

Between Swords of Iron and the Al Aqsa Deluge: The Regional Politics of the Israel-Hamas War

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Bottom Line

- The Hamas-Israel war has derailed but not destroyed the trend towards regional de-escalation and integration.
- Hamas' "success" has revived fears in the region of a Muslim Brotherhood resurgence and led aspiring regional powers to compete to steer the Muslim world's attitudes and responses to the crisis .
- Egypt and Jordan, Israel's peace partners, face particular domestic challenges that both constrain and incentivize engagement in the crisis. Egypt's strategic interests have led to a discreet, but more active role, while Jordan's domestic pressures have led it to keep the crisis at arm's length.
- The United Arab Emirates and other conservative Arab states emphasize the need to prevent escalation, to limit civilian deaths, and to implement an immediate ceasefire, and at least publicly, minimize the relevance of "who started" the war.

Until October 7, it seemed there was a positive dynamic in the Middle East. A slew of *detentes* took place in the region in the past two years: between Turkey and Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and even Egypt; between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Turkey, and Iran; between the United Arab Emirates and these same countries; between most Arab states and Syria. A key, and perhaps the most noteworthy, component of this

regional process was normalization—the “Abraham Accords”—between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and (less clearly) Sudan, as well as the growing possibility of formal ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

In Israel, normalization was presented as a choice by the conservative Arab states to no longer let the Palestinian issue dictate their agenda vis-à-vis Israel. Its Arab government partners’ motives were rather more complex. While they despaired over the state of the Palestinian polity and detested Hamas and its rule in the Gaza Strip, they saw improved relations with Israel not only as a means of promoting their security and economic interests and promoting regional integration, but also as a means of nudging Israel to improve the lot of the Palestinians. Hamas’ action was aimed at disrupting the positive dynamic of regional accommodation and integration. It aimed apparently, *inter alia*, at goading Israel into a military response which would stir up the Arab and Muslim publics, create internal challenges to the regimes with relations with Israel, and roll back the normalization process.

October 7 and the Battle for State Stewardship of the Muslim World

Hamas’ war against Israel has also revived the simmering competition for leadership in the Muslim world. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, religion and nationalism fueled the competitions for power and influence in the region. There were two primary ideological fault lines: the Sunni-Shia rivalry and the intra-Sunni rivalry over the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Sunni monarchical regimes in the region viewed as a revolutionary threat to their authority. Hamas’ October 7 attacks have re-awakened these ideological schisms in the region. Many of the conservative Arab states—Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—do not wish to see the Muslim Brotherhood re-mobilized or the Iran-led “Resistance Camp” ascendant as a result of Hamas’ October 7 gambit. In particular, these states saw Muhammad Deif’s Islamic call to arms as a destabilizing threat to regional stability and prosperity.

The Sunni-Shia divide played out first in the civil war in Iraq (2005–2007), a civil conflict in Lebanon (2006–present), and civil wars in Syria (2011–present) and Yemen (2014–2022). The general perception among the Sunni monarchical regimes was that the Islamic Republic of Iran was exploiting civil unrest and instability to upend the status quo of Sunni primacy across the region. The Iranian interventions in Iraq (2003) and Syria (2011) fueled this perception. This Sunni insecurity fed a growing region-wide rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and manifested itself in the Saudi interventions in the uprising in Bahrain in February 2011 and in Yemen’s civil war in April 2015. The intra-Sunni rivalry emerged following the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings. Qatar and Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led government in Turkey backed Egypt’s new Islamist government in Egypt as an expression of the popular will. In July 2013, a military coup, widely believed to be supported by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood

government in Egypt, restoring the military's dominance in Egypt. The coup led to a rift between pro-Brotherhood Qatar and Turkey on one side, and anti-Brotherhood Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Egypt on the other.

When the second Libyan civil war erupted in 2014, this intra-Sunni rift led to these two sides intervening to back pro- and anti-Muslim Brotherhood factions in the civil war. The intensity of this intra-Sunni competition reached its peak in June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt broke ties with Qatar and imposed a land, sea, and air blockade; Turkey went around the blockade and delivered food, water, and building materials to the emirate. Turkish forces in Qatar also reinforced the security of Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani's regime. And, at the beginning of 2020, Turkey intervened to provide critical military aid to the Muslim Brotherhood supported Government of National Accord government in Tripoli, which tipped the balance of power in its favor in the Libyan civil war.

The January 2021 Al-Ula Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Summit ended the blockade on Qatar and ultimately restored ties between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. Turkey, for its part, re-normalized its ties with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt in late 2021 and 2022. These rapprochements, like the Saudi-Iranian deal that followed, were driven by converging interests that resulted from a new global context. But they would not have happened without Turkey and Qatar's commitment to rein in their support for the Muslim Brotherhood. In May 2022, Ankara announced it would shut down the *Mekameleen* television network in Turkey, which was closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. In an interview published during Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's first ever visit to Doha in September 2022, Emir Tamim claimed there were no active members of the Muslim Brotherhood or any groups related to it on Qatari soil. Even if these gestures appeared to be cosmetic, there was a general perception that the Muslim Brotherhood was in retreat. Saudi scholar Nawaf Obaid, a former adviser to Prince Turki al-Faisal, even published a 2020 book titled, *The Failure of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab World*.

Hamas' October 7 terrorist offensive on Israel up-ended the trend toward regional cooperation and catalyzed fears of a renewed ideological competition for religious legitimacy among Muslims in the region. Iran champions armed struggle against Israel, hoping to weaken and deter Israel's power through a confrontation of attrition at Israel's borders. Iran refers to this policy as "forward defense." Erdogan's AK Party embraces a Muslim Brotherhood inspired Islamist platform, and therefore Erdogan views Hamas, whose ideology is also rooted in the Muslim Brotherhood, as an ideological fellow traveler with whom a large portion of his political constituency in Turkey fervently supports. Erdogan has allowed Hamas to set-up a base of operations in Turkey and he views the Palestinian issue as a means to cement Turkey's global standing as an independent, intermediate power by potentially facilitating diplomacy between Israel and Hamas. Saudi Arabia, as the guardian of Islam's holy sites in Mecca and Medina, would like to steer the Arab Muslim world away from the

revolutionary Shiism of Iran and the revolutionary Sunni ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood. Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's crown prince, has tried to depoliticize religion in the kingdom, sidelining religious leaders on any question of state and security.

The importance of this regional competition for influence and legitimacy over the Palestinian cause reflects Hamas' success in transforming the Palestinian nationalist movement into a broader symbol of religious struggle against Israel. The name of Hamas' operation, "Al-Aqsa Flood (*tufan al-Aqsa*)," alluding to the Haram al-Sharif (or Temple Mount), in Jerusalem, exemplifies the spirit of Hamas' pan-Islamic call to arms. In some sense, Hamas' approach generates a competitive dynamic in which each of these three aspiring regional powers seeks to project their framing of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a way that serves its state interests. In practice, this often means preventing a rival's interpretation of the conflict from gaining traction and creating a regional consensus that damages its domestic prestige and regional standing.

Iranian and Turkish political leaders have largely ignored Hamas' October 7 atrocities while publicly lambasting Israel's military response in Gaza. Iran is walking a fine line between deterring and provoking Israel and the United States. Iran's partners, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, have already carried out probing attacks targeting Israel, which they try to keep below a threshold that might trigger a more serious escalation. Iran's clients in Iraq and Syria have struck at US forces there, testing America's warnings that it would intervene in defense of Israel. The danger of this approach is clear, and even prompted a direct back-channel message from President Joe Biden to Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.

Initially, Turkey was seeking a diplomatic role in this conflict. It has used populist rhetoric to describe Israel's military operations in Gaza, while Hakan Fidan, Turkey's foreign minister, has been trying to play a constructive behind-the-scenes role in preventing this conflict from becoming a wider regional conflagration. Turkey's approach has been both populist and pragmatic, but with the start of Israel's ground operations in Gaza, its rhetoric has turned fiery and even belligerent, even suggesting Turkey might intervene in the conflict. Turkey's role is likely to be guided by a combination of popular opinion and how Turkey perceives Washington's influence on the conflict.

Saudi Arabia has been critical but less bombastic towards Israel. It has insisted on de-escalation in Gaza and called for renewed efforts to address the root causes of the conflict. Mohammed bin Salman, who exchanged views on containing the crisis with Biden on October 24, has made few public remarks as the conflict has developed. Shaykh Ali bin Abd al-Aziz Al Shibl, a respected member of the Saudi religious establishment, recently instructed the public to refrain from talking about Gaza and to leave the issue to their leaders.

Turki al-Faisal, a former intelligence minister, delivered public remarks at Rice University's Baker Institute in Houston on October 18. While al-Faisal had critical words for both Hamas and Israel, he was one of the first Arab figures to publicly condemn Hamas' attack on Israeli civilians as un-Islamic. He emphasized that there was an Islamic injunction against killing innocent women, children, and elders. Al-Faisal also lamented that Hamas had gifted the "higher moral ground" to an Israeli government that was "universally shunned." He notably criticized Hamas for sabotaging Saudi efforts to reach a peaceful resolution to the plight of the Palestinian people.

Saudi Arabia's general posture towards this war has been conservative. Turki al-Faisal has represented the camp within the Saudi royal family that has been more outspoken about a Saudi obligation to help the Palestinians achieve a just settlement with Israel. He belongs to the old-guard in the kingdom that views Saudi security as inextricably linked to how it executes its role as custodians of the holiest sites in Islam. Many believe King Salman sees the Palestinian issue similarly.

Mohammed bin Salman's relative silence on the evolving conflict may reflect a more nationalist response to Hamas' October 7 offensive. He may view it as a provocative attack on Saudi interests. The Saudis were negotiating a deal with the United States and Israel that might have enhanced Saudi security by providing the kingdom with a formal US commitment to Saudi security and potential American nuclear assistance. More broadly, the prospective deal appeared to place the Saudis at the center of a new American-backed regional security order. The crown prince's muted public approach to current developments is no doubt influenced by some desire to punish Hamas for attempting to spoil this deal, without reigniting Saudi Arabia's conflict with Iran.

With the start of the Israeli ground operations this past weekend, Saudi officials appear increasingly concerned that the war is inflaming popular opinion in the kingdom, which is creating greater pressure on the Saudi leadership to publicly condemn Israel and avoid domestic unrest.

Despite these dynamics, it is worth remembering that Saudi-Israeli bilateral ties have evolved and progressed over the last two decades, despite at least four major conflicts (2008–2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021) between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. In this war, one can already see new developments in the relationship. Israelis are regularly appearing on Saudi-owned media outlets and those media-outlets are challenging the Hamas narrative of these events. Rasha Nabil, an Egyptian journalist on *Al Arabiya* television network, aggressively questioned Khaled Mashal, one of Hamas senior leaders in Qatar, during an interview about the October 7 attacks on Israel. This will not change broader popular opinion in the Arab world on the conflict in the short term, but it is nevertheless an important development.

More broadly, Hamas' attack on Israel has revived a unity of purpose between the anti-Muslim Brotherhood Sunni camp of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt (see [here](#) and [here](#)). In the next two sections below, we address the state-specific challenges facing Israel's peace and normalization partners among the conservative Arab states.

The Historical Peace Partners: Egypt and Jordan

Egypt is the Arab state with the most highly developed strategic relationship with Israel. The peace treaty between the two states is the oldest, and security cooperation between the two states has for many decades been strong, and was enhanced by significant Israeli assistance to Egypt's war against jihadi groups in Sinai during the past decade. Egypt is the major customer for Israeli [natural gas exports](#), and provides about one-fifth of the gas Egypt consumes each year ([Israeli gas exports to Egypt have declined by over 60 percent](#) since October 7, due to the closing of the Tamar platform and the pipelines connecting Israel to Egypt for security considerations). However, appreciation for the closeness and strategic significance of the relationship is restricted to the highest level of government and to the security sector. Forty-five years of peace has not significantly impacted Egyptian public opinion, elites, or civil society.

The Sisi regime (like the other conservative Arab leaderships) detests Hamas, as it does its ideological parent the Muslim Brotherhood, and has in the past stood by while Israel struck the organization. However, the outpouring of support on the Arab, including the Egyptian, street has forced the Sisi regime to take a position openly opposing the Israeli actions. The Egyptian government in September announced that a presidential election would be held in December; while its results are not in doubt, Sisi may fear that public anger at Israel, if not correctly harnessed, could lead to embarrassing numbers at the polls. A regime attempt on October 20 to allow a day of pro-Palestine demonstrations and channel the anger into support for the president, reportedly led to [demonstrators making their way to Tahrir Square and sounding anti-government slogans](#).

Two other more strategic considerations seem to be at play. Crises regarding Gaza always put Cairo, as the gateway to the Strip and as Israel's principal interlocutor regarding developments there, in a central role. The scope of the current crisis has afforded Egypt an opportunity to lead the Arab camp in the crisis, overshadowing the Gulf states, after a decade or more largely on the sidelines. The proximity of Gaza to Egypt has led to another major strategic consideration for Cairo: pressure has been put on it to open its Rafah border to allow humanitarian assistance into the Strip, but also to allow internally displaced Gaza residents safe haven in its territory. Egypt has steadfastly resisted such calls so far, since it fears that such a "temporary" step might turn permanent, and leave it with a violent and disaffected refugee population in its most restive and sensitive province. On a more visceral level, Egypt fears that Israel might seek to solve some of its strategic dilemmas regarding

Gaza by “transfer” of the Palestinians to Sinai under cover of war. This fear has been fed by discussion of such a possibility in far-right Israeli circles for many years (including in official documents of peripheral ministries in recent weeks).

Dread over Israel using the war in Gaza and growing tension in the West Bank to try to pursue demographic change by displacing Palestinians to neighboring states touches on even deeper fears in Jordan. The kingdom has historically been concerned with a supposed Israeli desire to create an “alternative homeland” for Palestinians in Jordan. Like Egypt, Jordan has deep strategic ties with Israel: Gas imported to Jordan under long-range contracts provides some 70 percent of Jordan’s electricity, it is highly dependent on Israel for water (a trilateral deal exchanging electricity from solar power from Jordan for desalinated water from Israel, with Emirati funding, has been slowly progressing), and close military and security cooperation has existed for many years. But Jordan’s public, elites, and civil society organizations are staunchly anti-Israel, as well as pro-Palestinian (with a majority of the population having family and cultural ties to Palestine): One Jordanian colleague bemoaned the “lack of empathy” for the Israeli victims of Hamas terror.

Jordan’s leadership has always been forced to tread a tortuous path between discreet strategic cooperation, and public and diplomatic tension with Israel (spearheaded by the foreign ministry under Ayman Safady), especially regarding Jerusalem and the Palestinians. Added to this are the longstanding poor relationship between King Abdullah II and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, as well as generally held frustration and deep suspicion among both the regime and public regarding the incumbent Israeli government and its policies. In addition, there is widespread public criticism and disaffection with government policy and even with the regime itself, which government “steadfastness” regarding Palestine may be aimed at alleviating, or at least at not aggravating. Large crowds have surrounded the Israeli embassy in Amman (the diplomats are not present), calling for its closure. While calls have been heard in Jordan for massive marches to the border with Israel, and small numbers of people have reached the border, the Jordanian security forces have made clear that such steps would not be permitted, and have restricted demonstrations to permitted locations. The King has been taking a publicly strong stance against Israel’s actions, canceling the planned summit with Biden to Amman in the immediate aftermath of the hospital explosion, and making a strong speech at the summit in Cairo. Jordan proposed the UN General Assembly resolution calling for a “immediate, durable and sustained humanitarian truce leading to a cessation of hostilities.”

A strategic analyst in the Gulf assessed Hamas’ strategy to me in this way: Hamas wanted to gain legitimacy among Palestinians and delegitimize the Palestinian Authority by acting as the organized armed forces of a *de facto* government. Its ultimate goal is to attain what the Taliban and the Houthis did: transforming themselves from a reviled terrorist organization into a relevant and legitimate interlocutor for the international community, and eventually the recognized governing power in the whole of Palestine, in place of that previously recognized by the international community. They assess that recent moves by Saudi Arabia to tighten its

ties with the Palestinian Authority and bring it into its larger campaign regarding the prerequisites for normalization with Israel may have encouraged Hamas to try and undermine that process.

Israel's Newer Partners: The Abraham Accord Countries

It is perhaps easier for the newer partners to take a less strident stance regarding Israel, since they are removed geographically from the cockpit of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and have less to fear from its direct effects internally. However, there is strong support in the Bahraini public for the Palestinians, perhaps also as a way of criticizing the regime—which is unpopular among large segments of the society, and which has never put much effort into articulating a clear public argument for the Abraham Accords. The strong social control in the United Arab Emirates, and the general disposition of Emiratis to trust and not challenge their leader's policy, has meant that there have been no significant demonstrations, though reportedly there is wide sympathy for the Gazans, especially among the majority Muslim expatriate population. The Emirati government had been relatively reserved in its public stance on the crisis and shown a willingness to criticize Hamas. But Abu Dhabi also has “the Arab seat” on the UN Security Council until the end of this year, and as such, has been presenting an Arab consensus view there, including joining with Russia to call for an emergency meeting of the Council, and opposing what it saw as one-sided drafts raised by the United States. On October 28, it condemned, as did Saudi Arabia, the beginning of Israeli ground operations.

While the ubiquitous public and elite opposition to relations with Israel is usually quiescent or at least ignored in times of tension, the concerns about “the street” become much more salient. Protests against Israel are often an indirect and more tolerated way of expressing more general criticism of the regimes. While none of the countries with relations with Israel are interested in permanently suspending these relations and losing the strategic, and in some cases, economic benefits which fostered them in the first place, they undoubtedly wish to reduce the profile of those relations to the minimum for the near term.

It is difficult for Israel's regional partners to understand the extent to which Israeli strategic decisions are driven not only by cold analysis of interest and second-order effects, but also by public pressure inherent in a democratic system. Most of the partners are deeply distrustful of the Netanyahu government, and reportedly suspect that it is trying to use them as “cover” for a punitive strategy that is based on ulterior motives (such as disrupting their normalization with Iran or, as noted, population transfer). In such a situation, it is futile for Israel to expect its Arab partners to publicly side with it to strongly condemn Hamas, or even to display neutrality. For the Arab publics, Israel's reaction in Gaza has overshadowed Hamas' outrages. The questions raised after the initial reports on the hospital bombing in Gaza have not penetrated the regional narrative at all. Their governments (with the notable exception of United Arab Emirates) feel they cannot condemn Hamas without being seen as

identifying with Israeli aggression. They therefore emphasize the need to stop escalating violence, the death of civilians, and the need for an immediate ceasefire, and at least publicly, minimize the relevance of “who started” the conflict. They also express their disdain for those countries (the United States first and foremost) they say react differently, and with less outrage, to Muslim deaths than Israeli ones (Jordan’s King Abdullah said as much in his summit speech).

Apart from concerns about domestic stability, the moderate Arab states seem to be driven by concerns of the situation expanding to a regional war fed by the Houthi attempts to fire cruise missiles and armed drones at southern Israel (which landed in Egypt), the continued low-intensity warfare on the Lebanese-Israeli border, and increased attempted attacks by Iranian proxies on US forces in the region. They also assess that Israeli ground operations will lead to an extended campaign, which they assess would escalate the crisis, and public outrage, even more. America’s strong pro-Israel position in the crisis has also raised the public cost of the moderate states’ close and strategic identification with the United States.

Looking Forward: What Can Be Done?

Almost any post-Hamas political order will be widely seen in the region as imposed on Israeli bayonets. To the extent that Israel does conceive of such a role for conservative Arab states, one sure way to preclude it is to discuss it openly and to telegraph Jerusalem’s preferences. It can only be hoped and assumed that discreet contacts, probably in the security channel, continue (though the incumbent government in Israel has shown little aptitude or appetite for discretion in diplomacy). This is both to receive the vital input and signals the partner states can give, to allow and encourage them to take a role in the postwar reconstitution of the Palestinian polity and economy (which needs to be a key consideration in determining the end-state Israel wishes to achieve as a war goal), and to retain a firm base from which relations could be reconstituted in the days after. These governments do not want Hamas to determine their long-range policy, and would likely support Israeli steps that undercut the Muslim Brotherhood’s revolutionary approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israel, however, will not be able to escape the expectation and demand from this camp that the end of Hamas’ sovereignty in Gaza will ultimately deliver some tangible benefit to the Palestinians’ aspirations for statehood. It is crucial for the Israeli leadership to reassure Egypt and Jordan, publicly and especially discreetly, that Israel has no intention of transferring populations. It is also crucial that Israel makes clear that, despite voices on the far margins, it has no intention of reoccupying Gaza.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan organization that seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities.

Image: [Flickr \(State Department Photo by Chuck Kennedy\)](#)

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