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The Middle East in Turmoil: How the October 7 Attacks Transformed the MENA Regional System

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On October 7, 2023, a Hamas-led Palestinian militant coalition perpetrated the most devastating terrorist attack in Israel's history. Through a combination of rocket swarms, paraglider landings and ground assaults, the Hamas-led coalition killed 815 Israeli civilians and 379 Israeli security personnel. Hamas's attack stunned Israeli officials who were fixated on threats emanating from the West Bank and confounded Western assumptions about a nascent era of reconciliation between historically competing regional powers. In response to these staggering casualties, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to obliterate Hamas and ordered a full-scale invasion of the Gaza Strip. Israel's offensive decapitated key Hamas leaders including October 7 perpetrators Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Deif and expelled Hamas from its northern Gaza strongholds by January 2024. These successes came at an immense humanitarian cost. Israel's military assault has killed over 50,000 Palestinians and left more 1.8 million Gaza residents facing "extremely critical" levels of hunger.²

Within hours of the October 7 attacks, it was clear that the Gaza War had potential for metastasis across the region. Building on cross-border skirmishes in April and July 2023, Hezbollah began firing on Israeli positions in the Shebaa Farms on the Lebanon-Syria border on October 8. These tit-for-tat attacks incrementally intensified into a full-scale Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in October 2024. Yemen's Houthi militias began firing drones and missiles on Israeli cities and instigated a full-blown offensive

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² *Over 1.8 Million in Gaza Face Extreme Hunger, United Nations, October 17, 2024*
<https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/10/1155836>

against Western commercial vessels in the Red Sea. While Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces and Baathist Syria refrained from major escalations against Israel, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was toppled by a rapid-fire Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) offensive in December 2024.

These proxy wars coincided with Israel and Iran breaking their unwritten taboo against direct attacks on each other's territory. After a series of tit-for-tat strikes in April and October 2024, Israel instigated Operation Rising Lion against Iran's nuclear facilities and military infrastructure in June 2025. After twelve days of intense hostilities, which led to the assassinations of senior Iranian military leaders, the partial degradation of key nuclear facilities and a retaliatory Iranian attack on Qatar's Al-Udeid Air Base, a Qatari-brokered ceasefire abruptly ended the war. As the Gaza War ceasefire talks remain inconclusive and Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian has suspended cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the potential for a new escalation in the Middle East remains extremely high. The July 2025 Israeli strikes on Damascus, which followed signals of an impending Israel-Syria normalization, and reignition of Houthi attacks on Red Sea maritime shipping underscores the region's volatility.

This paper provides a broad contextual assessment of current security dynamics in the Middle East and aims to answer three critical inter-related questions: Why did the Middle East reignite into a geopolitical tinderbox after October 7 and why was this escalation so surprising for Western officials? Which regional powers have been the primary winners and losers from the past eighteen months of conflict? What are the Middle East's plausible security trajectories in the months and years ahead? While these questions lack concrete answers, this paper will draw upon reflections from the author's extensive engagement with Western and MENA regional stakeholders since October 7 to provide some in-depth analytical insights.

The Collapse of the Illusion of Stability in the Middle East on October 7

Ahead of the October 7 attacks, an atmosphere of uncharacteristic calm prevailed over the Middle East. After the January 2020 assassination of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Forces commander Qasem Soleimani took the U.S. and Iran to the brink of war, regional tensions ebbed markedly. The end of the Qatar blockade, easing of tensions between Turkey and the UAE, normalization of Saudi Arabia-Iran relations and the Abraham Accords de-escalated the tangled web of intra-regional proxy wars. Syria, Libya and Yemen transitioned from high attrition battlefields into semi-frozen conflicts. These transformations were greeted with enthusiasm by American and European policymakers. After the March 2023 Saudi Arabia-Iran normalization deal, the European External Action Service cautiously argued that "the resumption of their bilateral relations can contribute to the stabilization of the region as a whole."³ On September 27, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan ignominiously opined that "the Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades."⁴

³ Iran/Saudi Arabia: Statement by the Spokesperson on the Announced Resumption of Diplomatic Relations, European External Action Service, March 11, 2023
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/iransaudi-arabia-statement-spokesperson-announced-resumption-diplomatic-relations_en

⁴ Jake Sullivan, *The Sources of American Power: A Foreign Policy for a Changed World*, Foreign Affairs, November/December 2023

Did Western officials misread the geopolitical situation in the Middle East or was there an abrupt unforeseeable transformation of the regional dynamics? While hindsight is always 20/20, the narrative of nationwide reconciliation that prevailed before October 7 belied realities on the ground. This detachment was as jarring as the illusions of authoritarian stability that Western analysts ascribed to the pre-Arab Spring order and is reflected in three prevailing facets of the Middle East regional system.

The first dimension pertained to the rationales for the de-escalation of proxy wars and hostile inter-state rivalries in the Middle East. While deconfliction was often regarded as an intrinsic objective, it was largely motivated by pragmatic concessions on the limits of hard power. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt's three-and-a-half-year-long blockade of Qatar strengthened the Gulf emirate's ties with Iran and emboldened Al Jazeera. The inconclusive outcomes of the civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen augmented this realization. United Arab Emirates (UAE) was chastened by the collapse of Libya National Army (LNA) chieftain Khalifa Haftar's Tripoli offensive under Turkey's military assault and the Libyan war's escalatory potential in the eastern Mediterranean. Turkey was unable to unite Libya under the leadership of a friendly candidate like ex-Minister of the Interior Fathi Bashagha and overthrow its nemesis Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Saudi Arabia's \$265 billion net spend in its multi-year war in Yemen did not vanquish the Houthi resistance. Qatar's fervent support for the Arab Spring did not create a wave of Islamist democracies or trigger Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's overthrow. Facing economic losses from energy supply chain disruptions, blockades and currency crises, the Middle East's leading regional powers realized that restraint was their only viable course.

The fragility of the tangled web of cold peace agreements was evident from under-reported diplomatic dynamics. The implementation of the January 2021 AlUla Agreement that ended the Qatar blockade encapsulated these dynamics.⁵ The UAE brokered a reluctant normalization between Bahrain and Qatar in January 2023 and only re-re-established full pre-crisis-level diplomatic relations with Doha in June 2023.

Due to the UAE's opposition to Saudi Arabia's OPEC+ oil production cuts and the intensification of Riyadh-Dubai commercial competition, the once-ironclad Saudi-UAE alliance suffered strains. Saudi Arabia's abstention from a January 2023 Arab leaders gathering in Abu Dhabi and the UAE's dispatch of lower-level delegations to the May 2023 Arab League Summit in Riyadh raised eyebrows.⁶ In commercial rivalries like the scrum for control of Kabul Airport after the 2021 Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and armed conflicts like the 2023 intra-military turf war in Sudan, intra-Gulf geopolitical competition bore the hallmarks of blockade-era confrontations. In January 2020, a trusted advisor to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman warned the author that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was assuming Soleimani's legacy as a regional disruptor.⁷ While these public displays of antipathy waned and Saudi and Emirati capital bolstered Turkey's floundering economy, the eastern Mediterranean and Sub-Saharan

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/sources-american-power-biden-jake-sullivan>

⁵ Samuel Ramani, The Qatar Blockade is Over, but the Gulf Crisis Lives On, Foreign Policy, January 27, 2021

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/27/qatar-blockade-gcc-divisions-turkey-libya-palestine/>

⁶ Anna Jacobs, Gulf Arab Reconciliation Hides Simmering Tensions, The International Crisis Group, July 12, 2023

<https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/qatar-saudi-arabia-united-arab-emirates/gulf-arab-reconciliation-hides-simmering-tensions>

⁷ Interview with Saudi expert, January 2020

Africa remained theatres of contestation. American University of Beirut academic Jana Jabbour's depiction of Saudi Turkish relations as a "frosty entente" in February 2022 aptly summarized the state of play.⁸

Aside from these animosities and rivalries, ideational rifts also persisted. The legacy of Qatar and Turkey's willingness to embrace grassroots Islamist movements during the Arab Spring, and the UAE's hostility towards these factions sullied the potential for durable reconciliations. While the constructs of a Saudi Arabia-UAE-Egypt counter-revolutionary axis and Qatar-Turkey alliance are oversimplifications, these power centres were often unable to coordinate on resolving regional crises. The sole exception to this trend was the Qatar-Egypt relationship. Due to the unexpected cordiality of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's meeting with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani in June 2022 and Qatar's capital injection into Egypt's economy at a time of dire need, Cairo and Doha were able to transcend these differences.⁹ This rapprochement aided mediation efforts during the Gaza War but extant rifts restricted coordination on de-escalating the post-October 7 spiral of violence.

The second dimension stemmed from the propensity of Western policymakers to neglect state-society relations when analysing Middle East affairs. This omission was especially apparent in assumptions about the trajectory of the Abraham Accords. As the UAE and Bahrain normalized relations with Israel, the U.S. hailed these pacts as peace agreements and Arab states did not publicly rebut this narrative. Silence and solidarity were equated with consent and the U.S. assumed that the tide of normalization would inexorably expand. This presumption was based on weak empirical foundations. While 50% of Emiratis and Bahrainis, and 40% of Saudis and Qataris viewed the Abraham Accords favourably in November 2020, these figures plunged into the 19-25% range by March 2022.¹⁰ The Gaza War built on already-entrenched grievances about Israeli expansionism in the West Bank. By December 2023, 96% of Saudis believed that Arab countries should halt their engagements with Israel and only 15% believed that Hamas should settle for a two-state solution.¹¹

The author's engagements with experts and officials in the Gulf region reinforced these statistical trends. A prominent Emirati academic told the author that the U.S.'s intense efforts to incorporate Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords reflected its tendency to homogenize GCC countries and that Saudi society would have vetoed Mohammed bin Salman following the UAE's lead.¹² A Saudi commentator told the author that perceptions of the Iranian threat emanating from the Houthis in Yemen endured and that the normalization agreement merely reflected fatigue with high-risk, low-reward military action.¹³

⁸ After Parting Ways: The Coming Frosty Entente in Saudi-Turkish Relations, Arab Center Washington DC, February 2, 2022

<https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/after-parting-ways-the-coming-frosty-entente-in-saudi-turkish-relations/>

⁹ Interview with senior Egyptian official, May 2025

¹⁰ Dylan Kassin and David Pollock, Arab Public Opinion on Arab Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 15, 2022

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-public-opinion-arab-israeli-normalization-and-abraham-accords>

¹¹ Vivian Nereim, Saudis Overwhelmingly Oppose Ties with Israel, Poll Finds, New York Times, December 22, 2023

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/22/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-poll-israel-gaza-war-hamas.html>

¹² Interview with Emirati academic, March 2024

¹³ Interview with Saudi commentator, March 2024

Societal pressures were pushing the region towards a state of renewed conflict, but these centrifugal forces were largely overlooked by Western officials.

The third component related to Israel and Iran's dissatisfaction with the Middle East's new status quo. Israel was emboldened by its ability to secure new partnerships in the Arab world without making concessions on Palestinian statehood. This dynamic emboldened expansionist sentiments within Netanyahu's government. From 2021-22, Israel's settlement construction in East Jerusalem and the West Bank expanded from 22,030 to 28,208. These new settlements sought to rupture the contiguous boundaries between East Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Ramallah, which would severely complicate a future transition towards Palestinian self-governance.¹⁴ Israel's settlement constructions coincided with a rise in communal violence. In December 2022, UN experts revealed that Israeli security forces were responsible for at least 150 fatalities in the West Bank and 33 of those deaths were children.¹⁵ Israel's bellicose policies further weakened Palestinian Authority chief Mahmoud Abbas's support base in the West Bank and provided ammunition for Hamas and Islamic Jihad to outflank him with more aggressive tactics.¹⁶ The growing power of extremist Palestinian groups increased the electoral clout and political power afforded to hardline Israeli revanchists. Itamar Ben-Gvir's November 2022 appointment as Israeli Minister of National Security and overseer of the West Bank settlements set the stage for an escalating spiral of confrontation.

Iran's unease with the extant regional system was also apparent from the statements from its officials and proxy militias. While Iranian officials celebrated their role in U.S. setbacks in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, they viewed Arab state normalizations with Israel as an antidote to their hard-won regional influence. Iran's contempt for and willingness to retaliate militarily against the Abraham Accords were evident from state-aligned discourse. In August 2020, the Iranian Foreign Ministry panned the Israel-UAE normalization as an act of "strategic stupidity" and warned that it would strengthen the hand of resistance forces.¹⁷ In July 2022, the head of Hezbollah's Executive Council Hashem Safiedinne declared "The normalization of relations with the Zionist regime is treason, and resistance and the use of weapons will continue until the liberation of al-Quds."¹⁸ While the Houthi January 2022 attacks on oil tankers and airport infrastructure in Abu Dhabi grabbed attention, Iran was also stealthily shoring up its once-frosty relationships with Hamas and Islamic Jihad.¹⁹ Given Iran's militaristic posturing, its normalizations with

¹⁴ 2022 Report on Israeli Settlements in the Occupied West Bank, Including East Jerusalem (January to December 2022), The Office of the European Union Representative (West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA), May 25, 2023
https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/palestine-occupied-palestinian-territory-west-bank-and-gaza-strip/2022-report-israeli-settlements-occupied-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem-january-december-2022_en

¹⁵ Israel: UN Experts Condemn Record Year of Israeli Violence in the Occupied West Bank, United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, December 15, 2022
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/12/israel-un-experts-condemn-record-year-israeli-violence-occupied-west-bank>

¹⁶ Daniel Byman, A War They Both are Losing: Israel, Hamas and the Plight of Gaza, *Survival*, Volume 66, 2024, p. 61-78

¹⁷ Iran: UAE-Israel Deal a "Stab in the Back" to Muslims, *Al Jazeera*, August 14, 2020
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/8/14/iran-uae-israel-deal-a-stab-in-the-back-to-muslims>

¹⁸ Lebanon to Remain a Home for Resistance: Hezbollah Official, *Tasnim*, July 25, 2022
<https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/07/25/2747668/lebanon-to-remain-a-home-for-resistance-hezbollah-official>

¹⁹ Erik Skare, Iran, Hamas and Islamic Jihad: A Marriage of Convenience, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 18, 2023

GCC countries were not what they seemed. Iran's cold peace with Abu Dhabi aimed to weaken the Saudi Arabia-UAE alliance and capitalize on Emirati discontent with Mohammed bin Salman's policies.²⁰ Iran's de-escalation with Saudi Arabia in Yemen was partially aimed at redirecting scarce resources to more strategically critical theatres like Syria and Ukraine. These calculations were perilously misinterpreted as a sign of Iran's diluted commitment to revanchism.

The Winners and Losers from the Post-October 7 Regional Order

As the two-year anniversary of October 7 looms, the regional system's balance of power remains in a state of flux. Based on the author's extensive post-2023 engagements with U.S. and European officials, the prevailing view is that Israel has achieved noteworthy strategic victories, Iran has suffered massive setbacks, and the remaining regional powers have been diplomatically assertive and militarily restrained. The complexity of the Middle East regional system necessitates a more nuanced assessment and the pitfalls of this reductionist framework.

When it comes to the Gaza War's impact on Israel's regional position, the following question remains wide open: Has Israel achieved a military triumph or a pyrrhic tactical victory that will worsen its long-term insecurity? Geopolitical developments do not provide a concrete answer to this question. On the one hand, Israel's airstrikes assassinated Hezbollah's mercurial leader Hassan Nasrallah and degraded the Lebanese movement's threat potential. Iran's underwhelming October 2024 retaliation against Israel shattered its self-professed image of military strength. On the other hand, Israel faces regular attacks from the Houthis and has prioritized expansionism in the Golan Heights over capitalizing on Iran's strategic defeat in Syria. The Abraham Accords are unlikely to have any new signatories for the foreseeable future and popular anti-Israeli sentiments have soared across the globe. Like in Gaza, Israel has seemingly traded short-term victories for long-term insecurity.

An evaluation of Israel's domestic environment reveals similar split-screens. While the January to October 2023 judicial reform protests battered Netanyahu's political standing and propelled former Defence Minister Benny Gantz's rising popularity, the October 7 attacks ephemerally swung the momentum in Likud's direction. Some of Netanyahu's most internationally criticized policies possess widespread support amongst both Orthodox and secular Israelis. A May 2025 poll revealed that 82% of Israelis supported the forced expulsion of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and 53% of Israelis backed the full blockade of humanitarian aid into the enclave that commenced in March.²¹ Despite these sentiments, there are ominous warning signs for Netanyahu. Spurred on by protests from the families of captives, 69% of Israelis support a deal to return all hostages from Hamas custody in exchange for an end to the Gaza War.²² Recent polling indicates that 70% of Israelis mistrust Netanyahu's government. As the war

<https://ecfr.eu/article/iran-hamas-and-islamic-jihad-a-marriage-of-convenience/>

²⁰ talashesaye albuzaabi baraye eslah ravabet ba iran az kanal mianjigari (Abu Dhabi's Efforts to Improve Relations with Iran Through Mediation), AL-Quds, August 15, 2020

<https://www.qudsonline.ir/news/714723/> تلاشهای-البيوظي-جراي-اصلاح-روابط-با-ايران-از-کانال-میانجی-گری

²¹ Nadav Rapaport, Nearly Half of Israelis Support Army Killing All Palestinians in Gaza, Poll Finds, Middle East Eye, May 24, 2025

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/majority-israelis-support-expulsion-palestinians-gaza-poll>

²² Poll: 70% of Israelis Don't Trust Government, Including a Third of Coalition Voters, Times of Israel, June 10, 2025

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/poll-70-of-israelis-dont-trust-government-including-almost-half-of-coalition-voters/>

drags on, Israeli society is arguably more polarized than it was prior to October 7 and its economy is reeling from wartime agriculture and construction sector declines.

While Israel cannot be described as a definitive winner from the Gaza War, its fellow regional powers have not fared better. Despite the threatening bravado that continues to characterize its official rhetoric, Iran has been dealt severe material and status blows from the Gaza War's metastasis. While the scale of the damage inflicted on the Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan nuclear facilities is unclear, Iran's Russian-made and domestically manufactured air defences crumbled in a matter of hours. Much like during its 1980-88 war with Iraq, Iran found itself isolated from its regional allies and great power partners. Aside from largely ineffective Houthi strikes against Israel, Iran's proxy militias, Russia and China were mere spectators during Operation Rising Lion.

While these setbacks are humiliating, they do not tell the entire story. Although Israeli strikes decapitated IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami, who was one of Iran's most bombastic champions of hardline nationalism and anti-Westernism, the attacks created an ephemeral patriotic rally-and-the-flag effect. This coalescence of nationalism underscored the unrealistic nature of regime change proposals advanced by hawks in Israel and Western countries. The Islamic Republic maintains a tight grip on Iranian society and is enhancing its control by leveraging fears of Israeli infiltration.

It is also unclear whether Iran's weakened capabilities have caused it to reduce its support for the Axis of Resistance. Although Iranian officials were frustrated with Assad's passivity towards Israeli strikes on Syria and intransigent attitude towards them, Iran's meek response to his overthrow supports this hypothesis.²³ As new Lebanese President Joseph Aoun pushes for Hezbollah's disarmament, Iran's Ambassador to Lebanon Mojtaba Amani insists that Tehran will not interfere in this process.²⁴ Notwithstanding these signals, there are also indicators which suggest that Iran is militarily supporting its proxy militias at accustomed levels. Iran maintains overland truck transport routes via Iraq and Syria to resupply Hezbollah and the Syrian reconstruction process could provide it with new avenues to rearm the group.²⁵ While Iran pressured the Houthis into the May 2025 ceasefire deal with the U.S. to advance the nuclear negotiations, Yemeni officials warn that Tehran has supplied the Houthis with enough weapons to attack Israel and Red Sea commercial vessels for years to come.²⁶

While the resilience of Iran's arms trafficking nexuses to its proxies qualify the scale of Israel's triumph, the growth potential of its non-Western partnerships constrain it further. In May 2025, the Iranian Parliament ratified a twenty-year strategic agreement with Russia. Although this pact lacks the mutual

²³ Sanam Vakil, The Fall of Assad has Exposed the Extent of the Damage to Iran's Axis of Resistance, Chatham House, December 13, 2024

<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2024/12/fall-assad-has-exposed-extent-damage-irans-axis-resistance>

²⁴ efir iran dar birot: dar mosaleh khal salah moghavmat dokhalt nemikonim (Iranian Ambassador to Beirut: We will not Interfere in the Issue of Disarmament of the Resistance), ISNA

<https://www.isna.ir/news/1404020402466/سفير-ايران-در-بيروت-در-مساله-خلع-سلاح-مقاومت-داخلت-نمی-کنیم>

²⁵ Michael Knights, Don't Assume Iran's Supply Lines to Hezbollah Are Cut, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, December 12, 2024

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/dont-assume-irans-supply-lines-hezbollah-are-cut>

²⁶ Melanie Swan, Houthis Growing Stronger Through New Iran Supplies, Warns Yemeni Army, The Telegraph, January 4, 2025

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2025/01/04/houthis-iran-weapons-yemen-israel-shipping-middle-east/>

defence clause of the June 2024 Russia-North Korea partnership agreement, it could serve as a gateway for the supply of advanced Russian Su-35 fighter jets to Iran.²⁷ The development of Iran's conventional military, which was weakened by decades of sanctions and post-1979 underinvestment, is likely to accelerate. Iran is also likely to strengthen its partnerships with Russia and China in the artificial intelligence and laser technology spheres.

The consolidation of Iran's place within the so-called Russia-China-Iran-North Korea "Axis of Upheaval" has been paired with growing interdependence and partner diversification amongst its proxy militias. While the Houthis had already consolidated logistical and technological partnerships with fellow Iran-aligned militias, they have received alleged security assistance from Russia, economic aid from China and military support from Iraq's PMF since 2023. If Iran can counterbalance this crystallized eastward pivot with even a limited de-escalation of nuclear tensions with the West, it could emerge from the post-October 7 regional order as less isolated and more internally stable.

As Israel and Iran's efforts to overhaul the pre-October 7 order dragged them into a multi-pronged conflict, other regional powers reacted with a mixture of trepidation and opportunism. The Middle East has been bifurcated between acquiescent actors to Israel's war on Gaza (principally Saudi Arabia and the UAE), and activist critics (Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Algeria) with Qatar and Egypt bridging the divides between these camps. While Saudi Arabia has spearheaded U.S.-Russia negotiations and hosted talks to end Sudan's intra-military turf war, it has approached developments in its own region with greater caution. Saudi Arabia has presented itself as a stabilizing force in the region by convening a two-state solution summit on Palestine, which addresses the core issues driving the Gaza War, and by providing Syria's new government with debt forgiveness lifelines that promote economic stability. Saudi Arabia has cautiously refrained from any direct military intervention in Yemen and even struck an "economic de-escalation accord" with the Houthis in July 2024.²⁸ The UAE has mirrored Saudi Arabia's cautious approach to regional tensions. While the UAE has used its UN Security Council non-permanent seat to showcase its opposition to Israeli attacks on Palestinian civilians, it has maintained robust economic engagement with Israel and tacitly expressed opposition to Hamas's role in a post-war Gaza Strip.

Although Netanyahu met with Erdogan in September 2023, Turkey emerged as one of the region's most fiery critics of Israeli conduct in Gaza. In part due to Erdogan's Muslim Brotherhood sympathies, Turkey stridently defended Hamas's legitimacy as a Palestinian political actor and has recalled its ambassador to Israel.²⁹ Yet even these displays of activist defiance have their limitations. Turkey has refrained from drastically scaling back commercial ties with Israel and has unsuccessfully pitched itself as a prospective conflict mediator. Despite their diametrically opposed views on Syria's new government, Turkey and

²⁷ Iran's Revolutionary Guards Commander says Iran Purchased Russian-Made Sukhoi-35 Fighter Jets, Reuters, January 27, 2025
<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/irans-revolutionary-guards-commander-says-iran-purchased-russian-made-sukhoi-35-2025-01-27/>

²⁸ How Israeli Attack Helped Houthis Push Saudis to Tame Yemeni Rivals, Amwaj, July 25, 2024
<https://amwaj.media/en/media-monitor/how-israeli-attack-helped-houthis-push-saudis-to-tame-yemeni-rivals>

²⁹ Ayli Ayditasbas and Kevin Huggard, Understanding Turkey's Response to the Israel-Gaza Crisis, Brookings Institution, December 7, 2023
<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/understanding-turkeys-response-to-the-israel-gaza-crisis/>

Israel held talks on the situation in April 2024 and created a diplomatic hotline to regulate the scope of tensions.³⁰ Turkey's split-screen policy has rendered Arab countries with more marginal influence on the trajectory of the regional system like Iraq, Algeria and Jordan the principal pro-Palestinian activist voices.

Despite criticisms of its pre-October 7 financial assistance to the Hamas-led Gaza Strip and periodic rebukes from right-wing Israeli politicians, Qatar has ensconced itself as the war's mediator-in-chief. Qatar has leveraged informal ties with Israeli officials, which date back to its establishment of trade relations with Israel in 1996, and hosting of Hamas representatives to broker two temporary ceasefires. These accomplishments elevated Qatar's role within the U.S. and Europe's regional strategies and combined with Assad's fall in Syria has rendered Doha an ascendant force. Notwithstanding the antipathy that soured bilateral relations with Qatar during Sisi's early years in power, Egypt has reliably worked with Doha on de-escalating the Gaza War. While Qatari and Egyptian sources conceded to the author that there were initial competitions for mediation credit, Qatar's focus on the hostage issue and Egypt's prioritization of humanitarian assistance ensured that their diplomatic coordination was compatible.

The Future Trajectories of the Middle East Regional System

Despite the intensity of inter-state conflict and proxy wars in the post-October 7 Middle East, a major question persists: Has the regional order really changed? At first glance, the continuities appear to outweigh the transformations. The U.S.'s steadfast military support for Israel's war against Hamas has diminished its soft power in the Arab world and increased the appeal of non-Western partners like Russia and China. Although neither Moscow nor Beijing have the capabilities and inclinations to displace the U.S. as a security guarantor, the region's embrace of an increasingly multipolar order since the late 1980s has intensified. Despite populist anti-Israeli angst, the post-Arab Spring decline of transnational Pan-Arabist and Islamist forces has continued. Aside from ISIS's sporadic clashes with Syria's HTS authorities, transnational terrorism has not made a resurgence and authoritarian regimes in the MENA region appear stable.

These continuities leave the door open to three scenarios for the Middle East's regional order. The first is the region's gradual transition towards the de-escalation of inter-state conflicts and a more substantive return to the pre-October 7 spirit of normalization. The hallmark of this scenario would be an eventual normalization deal between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which would provide the Kingdom with NATO-style security guarantees and a civilian nuclear energy program. Another component is a JCPOA-style nuclear deal between the U.S. and Iran, which is at least tacitly accepted by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE as a lesser evil to war. The second is the persistence of frozen conflicts that periodically reignite into intensified proxy and inter-state wars. This scenario would feature ongoing cross-border escalations between Israel and Lebanon, continued Israeli and Turkish strikes in Syria, a reheating of military hostilities in Libya and sustained Houthi aggression towards its Yemeni rivals. The third is a shift towards sustained hot wars and the fraying of state-society relations that threatens the grip of authoritarian regimes. This would represent a return to the pre-2021 status quo ante, which featured stark ideational

³⁰ Ragip Soylu, Turkey and Israel set up Hotline over Syria Tensions, Middle East Eye, May 21, 2025
<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-israel-establish-hotline-syria>

rivalries, waves of popular uprisings and internationalized proxy wars. The worst-case scenario would stem from the failure to secure a new-and-improved JCPOA and a concomitant escalation of Israel-Iran tensions into full-scale war that lasts much longer than Operation Rising Lion.

Due to the checked risk appetites of key regional powers and plethora of intractable local conflicts, the second scenario appears to be the most plausible forecast for the Middle East regional system. For the first scenario to transpire, Israel would likely need to experience a political turnover to a new leadership that sees military action as a high-risk, low-reward endeavour and Iran would need to durably dismantle its proxy networks in favour of conventional security strategies. For the third scenario to come to fruition, Arab regional powers and Turkey would need to rediscover their appetite for brazen military adventurism that was squelched by the wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen. It would also likely require a resurgence of Islamist civil society movements, a pervasive crisis of civil-military relations and new tactics for popular protests to counter advanced authoritarian surveillance mechanisms. These variables are distant prospects.

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