has worked for. In fact, it can—and should—build on elements of the order it previously envisioned. In particular, Washington must anchor its new plan for the region in its partnership with Saudi Arabia, which has working relations with Iran, Israel, and the entire Arab world. Riyadh can use its expansive influence to help revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and help the United States strike a nuclear agreement with Iran. And together, Riyadh and Washington can create the Middle Eastern economic corridor the United States needs to balance against China.

This new grand bargain will not be as straightforward as the deal the United States was negotiating before October 7. It will not begin with Israeli-Saudi normalization, and it will not end with an Arab-Israeli alliance against Iran. But unlike past agreements, this new framework is achievable. And if done right, it will lower regional tensions and establish lasting peace.

WISHFUL THINKING

It is easy to see why the United States believed it could step back from the

Middle East. The Arab-Israeli conflict appeared to be ending, even if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict dragged on. Iran had struck an effective bargain with the United States to limit the advancement of its nuclear program and had normalized ties with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. The region seemed to be taking care of itself, freeing Washington to focus on Asia and Europe.

But Washington had overestimated the stability of that situation, and it had underestimated the forces arrayed against it. U.S. President Joe Biden, for example, appears to have given little thought to how he would earn Senate approval for a defense treaty with Saudi Arabia, even though the treaty could entail providing the kingdom with advanced weaponry and civilian nuclear infrastructure. The United States also wrongly assumed that other Middle Eastern countries would not protest as it boosted Riyadh's quest for regional hegemony. Washington figured that Tehran, for example, was too eager to normalize ties with Arab states and too busy with domestic unrest to interfere with U.S. plans. In reality, of course, Iran was continuing to strengthen and nurture its armed proxies.

But Washington's biggest miscalculation was thinking it could ignore the Palestinian issue. Its tentative agreement with the Saudis, for example, was premised on the assumption that Riyadh could normalize ties with Israel and not prompt widespread backlash, even though it was unlikely that any deal would involve major concessions to the Palestinians. The United States did know that, despite the promise of

de-escalation, the shadow war between Iran and Israel continued to simmer. But it did not foresee that war converging with the Palestinian issue, and to devastating effect.

As October 7 showed, Washington's beliefs about the Middle East were completely incorrect. And yet so far, the United States has not updated its thinking. Instead of pushing for a limited military campaign that might salvage Israel's reputation, Washington's overarching response to the war in Gaza has been nearly unequivocal support for a brutal military assault. The result has been both anti-Israeli and anti-American outrage across the Middle East. Jordanian King Abdullah II and his wife, Queen Rania Al Abdullah, for example, have publicly condemned the Israeli military campaign, criticized American support for it, and made it clear that in this war, Jordan does not stand with the West. Both Jordan and Bahrain have recalled their ambassadors to Israel and frozen diplomatic ties. When U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Arab leaders held a meeting in Amman in November, they could not even produce a perfunctory joint communiqué.

The United States has tried to compensate for its pro-Israel position by supporting pauses in the fighting to get humanitarian aid into Gaza. It has also cooperated with the government of Qatar, which has close ties to Hamas, to secure the release of hostages. And Washington has lobbied to have the Palestinian Authority govern Gaza at the end of the war, instead of subjecting it to a prolonged Israeli occupation.

But these modest steps are unlikely to stabilize the region. In fact, they

are doing the opposite: creating a vacuum that the Arab world's other actors will use to advance their own interests. Israel has made destroying Hamas its immediate goal, but without U.S. pressure, it will also look to convince its citizens and the region of its invincibility by dealing incalculable damage to Gaza to deter potential adversaries. Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority will want to minimize internal and external threats to their power, so they will try to make sure any postwar diplomacy suits their economic interests and bolsters their regional standing. Gulf countries, too, will use the conflict to vie for influence. Qatar is already leveraging its relationship with Hamas to make itself into an indispensable regional player—one with more influence than both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Turkey, meanwhile, wants to find a role in resolving the conflict so it can get Washington to sell it F-16 fighter jets and back away from supporting the Kurds in Syria.

But the state that has already gained the most from the war is Iran. The resurrection of the Palestinian issue has focused regional attention once again on the Levant. The “axis of resistance” that Iran leads, which in addition to Hamas and Hezbollah includes the Assad regime, Shiite militias in both Iraq and Syria, and the Houthis in Yemen, has shown it can change the direction of Middle East politics, escalating and de-escalating regional conflicts at will. By offering unwavering support for Hamas, Iran has also bolstered its image as the defender of the Palestinians, increasing its popularity across the Middle East. And

Tehran is balancing its support for Hamas with its burgeoning relations with the Arab world to fully embed itself in regional politics. Shortly after the Hamas attacks, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi spoke on the phone with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman for the first time since the states renewed their ties in March 2023. Raisi then traveled to Riyadh in November at the prince's invitation to attend what participants named the Joint Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit. Tehran has taken the idea of an Arab-Israeli axis to contain Iran and turned it on its head.

Together, these trends are driving the region toward a wider conflict. The deepening distrust of the United States, the country's inability to lead the region to stability, and the lack of any common vision to rally around are driving different states to pursue their own short-term interests, increasingly guided by pressure from the streets and fears of a wider war. These divergent interests are prolonging the region's crisis and increasing the chance of unintended escalation. To avoid the worst, Washington will have to revisit its core assumptions, renew its commitment to the Middle East, and lay out a fresh vision for the region.

DEAL OR NO DEAL

Washington's most urgent task is ending the war in Gaza. As long as Israel is attacking the territory and killing civilians there and the United States is doing little to rein in its ally, governments and people in Arab countries will be too furious to follow the United States' lead. As a result, U.S. officials must press Israel to cease waging a war

on Hamas that collectively punishes civilians—as of November 16, 2023, fighting in Gaza had killed over 11,000 Palestinians and denied the territory access to food, water, and medicine. Washington must make Israel stop using unrestrained violence in Gaza and pressure it to instead pursue a peaceful, political solution to the decades-long Palestinian issue.

Once the fighting ends, Washington can begin looking forward. As it does so, it will need to take a sober view. But it does not need to throw away everything it had worked toward before October 7. The United States should still base its strategy on striking a grand bargain with Saudi Arabia. Although Riyadh may not normalize ties with Israel any time soon, it is still one of the few governments in the region that remains on good terms with every country in the Middle East and North Africa. It even has cordial, if informal, relations with Israel. It is a key broker in the region.

If anything, the war in Gaza could boost Saudi Arabia's primacy by giving it a chance to stabilize the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Joint Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit, which included leaders from across the Arab world, in addition to Iran and Turkey, was a first step in this direction. Unlike Egypt, Jordan, or the other states that usually mediate between Israel and its adversaries, Saudi Arabia has the credibility and regional relations needed to help strike a real peace deal. To do so, Saudi Arabia would work with Iran and Turkey, the main powerbrokers in the Arab world, as well as with Israel via the United States, to arrive at a broad

framework for an Israeli-Palestinian peace process with the aim of creating a Palestinian state. Then, Saudi Arabia and its partners would work to build an overarching framework for regional security that must include rules and redlines broadly agreed to by all sides. Only an agreement like this would ensure lasting peace on Israel's borders, close the door to radical forces among Palestinians, contain the shadow war between Iran and Israel, and rein in Tehran's axis of resistance.

The Saudis will be reluctant to own the Palestinian issue. But Saudi Arabia's interests rest in regional peace and security. Its grand economic vision cannot unfold if there is lasting crisis in the region. Riyadh also continues to covet regional leadership and recognition as a great power on the world stage, something that requires American support and could therefore prompt Riyadh to heed U.S. calls to broker a peace agreement.

To help Saudi Arabia, the United States would have to offer Riyadh diplomatic support to pursue broad-based diplomacy, including giving the government permission to seek Iranian acquiescence on a deal to resolve the Palestinian issue. Washington will have to corral its other Arab allies to support Riyadh, as well. And the United States must pursue the defense pact that was on the table with Riyadh before October 7. But it can no longer demand immediate recognition of Israel as a precondition. Instead, the United States should ask that Saudi Arabia lead the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Normalized ties with Israel could then be the outcome of the process.

As it puts forward a peace proposal for Israel and the Palestinian territories, Saudi Arabia will have to prove it can consult with Gulf neighbors and better take into account their ambitions, as well as their security concerns—which it did not do before October 7. Doing so could require that Riyadh use diplomatic energy it might be reluctant to spend. But if it succeeds at helping ease the path to an Israeli-Palestinian agreement and achieving greater regional security, Saudi Arabia would acquire the diplomatic gravitas it craves. A defense pact with the United States, meanwhile, would provide the kingdom with the military capabilities it needs to solidify its status as the Middle East's premier economic and political actor.

CONSTRAIN, DON'T CONTAIN
Solving the Palestinian issue is essential to creating a stable Middle East. But it is not the only challenge facing the region. As part of any grand bargain, Washington will need to lower tensions with Iran and use its deal with Riyadh to constrain the country's ambitions. And by itself, a deal with Riyadh risks doing the exact opposite.

There are many reasons Iran might respond poorly to a U.S.-Saudi agreement. The scale and quality of weapons that would begin to flow from the United States to Saudi Arabia, for example, will alarm Tehran. It will also see a Saudi civilian nuclear program as inherently aggressive, no matter how many restrictions Washington puts on it. Iran would also worry that a U.S.-Saudi defense treaty would lead to an expanded American military presence in the Middle East.

Tehran might therefore respond to a U.S.-Saudi deal by escalating its own weapons manufacturing, launching more proxy attacks, and advancing its nuclear program. (Egypt, Turkey, and the UAE might start to seek nuclear capabilities, as well.)

If Israel and Saudi Arabia eventually normalize relations, Israel might even establish a direct military and intelligence presence in the Gulf, one that could be protected by the U.S.-Saudi defense treaty. For Iran, such an outcome would be a nightmare. Tehran would no longer be able to deter Saudi military cooperation with Israel by having its proxies attack Saudi troops or oil refineries, since doing so would provoke a direct confrontation with Washington.

Fortunately for Iran, Riyadh does not want to end its détente with Tehran, which has been a boon for the country. Since Saudi Arabia restarted ties with Iran, the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen have stopped attacking Saudi territory. Together, Riyadh and Tehran have established a stable cease-fire in Yemen after years of brutal warfare. Now, Yemen's parties are making progress toward a permanent agreement. This newfound security has made it easier for Saudi Arabia to pursue its lofty economic goals by removing the threat of Houthi missile attacks on Saudi refineries and other infrastructure. As a result, Riyadh no longer seems to share Israel's vision for a joint military and intelligence axis to roll back Iran's regional influence. In fact, since March 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia have worked to fully normalize relations by opening embassies, easing travel between their countries, and establishing cultural exchanges.

Iran had already established full relations with Kuwait and the UAE in 2022. It is in talks with Egypt and Jordan to restore ties with those countries, as well.

A U.S.-Saudi defense pact will still be a concern for Tehran. But it is less likely to react adversely to one that does not affect its diplomatic and economic relations with Riyadh and the rest of the Gulf, and that does not set up a regional security arrangement aimed at degrading its power. By engaging Iran in bilateral and regional issues as it pursues a grand bargain with the United States, Saudi Arabia can minimize Iranian resistance to a U.S. deal and even find ways to secure Tehran's consent for a new regional order.

Washington may not approve of Riyadh's efforts to keep Tehran on board by using diplomatic concessions and economic benefits. Iran is one of the United States' principal adversaries, and it is Israel's main enemy. But the United States cannot stop the normalization of ties between Iran and its Arab neighbors. As Iran's axis of resistance has grown stronger, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE have all decided that Tehran must be integrated into the region to keep themselves safe. They have decided that they can better protect their security if they engage Iran and if Tehran has a vested interest in bilateral ties with them.

Nor should the United States try to stop normalization. If the Arab world's approach is successful, it will serve American interests by de-escalating regional tensions, freeing the United States to focus on Asia and Europe. The United States should therefore use the Middle East's new order to cage Iran's ambitions, instead of try-

ing in vain to create an anti-Tehran alliance. To do so, Washington should encourage Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to deepen their diplomatic and economic engagement with Iran in order to secure Tehran's acquiescence to a permanent settlement for the Palestinian issue and de-escalation in the Levant. A solution for the Palestinians will be difficult to arrive at without at least tacit Iranian agreement—and any deal will be far more resilient with it. Such a solution would also deny Iran the ability to exploit the issue, cost radical Palestinian voices their influence, and provide political space to the Arab world to establish better ties with Israel.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

There is one issue that Israel, the United States, and most Arab countries still agree on: Iran's nuclear program. They all believe that the program's continued expansion is one of the most destabilizing developments in the Middle East. As Tehran gets closer to producing nuclear weapons, Israel might step up its covert attacks on Iran. If Tehran appears to be on the cusp of nuclearization, Israel could attack the country outright—an act that could quickly draw the United States into a direct conflict. Should Riyadh and Washington sign a defense treaty, Saudi Arabia might also become a party to any war. That war would then unfold in the Levant, as well as the Gulf, with devastating consequences for both regions and for the global economy.

Iran and the United States have tried, and failed, to strike a new nuclear accord since Biden took office at the

beginning of 2021. And at first, the October 7 attacks might seem to make a new agreement virtually impossible to reach. But Tehran and Washington had worked carefully to de-escalate before October 7, and their quiet agreement has largely held steady. The informal nuclear deal, for example, appears to remain in effect. Iran's proxies launched rockets at American bases, but there is little indication that either side wants to fight the other—those attacks are more designed to show support for Gaza and to warn the United States against scuttling the informal deal than to do real damage. Washington's own sporadic strikes are similarly about posturing, carried out to appease domestic audiences agitating for a response to the Iranian attacks. For Washington, escalation with Iran would divert military and diplomatic resources away from its competition with Beijing and Moscow. Iran's leaders, meanwhile, do not want to risk a conflict that could devastate their economy—and possibly bring down their regime.

This relative calm will likely hold at least until the U.S. presidential elections in November 2024. But the possible return to office of former U.S. President Donald Trump means Tehran and Washington do not have much time to strike a new agreement. Even if Biden is reelected, the two states must resolve their nuclear standoff before October 2025, when the ability of any signatory to reinstate UN-approved sanctions under the 2015 nuclear deal (which Trump withdrew from) expires. If the United States and its European allies do not reinstate the UN sanctions before then, they may never be able to implement them

again; China and Russia will likely veto any future restrictions, which must pass through the UN Security Council. But if the West does opt to reimpose these restrictions, Iran has warned that it will leave the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty—a very public precursor to building a weapon—precipitating a major international crisis. Washington and its allies, then, want a new agreement before they make up their minds.

To create a new deal, Iran and the United States should pick up where they left off in Vienna in August 2022: the last time the two countries held nuclear talks. Despite the fighting in Gaza, their objectives remain the same. The United States wants to limit the amount and purity of uranium Iran can enrich—thereby extending the time Tehran needs to produce enough fissile material to make a nuclear weapon—and to ensure that Iran's nuclear program is subject to rigorous international monitoring. Iran, for its part, still needs relief from crippling economic sanctions.

But unlike in 2022, the United States should closely coordinate its nuclear talks with Saudi Arabia's own efforts to reduce tensions with Iran. The two are, after all, linked. Success in nuclear talks that reduce tensions between Iran and the United States will help Saudi talks achieve the same with Iran; success in talks between Riyadh and Tehran, meanwhile, will give Iran more reason to trust a nuclear deal with the United States, particularly if such talks are encouraged by Washington. And the United States will have to ensure that any nuclear deal it makes with Saudi Arabia contains limits and restrictions that

resemble the agreement it strikes with Iran. Otherwise, the two states could enter an escalatory spiral, as whichever state is granted inferior nuclear capabilities will work hard to catch up.

CATCHING UP

In the near term, Washington's Middle East strategy must focus on ending the war in Gaza and finding a path to regional stability. But in the long term, the United States needs to look beyond just Iran and the Palestinians. Its Middle East policies must also contend with Beijing: Washington's chief international competitor.

China's economic presence in the Middle East has grown markedly over the past decade. The country relies heavily on the Gulf for its energy supplies, and it has used the Gulf as a gateway for its expanding trade and investment networks in Africa. China has, in turn, offered Saudi Arabia and the UAE access to knowledge—for example, about the technologies underlying green energy—that they cannot procure in the West, helping spearhead development in the Gulf. China has also made substantial direct financial investments in the Gulf, especially within Saudi Arabia. Under Chinese President Xi Jinping, this commercial relationship has been folded into China's Belt and Road Initiative. Xi has made fostering these ties part of his response to Washington's efforts to constrain Beijing.

The United States has taken note of China's expanding relationship with Middle Eastern states. It paid especially close attention when Xi helped mediate the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Washington

believes that China wants to use its economic influence in the Middle East to become a political and security power in the region. The U.S.-Saudi defense treaty is a response: a way of arresting Riyadh's drift into China's orbit. Washington's plans for a trade corridor through the Middle East are also designed to undermine Beijing's scheme. Such a corridor would benefit the region economically, but its primary purpose is to counter the Belt and Road Initiative by anchoring the region's economic future to India and Europe. The corridor would also bind the UAE and Saudi Arabia to Israel and integrate Israel's economy into that of the Middle East.

Beijing has responded warily to Washington's proposals. When the United States talked about creating an Indian-Middle Eastern-European economic corridor, China reacted by saying it would welcome the corridor provided it did not become a "geopolitical tool," which is, of course, exactly what the United States intends it to be. It would divide the Middle East between those that are part of the economic corridor and those that are not: an exclusionary system that runs counter to China's regional vision. And Beijing knows the Biden administration's push for Israeli-Saudi normalization is an attempt to match China's own success with the Iranians and the Saudis. China is not yet in a position to foil the United States' plans, but there are no signs it will slow its economic engagement with the region. In the current geopolitical vacuum, that engagement will continue to expand and deepen.

Saudi Arabia does not want to choose between China and the United States.

But just like Israel and the Palestinian territories, Riyadh may still agree to Washington's plans because they would bolster Riyadh's great-power ambitions by strengthening its regional position and expanding its economic influence. These plans would improve the economies of other regional states, as well. As a result, Arab countries that might otherwise be hostile to a Saudi-centered Middle East could go along with the United States' proposals. If they do, the result would be greater stability both within Middle Eastern countries and between them.

But to increase the likelihood that every state will buy into its proposed order, the United States may have to do more than make sure its system delivers widespread prosperity. The United States must also subscribe to a vision for Middle East security that does not divide the region into camps but makes room for all actors. That requires the United States to let the countries in its envisioned economic corridor join other economic arrangements, as well. It also requires a grand bargain to promote the security of Israel, other Arab states, and even Iran. Such security can be, in part, offered through a new nuclear deal and a regional accord between Iran and Saudi Arabia. But the United States should consider making regional pacts beyond the one it concludes with Saudi Arabia. These pacts could extend U.S. security guarantees to other states, but they must also come with restraints and redlines. Washington cannot simply continue supplying weapons to regional allies, as it did before October 7. Instead of promoting stability, this policy encouraged a regional arms race and war.

MAKING PEACE

No matter what Washington does, there will be resistance to its Middle East vision. Iran will remain hostile to Israel and the United States. Saudi Arabia's Gulf neighbors will never be pleased about the kingdom's dominance. Israel and Turkey will also calculate what it means for Saudi Arabia to amass so much power and what the United States' commitment to the Saudis means for their interests. They will react accordingly, and likely in ways Washington cannot expect.

But although all these countries will want more power, what they want most of all is to preserve the stability of their regimes. They want to subscribe to a vision that ends local conflicts, fosters economic growth, and otherwise reduces domestic pressure. If a U.S.-Saudi pact delivers, they will ultimately accept it.

Yet to make this bargain work, the United States will need to persuade Israel to stop engaging in what many see as the collective punishment of Palestinian civilians. Washington must tackle the plight of the Palestinians more broadly, instead of ignoring their cause, by helping create a credible pathway to a future Palestinian state. Washington's bargain must contend with the challenge that Iran presents by freezing its nuclear program and constraining its network of regional clients, both through deterrence and by taking steps to reduce tensions. And the United States must create a trade corridor that helps cultivate the Middle East's economies. Only then will the region be stable—and only then will Washington be free of its present responsibilities. 🌍



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Saudi Arabia Needs to See a New Approach from Washington

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Saudi Arabia Needs to See a New Approach from Washington



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Three months after the horrendous events of October 7, the death toll in Gaza continues to mount daily. The humanitarian crisis has been called “unprecedented” and will have lasting effects for generations to come. Moreover, every day the crisis continues, the region faces the potential of multiple conflicts that, unless managed effectively and immediately, threatens to broaden the scope of the calamity beyond what has been seen so far.

The escalation is already visible in the Red Sea, with several attacks on international shipping lines putting 12% of the world’s commerce that traverses the Bab El-Mandab strait at risk. These attacks increase the possibility of further regional reactions and instability. While efforts such as the recently announced US-led maritime task force Operation Prosperity Guardian are welcome steps to prevent further incidents from occurring, the issue of maritime security around the world’s chokepoints must be addressed collectively by the international community. Only such combined efforts will send the right message to the concerned states, and to the Houthis in Yemen and other violent non-state actors and prevent more attacks.

The rising tensions in the Red Sea are a clear indication of how volatile the security environment in the entire Middle East remains and how quickly developments can escalate. Given the current state of affairs, any incident can further unravel the delicate situation in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, or Libya, to name the most immediate cases. Once the pressure valve explodes, it will be incredibly difficult to reverse the consequences.

All the above undermines the efforts by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over the past years to de-escalate regional tensions and put relationships on a more cooperative footing. This includes rapprochement with Iraq and Türkiye and pushing for Syria to rejoin the Arab League. Regarding Iran and Yemen, Saudi Arabia has recently reiterated its commitment to peaceful regional relations, including welcoming the UN envoy’s statement on the Yemen Peace Roadmap as well as reiterating its commitment to the Beijing Agreement with Iran.

What is therefore required, now more urgently than ever, is a clear meeting of the minds of Washington and Riyadh when it comes to preventing further tragedies. The United States remains the most consequential actor when it comes to the medium to long-term security landscape in the wider Middle East. Yet, its policies over the past decades have been unbalanced, haphazard, and



uncommitted and have threatened the long-term stability of the region. Moreover, the US has not listened to the advice of its Gulf allies throughout this period. This must change, or the gap in perception between the two sides will continue to widen.

The more pressing issue is the need for a straightforward and clear commitment by the US to end the conflict in Gaza. The US is the only external actor with a measure of influence over Israel, but it has yet to use that influence effectively in ending the hostilities and promoting a more comprehensive and just political solution for the Palestinian issue. Instead of focusing on an Israel-only approach, what this involves is a genuine engagement with all its regional allies to defuse the situation and prevent further escalation. This can best be done if there is adequate and wide-ranging engagement with the Arab world, including with the GCC states.

So far, Washington has not uttered the word ‘ceasefire’ even once. This stands in contrast to most of the rest of the international community, including an increasing number of European countries and many Latin American countries, that demand an end to military operations as far as the current violence on the Palestinian-Israeli front is concerned. Any change in rhetoric heard from Washington so far has been inconsequential. This includes the most recent announcement from Israel of a tactical shift in fighting, a step that President Biden had pushed for.

The region now expects the US to demonstrate a real and substantive commitment to pursuing a ceasefire as every day this conflict remains, the threat of extremism and a widening regional conflict also increases. The time for shuttle diplomacy for the sake of conducting visits has clearly passed.

Additionally, there needs to be a clear commitment to the two-state solution with reference to the Arab Peace Initiative. At the 2023 Munich Security Conference, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained about the Ukraine crisis that “there is no neutral position when it comes to a war of aggression...there is no balance.” However, these same principles are not being applied by the US when it comes to Gaza and the wider Middle East.

The US refused to listen to the advice of the GCC states twenty years ago in Iraq; Unless it quickly begins to shift its course, it risks making those same mistakes again. Saudi Arabia, as well as most of other Arab states, see no wisdom in the current US regional policy and cannot support an unwise policy. It's not defiance to the US, but a rejection of a short sighted, non- fruitful policy.



Photo Source: [France24](#)



Gulf Research Center
Knowledge for All

Repeating the Mistakes of the 2003 Iraq Invasion

The Warnings from the GCC and other Middle Eastern states on the Gaza crisis are once again being ignored

Christian Koch
January 2024



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Repeating the Mistakes of the 2003 Iraq Invasion

The warnings from the GCC and other Middle Eastern states on the Gaza crisis are once again being ignored.

The crisis in Gaza continues unabated. There have already been more than 20,000 deaths—1,200 on the Israeli side and more than 22,000 on the Palestinian side as of January 1, 2024. Moreover, the death toll on both sides continues to climb daily, although at a much faster rate for Palestinians, especially among civilians. In addition, the humanitarian crisis has been referred to as “unprecedented.” The damage done will have repercussions for decades to come.

Every day the conflict continues, the risk of a wider regional conflagration also increases. The situation on the Israeli-Lebanese border remains a powder keg as evidenced by the killing of Hamas official Saleh Al-Arouri in Beirut by a drone strike on January 2nd. In the Red Sea, the Houthis in Yemen have attacked commercial shipping lines, threatening to shut down a vital lifeline between the Suez Canal and the Bab el-Mandab. There is thus now a real possibility that the advances in de-escalation and rapprochement in the region, including between Saudi Arabia and Iran or the ongoing peace process in Yemen, that have been witnessed in recent years, could come to a screeching halt.

The determination of Netanyahu to continue its operations “until the job is done,” including suggestions that not only Hamas but also Hezbollah must be dealt with, makes wider escalation a very real scenario. All of this bears tremendous global consequences, even beyond the Middle East.

The situation is further complicated by the sheer unwillingness of the United States to call for an end to the violence. Until now, Washington has issued Tel Aviv a blank check which the Netanyahu government has cashed with impunity. On December 17, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin once again reiterated during his visit to Israel that the US would not dictate to Israel a timeline for the war. Despite increased lament about Israel’s “indiscriminate bombing of Gaza,” President Biden has by-and-large stuck to his unwavering commitment to Israel’s chosen course of action.

All of the above is eerily reminiscent of a previous case that brought lasting negative consequences for the Middle East and beyond—the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. What was framed by then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as the “dawn of a new Middle East,” quickly turned into a quagmire from which the region has still not fully recovered.

Then, as now, the US and Europe ignored the numerous warnings coming from the region about the potential consequences the invasion would unleash. Prince Saud al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia’s then Foreign Minister, among many others, pleaded with US officials not to proceed with their war plans, fully aware of the Pandora’s box that was about to be opened. In 2005, Prince Saud bitterly stated that through the war, Washington had “presented Iraq to Iran on a silver platter.”

On the Gaza crisis, strikingly similar words of warning from the GCC side have been voiced, equally clear and straight-forward as back in 2002 and 2003 in the lead-up to the Iraq campaign. Speaking at a press conference on December 8, 2023, Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al-Saud said: "Our message is consistent and clear--that we believe that it is



absolutely necessary to end the fighting immediately." He then lamented the fact "that ending the conflict and the fighting doesn't seem to be the main priority" for the international community. The communique of the GCC Summit from December 2023 also warned of the dangers of expanding confrontations and stated that unless the violence is brought to an end, "dire consequences for the peoples of the region and for international peace and security" would result.

Outside of Gaza, countries like Saudi Arabia have argued for several years that the Bab el-Mandab is not secure, and that the Houthis represent an international danger. Now, international shipping companies are forced to circumvent the Red Sea due to Houthi attacks causing tremendous costs to the world economy.

One direct outcome of the Iraq War in 2003 was increased radicalization as witnessed by the rise of ISIS and the subsequent further empowerment of violent non-state actors throughout the entire Middle East. Today the same danger is present, as has already been witnessed by increased instances of radicalization in Europe.

And similar to the case in 2003, is the fact that the United States is once again muting the voices of its Gulf partners, ignoring the numerous warnings being put forward and pushing aside concerns that were proven valid the first time around. Up to this point, the lessons of the past have not been learned, and in fact are being ignored.

What Iraq in 2003 underlined is that there is no military solution to occupation. Resolution can only be achieved through a genuine political process. In the meantime, Israel, the United States, and much of Europe are quickly losing the war of public opinion in the Arab world.

It is high time that warnings from regional voices be heeded. Unless done so immediately, the outcome this time around could be equally devastating and possibly even more consequential. The alternative is another twenty-year disaster in the making.



The US and Europe Must be More Balanced to Diffuse Middle Eastern Tensions

GRC Commentary & Analysis

October 2023

Dr. Christian Koch and Amnah Mosly*



Destruction in Gaza, October 2023

Source: [CNN](#)

Just one month ago, there was hope for peace in Palestine through the Saudi-US-Israel talks. In his recent interview with Fox News, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman [reiterated](#) that "there is an approach by President Biden's administration to get to that point. For us, the Palestinian issue is very important. We need to solve that part, and we have good negotiations [continuing] until now. We got to see where we go. We hope that it will reach a place, that it will ease the life of the Palestinians, and get Israel as a player in the Middle East." The



Crown Prince [explained](#) that “every day we get closer” to reaching an agreement, which he called “the biggest historical deal since the Cold War” and that “it seems it’s for the first time a real one, serious. We’re gonna see how it goes.”

While the likelihood of such an agreement seems impossible at this stage, there is nevertheless the need to acknowledge the agency of the wider Arab world, particularly the GCC states, to insist on defusing the latest eruption of conflict and to ensure that it does not spiral even further out of control. As Western leaders are streaming to express solidarity with Israel, the Middle East faces the potential of a wider regional conflict that, unless managed effectively, threatens to broaden the scope of the calamity beyond what has been seen so far. This danger alone demands broader and more comprehensive diplomatic efforts by the West than adhering to merely an Israel-only focused approach. It is, therefore, essential that on their upcoming visits to the region, President Biden, the EU leadership, and individual European leaders engage with not only Tel Aviv, but also Riyadh, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, Amman, and Doha.

The GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, are deeply committed to the de-escalation trends witnessed in the region in recent years, such as the rapprochement with Iraq, Türkiye, and Iran, pushing for Syria to rejoin the Arab League, and negotiating with Yemen, as well continue to make their ties to the United States and Europe the cornerstone of their foreign policy.

Despite significant initial skepticism among GCC member states regarding US policy in the region, US ties with the GCC states have seen positive developments over the past few months. The Jeddah Security and Development Summit can be seen as an example of a positive shift in US-GCC relations, with [President Biden](#) stating that the US would “remain an active, engaged partner in the Middle East” and “will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran.” The US has also welcomed initiatives by the Gulf countries regarding playing a more decisive mediating role, such as in the Sudan and Ukraine crises.

In addition, the Arab states have already proposed a viable solution to the conflict between Palestine and Israel, known as the Arab Peace Initiative since 2002. The initiative needs to finally be given the proper consideration as a starting point for the path forward. On October 11, the



foreign ministers of the Arab League held an “extraordinary meeting’ in Cairo to discuss the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip. The meeting [highlighted](#) “the importance of resuming the peace process and starting serious negotiations between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel.” Saudi Arabia also [called](#) for an urgent meeting of the executive committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah on October 18 “to address the escalating military situation in Gaza and its environs as well as the deteriorating conditions that endanger the lives of civilians and the overall security and stability of the region.”

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries were essential steps toward helping contain the violence in Gaza. During this meeting HRH Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman reaffirmed, the Crown Prince [reaffirming](#) “the need to find ways to stop the military operations that have claimed the lives of innocent people, stressing the Kingdom’s endeavor to increase communication, calm the situation, stop the current escalation, and ask for respect for international humanitarian law.” Blinken [called](#) the meeting “very productive” underscoring the central role that the Kingdom plays in regional matters. The same goes for his visit to the UAE and Qatar.

President Biden has, in the meantime, urged Israel against occupying Gaza, [calling it](#) a “big mistake” and reiterated the US call for a two-state solution, [saying](#) “there needs to be a Palestinian authority. There needs to be a path to a Palestinian state.” This statement marked a change for Biden and his administration, which previously offered Israel’s military operations broad support ahead of a ground invasion that human rights organizations claim will cause large-scale civilian casualties. However, the word “ceasefire” was not uttered once.

The White House’s statement on President Biden’s trip to Israel comes with the [announcement](#) that the US and Israel “have agreed to develop a plan that will enable humanitarian aid from donor nations and multilateral organizations to reach civilians in Gaza.” The White House also stated that President Biden will travel to Jordan to meet with King Abdullah II, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. To give such statements greater substance, President Biden should even consider combining his trip to Israel with a wider



tour to include the Gulf countries. There is an absolute need to activate as many diplomatic channels as possible and to present a unified position across the board.

The same goes for the European Union. Initial statements by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that provided EU unqualified support to Israel and carte blanche in Israel's response abdicated any balanced role that the EU could play in resolving the crisis. EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell was more balanced, [stating](#), "Some of the actions [by Israel] — and the United Nations has already said it — cutting water, cutting electricity, cutting food to a mass of civilian people, is against international law." Irish President Michael Higgins has in the meantime, referred to von der Leyen's comments as "thoughtless and even reckless."

The GCC-EU Ministerial Meeting held in Muscat on October 9 and 10, 2023, underlined the common [position](#) between the two sides, calling "for restraint, for the release of hostages and for access to food, water, and medicines in accordance with international humanitarian law, and stressed that an urgent political solution to the crisis is needed to prevent this violence from recurring flare-ups again and again." This momentum now needs to be accelerated forward and further activated.

As Israel continues to [respond](#) with heavy airstrikes and contemplates a total siege of Gaza, the US together with Europe must engage with all allies to defuse the situation and prevent any further escalation. This can best be done if there is effective and wide-ranging engagement with the Arab world, including with the GCC states. This is also essential to bringing much-needed balance back to the discussion table.

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Europe is Stuck Over the Israel-Hamas War

by Maria Luisa Fantappiè and Nathalie Tocci

Since the horrific attack launched by Hamas on Israeli citizens on 7 October and the brutal ongoing Israeli military response, European governments and publics have rallied behind two diametrically opposite worldviews: unconditional support for Israel's right to self-defence versus solidarity with Palestinians massacred by Israel's military operation in Gaza. Europe should work proactively to chart its way in this inflammatory debate, rather than passively buying into the polarising narratives from Israeli and Arab public debates and allowing these to sow divisions, paralyse action, hamper credibility and poison democracies.

Europe's baffling response to the war

Europe has been shooting itself in the foot in three interrelated ways. First, it has been hopelessly absent in the attempts to put out the fire in this brutal war. The European Council's attempts

to strike a balance, acknowledging Israel's right to defend itself "in line" with international humanitarian law came after days of European cacophony and sounded weak; furthermore, they were almost immediately superseded by a threefold European split at the United Nations General Assembly over a resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza. Sure, the United States' approach has not been a stellar success either. Not only does the US role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict represent a structural element that took us where we are today, but it has also so far failed to moderate Israel in any meaningful way. Its public embrace of Israel while nudging and asking tough questions behind closed doors hasn't yielded any significant results thus far, while the death toll in Gaza rises by the hour. But the Biden administration, starting with the President himself and the tireless work of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, must be

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credited at least for trying, rather than simply stopping at the public shows of solidarity towards Israel as seen in the case of the string of European leaders travelling to Israel in the first days after the attack without any meaningful impact then and ever since. Europe is a passive spectator of this conflict and a passive recipient of its polarising narratives, which undermine European security and ambitions to play a global role.

Second, European divisions over the Middle East suddenly made the show of a united foreign policy front over Russia's invasion of Ukraine look fragile. War in the Middle East and the divisions it has caused in Europe have not directly triggered division or "fatigue" over the war against Ukraine. They did, however, expose and magnify the "fatigue" narrative that has latched especially on those in Europe who had always been only half-heartedly committed to Kyiv's cause for freedom.¹

Third, the overarching backing by European governments and institutions for Israel, and consequently for its military response in Gaza, has literally wiped out the (already dented) European credibility in large parts of the world. As known, Israel's military onslaught is translating into unspeakable Palestinian deaths, dispossession and destruction, violating those norms

¹ The Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, in a telephone conversation with two pro-Putin self-professed "comedians" whom she believed were the President of the African Union, explicitly referred to "fatigue". That conversation took place on 18 September. It is no coincidence that the recording was released after the outbreak of war in the Middle East, when the debate over Western distraction and fatigue started mounting.

of international law that Europe wished to uphold denouncing Russia's aggression on Ukraine. As a result, to Russia and China's delight, Europe's claims to be on the right side of history and international law now appear painfully hollow and hypocritical in the eyes of countries in the Global South. Although for Europe (unlike the US, which provides military assistance to Israel), there is no policy tradeoff between support for Ukraine and for Israel, the tradeoff in the public and political debate exists. Never has there been such a sorry display of European double standards than in the parallel wars unfolding in Ukraine and the Middle East today, confirming all the criticism and stereotypes about Europe, from its racism to its Eurocentrism and neocolonial practices.

A war fuelling divisions in European societies and politics

Europe's response is baffling. It is neither principled nor interest-driven. It undermines European security and credibility in the world. But why are the European Union and most member states so manifestly shooting themselves in the foot?

Beholden to a binary view of the conflict, Europe has trapped itself in a corner. European societies are deeply divided over the Israeli-Palestinian question, with expressions of antisemitism and islamophobia reaching unprecedented heights. Right-leaning governments, parties and sectors of society support unconditionally Israel's military response in Gaza, buying into the Israeli narrative that what happened on 7 October in Israel could take place

in European societies too – thus totally erasing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the equation, Hamas' attack is portrayed as the product of Islamist radicalism and terror, analogous to the terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States in past years, just at an entirely different scale and gravity. As many recalled in the early days after Hamas' attack, 7 October was not "just" Israel's 9/11 – in relative terms, given Israel's size, it was far greater. The "Hamas is al-Qaeda or ISIS" slogan propagated by Israel and bought by many in the West has reawakened the "war on terror" narrative as well as Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" prism for viewing the world, in which, faced with an existential danger, all means are possible and legitimate. For those who have bought into this story, the mounting number of Palestinian casualties is quickly brushed over as an unfortunate inconvenience. If these are unavoidable victims of an existential war – given that Hamas uses them as human shields, so the narrative goes – there is little to be done about them. And if the rest of the world disagrees, then so be it too. It is a matter of life or death; therefore, going with the global flow is not an option.

Those who read the unfolding drama in the Middle East through this lens tend to erase the political context of the conflict, viewing it as secondary at best and an unpalatable expression of antisemitism at worst. The problem is political Islam and terrorism. Therefore, given the growing presence of Muslim communities in Europe, European countries should counter migration, double down on anti-terrorism and unconditionally back Israel as the

frontline state in a civilisational battle for survival.

On the other side of the spectrum, left-leaning groups as well as migrant communities have backed the Palestinian cause unconditionally, to the point of papering over Hamas' war crimes, if not legitimising them as an unfortunate yet necessary act of resistance against Israel's 56-year-old occupation. Legitimate criticism of Israel's occupation and its brutal war on Gaza rapidly spills into and is overtaken by broader ethnic, religious and class grievances against the political establishment, increasingly targeting the existence of Israel and even degenerating into episodes of antisemitism. Governments, at a loss over what to do, have gone as far as banning pro-Palestinian demonstrations tout court, in an unprecedented restriction of democratic freedoms.

While happening miles away from Europe, this conflict drives at the core of European politics and society, exposing and accentuating the risk of a backsliding of its democracies. Space for European citizens to denounce both Hamas and Israel's killings is shrinking. Polarising worldviews have gained traction fuelled by rising populism on the right and on the left, eroding the basic principles of coexistence.

Europe's need for a political solution

To counter this binary framework, there is no other place to start than to rekindle the fraying European consensus over a genuine two-state solution and, above

all, actually begin, for the first time, to use the limited instruments at the EU's disposal to promote such a goal. The route that Europeans have embarked on to date – passive support for Israel, camouflaged as a European variant of Washington's "hugging Israel close" – can only lead to greater catastrophe. If a true friend to Israel, Europe should be a good counsellor. Hamas' brutality and Israel's unprecedented intelligence failure have undermined the credibility of Benjamin Netanyahu's government and prompted it to focus on revenge, eliminating Hamas and maintaining indefinitely a security control of Gaza, with no political plan in sight. A focus on the military objective with no credible political plan for Palestine and Israel-Arab relations is a recipe for disaster, as much for Israeli security as for Palestinian rights.

Meanwhile, the collective punishment of Palestinians has mobilised the Middle East against Israel and shelved its normalisation in the region, while bolstering Iran's legitimacy and that of pro-Iranian groups as the true defenders of the Palestinian cause. With every day of death and destruction in Gaza, Israel is less secure.

Together with the United States, Europe needs to deliver a political plan for the Israel-Palestinian conflict rather than remain trapped in polarising worldviews generated by violence. That starts with actively supporting Arab diplomacy and engaging with states in the region that have a stake in the Palestinian question (Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, the UAE and Saudi Arabia), while countering Iran's support for Hamas' military actions. The US and Europe

should reinvest in a political plan that aims at embedding a two-state solution in Israel-Arab normalisation. Expecting Israel-Arab normalisation to move forward by turning a blind eye to the Palestinian question has already been tried, and 7 October was the result. It is high time to acknowledge this and reinvest seriously in Israeli-Palestinian peace. What is at stake is not only Middle Eastern stability but Europe's own future.

10 November 2023

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*AffarInternazionali*), two book series (*Trends and Perspectives in International Politics* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

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Arab nations develop plan to end Israel-Hamas war and create Palestinian state

Deal could establish formal ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia

Financial Times

By Andrew England

January 18, 2024

Arab states are working on an initiative to secure a ceasefire and the release of hostages in Gaza as part of a broader plan that could offer Israel a normalisation of relations if it agrees to “irreversible” steps towards the creation of a Palestinian state.

A senior Arab official said they hoped to present the plan — which could include the prize of Saudi Arabia formalising ties with Israel — within a few weeks in an effort to end the Israel-Hamas war and prevent a wider conflict erupting in the Middle East.

Arab officials have discussed the plan with the US and European governments. It would include western nations agreeing to formally recognise a Palestinian state, or supporting the Palestinians being granted full membership of the UN.

“The real issue is you need hope for Palestinians, it can’t just be economic benefits or removal of symbols of occupation,” the senior official said.

The initiative comes as Israel faces mounting international pressure to end its offensive in besieged Gaza, with the US stepping up diplomatic efforts to prevent a broader conflagration and pushing for a longer-term resolution to the protracted Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

US secretary of state Antony Blinken on Wednesday described the war in Gaza as “gut-wrenching”, adding that what was needed was a Palestinian state “that gives people what they want and works with Israel to be effective”.

When Saudi foreign minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan was asked on Tuesday if Riyadh would recognise Israel as part of a wider political agreement, he said “certainly”.

“We agree that regional peace includes peace for Israel, but that could only happen through peace for the Palestinians through a Palestinian state,” he told a panel at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Later on Tuesday, US national security adviser Jake Sullivan said Washington remained focused on securing an agreement that led to Saudi Arabia normalising relations with Israel as part of its plans for the postwar era.

“Our approach is and remains focused on moving towards greater integration and stability in the region,” Sullivan said in Davos.

But there are multiple challenges to securing a deal with Israel.

After Hamas's October 7 attack killed at least 1,200 people, Israeli officials warned that the war in Gaza would last months, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ruled out working with the western-backed Palestinian Authority and rejects a two-state solution.

In December, Netanyahu said he was "proud" that he had prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state, saying "everyone understands what would have happened if we had capitulated to international pressures and enabled a state like that".

The prime minister presides over the most far-right government in Israel's history, which includes religious Zionist settlers who openly call for the annexation of the West Bank.

"Given the Israeli body politic today, normalisation is maybe what can bring Israelis off the cliff," said the senior Arab official.

Saudi Arabia was edging closer to establishing diplomatic relations with Israel before Hamas's October 7 attack, in return for the US agreeing to a security pact with Riyadh and supporting the development of the kingdom's nuclear ambitions.

US and Saudi officials were also discussing a Palestinian element to the deal that included freezing the expansion of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, boosting support for the Palestinian Authority that administers limited parts of the occupied territory, and establishing a pathway towards a two-state solution.

Before the war erupted, Blinken had been scheduled to visit Riyadh in mid-October to discuss the plans for the Palestinians. Hamas's attack and Israel's response in Gaza upset that process.

But Saudi Arabia made it clear that while the process was stalled, the kingdom had not taken the option off the table. There was also the realisation that Riyadh would have to secure greater concessions from Israel for the Palestinians, including in Gaza, with more concrete steps towards the creation of a Palestinian state.

"We had already got an outline from the PA," a person briefed on the talks said. "Now that element has to be strengthened for it to be politically viable at any point in the future."

Since October 7, the Biden administration — Israel's staunchest backer — has repeatedly spoken of the need for a two-state solution as the only option to ultimately provide the security the Jewish state desires.

Saudi Arabia's willingness to consider normalising relations potentially provides an important bargaining chip with Israel, which has considered diplomatic relations with the kingdom the grand prize in its efforts to develop ties with Arab states. The oil-rich kingdom stands out as a leader of the Sunni Muslim world and custodian of Islam's two holiest sites.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the nation's day-to-day leader, was keen to normalise ties with Israel as he drives an ambitious programme to develop the conservative kingdom into a

finance, trade and tourism hub. Now, like other Arab states, Riyadh is worried about the risk of the Israel-Hamas war causing a regional conflagration that spills over borders, as well as the danger that the devastation in Gaza radicalises a new generation of young Arabs.

The Saudi leadership has expressed outrage at Israel's offensive in Gaza, which has killed more than 24,000 people, according to Palestinian health officials, raised the risk of famine in the strip, and reduced swaths of the enclave to rubble-strewn wastelands. It has repeatedly joined calls for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

Blinken said on Wednesday it was up to Israel to "seize the opportunity that we believe is there," saying the crisis was "an inflection point" for the Middle East that required hard decisions.

Gaza: The known unknowns of a complex war

Last week's agreement on the release of hostages offers a sliver of hope, however, it also raises a host of challenges that need to be addressed to reach a long-term resolution

Raisina Debates

By Navdeep Suri

November 28, 2023

The [initial agreement between Israel and Hamas for a short ceasefire from 24 November 2023](#) and a limited exchange of Israeli hostages held by Hamas with Palestinian prisoners held by Israel offers the first bit of respite since 7 October. It has come after painstaking efforts by Qatar, coordinated closely with Egypt and the United States (US). The brutal terrorist attack by Hamas on Israeli soldiers and civilians on 7 October has been followed by a relentless assault on the 2.2 million hapless residents of the Gaza Strip by Israel's formidable air force, army, and naval forces. Visuals of bombed-out residential neighbourhoods and wounded children, of doctors, journalists and UN staffers killed in the line of duty and of caravans of desperate families moving from North Gaza towards an illusion of safety in the South have all combined to create a powerful anti-Israel narrative of collective punishment, war crimes, and even genocide. It has also stirred millions to come out on the streets to demand an immediate ceasefire. Banners and T-shirts proclaiming 'Free Palestine' have become ubiquitous in massive protests from Cairo to Cape Town and from London to Lahore. One even made its way into the [ICC World Cup Finals in Ahmedabad on November 19](#) and briefly halted the game.

For Israel, this is an unusual situation. Its argument that Hamas has built a vast underground network of tunnels and massive aerial bombardment with unavoidable collateral damage is the only way of achieving its stated objective of destroying the militant organisation is plausible. But the legitimacy of this position is grievously undermined by the egregious statements emanating from prominent Israeli leaders, [including serving members of the government who indicate, at the very least, an intent towards ethnic cleansing in North Gaza](#). The impunity being displayed by armed Jewish settlers in the West Bank as they grab Palestinian properties in broad daylight only adds to Israel's opprobrium. This is also Israel's first conflict with the Palestinians where mainstream media is unable to channel the narrative in Israel's favour. The social media revolution, for all its faults, has led to a democratisation of information as a host of citizen journalists use their cell phones to capture images and videos that go viral on Instagram. Prime Minister Netanyahu is responding to these challenges with a tried-and-tested formula that has usually worked in the past—a mix of bluster, obfuscation, prevarication and procrastination. But in the changed realities of 2023, this may not work.

One such changed reality is the flurry of diplomatic activity that goes beyond the usual confines of the UN Security Council and General Assembly resolutions. [The newly expanded BRICS group held an emergency virtual summit under South Africa's presidency on 21 November](#) and called for an immediate ceasefire, while the G20 virtual summit held under India's presidency on 22 November issued [a seven-point plan that reiterated the need for a long term resolution of the Palestine issue](#)

[within the ambit of a two-state solution](#). More important, perhaps, [was the tough final statement issued by the extraordinary joint summit of Arab and Islamic nations in Riyadh on 11 November and the ministerial committee established to](#) “stop the war in Gaza and exert pressure to launch a serious and real political process to achieve lasting and comprehensive peace in accordance with approved international resolutions.” The committee, comprising the foreign ministers of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Türkiye, Nigeria, Indonesia and the Palestine Authority and the secretary generals of the League of Arab States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation has set about its mission of with unusual vigour. They have already visited Beijing, Moscow, Paris and London and “[underscored the need for members of the Security Council and for the international community to take effective and urgent measures for a complete ceasefire in Gaza](#).” The Saudis have publicly called for a two-state solution and a return to the pre-1967 borders in return for a more broad-based Arab recognition of Israel as outlined in the Arab Peace Plan of 2002.

Any serious effort in this direction must address a host of immediate challenges even as it seeks a longer-term resolution for the conundrum. These include, in Rumsfeld-speak, both the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns.

1. What happens to the rest of the hostages? In a sense, the deal involving 50-odd women and children appears to be the easier part. Things will become more complicated when it comes to exchanging Israeli soldiers for Palestinians who have been convicted by Israeli courts for ‘terrorist’ offences.
2. The initial success of these hostage negotiations provides clear evidence that even after six weeks of intense bombardment and amidst the presence of Israeli tanks and troops in the heart of Gaza, there is a degree of functional coordination between the political wing of Hamas in Doha and the military wing in Gaza. So what happens next? Does the ceasefire continue as negotiations for further releases progress? The growing pressure from the families of hostages on Netanyahu’s government would suggest that such negotiations may now take precedence over the nebulous goal of destroying Hamas.
3. What’s the endgame that Israel plans for Gaza? Once the deal for the hostages is done and the dust from the destruction of Gaza—if not of Hamas itself—has settled, will Netanyahu follow through with his promise of establishing security control over Gaza? Are we going to see [the return of Israeli settlements like the 21 that existed until Israel under Ariel Sharon unilaterally vacated Gaza in 2005?](#) But that would mean returning to a playbook that was tried and that didn’t work.
4. If it isn’t Israel, then who runs Gaza after the war? The territory was under Egyptian jurisdiction from 1948 until Israel took control in the 1967 war but neither Egypt nor any of the other Arab states have any appetite for this responsibility. An alternate could be to enable the Palestine Authority (PA) to establish unified control over both the West Bank and Gaza but this runs into two problems. Israel would have to make a dramatic switch towards strengthening the PA instead of undermining it and the PA would need to choose a more effective leader than Mahmoud Abbas.

5. That still doesn't resolve the other new reality created by 7 October and its bloody aftermath. Despite all the death and destruction that its actions have wrought on so many in Gaza, Hamas, today, is perceived by a not insignificant number of Palestinians as a more effective voice for their legitimate grievances and unfulfilled aspirations than the PA is sometimes seen as an accomplice of Israel. Netanyahu's vows to destroy Hamas have also created a dangerous zero-sum game where the survival of Hamas equals its victory. None of this is desirable for Arab states like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates which consider Hamas as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood—an organisation that they have outlawed and declared as a terrorist entity. The possibility of a Hamas-inspired and Iran-fuelled rise of Islamic radicalisation amongst the youthful populations of this region is anathema to them. And yet, a pragmatic approach may require the inclusion of Hamas into the kind of big-tent structure that the Palestine Liberation Organization had traditionally embraced, one that was able to accommodate diverse and occasionally feuding groups like Fatah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and others within its embrace. Would Hamas agree to the recognition of Israel as a price for its own acceptance and would the key Arab states agree to give Hamas a seat on the table if negotiations for the future of Gaza (and possibly of the West Bank) gather momentum? This could be an effective counter to Netanyahu's approach of dividing the Palestinian leadership between an emasculated PA in the West Bank and an ostracised Hamas in Gaza.
6. Iran has once again demonstrated its disruptive power in the region. It had been left out of developments that started with the Abraham Accords in 2020, gave birth to the I2U2 grouping in 2021 and to the ambitious India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor project that was announced on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023. But the 7 October attack by its ally Hamas has pushed both Iran and the Palestine issue back into the equation. [Little wonder that President Raisi showed up at the Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh](#), posing a pointed question: can Iran be made a part of the solution instead of being seen as a part of the problem? Otherwise, the Iran-Hezbollah-Hamas narrative that peace negotiations and multilateral efforts don't work, that Gaza shows the moral failure of the Western rules-based order where some lives matter less than others and that an armed and capable axis of resistance is the only alternative will not only become the dominant narrative but will also fuel further radicalisation.
7. With almost half of Gaza's housing and much of its vital infrastructure already in ruins, any plans for the day after will have to include a massive reconstruction effort even if the war ends today. The approaching winter will expose over 1.7 million displaced Palestinians to the mercy of the elements. Could this impending humanitarian disaster impose a sense of urgency on decision-making processes and possibly lead to an Arab-led, Gulf-funded and UN-backed process that takes the lead for both security and reconstruction in Gaza? It would have to take place within a broader framework of assurances from Israel and the US that the reconstruction won't be reduced to rubble again.

8. In Israel, there will clearly be a reckoning once the war is over. Netanyahu's turbulent reign over the country's fractured polity is widely expected to end, prompting muted hope of a new leadership that will recognise the structural failure of a policy that is predicated on a denial of Palestinian rights. Will the horrors of the 7th October attacks lead to the emergence of a more centrist leadership in Israel?
9. And finally, there is the US which has once again demonstrated its centrality by working closely with Egypt and Qatar in the ongoing hostage negotiations and in ensuring the flow of some relief supplies into Gaza amidst the hostilities. But as the election season gets into full swing, there is a clear gap between how President Biden overcame his distaste for Netanyahu's policies to express rock-solid support for Israel and the way his Democratic party supporters take a more balanced view of the issue. Since the Republicans have largely positioned themselves behind both Netanyahu and Israel, the evolving political calculus in Washington DC will become another key unknown.

This is a complicated situation even without bringing in other unknowns like the actions of Iran's allies like Hezbollah on Israel's border with Lebanon and the Houthis as they target shipping in the Red Sea from their redoubts in Yemen. The war in Gaza could still spiral into a regional conflagration through an accidental strike, a communication failure or a misadventure by one of the non-state actors. Last week's initial agreement on the release of hostages has opened up a tiny sliver of hope and all the key actors must build upon it to establish a lasting ceasefire as an essential first step towards de-escalation and a durable resolution.

Why Arab States Must Lead on Gaza

How Regional Countries Can Pool Their Leverage
to End the Israel-Hamas War

LINA KHATIB

When Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, it was 50 years and a day after the start of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. That conflict had also begun with a surprise attack, when forces from Egypt and Syria caught the Israeli military and intelligence services off-guard. Back then, the Arab world stood united against Israel, with Arab oil-producing countries using an oil embargo to gain leverage in postwar peace negotiations and Arab armies supporting Egypt and Syria's military campaign by sending forces into Syria.

Today, the regional picture is much more complicated. The Arab world is not united against Israel. Instead, on the eve of October 7, each Arab state had a different relationship with Israel. Egypt and Jordan signed peace deals with Israel decades ago and continue to cooperate on security today. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) normalized its diplomatic relations with Israel more recently, signing the Abraham Accords in 2020. Before Hamas's attack, Saudi Arabia and Israel, with the backing of Washington, were finalizing a deal to normalize ties. Qatar, adhering to its

position of openness to communicating with all sides, kept its relationship with Israel informal while also hosting the political leadership of Hamas in Doha. Although these countries were frustrated with the growing tension between Israelis and Palestinians, none of them expected the situation to turn into war any time soon. Considering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict contained, they focused on their own political and economic objectives, which often meant doing business with the Israeli government.

But Israel's invasion of the Gaza Strip, which has killed some 15,000 people, according to health officials in Gaza, has altered these relationships overnight. It is driving Arab states toward a more unified public position on the Israel-Palestine conflict. By the time Israel struck the Jabalya refugee camp at the end of October, the response from Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE had become almost uniform, with all strongly condemning the attack and calling for a cease-fire.

This seeming unity, however, hides the fact that each Arab country's approach to the Israel-Hamas war is primarily driven by concerns over its own particular priorities. This is especially the case for the "Big Five" Arab powers: Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

As the war in Gaza continues, these countries are using their own diplomatic pressure points to shape the conflict to their advantage and to achieve individual priorities. If they could coordinate their approaches, however, they would have a better chance of obtaining an outcome to the conflict that would benefit them all: an Israeli-Palestinian peace process that they could help broker and a better strategy to counter Iran.

TIGHTROPE WALKING

There is anger about Gaza across the Arab world. Many Arab regimes now find themselves in the difficult position of keeping their publics calm while also protecting their economic and diplomatic ties with Israel. They are trying to position themselves as leaders for peace on the international stage partly to show their own populations that they are responsive when it comes to the Palestinians, thus heading off protests that could spiral out of control.

Although Egypt and Jordan have forged their own peace deals with Israel, they are anxious about what the Israel-Hamas war means for their own security and stability. Egypt and Jordan are particularly wary of a scenario in which thousands of Palestinians—including members of Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups—are pushed into their territories. Both countries have voiced their opposition to this prospect.

Jordan is also mindful of potential restiveness among its population, a majority of which is Palestinian in origin. To keep Jordan's streets calm, Jordanian Queen Rania, herself Palestinian by descent, has spoken twice to CNN since the start of the war to underline international responsibility for the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza. Jordan has withdrawn its ambassador to Israel and Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi has escalated his public criticism of Israel, saying that "all options" are on the table in response to Israel's actions in Gaza.

The UAE, for its part, is not geographically close to Israel, nor does it have the demographic profile of Jordan. So it does not have the same security worries. But its neighbors include Iran—Hamas's main backer—and Yemen, where the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels operate. These neighbors present their own security headaches. Although the UAE has signed the Abraham Accords with Israel, Hamas's attack tested the aura of security that an alliance with Israel was supposed to bring, because Hamas exposed shortcomings in Israel's security apparatus. In the wake of this security breach, the United States, which brokered the Abraham Accords, has offered the UAE and Israel additional security against Iran and its proxies, deploying aircraft carrier groups to the Mediterranean and the Red Sea as a deterrent to regional conflict. But this is not a long-term solution to Iran's destabilizing role in the Middle East.

Qatar's main point of leverage is its close relationship with Hamas.

Unlike the UAE, Qatar has shown no interest in signing a peace deal with Israel. Since the outbreak of war, it has been trying to walk a tightrope: justifying its hosting of Hamas's leaders in Doha without antagonizing Israel, other Arab states, or the international community. Hamas's political leadership has operated out of Doha since 2012,

when the war in Syria forced the group to leave that country. According to Meshal bin Hamad al-Thani, Qatar's ambassador to the United States, Hamas's political office opened in Doha after Washington made a request to establish indirect lines of communication with the group. Qatar has tried to appease both sides by serving as an intermediary between Hamas and Israel. Qatar's strategy is based on using its role as mediator to position itself as "a reliable international partner," a phrase often repeated in official Qatari government communiqués. Qatar's main concern is to maintain this political status when the Israel-Hamas war is over.

Saudi Arabia has its own set of concerns. Hamas's attack stalled its normalization talks with Israel, which may have been one of the reasons Hamas launched its assault. According to the White House, Saudi Arabia has indicated it would like the talks to resume. As the custodian of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, the Arab League–endorsed plan for a two-state solution that would end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Saudi Arabia is mindful of regional popular expectations for how it responds to Israel's actions. To counter any criticism against it, the Saudi regime has escalated its public criticism of Israel. The state-owned newspaper *Arab News* labeled the consequences of Israel's aggression on Gaza "the second *nakba*," referring to the term for the mass displacement of Palestinians that accompanied the 1948 establishment of Israel. Official statements by the Saudi Foreign Ministry have referred to the Israeli Defense Forces as the "Israeli occupation army" and insisted on the implementation of a two-state solution to resolve the conflict. Saudi Arabia is also at risk of attack from Iran and its regional proxies. As with the UAE, Saudi Arabia has increased its diplomatic engagement with Iran to de-escalate tension.

PRESSURE DROP

With their varied domestic concerns in mind, the Big Five are using whatever leverage they have to shape the actions of Hamas, Israel, and the United States. Concerned about domestic security, Egypt was the first in the Arab bloc to reject a U.S. proposal for a temporary Arab mandate over Gaza when the fighting stops. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi rejected CIA Director William

Burns's proposal for Egypt to manage postwar security in Gaza until the Palestinian Authority is ready to take control. Sisi said Egypt would not help eradicate Hamas because it needs Hamas to help secure the Rafah crossing. Even with Egypt's surveillance of its side of the crossing, Hamas has been able to smuggle all kinds of goods into Gaza. The group's presence in Gaza gives Egypt a useful tool it can use to pressure Israel; Egypt will not want to lose this card for as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues.

The only real card that Jordan can play is the West's investment in it as an island of stability in the Middle East. Jordan is confident that it can push Israel without losing the support of the United States or the United Kingdom, because both need Jordan to help protect their respective security interests in the Middle East. With this in mind, Jordan is trying to influence Israel to agree to a cease-fire by refusing to sign a water-for-energy agreement that would have provided Israel with clean energy in return for Israel supplying Jordan with water. Both countries were supposed to ratify the deal last month.

Although the UAE will not pull out of the Abraham Accords, the agreement still gives the UAE some leverage. The UAE has warned Israel of "irreparable ramifications in the region" if the IDF carries out indiscriminate attacks against civilians, suggesting that such attacks would increase threats by Iran-backed groups. This statement intends to communicate that the Arab signatories to the Abraham Accords have not given Israel *carte blanche*, especially when Israel's actions increase threats to their own security.

Qatar's main point of leverage is its close relationship with Hamas, which it has managed to use to its advantage for now. Serving as the regional headquarters of the U.S. military's Central Command, which oversees the Middle East, and being the United States' go-to mediator with Hamas, Qatar enjoys the kind of U.S. protection that other Arab countries covet. Qatar has hosted talks between Burns and David Barnea, the head of Israel's intelligence services, the Mossad, to agree on humanitarian pauses. Qatar will want to keep building on this mediation

to help resurrect the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, in which it could then play a larger diplomatic role.

Saudi Arabia's leverage is centered on the potential normalization of ties with Israel and its role as the custodian of the Arab Peace Initiative. Saudi Arabia has flagged to the United States and Israel that it would lose credibility in the Arab and Islamic worlds were it to move ahead with normalization with Israel without a resolution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The outbreak of war in Gaza has fortified Saudi Arabia's support for the two-state solution and given it an opportunity to assert itself as the leader of the Arab and Islamic worlds. Keeping in line with this objective, Saudi Arabia hosted a joint summit on Gaza with the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (a grouping of mostly Muslim-majority countries) in early November. It is also using its relationship with China to strengthen its international standing, leading a ministerial delegation to Beijing in November to signal to the United States that it can rally major countries to support its efforts to end the war. The Saudis have also invited Iran to attend the joint Arab League–OIC summit, easing tensions with Iran while also suggesting that they have the upper hand in the relationship.

COME TOGETHER

Although these separate efforts are promoting the interests of each country, much more could be accomplished if the Big Five pooled their resources, focusing on coordination rather than perfect alignment. The goal should be to jumpstart negotiations involving these countries plus Hamas, Israel, and the United States. The Big Five would be actively involved, but with a more equitable balance of power for themselves vis-à-vis Israel and the United States. They should insist on relaunching the peace process as a precondition for Israel's normalization with Saudi Arabia so as to preserve Saudi Arabia's credibility and status. And they should insist on a political rather than a military solution for containing Hamas. This means implementing the Saudi-led proposal that came out of the joint Arab League–OIC summit calling for the establishment of a Palestinian political coalition under the umbrella of the Palestine

Liberation Organization. But this can only succeed if the United States agrees to cooperate with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on a long-term strategy for containing Iran's regional interventions.

It has been Israel and the United States, not Saudi Arabia, pushing hardest for normalization. For years, the relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia was conducted behind closed doors and fueled by mutual concern over Iran. Although Saudi Arabia is interested in bringing its relationship with Israel out into the open, it is not desperate for normalization. Instead, Israel has been most keen to upgrade the relationship. Although Saudi Arabia will benefit from the technology transfer and financial, security, and political incentives that improved ties with Israel would bring, normalization is not an indispensable ingredient in Saudi Arabia's economic transformation plans. Saudi Arabia was never going to grant Israel normalization for free or for a cheap price. Saudi Arabia's ultimate aim is to bolster its regional and international standing so that major economic and political powers in the world invest in Saudi Arabia. The Israel-Hamas war has only strengthened Saudi Arabia's bargaining position. It can now use this new leverage to push for the resurrection of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process under new terms: a recognition that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be compartmentalized and must be resolved if the Middle East is going to achieve any real stability.

The war has only strengthened Saudi Arabia's bargaining position.

For Egypt and Qatar, neither will want to sacrifice Hamas easily, since that would mean losing an important tool of influence. The UAE initially did not see eye to eye with Qatar on the war, with Qatar's elevated status as mediator seemingly eclipsing that achieved by the UAE through the Abraham Accords. But the meeting of Qatar's emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan in November shows that the UAE is recognizing the value of increased Arab cooperation to try to contain Hamas.

Targeted coordination strengthens the Big Five's ability to shape the post-conflict space. With Saudi and Jordanian blessing, Qatar, the UAE, and Egypt have agreed on a scenario in which figures such as Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas's Doha-based political leader, would play a role in a Palestinian coalition government proposed at the joint summit between the Arab League and the OIC.

The Big Five can also make the issue of Iran a more central part of talks with Israel and the United States. The aim would be to get the United States and Israel to accept the Arab countries' call for a cease-fire, which could lead to the resurrection of the peace process. The longer the Israel-Hamas war continues, the greater the chance that Iran-backed groups in the region will escalate, which could prompt the United States to get involved to protect Israel. If Israel ignores the threats the war poses to the security of its Arab allies, it will put a strain on its relationships with them. Any big fissure in Israel's relationship with Arab countries means added pressure on the United States to step back in to protect U.S. interests in the region.

This gives the Big Five an advantage in their relationships with the United States. Their position is in contrast to Israel, which, under the leadership of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, appears recklessly willing to accept regional escalation. The ongoing war is an opportunity for Arab countries to go beyond pragmatic de-escalation with Iran and to push for the United States to develop a strategy that addresses Iran's destabilization of the Middle East. Such a strategy would require more than the imposition of sanctions and targeted retaliatory attacks on Iranian assets in places such as Iraq and Syria. Instead, Arab countries would need to take part in setting the agenda for a long-term plan that would undermine Iran's political and military influence. If the Big Five could see where their interests intersect, they could amplify the diplomatic gains for their individual countries while seizing a chance to stabilize the region.

The Gulf States and the Israel-Hamas War

Ilan Zalayat and Yoel Guzansky | No. 1787 | November 20, 2023

With the exception of Qatar, the Gulf states share the goal of ending Hamas's control of the Gaza Strip, weakening the Iranian-led axis, and dealing a blow to Muslim Brotherhood ideology. However, their main priority is to safeguard the regional detente achieved in recent years, especially vis-à-vis Iran. Therefore, the risks that a regional conflict entail could propel them to prefer a quick end to the conflict over the benefit that could accrue from defeating Hamas. Regarding "the day after," it is possible they would be willing to be part of an effort to bring stability to the Gaza Strip, within a strategic reality whereby Hamas is stripped of its military and governmental capabilities, the United States retains an active role in the region, and the Israeli-Palestinian political process is renewed.

The war between Israel and Hamas has put the Gulf states in a complex position: some have diplomatic relations with Israel, while others – particularly Saudi Arabia – have been engaged in contacts aimed at establishing ties. Just recently, they finalized a series of reconciliation agreements, in the hope that these would foster regional stability and allow them to turn their attention to domestic matters. In addition, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have demonstrated independent and active foreign policies that encourage the expectation they will take a more active role in regional developments. The monarchical regimes in the Gulf feel threatened by the public relations and military achievements that Hamas's October 7 massacre could grant to their rivals – Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood – and they would like to see Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip end and Hezbollah weakened. Moreover, they are afraid that any achievements by Hamas and Hezbollah would boost members of Iran's regional alliance and the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. In other words, they fear that the achievement recorded by Hamas on October 7 could give credence to the Muslim Brotherhood's argument that political Islam can succeed where Arab regimes have failed.

How Robust are the Abraham Accords?

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are both eager to safeguard their framework of relations with Israel, but the pictures from the Gaza Strip have aroused major public backlash against Israel and diplomatic relations. The

monarchies' sensitivity to public opinion in the Arab world is evident in their response to the explosion at the al-Ahli hospital on October 17. In face of the anger that the report generated across the Arab world, the Gulf regimes ignored the Israeli version – which claimed that the blast was caused by a misfired Islamic Jihad rocket – and joined the harsh regional condemnation of Israel. Concern for the Palestinians was expressed by [Anwar Gargash](#), a senior diplomatic adviser to the UAE president, who described the Israeli response to the Hamas massacre as “disproportionate.” He added that the attack proved that the Israeli policy of ignoring the Palestinian issue had failed, and that Israel must not resume it when the war ends.

At the same time, Abu Dhabi in particular is worried about any achievement linked to Hamas's ideological identification with the Muslim Brotherhood. In a [statement](#) at the United Nations, Reem al-Hashimy, the United Arab Emirates Minister of International Cooperation, described the Hamas attacks as “barbaric and cruel.” The Foreign Ministry in Abu Dhabi [blamed Hamas exclusively](#) for the escalation and said that it was “appalled” that Israeli civilians were abducted as hostages. No less important were comments from the head of the UAE Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, Dr Ali Rashid al-Nuaimi, [who said that](#) events in Gaza would not change the fact that “the Abraham Accords are there to stay.” Even when after a month of fighting the Palestinian death toll began to rise sharply, UAE leaders [made it clear](#) that their country would retain diplomatic relations with Israel. UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed was the first Arab leader to speak with the Israeli leadership in the aftermath of October 7. He reportedly also spoke to Arab leaders, including Syrian President Bashar Assad, warning against interfering in the conflict or using it as an excuse to attack Israel.

Around a month after the outbreak of the war, when the extent of the devastation in Gaza had already led to mass protests across the Arab world, Saudi Arabia hosted an emergency joint conference of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to discuss the situation in Gaza. Among those participating in the meeting were Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who became the first Iranian President to visit Riyadh in many years, as well as Syria's Assad. Notably absent was the President of the UAE, who instead sent his deputy to the summit, apparently as part of the ongoing tensions with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. To a large extent, the summit was a Saudi attempt to show that it is present and active in the Gaza crisis and is not letting Iran take all of the regional glory thanks to Tehran's support of Hamas and its vigorous opposition to Israel and the United States. Iran and Assad, for their part, used the summit to bolster the normalization that they have been enjoying in the Arab world.

As expected, the summit did not lead to any practical resolutions and the joint [closing statement](#) included a call for a ceasefire, for humanitarian aid to be allowed into the Gaza Strip, and for an end to the Israeli blockade, alongside a demand that the UN Security Council pass a binding resolution to that effect. It was reported that behind the scenes, the UAE, Bahrain, and apparently also Saudi Arabia [blocked](#) a proposed resolution that would have obligated any member of the Arab League with diplomatic ties with Israel to sever relations, as well as a call to disrupt oil supplies to Israel's allies, along the lines of the "oil embargo" imposed by Arab states in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War.

Future Normalization

The timing of the Hamas attack bolsters the prevalent assumption that the organization and Iran sought to derail contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia ahead of a possible normalization agreement. This claim was raised by US President Joe Biden, when he said that one of the reasons that Hamas attacked Israel was that "[the Saudis wanted to recognize Israel](#)," and by Hamas spokesman in Lebanon, Osama Hamdan, who [declared](#) that the October 7 attack was a message to Arab countries who are considering normalization with Israel. Hamas was no doubt inspired by the idea that normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia – the most important Sunni country and the guardian of the Islamic holy sites – would be a symbolic blow to efforts to delegitimize and eliminate Israel, along with a concern that any such agreement would increase measures that strengthen the Palestinian Authority. The normalization agreement was also apparently supposed to include a defense alliance between Washington and Riyadh and cooperation on the issue of civilian nuclear power – developments that would be gamechangers in the strategic balance to Iran's detriment.

Indeed, a few days after the start of the war, [Saudi officials announced](#) the suspension of talks with the United States over normalization with Israel. The announcement was expected and was carefully worded not to terminate the process forever, and at the same time, to intimate that at least for the time being, Riyadh is distancing itself from Jerusalem. [A statement issued by the White House](#) in late October, which insisted that bin Salman told Biden that he was keen to continue normalization talks after the war, also confirms that Riyadh is in no hurry to give up on the promises that the US made during normalization talks between the two countries. The Saudi announcement suspending normalization talks came after a [telephone conversation](#) between bin Salman and Iranian President Raisi, the first since the two countries renewed ties in March 2023.

The Gulf states have confronted the tension between not wanting to allow Hamas and Iran to appropriate the Palestinian issue and to maintaining ties with them by issuing general condemnations of Israel, calling on all sides not to escalate the situation and calling for a ceasefire. Thus while Saudi Arabia is highly critical of Israel, it has also not spared Hamas. For example, Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former head of Saudi intelligence, [said](#) that the Hamas atrocities opposed the principles of Islam and were not “heroic.” In Saudi-controlled media outlets, the dominant line is to [accuse Iran](#) of being behind the barbaric Hamas attacks and to describe the Palestinians as victims of the Islamic Republic – in sharp contrast to Riyadh itself, which [sought to improve](#) the lives of the Palestinian people by means of normalization talks. It also accuses Hamas of sacrificing the people of Gaza for a hopeless military escapade. The [interview](#) by senior Hamas official Khaled Mashal to al-Arabiya created waves across the Middle East, after the interviewer, Rasha Nabil, leveled several harsh allegations against Hamas and even compared the organization to ISIS. Saudi journalist Abdulaziz al-Khamis went further during an interview with Israeli network Kan, [saying](#) that if the war ends without the destruction of Hamas, it would be a disaster for Israel and for the entire free world. It is thought that this is also the official position of the Saudi Royal House, which wants to see Hamas ousted from power in the Gaza Strip but is afraid that Israel will not get the job done.

The main concern of the Gulf states is that the [conflict will spread](#) to arenas closer to home. Their primary concern is Yemen, where Iran’s use of the Houthis as a proxy to attack Israel could lead to the collapse of the ceasefire and once again expose Saudi Arabia to Houthi attacks. In addition, the Gulf states are home to US military bases, which are also potential targets for Iran and its proxies. Saudi authorities see how the United States has stood steadfastly by Israel’s side, both in terms of public messaging and deploying troops and other military assets to the region. For Riyadh, this is an encouraging sign that Washington would respond in the same way if Saudi Arabia were to come under attack.

The Palestinian issue is very important in the Gulf states, and the gap between the highly positive public attitude toward the Palestinians and the more balanced approach of the leadership is evident. Moreover, the increasing risk of a regional war increases the level of anxiety in the Gulf and could encourage Arab regimes to prefer a quick resolution of the Gaza war over any benefit they might enjoy from destroying Hamas.

Conclusion

In the Israel-Hamas war, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which seek to position themselves as key actors in the Arab world, have been relatively passive. Apart from formal statements and humanitarian aid, they have left the diplomatic arena to Qatar, given that they remain dependent on US protection from a possible attack by Iran. At the same time, both countries could still play a stabilizing role the “day after Hamas.” This depends on Israel delivering a fatal blow to Hamas; the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian political process, which would include the Palestinian Authority; and significant United States involvement in the region. In addition, while it is impossible to imagine Israel and Saudi Arabia moving any closer to normalization while the war continues, Riyadh has left the door to normalization open. It is likely, however, that once the war is over, the Palestinian element in any normalization agreement will be more prominent than it was before the Hamas attack.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE see how Iran has no problem using its proxies and how the United States is mustering its military force to defend Israel. These developments could encourage it to move closer to Israel and the US. Even now, the joint effort by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to stop the Houthi missile fire from Yemen is a good omen for future cooperation, which could even be expanded.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen

The Israel-Hamas War: Israel Needs a Political Idea

Udi Dekel | No. 1788 | November 20, 2023

Although the military goals of the Swords of Iron war, as defined by the Israeli government, are clear, Israel has not presented a political idea that should be served by the fighting. As a result, there is increasing international pressure on Israel to present the political goals of the military operation. Israel should present a political plan based on the establishment of a technocratic administration in Gaza, with the support and involvement of pragmatic Arab states and the international community, and in coordination with the Palestinian Authority. Broad support would allow for the reconstruction of Gaza after the war, and at the same time, help renew the process of regional normalization with Israel and the establishment of a new regional architecture – which would weaken the radical axis led by Iran.

The objectives of the Swords of Iron war, as defined by the government of the State of Israel, is to destroy Hamas's military and governmental capabilities and to create a new reality in the Gaza Strip whereby Hamas is unable to regain control – and to ensure the return of the Israeli hostages.

In the vision of Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip and the leaders of the organization's military wing, Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif, a massive, barbaric, and murderous surprise attack would expose Israel in all its weakness, at a time when Israeli society was undergoing a process of disintegration, and that this would spark broad Arab engagement and lead to escalation on the other fronts – which would provide an opportunity to vanquish Israel. The results of the Hamas attack were extensive and deadly, especially because of the collapse of the IDF's defensive mechanisms, forcing Israel to realize that no Israeli communities can live safely in the western Negev as long as Hamas is in control of Gaza and retains an armed military wing. The attack also highlighted that Hamas does not see its primary purpose as addressing the needs of the 2.3 million Palestinians who live in the Gaza Strip; rather, it sees itself as an armed force that above all is dedicated to the destruction of the State of Israel and the establishment of an Islamic-Palestinian state in its place.

Thus far, however, three of the fundamental assumptions of Hamas's leaders have collapsed:

- a. *The surprise Hamas attack would lead to a regional war:* Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emphasizes that Hamas is an integral part of the axis of terror spearheaded by Iran, and indeed, the combat zone has spread beyond the Gaza Strip. The war now includes escalation on the northern front, with exchanges of fire between Israel and Hezbollah, which is a challenge for Israel as it tries to control the level of escalation below the threshold of war; sporadic attacks by Iran's proxies, the Shi'ite militias, which launch missiles, rockets, and drones from Syria, Yemen, and Iraq; escalation in the West Bank, which has heated up because of the Gaza war and because of the increased activity by the IDF, which is attempting to dismantle the infrastructure of Hamas and the other terror groups operating there. Nonetheless, a regional, high-intensity war has not erupted, and the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Arab communities inside Israel remain relatively stable.
- b. *Israel will be reluctant to undertake a ground operation deep into the Gaza Strip in response to the attack.* Israel, which was taken by surprise and dragged into a war, opted for a broad military operation, including a ground operation deep in Gaza, with the goal of uprooting the Hamas regime and dismantling the organization's military capabilities. Israel is determined to continue with this operation, even if it takes several months.
- c. The United States would be quick to stop Israel. Surprisingly, from the perspective of Israel's enemies, the United States has stood solidly by Israel's side, deployed troops to the region to prevent a regional war, and in practice, shares the goal of toppling Hamas.

The Israeli government formulated a strategic military-operational idea with clear military objectives: destroying Hamas's governmental and military capabilities; demilitarizing the Gaza Strip; creating the conditions that would give the IDF freedom of operation inside Gaza in order to prevent Hamas from rebuilding itself; establishing a broad security zone along the border of the Strip to create the security conditions that would allow Israelis to return to their homes in the western Negev; implementing a practical and effective solution to prevent Hamas and other terror groups from rearming by hermetically sealing the Philadelphi Route along the border between Gaza and Egypt and introducing effective security

checks at the Rafah border crossing; preventing the war from spreading to other fronts, especially Israel's northern front with Hezbollah in Lebanon.

However, the Israeli government has shown difficulty in presenting a strategic political idea – the concept of the political campaign – apart from ensuring the safe return of all the hostages. Israel has not defined what it wants to achieve. Rather, it has merely stated what it does not want: there will be no Hamas regime in Gaza, but the region will not slide into chaos; Israel will not establish a military government over the Gaza Strip and the area will not be reliant on Israel; there will be no comprehensive political process to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that applies to the Gaza Strip as well as the West Bank; the Palestinian Authority will not resume control over Gaza because it is weak and ineffective – and also because of the concern that this could be the first step toward a comprehensive agreement between Israel and the Palestinians.

US President Joe Biden and other Western leaders have publicly stressed the importance of the political horizon. For them, there can be no military action without clear political goals. As presented by Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the outlines of US policy include: Gaza will no longer serve as a platform for terror; Israel will not recapture the Gaza Strip, and its territory will not be reduced; there will be no forced relocation of the Palestinian population; there will be no blockade or closure of the Gaza Strip; a mechanism for Gaza's reconstruction will be established; governance of Gaza will be in Palestinian hands, with the West Bank and the Gaza Strip being unified under the Palestinian Authority; and at the same time, conditions will be created for a comprehensive political agreement based on the two-state solution.

Since Israel has not presented – certainly not in public – its political objectives, political pressure has increased, mainly from the United States but also from other allies in the West, countries in the Middle East with which Israel has a peace agreement, and potential regional partners. This is in addition to the widespread demand that Israel agrees to humanitarian pauses in the fighting to reduce, if only slightly, the painful outcome of the fighting for the Gaza population.

Like the United States, the pragmatic regimes in this region, which are part of the normalization process with Israel, have a vested interest in the option of shaping a new and more moderate regional architecture. But the war is a domestic challenge for them and the lack of certainty over Israel's political goals complicates the situation. Egypt and Jordan are convinced that Israel is planning on expelling the Palestinian population to their territory, while Western nations are worried that Israel is operating, in tandem with the war against Hamas, to bring down the

Palestinian Authority. This assessment is strengthened by the Israeli decision to cut the tax revenues that it sends to the PA, the marked increase in the IDF's counterterrorism operations in the West Bank, and, above all, the Israeli government's ineffectiveness in dealing with Jewish nationalist crime.

The absence of a strategic political goal makes it hard for Israel to reset the international clock of legitimacy, which is vital if the IDF is to be afforded the time it needs to complete the military goals of the operation. There is, however, a way to do this: formulating a political path and a positive direction that will show where Israel is focusing its efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which, though not to Israel's liking, has been thrust back onto the international and Arab stage.

First and foremost, Israel should not annul the 1995 Interim Agreement (whereby the Palestinians are granted the right to self-government in Palestinian communities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) or the three demands by the Quartet to any Palestinian government: recognition of the State of Israel, recognition of existing agreements between Israel and the PLO; and an end to terror and violence. At the same time, Israel's approach to the Gaza Strip must also change, in light of the acceptance of Hamas rule in the Gaza Strip for 16 years, the Palestinian Authority's inability to resume control over Gaza because it is too weak, and the PA's failure in governing the West Bank. Therefore, Israel should work to install a new leadership in Gaza. One of the options is to set up an administration of technocrats that is not tainted by affiliation to either Hamas or Fatah. A technocratic administration would receive its legitimacy from the Palestinian Authority, based on Ramallah's agreement to hand over control of the Strip, provide it with the requisite economic framework, and a channel for transferring donations and resources that are provided by the international community (for which the Palestinian Authority is the official Palestinian government).

The primary challenge will be the likely difficulty in nurturing local leadership in the Gaza Strip – the leadership that will comprise the technocratic administration and effectively manage the local authorities and all the vital mechanisms needed to run civilian life, including restoring order, preventing chaos, and thwarting expected attempts by rogue groups to seize power, including the rebuilding and rearmament of Hamas (which is supported by around 40 percent of the Gaza population). To this end, what is needed is not legitimacy from Israel, but from the international community and the pragmatic Arab states, which will be active partners in providing the support and resources needed to manage Gaza.

Despite its negative experience with international peacekeeping forces, Israel can demand the deployment of a pan-Arab task force to operate within a broad

international framework before it pulls out IDF troops from Gaza. The role of this task force would be to help the technocratic administration – along with the international organizations working in Gaza – to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the proper destination, support the local authorities and civil organizations to meet the challenge of governance, and prevent chaos. Egypt can play a central role in this mission, given its deep knowledge of Gaza and its control over the main artery through which aid enters the Strip – the Rafah border crossing. Egypt will find it easier to fill this role under an international and regional umbrella, especially if it is suitably rewarded for its investment in bringing stability and order to Gaza. This alternative can be presented as an interim solution until Gaza has stabilized, and it does not preempt the possibility of the Palestinian Authority retaking control of Gaza in the future – on condition that it proves itself capable of controlling the West Bank, stops supporting the terrorists and their families, and makes an active contribution to stability in Gaza.

Israel's insistence that it retain freedom of military operation in Gaza – in order to prevent terrorist attacks and to dismantle terrorist infrastructure – and to set up a security zone around Gaza (as a military buffer between the Israeli communities in the western Negev and the Strip) could clash with the idea of deploying a pan-Arab or regional task force. To this end, the United States should grant Israel guarantees and legitimacy: (1) Israel has the right to defend itself and ensure that events such as those of October 7 never happen again; (2) Gaza remains strictly demilitarized by hermetically sealing the Philadelphi Route to prevent arms smuggling and by introducing more effective security measures at the land borders and, in the future, at sea ports; (3) any regional task force is under the control of the United States Central Command; (4) coordination mechanisms are set up to ensure that there are no clashes between the IDF and the task force; (5) under the auspices of the United States Security Coordinator (USSC), internal security and policing forces will be set up in the Gaza Strip, taking members from the Gazan population.

A statement of intent from Israel in this spirit would alleviate some of the intensifying international pressure, which is threatening to shorten the time that Israel has to achieve its military objectives. In addition, this would help revive efforts to introduce a new regional architecture, in response to the region's most destabilizing actor – the Iranian axis – while deepening the relationship between Israel and the United States and promoting regional attention to the Palestinian issue, so that it is no longer a burden on Israel alone.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen

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Israel and Hamas at War: What Price Peace?

By Lawrence Anderson

SYNOPSIS

Six weeks after Hamas' surprise attack on 7 October, Israel has demolished much of Gaza City in the northern part of the Gaza Strip as well as substantial infrastructure elsewhere in the territory. Sustained military attacks has led to disproportionate casualties amongst civilian Palestinians and prompted urgent calls for a pause to the fighting. It does not appear either side can win but there is also no will to pursue peace via the two-state solution.

COMMENTARY

Initial sympathy for Israel arising from the vicious attacks by Hamas on 7 October has shifted decisively to criticism of it for perpetrating the mounting destruction of civilian infrastructure and deaths and suffering of Palestinians, especially children.

The UN Security Council adopted a resolution on 15 November calling for "urgent and extended humanitarian pauses" to provide Palestinian civilians some relief from incessant attacks by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). A similar vote was passed at the UN General Assembly last month. Even the United States, Israel's staunchest ally, has urged restraint and called for a humanitarian pause to facilitate the release of hostages held by Hamas and for supplies of essential goods to enter Gaza. Faced with mounting international pressure, Israel's foreign minister has estimated that the IDF will have to cease its military operations within two to three weeks.

Most governments and commentators have expressed the view that the Israelis have the right to self-defence under the circumstances, particularly in view of the terrorist actions perpetrated by Hamas. But this does not absolve the IDF of the responsibility to observe international codes of humanitarian behaviour designed to protect innocent civilian population.

Prospects for Victory

Israel cannot win militarily. Even if Hamas is destroyed, other Palestinian terrorist groups, such as Palestine Islamic Jihad, will take over. The Palestinian threat is an existential problem for Israel that will fester beyond the current war.

Hamas cannot win either. Although its popularity with Palestinians and Muslims all over the world has soared, it will not be allowed to rule Gaza. A post-war plan to replace it with the Palestinian National Authority is currently being brokered by the US, Israel, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, amongst others.

Hamas has delayed, but not derailed the emerging cooperation between the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Gulf states see Iran's hand in the current outbreak. On the ground, Hamas has nominal support from Palestine Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and terrorist groups in Iraq. These are all Iranian proxies and opposed to the Gulf monarchies as well.

Once the current fighting ceases and after a decent interval, the Saudis will move on to recognise Israel. Before that, they will work towards securing concessions from Israel and security guarantees from the US, all of which will amount to a *de facto* alliance.

While there are no clear winners from the war, what is certain is that the losers are the two million Palestinians in Gaza.

Likelihood of a Regional War?

The US has deployed formidable military assets, including two aircraft carrier groups and a nuclear submarine, to deter threats of a wider regional war. This has proven successful so far.

Hezbollah and Iran's other proxies have escalated their attacks on Israel from their respective strongholds, but with limited effect for now. Iran itself, bogged down with its own internal problems, will not want to be involved in a major war. But Iran will continue to use its proxies to foment regional instability.

The US remains the dominant player in the region, but it is not all-powerful. Washington will continue to provide financial and material support to Israel, but it will also try to curb Israel's military excesses besides focusing on getting the hostages released and a humanitarian pause implemented.

Although self-sufficient in its energy needs, the US will not allow Saudi oil reserves or Qatari natural gas deposits to fall into the hands of unfriendly governments such as Iran, Russia and Islamist groups. Consequently, Washington will not abandon its role as the security guarantor of its Gulf allies. What is of concern to the Saudis is whether this guarantee extends to the preservation of Al Saud rule. Hence, a Saudi understanding with Israel serves as an added insurance policy against Iran, as well as a source of much-needed technical and managerial expertise.

China's stock in the region has grown, given its economic clout and diplomatic foray

that capitalised on the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. China's interests in the region are primarily energy security and economic. Its leaders are astute enough to want good relations to remain with Saudi Arabia and its allies on one side, and Iran on the other. They have no desire to become embroiled in the region's intractable quarrels.

What price a permanent peace?

A viable Palestinian state is now a pipe dream. The two-state solution which recognises Israel's right to exist alongside a Palestinian state does not resolve a fundamental problem of geography, i.e., the Gaza Strip at one end and the West Bank on the other, with Israel in between through which a land bridge runs linking the two Palestinian entities. A unified Palestinian state would mean the *de facto* partition of Israel, which Israel will never accept. This leaves the current separation between Gaza and West Bank as the best-case reality.

For such a divided Palestinian state to be independent and to prosper, it must build on good relations with its powerful Israeli neighbour. Sadly, the latest spate of fighting will only reinforce the animosity, distrust and righteous indignation between Israelis and Palestinians. Both sides believe they are legally and morally right with God on their side, making prospects for lasting peace in the coming years highly unlikely.

The harsh reality is that neither Israel nor Palestine wants a two-state solution. Every Palestinian leader, whether it is Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian National Authority, or his successors, knows that any peace settlement will entail making compromises and accepting terms that will not fully satisfy the Palestinian people. Zionist extremists on the Israeli side would also be opposed to a two-state solution. Any Palestinian or Israeli leader who signs on to a two-state solution is likely to risk assassination by extremists.

Conclusion

There is no possibility that Israel, the US and many of the Arab states will accept a return to Hamas rule in Gaza. Neither does Israel want to permanently occupy Gaza, which will remain a hotbed of terrorist violence, unless it can expel all the Palestinians.

The likely outcome after the fighting has ceased is the return of the Palestinian National Authority to Gaza, supported by a multi-national force with an Arab component. But it will be an almost impossible task for the Palestinian National Authority to demilitarise and deradicalise the Gaza Strip.

For now, the international community will continue to push for a two-state solution as the most acceptable diplomatic and political option to the Israel-Palestine conflict. There is no hope of another process to supersede the Oslo Peace Accords which delivered the two-state solution almost 30 years ago. At the same time, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing partners in the present Israeli government will not condone a Palestinian state in God's promised land. Israeli objection to anyone else's proposal on the status of Jerusalem seems unshakeable. The prospects for progress on the two-state solution or other diplomatic initiatives are, at best, dim.

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The closer Israel gets to destroying Hamas, the more likely war with Hezbollah becomes

The US must do everything it can to prevent another devastating war.

Chatham House Expert Comment

By Bilal Saab

November 17, 2023

He leads an army of more than 100,000 dedicated and battle-hardened fighters equipped with thousands of missiles, rockets, and armed drones that can hit targets deep inside Israel with pinpoint accuracy. He inspires and commands the loyalty of Iran-backed militias across the Arab world.

So when Hassan Nasrallah, the head of the Lebanese Hezbollah and the most powerful non-state actor in the world, says that he doesn't wish to broaden the war in Gaza to help his Palestinian ally Hamas, the region should breathe a sigh of relief – because his words matter.

But Nasrallah's intentions alone are hardly sufficient to prevent regional escalation. Israel's willingness to avoid another catastrophic war with Hezbollah, like the one in 2006, is critical, too. Yet it is not known what the Israeli war cabinet is thinking or what it wants to do.

There are those in the Israeli government, including Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, who want to more aggressively punish Hezbollah for its shelling of Israeli military positions along the border.

More ambitiously, they also see an opportunity to neutralize the threat to Israel's northern front once and for all. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has not reached that conclusion yet, but if Gallant and others threaten to resign over this issue, he might change his mind to ensure his political survival.

The concern in Washington about Israel's intentions is so palpable that [Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had to phone Gallant](#) and urge him to calm things down along the Israel–Lebanon border.

Earlier, during [recent visits by President Joe Biden](#), Gallant shared with Secretary of State Antony Blinken his desire to strike Hezbollah pre-emptively, but he was overruled by his Israeli colleagues.

Inevitable war?

Within the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), many senior officers believe that a war in the north is inevitable, which raises the probability of a pre-emptive Israeli strike, leading to a forceful Hezbollah response.

The last thing President Biden wants during re-election season is a war between Israel and Hezbollah that could drag the US into the conflict and lead to a direct confrontation with Iran.

Not only will this be terrible strategically, but politically, too. Biden's progressive constituency is already applying intense pressure on his administration to end the war in Gaza.

In an attempt to deter Hezbollah from launching deadlier attacks against northern Israel, Biden has ordered the deployment of a substantial amount of [additional military assets](#) to the Middle East, including an aircraft carrier, warships, a nuclear-powered vessel, attack helicopters, fighter jets, and 5,000 sailors.

Heightened tensions, expanding conflict

Hezbollah's commitment not to escalate is not set in stone. Nasrallah was clear about this in his latest speeches on 3 and 11 November, and there's no reason to believe he was bluffing.

His red line is the destruction of Hamas as a military organization. The closer Israel gets to achieving that objective, the more likely it is that Nasrallah will order his troops to dial up their attacks against Israel and widen the war.

Israel and Hezbollah's intentions aside, the tensions along the Israel-Lebanon border are already high. 10 Israeli soldiers and civilians have been killed, as have 70 Hezbollah fighters and 10 Lebanese civilians, as a result of the shelling.

The depth and sophistication of the attacks by both parties are increasing, too. The perimeter of confrontation has broadened from a single mile to 25 miles in a matter of weeks.

Israel has struck hard from the air while Hezbollah has used anti-tank missiles to damage Israeli outposts as well as armed drones to target the city of Eilat, which is 350 miles away. Gallant told Austin that '[Hezbollah is playing with fire](#)'. The same could be said about Israel.

Whether the current situation along the Israel-Lebanon border is sustainable is highly uncertain. Since 2006, both sides have respected unwritten rules of engagement where certain levels of confrontation within well-defined geographical areas were acceptable. Today, those rules are slowly but surely vanishing. Hezbollah's attack on Eilat from Syria is proof of that.

Miscalculation and escalation

The opportunities for miscalculation and accidents are endless. In 2006, neither Hezbollah nor Israel wanted a war, but they ended up clashing viciously in a conflict of 34 days. Israel severely damaged Lebanese civil infrastructure and displaced approximately one million Lebanese.

Hezbollah hit targets deep inside Israel and forced the evacuation of roughly half a million Israelis. The conflict led to the killing of 1,300 Lebanese and 165 Israelis. A new war will dwarf that of 2006 because of the much-improved military capabilities of Hezbollah and of the extreme right leanings of Israel's ruling politicians.

Iran's perspective

Tehran has an interest in preserving Hezbollah's strategic deterrent against an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program and would rather not see its Lebanese ally get weakened or disarmed following a fight with Israel.

But Iran does not have strict control over Hezbollah. It wasn't able to stop Hezbollah from fighting Israel in 2006.

Members of Iran's proxy network – in Yemen, Iraq, Bahrain, Syria, Palestine, and Lebanon – maintain a sufficient degree of operational independence, especially during wartime. These actors have their own local calculations and preferences which are mostly consistent with Iran's strategic wishes.

So when the US deploys more firepower to the Middle East to send a strong message to Iran to rein in Hezbollah, it's not at all clear it will work.

Hezbollah can call its own shots, especially if it perceives that its own wellbeing is at risk. Furthermore, Hezbollah knows that Israeli leaders are perfectly capable of levelling Lebanon as a whole, like they did in 2006.

The Gaza War and the Region

Emile Hokayem

The Islamist Palestinian militant group Hamas's 7 October attack on southern Israel from Gaza, in which roughly 1,200 Israeli civilians and security personnel were killed, often gruesomely, and more than 200 hostages were taken, was a generation-defining event that has left Israel deeply traumatised, Palestine in even greater distress, and the region itself dangerously close to all-out war.¹ The assault was as much a Hamas military success as it was a comprehensive Israeli failure. In the past two decades, successive Israeli governments had believed that the Palestinian 'problem' could be boxed in, shrunk and ignored as they pursued territorial expansion in the West Bank and regional integration and normalisation with Arab states. Many Western and Arab states seemed satisfied, complacent or resigned. This mindset has badly backfired.

Hamas's nebulous agenda

Hamas's precise aims and motivations remain unclear, but the drivers of its action are evident. The organisation is less cohesive than it looks from the outside: its Gaza-based military wing, which has been ascendant in recent years, grew distrustful of a political leadership that is largely based abroad. The responsibility for governing Gaza felt like a trap insofar as it could have operated to weaken the group's ethos of resistance and further split the fates of Gaza and the West Bank. The intensification of Israeli occupation

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in the West Bank and East Jerusalem exposed the haplessness of the secular Palestinian Authority (PA) and did not deter several Arab states from normalising relations with Israel. Israeli–Saudi normalisation, which to many seemed imminent, would have been a symbolic humiliation and strategic setback.

The attack settled the debate about Hamas’s identity: resistance prevailed over governance. It elevated the group’s domestic and regional profile, as Hamas entered the premier league of non-state armed groups, joining the likes of Hizbullah, the Lebanese Shia militant group, among the stalwarts of the Iranian-backed *muqawama* front, or ‘axis of resistance’. Hamas has also decisively overtaken the beleaguered PA in standing and credibility. It has achieved notable psychological and political effects, shattering Israeli perceptions of its own power, the competence of its security services and political leadership, and the manageability of its immediate neighbourhood.

Hamas’s prospects will depend largely on how it emerges from the Israeli response. It has made extensive physical preparations (notably tunnels), acquired better capabilities and adapted its leadership structure. On 7 October, it fired nearly 3,000 rockets (as compared to a daily average of 124 by Hizbullah during the 2006 Lebanon War) and continues to strike deep into Israeli territory.² It will gear its hostage-release policy to its military and political goals. While Israel will focus on seizing territory and killing militants, Hamas will play for time and try to shape the narrative. Variables include how long its leadership will survive, what kind of tactical surprises it will achieve during the war, how long it can sustain rocket fire into Israel, how much additional harm Israel suffers, Israeli resolve and Israel’s political stability.

As the Israeli air and ground campaign intensifies, the Israeli military is likely to achieve some operational success. The destruction of Hamas’s advanced military capabilities and the decapitation of its Gaza-based command are realistic prospects. What is highly unlikely is the obliteration of Hamas as a social, political and ideological actor. Contrary to the Islamic State in Mosul or Raqqa, Hamas is entrenched in and extremely knowledgeable about the society that hosts it. Hamas will justify humanitarian suffering and high casualty levels among its fighters and civilians as the inevitable cost of future victory. To regenerate itself, it will find recruits among the many

orphaned young men of Gaza and elsewhere. Many Palestinians beyond its immediate sympathisers accept its nationalist credentials, and, in the short term, many of its detractors are likely to overlook its Islamist agenda. A key factor is whether Palestinians in Gaza blame Hamas for the calamity as much as or possibly more than Israel. That may depend on the degree of human loss and displacement, the physical damage done to infrastructure and physical space, and the erosion of the social fabric. These, in turn, depend on the type of military campaign Israel conducts. Israel is likely to dismantle the United Nations infrastructure that has sustained Gaza since 1948. Hamas is just as likely to evolve into a determined insurgency.

Many outside parties have called for external forces to govern and police Gaza after the war, whether it is the PA, Arab forces, UN peacekeeping troops or a mixture of the three. But the obstacles to such arrangements are immense. Israel is inclined to insist on maintaining a large and active security presence within Gaza and to deny any ruling authority full control over border points, maritime access, movement of people and goods, or local governance. Israel is also likely to assume control of territory and unilaterally announce no-go zones on land and at sea. External forces would then be seen as mere enforcers of an Israeli occupation, and Arab forces fighting Hamas would be a political catastrophe for Arab governments. Furthermore, without a clear articulation and acceptance by the Israeli government of a political dispensation that spells out tangible steps towards Palestinian statehood, no external player is likely to be willing to take responsibility for Gaza's future. The most probable scenario is another Israeli ground occupation on territory fundamentally reshaped to suit Israeli security concerns and over a destitute population with dismal political or economic prospects.

A neighbourhood on the brink

The Israel–Hamas war is profoundly destabilising for the immediate neighbourhood, which was already reeling from successive Arab–Israeli wars and the Syrian conflict. A long and destructive war, followed by an insurgency, large-scale displacement and popular anger, has dangerous implications for Lebanon and Syria, the two Arab countries most opposed to Israel, as well

as for Egypt and Jordan, the first two states to have signed peace agreements with Israel.

Egypt and Jordan have been concerned in recent years that other Arab states' focus on normalisation was diverting attention from worsening dynamics inside the Palestinian territories. From a political point of view, this alarm was awkward to express. Their main partners and financial backers, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have been positively inclined towards Israel. Neither is a front-line state, hosts refugees or needs to worry acutely about security and economic repercussions. Cairo and Amman also resented the fact that the normalisation push, energised by the Trump administration, was undermining their traditional roles as the lead Arab nations on Israel and Palestine. Jordan's King Abdullah II sees Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as uniquely dangerous and unreliable. Jordan refused to take part in the Negev Forum, a small grouping endorsed by the United States that included Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Morocco and the UAE, but excluded the PA.

Cairo and Amman's fear that ethnic cleansing will produce new waves of refugees – reinforced by statements by senior Israeli officials and a leaked Israeli intelligence memo – has motivated their frenetic diplomatic outreach pressing for an immediate ceasefire. While a ceasefire has not been forthcoming, the US and other Western countries are emphatically opposed to forced displacement.³

In the short term, Egypt is the most exposed. As desperate civilians congregate in southern Gaza and Israel shifts its operational focus from the north to the south, the humanitarian situation could deteriorate quickly. Cairo has publicly warned that it would not allow crossings into Sinai, but this position may become untenable if suffering increases significantly. Jordan has sought an immediate ceasefire so as to avoid such a scenario in the West Bank. This will be difficult to arrange. Israeli settlers and extremist politicians perceive a moment of opportunity to expand further into the West Bank. Settler violence has increased and is rarely stopped or contained by the Israeli military. While Hamas's presence in the West Bank is small, other militant groups, civil-society organisations and political parties may respond to calls for solidarity with Gaza. The PA, institutionally battered

and regarded as illegitimate by many Palestinians, would struggle to contain such an outburst unless backed by regional powers and a Western push for statehood.⁴

Popular solidarity with the Palestinians has also produced large demonstrations that serve as platforms for broad criticism of the Egyptian and Jordanian governments. In turn, dislocations of the war further stoke discontent.⁵ Egypt has faced energy cuts as Israeli gas production and transport has been suspended due to concerns about the security of the production facilities and underwater pipeline.

Dislodged regional prospects

In the days preceding the 7 October attack, regional discussion centred on the mesmerising possibility of US-facilitated Saudi–Israeli normalisation. Riyadh primarily sought US security, political and economic benefits. Jerusalem saw a deal with the Arab world’s political, religious and economic powerhouse as the ultimate validation of its regional strategy. Washington focused on economically driven regional integration. The region-wide trend towards de-escalation made normalisation an understandable if overhyped prospect. Saudi Arabia and Iran had restored relations; Turkiye and the UAE had suspended their rivalry; Gulf reconciliation had ended Qatar’s isolation; conflicts in Libya, Syria and Yemen were frozen; and the Abraham Accords had normalised relations between Israel and several Arab states. This fostered relief and enthusiasm in Western, Asian and many Arab capitals, but also complacency and wishful thinking.⁶ The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, in which Israel played a central role, is a prime example. It was unveiled at the G20 meeting less than a month before the 7 October attack. In late September, when Netanyahu brandished a map entitled ‘The New Middle East’ showing Israel as including all the Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights during his speech at the UN General Assembly, there was at best tepid objection by a few member states.⁷

In reality, the Middle East’s de-escalation has been thin, tactical, bilateral and unstructured. None of the core issues have been addressed, let alone resolved. Instead, grand plans for regional integration and cooperation ignored or understated the persistence of conflict, bleak economic and fiscal

prospects, and the worsening of domestic political trends in many countries. It was not difficult for the Israel– Hamas war to overturn the apparent regional agenda, as indeed it has. The war has forced the Palestinian question back to the top of the Middle Eastern agenda after years of neglect. Arab states' relations with Israel will be constrained for years to come. In Arab forums, Palestine is likely to overshadow other conflicts. Palestinians' faraway supporters, such as Algeria, Iraq and Kuwait, will be comforted in their uncompromising positions. Even Israel's closest partners in the Arab world despair at their lack of leverage over Israeli decision-making. Crucially, the crisis will allow Arab states to resist Western policies and professed norms. Disingenuously or not, a wide segment of Arab society considers Western outrage over Saudi Arabia's conduct of its war in Yemen and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's large-scale killing in Syria selective and hypocritical.

In private, however, there is considerable Arab anger at Hamas, especially insofar as the 7 October attack increases Iran's ability to upend regional dynamics. Many Arab states will decline to embrace Hamas's maximalist objective of a state comprising the totality of pre-1948 Palestine, to support a sustained war with Israel, or to deploy instruments of economic coercion such as an oil embargo. The ongoing war is unlikely to reverse de-escalation among major players. Signatories to the Abraham Accords are unlikely to pull out. While stalled at present, Saudi normalisation with Israel remains on the table, though the Saudi ask is likely to be considerably higher.

At the same time, the prospect of wider conflict, the relative futility of US diplomacy thus far and the contradictions of Western policy have energised regional diplomacy. In recent weeks, contacts among erstwhile enemies and rivals have multiplied. Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman held his first meeting with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi at the height of the crisis. Assad, Iran's foremost partner in the Arab world, attended an emergency session of the Arab League in Riyadh, as did Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The Qatari emir has met the Egyptian and Emirati presidents. Arab capitals' main effort is likely to be directed at the United States, which, however diminished, is seen as the only player able to restrain Israel, put a political process on track and provide guarantees.

Iran's calculations

Other than Israel, the state that will most shape the trajectory of the conflict is Iran. Exactly how informed and involved Iran was in the October Hamas attack remains a matter of debate. It empowers, guides and supports, but does not necessarily order or approve, its partners' actions. They are like junior brothers-in-arms. Hamas may have hoped for, but likely did not expect, direct and sustained Iranian help during a conflict. Early US intelligence has indicated that Iran did not play a direct role in the 7 October operation.⁸

Furthermore, Iran's relations with non-state groups vary according to political context, local conditions and risk appetite. Iran's relationship with Hamas soured during the Syrian civil war when Hamas sided with the Syrian rebels, with hundreds of its fighters operating from Palestinian refugee camps against Assad's forces and their Shia allies. Assad's victory in 2017, a change in Hamas leadership and then Hizbullah's mediation has since improved relations. Iran has consolidated its network of partners, opening a joint operations room in Beirut and encouraging operational and strategic cooperation. Hamas's ability to rebound after its costly conflict with Israel in 2014 owes much to Iranian support. But Iran's relationship with Hamas is still less organic and strategic than its ties with Hizbullah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hamas's smaller rival in Gaza.⁹

On balance, Tehran has emerged a beneficiary of the 7 October attack. The crisis has terrified Israeli society, re-energised Iran's axis of resistance and shaken its regional rivals. Iran can credibly present itself as the righteous supporter of Palestine in contrast with Arab states whose support had receded, allowing it to brush aside the criticism of its actions in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

In the short term, Iran does not appear to have an interest in expanding the war. Rather, the Gaza war is an affirmation of its forward-defence strategy. The more crucial question is whether Hizbullah should join the fight. The Lebanese group has become Iran's most effective instrument of punishment and deterrence against the US and Israel, and is the one best suited for an existential conflict as opposed to a contained and possibly inconclusive regional war. Much will depend on how the war unfolds and

what lessons Israel derives from it. Under the two most likely scenarios, Iran faces risks. An easy defeat of Hamas could motivate Israel to pursue an aggressive approach in Syria and Lebanon, which are strategically vital from Iran's standpoint. A slow, grinding war would raise questions about Iran's credibility. As Gaza got pounded and Hamas weakened, Iran would be asked why its fiery rhetoric and professed solidarity had not translated into supportive action. But should Hamas resist more stiffly than expected, inflicting serious damage on the Israeli military, and Israel come under sustained international condemnation, Iran would be able to keep avoiding a direct military role.

In any case, Iran's ability to operate through partners in various arenas gives it options short of all-out war. Iran-backed Shia militias have hit US bases in Syria and Iraq with mortar rounds and rockets; Hizbullah and Syria-based militias have fired rockets on northern Israel; and the Houthi rebels have launched ballistic and cruise missiles, as well as uncrewed aerial vehicles, at Israel from Yemen. This activity can be interpreted as Iran using its partners for strategic signalling of support while resisting pressure for greater direct involvement.

* * *

The Israeli military response to the October attack is unprecedented in scope and brutality, with a stated if probably unattainable objective of destroying Hamas. It is unclear as yet how the war will unfold, whether it will spread, and what Israel will do if its military objectives are or are not met. The prospect of a consequential Israeli strategic failure cannot be discounted. At a minimum, the war's human and other costs are likely to exceed anything that Israelis and especially Palestinians have endured in the past.

Notes

¹ For a detailed account of how the attack unfolded, see Jason Burke, 'A Deadly Cascade: How Secret Hamas Attack Orders Were Passed Down at

Last Minute', *Guardian*, 7 November 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/07/secret-hamas-attack-orders-israel-gaza-7-october>.

- ² See, for example, Emanuel Fabian, 'IDF: 9,500 Rockets Fired at Israel Since Oct. 7, Including 3,000 in 1st Hours of Onslaught', *Times of Israel*, 9 November 2023, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/idf-9500-rockets-fired-at-israel-since-oct-7-including-3000-in-1st-hours-of-onslaught/.
- ³ See, for instance, Yasmeen Serhan, 'Why Palestinians Fear Permanent Displacement from Gaza', *Time*, 2 November 2023, <https://time.com/6330904/palestinians-gaza-fear-permanent-expulsion/>.
- ⁴ See Mairav Zonszein, 'Settler Violence Rises in the West Bank During the Gaza War', International Crisis Group, 6 November 2023, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/israelpalestine/settler-violence-rises-west-bank-gaza-war>.
- ⁵ See 'Israel–Hammas War Fuels Anger and Protests Across the Middle East amid Fears of a Wider Conflict', CBS News, 18 October 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/israel-hamas-war-protests-middle-east/>.
- ⁶ See Jake Sullivan, 'The Sources of American Power', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 102, no. 6, November/December 2023, pp. 8–29, esp. pp. 22–3.
- ⁷ See, for instance, Daniel Edelson, 'Germany, U.S. Slam Netanyahu's Middle East Map Presented at UN', *ynetnews*, 26 September 2023, <https://www.ynetnews.com/article/b10ibyxt>.
- ⁸ Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes and Jonathan Swan, 'Early Intelligence Shows Hamas Attack Surprised Iranian Leaders, U.S. Says', *New York Times*, 11 October 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/11/us/politics/iran-israel-gaza-hamas-us-intelligence.html>.
- ⁹ See Nadeen Ebrahim, 'Hamas and Iran Are Longtime Allies. Did Tehran Help with Its Attack on Israel?', CNN, 10 October 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/09/middleeast/hamas-iran-israel-attack-analysis-intl/index.html>.



Political Implications of the Gaza War for the Middle East

Sara Nowacka

The escalation in Gaza and the strongly pro-Palestinian attitude of Arab societies forces Arab leaders to balance between declarative support for Palestine and the pursuit of their national interests. It also poses a challenge to Iranian-linked paramilitaries that want to avoid involvement in open warfare. The contrast between the West's pro-Israel stance and its verbal declarations of adherence to international law, in turn, serves Arab autocrats by undermining the credibility of democratic states as a normative force.

The Arab Position. Although [Arab decision-makers see the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories as a central issue in the context of the current escalation](#), differing attitudes towards Hamas and relations with Israel prevent them from taking a common position. An emergency meeting of the Arab League (combined with a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation), convened on 11 November, ended with condemnation of the Israeli attacks on civilians in the Gaza Strip and rejection of justifying them as self-defence. Eleven countries supported proposals for more radical measures, such as preventing the use of U.S. bases in Arab states to supply Israel with weapons. However, implementation of these measures is being blocked by opposition from, most likely, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Morocco, and Bahrain.

At the same time, Arab leaders stress that only a two-state solution will be able to prevent further waves of violence and the escalation they cause in the long term. In their view, the creation of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders also offers the greatest guarantee of securing Arab interests, that is, regional stability and reducing the risk of an influx of Palestinian refugees.

Egypt currently faces the greatest challenge in this regard. For this reason, it has so far only allowed the Rafah crossing to be opened to seriously injured and Palestinians with dual citizenship. This is linked to the situation in the Egyptian part of the Sinai Peninsula, where branches of ISIS and other

terrorist organisations remain active. Egypt fears that Palestinian refugees could become a target for recruitment by these groups and that tensions between the local and Palestinian populations could destabilise the Peninsula. The presence of fleeing Hamas members from the Strip could also politically strengthen Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood branch, seen as a threat to state stability. This approach is supported by other Arab states, as well as [many residents of the Strip](#) as they see the potential opening of the crossing as a step towards a forced Israeli takeover of its territories.

Gulf States' Interests. [The UAE and Bahrain, which normalised relations with Israel](#), expressed the closest position to Israel over the 7 October Hamas attack. Saudi Arabia, which held [normalisation talks with Israel](#), has also maintained a balanced position. These states see the development of relations with Israel as part of their rivalry with Iran, an economic transition, and a policy that allows them to cooperate more favourably with the U.S. on security issues. They also have a negative attitude towards Islamist organisations, reflected in the attitudes of Gulf societies towards Hamas: in 2023, only 17% of Emiratis surveyed and 10% of Saudis expressed a favourable opinion of Hamas. Therefore, in Saudi Arabia, unlike in other Arab states, entertainment and business events were not cancelled after the start of airstrikes on Gaza. This was to emphasise the kingdom's stability in the region, which reflects the

authorities' current priorities of transforming the kingdom and diversifying its sources of income.

At the same time, the Gulf states seek to highlight the negative effects of Western support for Israel. This is to allow them to maintain their credibility at the regional level. This is particularly important for Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman and *de facto* ruler of Saudi Arabia, who is seeking to [consolidate the state's role as a leader of the Arab world](#). Hence, he convened an extraordinary summit of the Arab League and, as part of his normalisation with Israel, wanted to propose an Arab plan to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict along the lines of the so-called Arab Peace Initiative of 2002 (also launched by Saudi Arabia). At the same time, he is using the situation in Gaza [to contest the dominant role of democratic states in shaping international relations](#). This was reflected, for example, in a speech by former Saudi intelligence chief Turki al-Faisal, who condemned both Hamas violence and Israeli actions. In doing so, he criticised the West's characterisation of Hamas attacks as "unprovoked", pointing to Israel's violation of international law.

Qatar, in turn, is using its positive relationship with Hamas, which is a subject of disagreement with other Arab states, to engage in mediation. The state has supported the release of hostages, as well as the opening of the Rafah border crossing to those with dual citizenship, allowing the evacuation of more than 1,000 people. In this way, the emirate is strengthening its credibility as an effective negotiator with most problematic partners. This is to reinforce the belief that its [independent policy towards states and organisations \(including Islamist ones\) in the region must be maintained](#).

Risk of Escalation. Prolonged hostilities and surge in Palestinian casualties increase the risk of regional escalation through growing popular discontent. The authorities of some Arab states fear that events in Palestine will serve to undermine the legitimacy of their governments, so they are stepping up anti-Israeli rhetoric, and some of them (e.g., Jordan, Bahrain) have withdrawn their ambassadors from Israel. The risk of pro-Palestinian demonstrations turning into anti-government protests is particularly high in Jordan, where more than half the population is of Palestinian origin and the scale of recent protests in front of the U.S. and Israeli embassies is unprecedented. This is why Queen Rania, who has Palestinian roots, criticised Western media during an appearance on CNN for their one-sided portrayal of the situation. Jordan also fears that Israel will take advantage of the situation to resettle West Bank residents in its territories, which the authorities have defined as a "red line".

The second risk factor remains the activity of Iranian-linked paramilitary organisations, or the so-called ["axis of resistance"](#). Since 7 October, clashes between the Israeli army and Hezbollah fighters at the "Blue Line" separating Israel and Lebanon have intensified. In Iraq, Iranian-linked paramilitary organisations have attacked U.S. bases, and Ansar Allah (Houthi) fighters from Yemen have attacked Israel. However, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah's speeches on 3 and 11 November indicate a lack of will to engage his and other organisations belonging to the "axis of resistance" on a larger scale. Although Nasrallah repeatedly indicated that the Hamas attack "exposed Israel's weakness", he did not declare an increase in action, stressing that it was "a Palestinian-only struggle". He justified the lack of greater involvement by the ongoing attacks on Israel. Nasrallah furthermore wants to avoid the spread of fighting into crisis-ridden Lebanese territory and, as a consequence, [a potential loss of support for Hezbollah](#).

Conclusions and Perspectives. Crucial to the Arab states' approach to the escalation in Gaza remain their national interests, which for the UAE and Saudi Arabia, for example, means continuing to strengthen cooperation with Israel. As a result, they are unable to develop a common official position on the war and proposals for ending it, which weakens Arab pressure to implement a two-state solution. In addition, it remains a challenge for states that have been active in combating Islamist parties for years (UAE, Egypt) to balance support for Palestine with criticism of Hamas. However, the Arab authorities will engage in de-escalation activities to consolidate their position in the region and push for a ceasefire.

At the same time, the Arab authorities are instrumentalising the situation in Gaza to legitimise their authoritarian mode of governance and divert attention from their cooperation with Israel. To this end, they highlight the inadequacy of the Western democracies' positions towards the Gaza war as not taking into account the recent years of systemic oppression to which the Palestinians have been subjected. They will use this criticism, for example, in their relations with countries of the [Global South](#) to undermine the influence of democratic states in shaping the international order. Given the negative impact of this rhetoric for building international solidarity with Ukraine, it is also in Poland's interest to maintain a nuanced position and support civilian victims on both sides. Openly criticising the negative impact of Israel's actions on the Middle East peace process and the chances of implementing a two-state solution will also increase the credibility of the EU and may reduce the effectiveness of the Arab rhetoric in international forums.



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What effect has the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict had on the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East?

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Introduction

In the past few years, we have seen a trend towards the normalisation of ties between Arab-Muslim states and Israel. Since the Abraham Accords in 2020, Israel has formally normalised ties with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan. In 2021, the Israeli ambassador to Singapore expressed Israel's interest to expand the wave of normalisation with the Muslim-majority states in Southeast Asia, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Perhaps most significantly, prior to October 7th this year, there were prospects of a normalisation agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, mediated by the United States. However, with the resurgence of conflict in Gaza, the political dynamics of the Middle East are set to shift again.

Since the end of the Cold War, the US has positioned itself as a hegemonic force in the Middle East, as seen in its military might and its capability to set political agenda among the region's most significant

actors. However, the ongoing armed conflict between Israel and Hamas is set to complicate regional dynamics in the Middle East, particularly between the US and Iran. Even while the truce between the two sides was underway to allow for the exchange of Israeli hostages with Palestinian prisoners, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has expressed his desire to continue Israel's ground offensive into Gaza to 'annihilate' Hamas¹. As such, the ongoing conflict stands to create challenges that are counterproductive to American and Israeli interests in the Middle East, and may damage its diplomatic standing with many in the Arab World. On the other hand, Iran may come out of the conflict with slight strategic gains, as the US, Israel, and its allies move towards isolation from the Arab world. This essentially opens opportunities for Iran to even the playing field with the US, if not just slightly.

For Indonesia, a more volatile and unstable Middle East resulting from the war in Gaza may also negatively affect its interests. This is particularly true given the strong economic and socio-religious connections that Indonesia has with the Middle East, given its status as the largest Muslim-majority state in the world. Challenges have already been raised in terms of protecting Indonesian citizens abroad, as there is a substantial Indonesian diaspora in both Israel and Palestine, as well as elsewhere in the region. As such, Indonesia must be wary of and prepare countermeasures in anticipation of the escalation of violence and geopolitical tensions in the Middle East.

Threats to US-Israeli interests in the Middle East

As is known, the US' primary geopolitical interests in the Middle East are to counter and preempt the activities of terrorist groups, prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction, to counter the influence of rival great powers, and to ensure the flow of oil into US and global markets. For Israel, it is to counter the regional and nuclear ambitions of Iran. The impact of the ongoing war in Gaza may prove counterproductive to these interests.

The impact of Israel's incursions into Gaza has killed tens of thousands and displaced millions, deprived the Gaza Strip of critical resources, and damaged the health infrastructure in the area. While it remains to be seen what concrete effect this may have beyond Palestine, it is simple to conclude that it may have a significant negative impact on regional security. One obvious consequence is the potential resurgence of transnational terror groups and attacks, particularly involving those who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause, or who have been impacted directly by the conflict in Gaza. Both Israel and the US are not strangers to militant groups who are sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Numerous attacks were conducted by such groups in the later 20th century as a reaction to the establishment of the state of Israel, as well as following the First Intifada in 1987. Notable attacks from this era include the Munich Massacre, in which Palestinian militants infiltrated the Olympic village in Munich and killed 2 Israeli olympians, and the hijacking of Lufthansa Flight 649, both in 1972. Intense violence and civil unrest also occurred on a number of occasions in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, notably following the Second Intifada in 2000, and the numerous conflicts in Jerusalem and Gaza in the 2010s.

A common denominator in the causes for these acts, particularly with the conflicts and civil unrest after the year 2000, is the harsh and inhumane treatment of Palestinians by Israeli authorities. Israeli authorities have historically relied on violent and coercive methods against the Palestinians, resulting in the discrimination and displacement of millions throughout its history. As such, due to the significant humanitarian impact the current conflict in Gaza has caused and the continued injustices brought upon the Palestinian people by Israeli authorities, we are likely to see an increase in transnational terror activity in the region and beyond, which may prove counterproductive to the US' interests in the Middle East.

¹ *Statement by PM Netanyahu* (Government of Israel, November 29, 2023), Israeli Prime Minister's Office, <https://www.gov.il/en/departments/news/spoke-statement291123>.

Secondly, the diplomatic relations between the US and Israel with the Arab and Muslim world may also be faced with a significant setback following this conflict. As has been mentioned, prior to October 7th we have seen a trend of Arab-Israeli normalisation, beginning with the Abraham Accords in 2020. This year, the US were also involved in talks to normalise Saudi-Israeli relations as well, in what would have been a tectonic shift in the geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East, and a significant blow to the strategic interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, the reaction from the Arab world and the broader international community towards the ongoing war in Gaza has been one of harsh criticism and condemnation, and may negatively impact the US' political sway in the Middle East for the foreseeable future.

Leaders from the Arab and Muslim world have also pointed to the West's double standards in dealing with the Palestinian conflict, and compared it to the quick condemnation and response against Russia following their invasion of Ukraine. They additionally also highlighted the selective application of international law and norms towards Israel, which Israel has violated on numerous occasions even prior to the ongoing war. Both of these sentiments were expressed in the Resolution against Israeli Aggression, which was adopted following the Joint Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit held in Riyadh². As such, diplomatic relations between the US and the Arab world may weaken significantly following the resolution of the war in Gaza. The US' objective of Saudi-Israeli normalisation is certainly off the table for the time being, allowing Iran the luxury of time to reassess their options in the region.

Slight strategic gains for Iran

On the other hand, the war in Gaza may open windows of opportunity for the Islamic Republic. Iran has positioned itself as a significant geopolitical player in the Middle Eastern region, and has served as a disruptive force and threat in particular towards the interests of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Prior to the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the US enjoyed friendly relations with the Shah of Iran, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who aligned Iran with the Western Bloc and the United States during the Cold War. The events of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 replaced Pahlavi with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and turned the pro-American monarchy into an Islamic theocracy, one which was a fervent opponent of the United States and the West. Since then, Iran has positioned itself as a threat to American and Saudi interests in the region, particularly in the realm of regional security.

One of the ways that the Islamic Republic exerts its influence in the Middle East is through a network of militant non-state actors. Its allies in the region include Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, the Assad regime in Syria, the Houthi Movement in Yemen, paramilitary groups in Iraq, and lastly, Hamas in Gaza. These groups have served as Iran's proxies in numerous armed and political conflicts mainly against Saudi proxies and Israel, in what has been described as a 'new Cold War' in the Middle East. However, this is not to say that Iran directly orchestrated the attack on October 7th, as Iran's proxies have traditionally acted independently, albeit with support from the Islamic Republic.

Regardless of Iran's direct involvement, the diplomatic impact of the war serves as a huge strategic blow towards the US, Israel, as well as Saudi Arabia, who have sought to increase Saudi-Israeli cooperation to counter Iran's regional and nuclear ambitions. While it is undeniable that Israel's military might is superior to Hamas³, it can also be argued that Hamas has successfully won the war of narratives, in that they have rallied the Arab and Muslim world against Israel and its allies, and simultaneously halted the trend towards the normalisation of Arab-Israeli ties.

² *Joint Arab Islamic Extraordinary Summit Adopts Resolution on Israeli Aggression against the Palestinian People* (Saudi Press Agency, November 12, 2023), Saudi Press Agency, <https://www.spa.gov.sa/en/N1996072>.

³ AJLabs, "The Israel-Hamas Military Balance," *Al Jazeera*, October 11, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/11/how-big-is-israels-military-and-how-much-funding-does-it-get-from-the-us>.

The Israel-Hamas war has thus driven a wedge between the US, Israel, and the Arab world, one which allows some wiggle room for the Islamic Republic to even the playing field. Israel is unlikely to expect friendly relations with any Arab or Muslim state in the foreseeable future, especially since they have indicated their desire to continue their offensive into Gaza. The US are unlikely to broker a peace deal that would unite their Saudi and Israeli allies against the Iranian threat. Further instability in Gaza will also demand significant attention from Israel and its neighbours, allowing Iran to focus its resources elsewhere. In that sense, Iran may gain a competitive edge against its rivals.

Despite this, the ongoing conflict is unlikely to assist Iran in achieving its greater regional objectives. While the US and Israel are set to become more isolated from the rest of the Arab world, Iran's regional standing has not changed, and its regional rivals have not disappeared. Qatar and Egypt's role in mediating the truce and hostage/prisoner exchange shows their diplomatic clout in the Palestinian issue. Saudi Arabia has expressed that prospects for Saudi-Israeli normalisation is not off the table.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the US and Israeli military presence in the Middle East has not disappeared. While their political and diplomatic standing have taken a significant hit, their hard power capabilities in the region remain. Because of this, Iran is not interested in an all-out war either between its proxies or directly with Israel and the US. Such a war would be a break in strategy, as Iran's proxies in the region are designed to deter the threat of Israel and the US, instead of instigating it. This is evident in Hezbollah's limited and restrained attacks against Israel from the Lebanon-Israel border, which have come in the form of targeted anti-missile and drone attacks towards the Israeli Defence Force. These attacks are designed primarily to deter the possibility of an attack on Tehran, as Iran lacks the capability nor will to face a combined Israeli-American offensive. In all, Iran's strategic gains from the Israel-Hamas war lies mainly in the prevention of further normalisation between Israel and its Arab neighbours, which buys the Islamic Republic time to reassess future strategies for the ever-changing political dynamics of the Middle East.

Implications for Indonesia

Indonesia and Palestine have enjoyed strong and positive relations since the mid 20th century. Palestine was one the earliest proponents of Indonesia's independence, which Indonesia reciprocated with similar support for the Palestinian cause, while simultaneously rejecting Israel's right to exist. As such, there has been significant socio-religious and cultural exchange between the two, as has been the case with Indonesia and the Middle East more broadly.

Due to these strong ties, Indonesia has also experienced the ramifications of the Israel-Hamas conflict, despite its geographical distance from the region. According to the Indonesian Embassy in Amman, Kingdom of Jordan, there were a total of 10 Indonesian citizens residing in Gaza at the start of the conflict in Gaza⁴. Data from the embassy also shows an additional total of 132 Indonesian citizens residing in Israel, though the embassy did not specify where specifically. As violence escalated in Gaza, the Indonesian Foreign Ministry scrambled to facilitate the evacuation of these citizens, as well as to ensure the protection of its citizens in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, given its close proximity to Israel. At the time of writing, the Foreign Ministry has successfully evacuated 7 Indonesian citizens from Gaza, and are currently in efforts to evacuate 1 more. The remaining two have elected to stay in Gaza as volunteer health workers. In addition to that, the Indonesian hospital in Gaza also experienced significant damage from Israel's ground offensive. The Indonesian-funded hospital was previously one of Gaza's largest medical facilities, and is currently said to be under the control of Israeli troops. Should violence escalate beyond Gaza, Indonesia's Foreign Ministry would have to take

⁴ *Penanganan WNI Terhadap Dampak Perkembangan Konflik Di Palestina - Israel*, October 12, 2023, Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, <https://www.kemlu.go.id/amman/id/news/26672/penanganan-wni-terhadap-dampak-perkembangan-konflik-di-palestina-israel>.

further steps to ensure the safety of its citizens in neighbouring countries as well.

Another important factor to consider when discussing the implications for Indonesia is the potential rise of domestic unrest and transnational terror groups. As is the case with the terror groups mentioned above, Indonesia has also experienced its share of terror attacks that were in part instigated by the occupation in Palestine. Indonesian society is also no stranger to anti-semitic acts, as seen in the public outcry against the opening of an Indonesian Holocaust museum in Tondano City, Sulawesi⁵. The infamous Bali bombings of 2002 serve as another example of this. Umar Patek, who had a role in the bombings in 2002, recently expressed in an interview that some members of Jemaah Islamiyah wanted revenge for the Israeli occupation of Palestine, as well as the attack on the Jenin Refugee Camp by Israeli Defence Forces in 2002⁶. In the case of domestic unrest, a clash between a pro-Israeli group and a pro-Palestinian group has already occurred in the city of Bitung⁷. As such, should violence continue against the Palestinians in Gaza, Indonesia should be wary of the implications that it may have at home.

Looking Forward

The way forward from this war for the Palestinian people remains to be seen. The humanitarian crisis that has been caused by Israeli forces in Gaza is undeniable, and a peaceful resolution to the conflict does not seem near. Its impact beyond Gaza also remains to be seen, as the violence and instability that has been seen in the area may spillover to other areas in the region. As mentioned, the conflict may have implications for the international system as a whole, as questions have been raised of the efficacy of international legal mechanisms in punishing Israel's actions. For Indonesia, it is imperative that they ensure the protection of their citizens both within Gaza and in its immediate vicinity, and also prepare countermeasures against terror groups at home. In some ways, the Palestinian issue has unfortunately been caught in the race for regional dominance amongst the region's most significant players. For Iran, Israel, and the US, and even Saudi Arabia, it may continue to be used as one of the battlegrounds in their geopolitical rivalry, at the cost of Palestinian lives.

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⁵ Sebastian Strangio, "Opening of Indonesian Holocaust Museum Met With Islamist Backlash," *The Diplomat*, February 4, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/opening-of-indonesian-holocaust-museum-met-with-islamist-backlash/>.

⁶ Aisyah Llewellyn, "Q&A: Bali Bomber on Crime, Punishment, and What Motivated Deadly Attack," *Al Jazeera*, November 11, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/11/qa-bali-bomber-on-crime-punishment-and-what-motivated-deadly-attack>.

⁷ Damar Iradat, "Ormas Dan Massa Pro Palestina Bentrok Di Sulut, Polisi Turun Tangan," November 25, 2023, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20231125230230-20-1029063/ormas-dan-massa-pro-palestina-bentrok-di-sulut-polisi-turun-tangan>.

Africa needs a stronger voice on resolving the Red Sea crisis

African countries' call for diplomatic solutions should be accompanied by AU action to protect the continent's interests.

ISS Today
By Timothy Walker
January 22, 2024

The Red Sea crisis is now a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) priority, with three meetings held this year already. Following several months of Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, a coalition of concerned countries [launched](#) military operations on 11 January to degrade Houthi maritime capabilities in Yemen.

The Houthis' campaign started shortly after the Israel-Hamas-Gaza conflict escalated in October 2023, in an apparent show of solidarity with Palestinians aimed at pressuring Israel into a ceasefire. After missiles against Israeli targets were intercepted by the United States (US) Navy, the Houthis started targeting ships – often with no link to Israel – sailing near the Yemeni coast.

The attacks – using missiles, drones and attempted boardings – have plunged the Red Sea into turmoil, with many companies halting shipping through the Bab-al-Mandab strait. This prompted the [creation](#) of the multilateral US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian and other naval deployments by countries such as France.

UNSC Resolution [2722](#), adopted on 10 January, demanded that the Houthis cease attacks and release all seafarers held hostage, noting the right of member states to defend their vessels. Whether the 11 January counter operations are in line with Resolution 2722 has garnered international attention, including from Sierra Leone, Mozambique and Algeria, the three non-permanent African UNSC members (A3).

The A3 emphasised the need for a diplomatic resolution, referencing the lack of a ceasefire in Gaza as a root cause. They also highlighted the humanitarian aspect, urging measures that prevent further escalation. Sierra Leone supported Resolution 2722, but Mozambique and Algeria abstained, citing insufficient recognition of links to the Gaza conflict.

The A3's stance recognises the broader implications of the Red Sea crisis on international trade and regional peace. But the three countries should re-engage with the issue, considering the major strategic importance of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden for Africa. There are several reasons why it's inadequate for the A3 to predicate the Houthi intervention primarily on the lack of a ceasefire in Gaza.

The Houthi rebels, backed by Iran, dominate northern Yemen, the southern Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb strait – a strategic maritime choke point because so much high-value global shipping chooses this route. And it's here that the Houthi have started to squeeze.

The attacks are causing many ships to be rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope, with disruptions to supply chains and higher costs. The immediate impact will be on Egypt's economy, which relies heavily on Suez Canal revenues. A prolonged decrease in canal traffic and income could strain its economy and stability. Egypt hasn't been outspoken on the issue – perhaps out of fear that its populace would interpret that as tacit support for Israel over Palestine.

Africa is already facing difficult economic [challenges](#). The effect on global supply chains will be higher costs and lower availability of goods across the board. Increased shipping costs due to longer routes or heightened insurance premiums can have a cascading effect on global trade and economies. This rise in expenditure trickles down to customers and imperils vital economic growth and recovery.

Houthi attacks could have security and environmental repercussions all around Africa. Attacks on oil tankers or accidents due to navigational errors carry the risk of oil spills that can devastate marine ecosystems and coastal communities' livelihoods.

The high risk of Western Indian Ocean pollution from oil and other hazardous substances has already [prompted](#) questions about the adequacy of African countries' contingency plans. More vessels calling at African ports, many of which are already [congested](#), could result in further delays, accidents such as oil spills during bunkering, and even wrecks.

Grain and fertiliser from Ukraine and Eastern Europe form a significant part of East Africa's total food imports, and the Houthi attacks put these at risk. Longer transit times will raise food prices and reduce availability.

The World Food Programme (WFP) also ships some grain to Somalia. Pirate attacks on WFP vessels in 2008 were the tipping point for international action against piracy. As naval task forces and governments focus on the Red Sea Crisis – and vulnerable ships pause or slow down to await orders – pirates will have many opportunities to strike again.

Although some Somali-based [pirates](#) appear to have attacked several ships over the past few months, a resumption of piracy on the scale of the 2008-2012 attacks is unlikely. Substantial counter-piracy capacity remains in the region, even if currently redirected towards the Yemen situation. More naval capacity is [expected](#) in the area too.

The call for diplomatic solutions requires the African Union Peace and Security Council (AU PSC) to play a greater role in helping African states navigate these uncharted waters.

Unlike its fellow [G20](#) members, the AU has been silent on the matter. A PSC meeting should be convened to, at the very least, hear recommendations from African initiatives such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC) and the Addendum to the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) New York Memorandum on Good Practices for Interdicting Terrorist Travel.

Although DCoC member states have been slow to implement the code, and its amendments aren't legally binding, it has an established information and coordination platform. DCoC actions – this year steered by South Africa – and GCTF measures are likely to become more necessary the longer Houthi

attacks persist. These steps could help coordinate counter-piracy initiatives and deter other groups from copying the Houthi strategy to commit acts of terrorism, smuggling or trafficking.

Preventing the spread of such practices, especially by groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia and Mozambique, is critical. The [proliferation](#) of Iranian weapons bound for Yemen that end up in the Horn of Africa already threatens regional security.

The PSC will likely be hamstrung by concurrent problems in the Horn, such as the Somalia-Ethiopia dispute and Sudan's civil war. Nevertheless, a united African response through sustained A3 and PSC calls and actions is needed to promote diplomatic solutions to the Red Sea crisis.

Prudence Means Fighting the Houthis Now

The Biden administration's hesitance to intervene decisively in the Red Sea is a big mistake.

Foreign Policy

By Steven Cook

December 29, 2023

Yemen's Ansar Allah—also known as the Houthis—poses a threat to commercial shipping in the Red Sea. From mid-November through mid-December, the group attacked at least [30 merchant ships](#) in the area, prompting most of the world's major shippers to reroute their vessels around the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa. The economic effects of these attacks have yet to be fully realized, but already [insurance rates](#) for shipping lines have doubled. Not only that, but circumnavigating Africa requires more time, fuel, and ships than routes through the Suez Canal, resulting in stretched supply chains and increased environmental damage.

Freedom of navigation is a core global interest of the United States. So how is it that the Houthis are getting away with rendering the Red Sea a no-go zone for all but a few shipping lines? It's ostensibly stunning that the Biden administration has allowed this happen—but in many ways it's not surprising at all. The hesitance results from the role Yemen now plays in the politics of U.S. foreign policy and prevailing fears the war in Gaza will become a regional conflict—but also from the longer-term trend of Washington having overlearned foreign-policy lessons of the recent past.

The civil war in Yemen is not well understood in Washington but has nevertheless been the subject of vehement debate inside the Beltway. Although Yemen's civil war between the government and the insurgent Houthis began in 2014 and the Saudis intervened a year later on the side of the Yemeni government, it was not until October 2018 that most members of Congress, pundits of all stripes, journalists, and foreign-policy analysts bothered to pay attention to the nasty conflict underway in one of the Middle East's poorest countries. It was that month when agents acting on the apparent orders of Saudi Arabia's crown prince murdered Jamal Khashoggi, a contributor to the *Washington Post's* opinion page. The hit happened against the backdrop of then-U.S. President Donald Trump's confrontation with elites, assault on American political institutions, and close ties with a variety of global authoritarians, chief among them the Saudi royal family. As a result, the twin outrages over Khashoggi's slaying and Trump's offensive to undermine the norms and principles of U.S. democracy became superimposed on the conflict in Yemen.

Lost in the simplistic anti-Saudi narratives that followed were the fact that the Houthis, who fight under the slogan "God is Great; death to America; death to Israel; damn the Jews; victory for Islam" are not the world's nicest group of people. They overthrew an internationally recognized government; [violate human rights](#); use [child soldiers](#); and have [imposed their version](#) of "Fiver" Shi'a Islam on the Yemeni population, persecuting those who resist. During the height of the civil war, the group also contributed to Yemen's humanitarian disaster by blocking ports through which

international aid was intended to flow, became fully aligned with Iran, and fired missiles and drones on Saudi and Emirati population centers with the sole intention of terrorizing civilians.

Through it all, however, [progressives](#) in [Congress](#) and a [variety of activists](#) tended either to overlook or minimize Houthi responsibility for Yemen's tribulations. Instead they agitated against American support for the Saudis and Emiratis, which became identified with Trump, his administration, his son-in-law, "maximum pressure" on Iran, and accommodation of Israel. Of course, the Saudi and Emirati governments have much to answer for their interventions, but among some in Washington there was a willful effort to give the Houthis a pass for their part in the destruction of Yemen. That is because the group's anti-Americanism, hostility to human rights, and own atrocities did not fit the preferred political narrative about Yemen, which had less to do with what was happening in that country than the political battles happening in Washington. It was a dynamic that carried over into the Biden administration and its early decision to reverse Trump's designation of Ansar Allah as a terrorist organization. For U.S. President Joe Biden to order strikes on the Houthis now—in what would surely be interpreted as an act of war in support of Israel—runs counter to much of what a growing constituency of the Democratic Party believes about Yemen.

Of course, not everything is narrative. The Biden administration is concerned that if it were to act against the Houthis, it would be widening the war in Gaza, a development it has otherwise worked hard to prevent. As a result, it has put the U.S. Navy in the area in a defensive posture. American forces will shoot down Houthi drones and missiles aimed at commercial shipping and by extension the global economy, but will not destroy Ansar Allah's ability to harass shipping. The recent [announcement of Operation Prosperity Guardian](#)—a multilateral effort to protect commercial shipping—is a manifestation of this reactive policy.

The White House's approach makes sense, but only in a limited way. If the president and his team are worried about the conflict expanding regionally, there must be pages missing from their briefing books. The Houthis (like Hezbollah in Lebanon) have already widened the conflict by targeting shipping in the Red Sea. The Biden administration also seems to misapprehend why the events in the Red Sea are happening. If it had a better understanding of the situation, it would know that a naval task force—no matter how formidable—will not by itself ward off attacks.

It was not unheard of for the Houthis to target shipping before the conflict in Gaza, but it seems that the Iranians encouraged them to incrementally escalate now in order to disrupt the global economy, which would put pressure on the United States and other major powers to rein in Israelis as it pummels Gaza and weakens Hamas. If Israel can actually incapacitate Hamas, it would be a significant strategic blow to Tehran, which is why the Israelis will resist at all costs international pressure to bring Israel's military offensive to an end—which is why the Houthis will not stop attacking shipping.

As a result, if the United States wants to protect freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and its environs, it is going to have to take the fight directly to the Houthis. There is precedent for this. Everyone remembers that in 1987, the United States agreed to reflag Kuwaiti tankers and provided U.S. naval escorts for those tankers after they came under near-constant harassment from Iranian forces in the

region. What many forget is that, in parallel, then-U.S. President Ronald Reagan ordered several military operations to destroy Iran's ability to disrupt freedom of navigation in the Gulf.

One can understand why Biden has been reluctant to take a similar step so far. The president has the responsibility to use the United States' awesome force judiciously. But to compel actors not to act—to deter them—sometimes requires a country to not just brandish its military forces but actually use them. Critics will no doubt argue that this prescription risks ensnaring the United States in yet another open-ended conflict in the Middle East. Fair point, though the search for a risk-free policy is as close to a unicorn as one can get in foreign policy. Besides, disrupting or destroying the Houthis' ability to disrupt shipping is hardly akin to the overambitious policies of the past aimed at regime change and remaking of societies. Rather, it's a move to protect a vital national interest.

Many in the American foreign policy community seem to have overlearned the lessons of the recent past. Either that or their analysis [begins and ends](#) with the idea that the United States is the problem in the Middle East. The fact remains that, as difficult as the last three decades have been for Washington there, the United States still has interests in the region and freedom of navigation is one of them. To be self-deterred in this instance is to be self-defeating.

Houthi Terror and the Global Threat to Freedom of Shipping: The Need for a Multinational Maritime Alliance

Manuel Trajtenberg, Yuval Eylon, Yigal Maor, and Alon Berkman |

December 25, 2023

Since the Hamas terror attack in the Negev on October 7 and the start of the war in Gaza, there have been escalating attacks by the Houthi terror organization, disrupting navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The stated aim of the organization, one of the most prominent Iranian proxies, is to harass and damage ships linked directly or indirectly to Israel, in response to Israel's operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. However, most of the Houthi attacks so far have damaged ships that have no link to Israel. In view of the centrality of the route through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal – a route taken by 12 percent of global maritime trade in goods, including cargoes of energy (oil, coal, gas, etc.), raw materials, and consumer goods – the Houthi attacks pose a threat to the global economy. An effective response requires a multinational maritime alliance led by the United States and joined by Israel and the pragmatic Sunni states in the region, similar to how the free world dealt with the threat of Somali pirates. The Abraham Accords, alongside the reassignment of US-Israeli military cooperation from the European command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), enable Israel to be an active and contributing partner in a maritime alliance of this nature.

Since the terror attack by Hamas on October 7 in the western Negev and the start of the Swords of Iron war in Gaza, a growing number of incidents by the Houthi terror organization have disrupted global navigation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The Houthis in Yemen, one of Iran's most important proxies in the Middle East, joined the "axis of resistance" against Israel and its "aggression" in the Gaza Strip and the region, and operate on two parallel channels: the first involves repeated ballistic missile and drone attacks on Israeli territory, particularly Eilat. So far these have been successfully neutralized by Israeli, US, and Saudi air defense systems. This threat, however, should not be underestimated, since no defense system is effective in all cases, and one successful strike could cause significant damage to people and property. The second and currently more significant channel is the

Houthi activity in the maritime realm. The organization has threatened to disrupt ships linked directly or indirectly with Israel, including ships that are partly or fully owned by Israelis, or ships making their way between Israel and Asia. So far, in most cases the Houthis have in fact attacked ships that have no link to Israel or Israeli/Jewish ownership. Therefore, these incidents should be viewed as a revival of marine piracy in the Red Sea, which was ostensibly eradicated in recent years, and as a threat to global trade and the global economy.

Global Trade and the Maritime Realm

Changes in global trade over recent decades, and the centrality of the route from Bab el-Mandeb to the Suez Canal within this system, highlight the threat posed by the Houthi activity to the global economy.

The importance of the maritime realm has increased in recent decades: it has assumed an expanded role in global trade, and in effect the global economy has taken to the seas. Almost 100 percent of Israel's foreign trade (in weight and volume) is transported at sea through its ports. Today's global trade, particularly in the field of liner shipping (container transportation), has morphed from a network of national shipping lines into a web of global and international matrices, unprecedented in their complexity and scope and in the size of the ships engaged. This revolution means that ships today carry cargoes for a range of international destinations, not just to one country.

In the framework of the revolution in maritime trade, the Arabian Sea in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, from Bab el-Mandeb in the south to the Suez Canal in the north, are important routes, with considerable effect on global supply chains. Indeed, it is hard to overstate the importance of these maritime routes for the global economy. Since its construction 150 years ago, the Suez Canal has become the main route for transporting goods between Asia and the countries of Europe and the Mediterranean. An estimated 12 percent of global marine trade traverses the route from Bab el-Mandeb to the Suez Canal, carrying cargoes of energy (oil, coal, gas, etc.), raw materials, and consumer goods. The total number of containers passing through the Suez Canal is equivalent to about 30 percent of the total global container trade, and worth about one trillion dollars annually. Israel is one of many countries in the region whose economy is dependent to a large extent on the safety of maritime trade in the Red Sea and through the Bab el-Mandeb route. In order to protect global trade, international law and its instruments have determined that these routes and others like it throughout the world must be open and safe for everyone, without question.

However, freedom of navigation in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea has been challenged since the start of the 21st century by piracy incidents launched by various groups. From 2006 to 2010 there was a sharp leap in the number of incidents threatening maritime trade through the Bab el-Mandeb strait by pirate groups from Somalia, who demanded ransom from the owners and operators of hundreds of ships that they boarded in the area of the Arabian Sea and the northwest of the Indian Ocean. An analysis by the World Bank in 2013 estimated the cost to the global economy of Somali piracy at \$18 billion, equal to a rise of one percent in the costs of global trade. In response to this threat, a multilateral task force was set up, led by the United States, to protect shipping routes, and 120 war ships from 20 different fleets were deployed in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea. These actions have managed to eliminate the Somali threat almost completely. However, in recent years there has once again been a rise in attempts to attack cargo ships on these routes, by countries and by terror organizations, characterized by a growing degree of violence, sophistication, and use of advanced weapons. Since October 7, 2023, the threats to the freedom of navigation have intensified, following piratical activity by Iran and its Houthi proxies.

The Threat from Iran and the Houthis to the Freedom of Navigation

Iran and its proxies have long threatened the freedom of global navigation and have steadily developed the capabilities and means to disrupt the maritime activity of countries around the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and the Persian Gulf. In the last two months, since the start of the war in Gaza, the Houthi terror army has significantly increased its provocations around the Red Sea. The Houthis comprise a Shi'ite-Zaydi terror organization that has been active in northwest Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula for about two decades. It numbers some 300,000-400,000 active members, and it is a central element of the Iranian "axis of resistance" in the Middle East, whose overall aims are the destruction of Israel, harm to US interests in the region, and undermining of moderate Sunni regimes that cooperate with the United States and Israel. The Houthi terror army demonstrates a wide spectrum of capabilities in the maritime dimension, where it is possible to discern Iranian influence, including attacking ships sailing to and from the Red Sea using USVs (Unmanned Surface Vehicles) and UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles), as well as planting naval mines and firing shore-to-sea missiles.

While Houthi rhetoric is directed against Israel and threatens ships linked to Israel, whether directly or indirectly, Houthi aggression has actually impacted a wide range of countries, and essentially threatens global maritime trade in general. For example, three ships damaged by the Houthis on December 3 had no link to Israeli trade, and were transporting cargoes to or from China. In another incident, the

Houthis took control of a car carrier called *Galaxy Leader* that was transporting automobiles between India and Turkey. The ship is British-owned, operated by a Japanese company, and flies the flag of the Bahamas, and its crew are from a range of nations. This is a clear example of the international nature of commercial ships today, making the identification of the nationality of a specific ship an extremely difficult, if not impossible task. In fact, commercial ships are practically a non-national means of transportation, serving the international community in general for global trade.

It is clear, therefore, that Houthi attempts to attack ships with a connection to Israel are a threat to all global maritime trade between Asia and the Mediterranean, Europe, and even the United States, passing through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal. It is already possible to see the signs of the Houthi threat in the discourse relating to global maritime trade and in the actions of companies operating in this field, some of whom have announced that they will divert their shipping routes and even extend them in response to the threat. In the near future, the physical damage to cargo ships is likely to lead to a further increase in war risk insurance premiums in the shipping market. In the extreme scenario, if large transportation companies decide to avoid crossing the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal and instead sail around Africa to the west, it is possible to predict huge disruptions of global supply chains and significant rises in the costs of international trade. The extra time required by ships choosing the route round Africa instead of the Suez Canal is about two to three weeks, according to the speed of the specific ship. As a result of the delay, countries and companies will have to invest in enlarging their stocks. An event that testifies to the dangers inherent in the Houthi threat is the obstruction of the Suez Canal for six days by the ship *Ever Given* in March 2021, which caused considerable international economic damage by delaying hundreds of ships trying to cross the Suez Canal, while others took the alternative route around Africa.

The challenges to the freedom of navigation and the global economy have intensified following recent statements by the Houthis, in which they threatened to create a de facto maritime blockade by attacking every vessel sailing toward Israeli ports. With this rhetoric the Houthis have significantly expanded the number of ships under threat. International companies will find it hard to stop services to Israeli ports, when even transshipment or announcing a “termination of voyage”¹ in a port outside Israel will make them a legitimate target in the eyes of the Houthis. The escalation of the threats from the Houthis and their

¹ The ability of a cargo ship to unload its cargo in a different port from the one stated in the bill of lading (the transportation contract) for reasons defined in the contract, including war, force majeure, and more.

international implications were brought into greater focus after the attack on the French military vessel (*FS Languedoc - D653*), which intercepted two drones aimed at it about 70 miles northwest of the area controlled by the Houthis. This apparently marks a big step forward in the Houthi threat to global maritime trade, which will demand special attention from the international community in the near future.

Addressing the Houthi Maritime Threat

In view of the global nature of the Iranian and Houthi threat to shipping routes in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, a coordinated and determined multi-national strategy is required, as was used successfully in the past in the struggle against Somali piracy. A failure of the free world to respond in a clear and resolute manner to the Houthi threats will damage global maritime trade and set a dangerous precedent of succumbing to terror on the seas, thus giving legitimacy to actions by other countries and organizations designed to disrupt the free passage of vessels at other chokepoints based on political discrimination.² Therefore, the required response to Iranian-Houthi aggression is a multi-national marine alliance led by the United States and with the participation of other countries, including pragmatic Sunni countries in the region.

In an encouraging development, on December 19, the United States launched a multinational maritime task force to safeguard ships passing through the shipping lanes in the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea from Iranian-Houthi threats. The initiative, named Operation Prosperity Guardian, was joined by France, the United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Australia, Greece, and Bahrain, among other countries. The task force also includes contributors that have not been named. This is a welcome development that Israel should support.

The Abraham Accords, together with the reassignment of US-Israeli military cooperation from the European Command (EUCOM) to the Central Command (CENTCOM), enable Israel to become an active partner in the new maritime alliance. The Israeli navy has a large variety of vessels, capabilities, and units that can participate in a wide range of task forces, from humanitarian missions, through assistance and the securing of freedom of navigation in threatened areas, to tasks of building situational awareness or the collection of intelligence, to obstruction of maritime terror activity and weapons smuggling. Maritime forces could operate overtly and covertly, using a combination of various fleets in the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and other places. All these are of course very relevant

² Chokepoints: between seas/oceans and other geographically restricted sailing routes whose blockage damages free maritime trade.

to tackling the threat from Iran and its proxies. In addition, the security industries of Israel are at the forefront in a range of maritime technologies and can make an important contribution to any alliance.

Implementation of the proposed policy through the advancement of marine diplomacy as a tool for intensifying and expanding the Abraham Accords at a time when they are challenged by the war in Gaza could help Israel turn the Houthi threat into a strategic opportunity. Maritime diplomacy is considered an effective tool for promoting cooperation between companies, thanks to the shared language of seafarers that permits them to bypass existing diplomatic obstacles.

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Armed Naval Multilateralism in the Red Sea

By Alan Chong

SYNOPSIS

Operation Prosperity Guardian was established in mid-December 2023 as a coordinated naval patrol operation to counter Houthi rebel attacks on shipping in the Bab-el-Mandeb strait in the Red Sea. This is a welcome instance of armed naval multilateralism.

COMMENTARY

On 18 December 2023, US Defence Secretary Lloyd Austin announced the launch of Operation Prosperity Guardian. One might quibble about the label, but it was apt in many respects. This naval policing operation involving an initial 13 countries in varying capacities was aimed at protecting the shipping lanes that run from the Suez Canal through the Red Sea, passing through a narrow strait named Bab-el-Mandeb close to the Yemeni coast, before proceeding to the high seas.

Trouble started as early as late November 2023 when Houthi rebels fighting an insurgency in Yemen [seized](#) British and Japanese owned merchant vessels. By early December, the Houthis had launched drones and missiles at merchant ships of different flags, including three Israeli commercial vessels. Things escalated from there.

As of the first week of January 2024, the Houthis have proven their resilience by launching repeated attacks on third and fourth party shipping including a [Singapore-registered](#) Maersk container ship bound for Egypt's Port Suez. A Houthi spokesperson claimed that the Singapore-flagged vessel was attacked after it failed to heed warnings from its personnel.

Officially, through their social media announcements on Al-Jazeera satellite television, the Houthis made it clear that their action was in support of the people of Gaza and

aimed at constraining Israel's bombardment of the Gaza Strip and its denial of food, medicine and other aid to the displaced population.

For the rest of the world's economy, this was not simply an inadvertent act to widen the Israel-Hamas war that began on 7 October 2023, but a violent attempt to hold the global economy hostage to a purported united front comprising the Iranian-supplied Houthis, Hamas and Iran itself.

Faced with this scenario of calculated escalation by the Houthis, we are witnessing what is in effect the equivalent of the creation of a posse of pro-multilateralist states: an armed naval multilateralism to secure the sea lanes of communication and trade between the Red Sea and the rest of the transoceanic sea routes.

Miscreants of an Interconnected Global Economy

By linking the prosperity of the world's seaborne commerce to the fortunes of the Israel-Hamas war, the Houthis and their supporters have embarked on a campaign to sabotage maritime commerce. Their message is clear: stop or curb Israel's military campaign in Gaza or risk retaliation against the world's seaborne trade.

The [statistics](#) bear out the scale and seriousness of this threat. Twelve per cent of the world's trade passes through the Suez Canal and transits the Red Sea passing through Bab-el-Mandeb onto the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and vice versa towards the Mediterranean, North Africa and Europe. Forty per cent of Asia-Europe trade is conducted via this seaborne route.

Analysts have also estimated that one million barrels of oil transit this route daily, along with 30 per cent of global container volume under non-threatening circumstances. Additionally, the Houthis' actions of randomly damaging, or seizing, Israel-bound and Israeli-associated cargo ships, generate a disproportionate effect in the diversion of world trade.

By mid-December 2023, major [shipping companies](#) such as MSC, Maersk, COSCO, CMA CGM Group and Hapag-Lloyd, among others, were already announcing improvised fallback shipping routes that round the Cape of Good Hope for both Europe and Asia bound ships. This diversion adds weeks to the delivery of goods and mineral resources transported by sea. Even BP Oil temporarily suspended its tankers from transiting Bab-el-Mandeb.

The Responsibilities of Leadership

The United States has announced Operation Prosperity Guardian as a coordinated naval patrol to fend off pirate actions by the Houthis at Bab-el-Mandeb. In this endeavour, the US Navy enjoys varying degrees of overt support by twelve other concerned states to date: the United Kingdom, Australia, Bahrain, Canada, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Seychelles, Singapore and Sri Lanka. These represent a good sample of major trading economies and seafaring states.

It has been reported that an [additional ten states](#) have privately signalled strong

support for the US-led effort while preferring to remain anonymous so as not to be seen taking sides for or against Israel and Hamas.

The importance of US leadership in this armed naval multilateralism is crucial. The United States will be bearing the brunt of responsibilities and serving as the public leader of a multilateral effort to defend the right of all economies to undertake seaborne commerce through the Red Sea without interference.

This is the laudable cost of supporting multilateralism during a time of war and at a crucial juncture where the world's economies have yet to recover fully from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Policing the Seas

Policing the world's oceans, seas and straits in the name of multilateralism has many beneficent historical precedents. Alfred Thayer Mahan had famously memorialised the maritime prowess of the British Empire over its rivals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in this regard.

In the age of high imperialism, Britain articulated and enforced an open access trading order through its constant naval presence all over the globe, albeit for self-serving purposes. In this respect, Britain stood for trade with both neutrals and rivals and profited from it while privileging those economies that traded under its naval umbrella, the benefit of obtaining goods and resources they could not produce themselves.

All maritime powers that predated Britain and the United States had also practised the naval strategy of convoying their commercial vessels and interdicting hostile craft in regional waterways and on the high seas. Operation Prosperity Guardian – so named with the global economy in mind – follows in these footsteps.

The [hardware deployed](#) by the three biggest naval powers of the coalition (the US, UK and France) with bases in the vicinity of Bab-el-Mandeb include advanced frigates and stealth destroyers capable of electronic surveillance and pre-emptive strikes against small speedboats, drones and missile launches by the Houthis. This is what armed naval multilateralism looks like today. It is also what is needed to tamp down the negative side-effects of the Israel-Hamas war on the global economy.

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Arab states must act now and plan for ‘the day after’ the war in Gaza

Calls for a ceasefire have yet to yield results. Those in the region must prioritize a political settlement.

Chatham House Expert Comment

By Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam

January 4, 2024

Almost three months into the devastating war in Gaza that has seen over 21,000 Palestinian deaths, no Arab state individually or collectively has yet to articulate any plan or strategy to manage the fallout from the war or to lay out a pathway to support Palestinian statehood.

Under pressure from their public’s strong support for Palestine, careful not to endorse Israel’s military campaign, and wary of divisive diplomatic and regional challenges ahead – including the risk of a broader regional conflict that could involve Hezbollah and Iran – states across the region have instead prioritized calls for a ceasefire and elevated the humanitarian catastrophe as the concern of first order.

Of course, they are right – saving lives and preventing ‘population transfer’, [as has been suggested by some of Israel’s far-right ministers](#), must be the priority, but that should not preclude regional states from working together in support of Palestinians.

Nor should it prevent them from building on the successes of last year’s series of de-escalations: between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the UAE and Turkey, and before that between the ‘gang of four’ – Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt – and Qatar. To preserve these successes and to demonstrate regional agency, the time for states to act is now.

Risks of delaying potential peace prospects

Countries in the region had hoped that this ceasefire-focused plan would pressure the Biden administration to impose urgency and restraint on Israel. As part of this strategy, Arab states have refused to discuss ‘day after’ reconstruction nor political or security scenarios and have instead outsourced these discussions to the Biden administration.

Those states have also not wanted to legitimize Israel’s military actions and refuse to bankroll reconstruction efforts without guarantees that Israel will not initiate further bombing cycles. Only with a ceasefire in hand, they say, will they begin considerations of their part in the complex political settlement process.

This strategy, however, is fraught with risks that could delay any potential prospect of peace – including further deferring the broader vision of regional integration that had included Israel.

It is a dangerous mistake to assume that a peace process will naturally emerge from this war, as many, including political leaders, seem to be doing. Without serious regional planning and investment in Gaza, a potential outcome that could materialize is lawlessness and a Palestinian political vacuum alongside the grim reality of famine, disease and death.

Israel on its own will not bear responsibility for this. Arab states will too be seen as liable. To prevent this scenario from emerging, investment in 'the day after' must begin today.

Threat of regional escalation

More broadly, regional states were caught off guard by Hamas's 7 October attacks that have (for now) slowed the broader vision of region-wide de-escalation and the integration efforts of the past few years.

In building these rapprochements, leaders across the region had prioritized pragmatic national interests. The Abraham Accords normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain, Syria's readmittance into the Arab League, reconciliation amongst Gulf Cooperation Council states, and Iran and Saudi Arabia's détente – all ignored Palestinian statehood.

A historic Israeli–Saudi normalization agreement underpinned by Washington was also meant to build economic and regional integration. The current approach, if not altered, will most certainly jeopardize these gains.

Waiting until a ceasefire is obtained will further delay a time-sensitive and complex political settlement process that can be easily obstructed by regional escalation which is already underway in the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and Bab el Mandeb, and those sponsored by Hezbollah on the Lebanese border. Moreover, the regional anger about the death toll and destruction in Gaza will not easily be overcome and risks delaying things further.

No certainty of a ceasefire

Gulf states must also consider the situation as it exists: while the Biden administration is gradually pressuring Israel to alter its operations in Gaza, a ceasefire is still not imminent. Hostage negotiations between Israel, Qatar, Hamas and the US continue, but there is no certainty that such a process will bring about a ceasefire.

The recent killing of Hamas leader Salah al Arouri in Beirut showcases the broader regional risks that are only increasing. Waiting on Washington alone or until Israel achieves its impossible goal of uprooting Hamas will also not deliver.

The Biden administration on its own cannot manage 'day after' scenarios in a critical US election year that could see Donald Trump return as Biden's opponent. The US is seen as the only power that can impose a ceasefire and a political resolution on Israel and the Palestinians.

It will take an almighty injection of political will to get the Biden administration to restrain Israel – especially during a presidential election year – and creative and adventurous diplomacy to work with all leaders representing the Palestinians.

In an ideal world, Israelis and Palestinians would work it out among themselves or regional powers would propose and encourage both parties to come together to resolve the crisis – there would be no need for external powers to impose anything on the Middle East region. Western intervention has rarely ended well, so far.

Regional states bear responsibility

Painful lessons can and should be learned from Western-led interventions in Iraq and Libya, where ‘day after’ plans were either lacking or poorly conceived and implemented. If the US is willing to do the diplomatic heavy lifting of imposing a ceasefire, which no other country can do, and set the parameters for negotiations, then regional states also have a responsibility.

They, with their ties to both parties, are in a strong position to not only support what could look like a 1991 Madrid-style peace process, but play an instrumental role in implementing it.

This is the reality even for those states in the region that feel unable to bring an end to the war in the Gaza through diplomatic means – Jordan and Turkey have withdrawn their ambassadors to Tel Aviv and made clear their horror of Israeli policy. They too should therefore begin to plan for the discredited notion of the ‘day after.’

The Gulf states have long argued persuasively that they should never have been left out of the Iran nuclear agreement negotiations. In the years before the war in Gaza, they called for and succeeded in acquiring greater agency to manage their own neighbourhood. They are therefore now in a strong position to take on the responsibility of handling their region’s security issues – including supporting Palestinian statehood.

Five scenarios for the future of Gaza

In the midst of the current war, there is still no concrete plan for the future of Gaza. Preparations for the day after need to be made now. Muriel Asseburg and René Wildangel talk about possible scenarios and what needs to happen

Essay by [Muriel Asseburg & René Wildangel](#)

The mass killings and atrocities committed by Hamas and other Gazan militant groups on 7 October compelled [Israel](#) to declare war, which has already lasted nearly four weeks. Israel's central war aims, [according to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu](#), are to retaliate and crush Hamas in the Gaza Strip. This will not be easy.

Speaking before the Knesset Foreign Affairs Committee on 20 October, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant [announced](#) that the Israeli military operation against [Hamas](#) could last for months. But after the military mission, he said, "a new security regime" will be established in Gaza and "Israel's responsibility for day-to-day life in the Gaza Strip" will end.

He did not explain what this post-war situation could look like in concrete terms, who would govern the coastal territory, or who would provide security.

The issue of the future cannot be postponed

At present, international attention is naturally focused on efforts to prevent a regional military escalation, free the more than 200 hostages still held in captivity by Hamas and alleviate the catastrophic humanitarian situation of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip.

Nevertheless, the question of possible future perspectives for Gaza and its civilian population of 2.3 million cannot be postponed. Israel's military action is quickly determining facts on the ground and the international community needs to simultaneously define its own role and responsibilities.

Five possible scenarios

At present, five different scenarios for how the situation in Gaza could develop seem most plausible. These scenarios are not mutually exclusive and could well overlap or follow one another.

Scenario 1: Tightened closure

The first possibility is at least a partial return to the prewar status quo, but with an even more heavily secured border between the Gaza Strip and Israel, enlarged restricted zones inside Gaza, and a continuation of the nearly complete blockade [imposed by Israel on 8 October](#).

This scenario could result from the acknowledgement that Hamas – which is deeply rooted in parts of Palestinian society and boasts an extensive tunnel system, numerous military and political cadres, as well as leadership structures spread abroad and in the West Bank – cannot be defeated militarily in a highly asymmetric conflict, despite far superior Israeli firepower.

In this scenario, Israel would have to live with a weakened Hamas in the Gaza Strip but would not be willing to enter into indirect agreements with it, as it had done in recent years. Moreover, Israel would seek to further

strengthen its military and intelligence control on land, sea, and air and permanently close all border crossings into Gaza.

This would mean no imports and exports to the Gaza Strip, no permits for Gazan laborers and businesspeople to enter Israel, and no medical referrals to the West Bank or Israel. Israel would also permanently cut off electricity and drinking water, forcing the Gaza Strip to secure all such necessary supplies via Egypt.

Barely viable even before the war

Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen [announced](#) that at the end of this war, "not only will Hamas no longer be in Gaza, but the territory of Gaza will also decrease". The current massive bombardments in the northern and eastern Gaza Strip suggest that this is primarily about a significant expansion of the [no-go areas along the border fence with Israel](#). A larger part of the northern Gaza Strip, including its historic capital, Gaza City, could remain mostly destroyed and uninhabitable, with all economic life and agricultural activity halted.

Even before the outbreak of the latest war, [around 35% of Gaza's agricultural land could not be cultivated](#) due to the restricted zone imposed by Israel. The heretofore heavily circumscribed access to Gaza's coastal waters could also be completely denied, thus bringing fishing to a standstill – one of [Gaza's](#) few, already severely reduced sources of income and food supply.

UN warnings

The Israeli closure of Gaza, which has been ongoing since 2006, but was intensified after Hamas came to power in 2007, combined with repeated armed confrontations, has already [thoroughly destroyed the local population's livelihood](#).

Even before the current military escalation, [80% of were Gazans dependent on international support](#). Of course, Hamas' prioritisation of its military capacities and the maintenance of the "resistance" also contributed to this situation.

Reconstruction and, above all, economic recovery would be impossible under the conditions of a total blockade, making local residents completely dependent on humanitarian aid. A considerable part of the population would remain permanently internally displaced.

Israel would try to shift the responsibility for feeding the population to Egypt and the international community. Gaza would remain permanently separated from the West Bank; a two-state settlement would become impossible.

Scenario 2: A new Nakba

An even bleaker scenario involves the permanent expulsion of hundreds of thousands or even millions from the Gaza Strip. Palestinians fear a new [Nakba](#) (Arabic for catastrophe).

This is the name given to the flight and displacement of the Palestinian civilian population in connection with the establishment of Israel and the Israeli-Arab war of 1948. Many were filled with trepidation at [Israel's October 13 call](#) for the evacuation of northern Gaza, without a time limit or guarantee of return.

Meanwhile, new tent camps have sprung up in the town of Khan Younis, in the central Gaza Strip, to house some of those fleeing the north. Fears are also fueled by [corresponding demands](#) from representatives of the Israeli right who explicitly evoke the Nakba.

Likud deputy Ariel Kallner, for example, tweeted on 17 October, "Right now, one goal: Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of [19]48.

A Nakba in Gaza and a Nakba for anyone who dares to join!"

Evacuation to the Sinai?

Deputy Speaker of the Knesset Nissim Vaturi, also of the Likud party, [demanded](#), "Nakba?! Expel them all. If the Egyptians care so much for them – they are welcome to have them wrapped in cellophane tied with a green ribbon."

Moreover, an internal paper from the Coordinating Ministry for the Intelligence Services [recommends](#) the "evacuation of the civilian population from Gaza to Sinai" as an "executable option" that would "yield positive, long-term strategic outcomes for Israel". Tellingly, Prime Minister Netanyahu [lobbied Europeans](#) to pressure Egypt into accepting refugees from Gaza. Reversing an earlier stance by the United States government, the National Security Council's Strategic Communications Coordinator [John Kirby announced that](#) the U.S. would talk to Egypt about the possibility of hosting Palestinians fleeing the Gaza Strip.

Arab states have made it clear that they are not willing to take in Palestinian refugees as this could once more result in their permanent displacement. Yet a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Gaza could incite a mass rush to the Rafah border crossing with Egypt that the latter would struggle to contain even through force.

Refugee camps would then spring up in the Sinai, and new migration routes to Europe would quickly emerge. The Gaza Strip would be partially depopulated and the future of those who remain uncertain.

Scenario 3: Permanent re-occupation

A third outcome could entail [a permanent \(or long-term\) Israeli re-occupation, possibly including a return of settlers to](#) the Gaza Strip, as some politicians of Israel's religious-right [already demanded](#) before the current war.

In view of the above-mentioned statements of the Israeli defence minister, this scenario seems to contradict the government's interests, however. It would expose Israeli troops (and settlers) to attacks from insurgents operating among an alienated population and would increase rather than decrease Israel's responsibilities and costs.

Still, long-term occupation might become a default option if no other actor is willing or capable to assume responsibility for control of the Gaza Strip and provide lasting security toward Israel.

Scenario 4: International troops and administration

Scenario four would involve the deployment of a robust international force to ensure comprehensive disarmament and security, with the Gaza Strip placed under an international interim administration. This would require a United Nations Security Council resolution under Chapter 7.

This seems rather unlikely in the foreseeable future given the deadlock between the council's veto powers – the U.S. on the one hand and Russia and China on the other. Moreover, international enthusiasm for robust peace-keeping missions has also declined significantly in recent years.

Even if an international agreement could be reached, Israel would in all likelihood still insist on its own security measures, buffer zones, and an impermeable border (as in Scenario 1).

Moreover, the U.N. and/or troop-contributing states would demand that a deployment be embedded in a political conflict resolution process and, in the medium term, followed by a transfer of control over Gaza to the Palestinian Authority (PA). Israel is likely to refuse both, especially under the current religious-right government. Reconstruction and economic recovery would remain difficult under such conditions.

Scenario 5: Negotiated opening

Finally, there remains the possibility of a controlled opening of the Gaza Strip within the framework of a regional arrangement and as a first step toward a negotiated settlement. In this case, too, there would have to be regional and international security guarantees.

In addition to the U.S., Israel's neighbours Egypt and [Jordan](#), but also Qatar and those states that have normalised their relations with Israel within the framework of the [Abraham Accords](#) – first and foremost the United Arab Emirates and Morocco – would have to assume responsibility.

This would also give the latter the opportunity to underpin the accords, which are [controversial among their own populations](#), in a way that allows for an actual peace dividend.

[Saudi Arabia](#), which harbours ambitions as a regional leader and with which Israel still wants to cooperate more closely, could also play a prominent role. Qatar and Egypt would have to employ their leverage to influence any remaining militants in Gaza. In return for relinquishing power, exile could be agreed for remaining leaders.

No security without a political solution

Under international law, the Gaza Strip (as well as East Jerusalem) is part of the territory of the "State of Palestine", as the International Criminal Court [affirmed](#) in February 2021. Accordingly, under this scenario, the administration would have to be transferred to the PA. The latter would have to be empowered and toughened up in order to be able to fulfill that role, however.

It would also need new democratic legitimation – in Gaza Strip as well as the West Bank – as no elections have been held at the national level since 2006. Indeed, [about half of those Palestinians eligible to vote today](#) have never had the chance to cast their ballot.

At the same time, the PA's remaining personnel resources in Gaza, which include some 60,000 former PA employees who have been sitting at home since 2007, could be used and contribute their administrative experience toward the rebuilding effort. Civilian employees of the current administration who were not involved in Hamas' military activities should also be integrated.

The previous security regime was based solely on military approaches. Yet Israeli drones, reconnaissance balloons, watchtowers, fences, walls, or recurrent military operations did not prevent Hamas' devastating October 7 attacks.

A new security regime must, therefore, be based on a politically negotiated settlement. This would speak to Israeli and Palestinian defence and safety concerns as well as ensure the free movement of people and goods, thereby also enabling reconstruction and sustainable development.

What needs to happen now

The Israeli government has not yet presented a plan for the day after the military confrontation. It is therefore all the more important that relevant international actors position themselves on Gaza's possible future.

Otherwise, the unconditional solidarity with Israel that the U.S. and some European governments have pledged could be interpreted as a *carte blanche* for Israel's government and specifically its [right-wing religious components](#).

This would be fatal if Israel consequently opted for one of the first three scenarios, which in various ways run counter to international law and offer neither development prospects for the population of the Gaza Strip nor promise lasting security for the Jewish state.

New breeding ground for militant groups?

Rather, they would undoubtedly constitute fertile ground for existing and new militant groups. The risk of further regional destabilisation, especially in Egypt, and regional conflagration would also remain extremely high.

This leaves the fourth and fifth scenarios, both of which could offer new perspectives for Gaza and its predominantly young population.

The core component would have to be a new security regime oriented toward the long-term, effective protection of the Israeli population from attacks, the safety of Gazans, and the realisation of their right to free movement and development.

This can only be guaranteed within the framework of a negotiated arrangement and a regionally and internationally coordinated and supported transitional regime.

The U.S. and the Europeans should take the lead in bringing about such an arrangement and act urgently, as a prolonged military campaign might reduce its prospects. In doing so, they could build on past proposals and mechanisms, such as the European Union's Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) to Rafah, which was created in 2005 to monitor that crossing.

Seeking a sustainable long-term arrangement

Although unable to carry out its original purpose since 2006, the mission, with an annual budget of over 2 million euros, remains on "stand-by" and could play a role once more. Egypt would have to effectively stop the smuggling of arms through the remaining tunnels under the border.

And instead of the sea blockade, which the Israeli navy has repeatedly enforced by firing, amongst others, on fishing boats, there could be an international patrol, similar to the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) Maritime Task Force, operating only 200 kilometers to the north.

The latter effectively prevents (at least in its area of operation) the supply of arms by sea to Lebanese militant groups.

A similar mission off the coast of Gaza could facilitate important development opportunities by enabling fishing and orderly maritime trade while also permitting Gaza to access its own Mediterranean resources, especially the natural gas deposits off its coast.

The shock of the October 7 atrocities and the resulting high risk of a regional and even international conflagration should serve as a wakeup call to the international community that it is high time to join forces to find a viable arrangement for Gaza.

That could be a first step toward finally settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and ensuring peaceful Jewish-Arab co-existence on the entire territory of Israel and Palestine.

[Muriel Asseburg und René Wildangel](#)

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