

The Geopolitics and Regional Security Implications of the Israel-Hamas War

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Executive Summary

This report analyses the profound implications of the war in Gaza on regional geopolitics and security. The first section examines certain dynamics pertaining to the Israel-Palestine conflict, namely Israel's expansionist policies and violations of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, that possibly played a key role in fuelling the recent escalation. These factors are coupled with the imminent normalisation of diplomatic relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia and the recent bolstering of ties between Iran and Hamas. Israel's diminishing decades-long isolation has gradually reduced incentives, both in Israel domestically and in the Middle East region, to engage with the Palestinians. If that gave Hamas the motivation to carry out the attacks on October 7, their growing relationship with Iran gave the group an opportunity to do so.

Yet the longer the war continues and the more Palestinian civilian casualties rise, the greater the tensions on the diplomatic and security fronts. The second section reveals that regional actors balance their domestic concerns and pro-Palestine sentiments while maintaining stable relations with Israel and preventing the war from expanding.

- Jordan is in a dichotomy between expressing the country's strong condemnation of the war in Gaza and preventing Palestinian refugees from entering the country. Maintaining cooperation with Israel is essential for Jordan to avoid the latter.
- Considering Lebanon's political crisis, its anti-Israel stance is determined by Hezbollah's role in this war, encompassing increasing violence with Israeli forces on the Lebanon-Israeli border. These incidents divide Israel's attention and resources away from Gaza but increase the risks of a costly retaliation against Lebanon.
- Iran is a pivotal actor in this war because of its ties to Hamas. Although Iran has repeatedly refused direct responsibility for its proxies' actions, if said activities are to increase, Tehran's direct participation in this war will inevitably occur.
- Saudi Arabia's US-brokered rapprochement with Israel, albeit frozen, is arguably not off the table, not least because of the expected utility of normalisation for Saudi Arabia's defence base and economy. The Saudis have not contributed to the war's resolution through diplomatic means because of their vested interests.
- Qatar's mediation role, which secured a temporary truce between Israel and Hamas, reflects the leadership's influence towards the latter. That reinforces the country's strategic partnership with the US and safeguards Doha's global profile as a credible mediator.
- Egypt's experience with Israel facilitates its role as a mediator. But more importantly, Egypt needs Hamas' continuous cooperation due to domestic security concerns. Official calls for aid delivery through the Rafah border crossing are countered by the



need to deter Palestinian displacement, which could exacerbate Egypt's financial and political crises. Egyptian and Qatari negotiation efforts will likely continue securing pauses in the fighting as long as the aforementioned relationships continue being leveraged.

Finally, the Israel-Hamas war encompasses a web of actors and conflict drivers, particularly concerning Iran's axis of resistance proxies. This report forecasts that concerns over a wider geo-political eruption of the war constrain military activities. As such, militia groups currently operate under a strategy of maximum pressure on Israel without major escalation. Hezbollah is very capable militarily, so Israel should avoid a multi-front war. Escalated hostilities with the Houthis, who target international trade in the Red Sea, could trigger increased risks associated with US forces in the region. Therefore, there is a realistic possibility that attacks on conflict-laden spots in the Middle East will continue escalating, which is contingent on retaliation by the US and Israel.

The refugee crisis, particularly the potential of refugee flows between countries, is arguably an overlooked risk in the Israel-Hamas war by being a mechanism of increased tensions and violence diffusion, as seen in pressure on Israel by Arab states for a cessation of hostilities in Gaza. The image of Palestinian refugees is a potent symbol for many in the Global South and could lead to a possible rise of militant Islamist activity. The mistreatment of refugees is linked to radicalisation, so Hamas may also capitalise on the refugee crisis specifically and Palestinian victimisation generally to recruit more fighters for their war against Israel.

Background Information

The report is undertaken under the following context: On the morning of October 7, 2023, Hamas, the militant Islamist group in control of the Gaza Strip since 2006, launched Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Planned by senior Hamas officials, the coordinated attacks included a barrage of missiles, ground incursions, paragliders, and bulldozers breaching the border wall separating Gaza and Southern Israel. Hamas operatives were aided by several other Palestinian militant groups, primarily the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) but also the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) and the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC). The resulting casualties from the October 7 attacks in Israel included around 1,200 killed, as well as more than 240 hostages taken, including soldiers, civilians, and foreign nationals. These were unprecedented attacks since it was the first time that any state or non-state actor had managed to violate Israeli territories to such an extent since the



establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. October 7 also marks the bloodiest day as the attacks led to the highest number of Jewish casualties on a single day since the Holocaust. In retaliation, Israeli forces have conducted airstrikes and a ground invasion in Gaza. Despite temporary ceasefires to facilitate the exchange of hostages and Palestinian prisoners, Israel Defence Forces (IDF) operations are ongoing. At least 20,000 Palestinians, the vast majority of them being civilians, particularly children, have been killed in Gaza since October 7. The Gaza Strip is witnessing a major humanitarian crisis, which is worsening as Israeli military operations advance further south into Gaza.

Domestic and Foreign Policy Factors

Internal Dynamics

Recent developments concerning the Israel-Palestine conflict can explain the logic of the October 7 attacks, or in other words, why Hamas decided to launch the attacks against Israel. A noteworthy factor lies in the Israeli government's policies surrounding the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), specifically the expansion of Israeli settlements and Palestinian dispossession in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Israeli settlements are primarily Jewish and were built in territories captured by Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War. The Israeli government has received criticism for the heightened building of settlements in the OPT. Reportedly, since 1967, more than 600,000 Israelis have lived in the OPT, and at least 60% of the West Bank is now under Israeli control. Violence perpetrated by IDF forces and Israelis residing in the West Bank, namely settlers, against Palestinians has been increasing. Overall, rising tensions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem arguably gave Hamas a "justification and opportunity to attack".

Secondly, the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif compound in East Jerusalem holds religious and symbolic significance for both Muslims and Jews. Any compromise about sharing this contentious sacred place between the two parties cannot be attained, making the compound a highly indivisible issue that has incited multiple violent incidents. Al-Aqsa Mosque, which lies in the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif site, is concurrently the third-holiest place in Islam while being located atop the ruins of Jewish temples. Since 1967, a status quo has been in place according to which the Waqf, a Jordanian-appointed body, manages the Al-Aqsa compound, and only Muslims are allowed to pray at Al-Aqsa. Still, Israeli police control the compound's access and security, and non-Muslim visitors can visit Al-Aqsa too. Religious Zionists, primarily, have been challenging the status quo by praying at the site. Israeli forces



have carried out raids during Ramadan, barring access to the site and causing physical damage. The past few months have seen increasing clashes between Israeli security forces and Palestinian worshippers, and Israeli officials have also entered the compound. In May 2023, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir visited the complex despite condemnation from Palestinians viewing it as an attempt to change the status quo. Three days before October 7, Israeli settlers forcibly entered Al-Aqsa on the fifth day of Sukkot. Desecrations of the Al-Aqsa Mosque are another crucial factor that can explain the October 7 attacks, which were named Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

Regional Foreign Policy

The progression of certain regional foreign policies has possibly contributed to the escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict following October 7. This section will delve into how regional foreign policies have fuelled this violence, focusing on the normalisation of Israel by Arab countries via the 2020 Abraham Accords, particularly the Israeli-Saudi Arabia rapprochement, and the growing relationship between Hamas and Iran.

The increasing acceptance of Israel by Arab countries represents a foreign policy approach that has fuelled the recent escalation. Countries like the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan normalised relations with Israel over the last three years, seemingly to advance peace with the Palestinians. However, some analysts argue that these normalisation efforts were driven by a desire to curb Iran's regional influence, prioritising regional dominance and stability over the prospect of resolving the longstanding Israel-Palestine conflict. The Abraham Accords are arguably an attempt to achieve some form of arrangement regarding Middle Eastern stability at the expense of addressing the prospect of an autonomous Palestinian state and the plight of Palestinians in the OPT and Gaza. Moreover, recent talks between Saudi Arabia and Israel, facilitated by the US and aimed at normalising relations, significantly impacted regional developments. It is speculated that Saudi Arabia and Israel were only weeks away from normalising ties before the October 7 Hamas attacks. Normalisation with Israel is economically attractive for Arab states as it would increase cooperation in sectors such as trade, commerce, agriculture, and energy. The deteriorating economy in Gaza is another factor that plays into Hamas' influence, as the group has been governing Gaza since 2006. Normalised relations between Israel and regional players diverted attention away from the problems faced by Palestinians, which would allow for an exacerbated socioeconomic crisis in Gaza. So, the October 7 attacks likely served to draw attention to the Gaza Strip itself, although with dire consequences. Overall, the growing



acceptance of Israel within the Middle East has diminished Israel's willingness to be accommodative towards the Palestinians.

What is more, Hamas gained confidence after repairing its ties with Iran in the lead-up to the October 7 attacks. The group reassessed its political stance adopted in the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2011, where Hamas opposed Iran and its ally, the Assad regime in Syria. Such opposition is partially attributed to the sectarian differences between Hamas, Iran, and the Syrian regime, as the former is a Sunni organisation, whereas the latter two, along with Hezbollah and most of Iran's proxies, are connected by the Shia religious link. Also, despite Iran's patronage towards Hamas, the group tends to operate more independently from Iran than Hezbollah. But more recently, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah played a personal role in improving relations between Hamas and Damascus. A Hamas delegation visited Damascus in October 2022 to alleviate tensions. In September 2023, Nasrallah hosted the Secretary-General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhalah, and the deputy chief of Hamas' political bureau, Saleh al-Arouri. These are just some examples of Hamas becoming more diplomatically involved with Iran and Iran-linked actors, which served to bolster Hamas' ties with Iran in the lead-up to October 7 for logistical support and funding. Aside from Iran sponsoring Hamas militarily and financially, there are claims that Iran provided military training to Hamas fighters as recently as September. Iran has refused any claims pertaining to its direct involvement in the October 7 attacks. Notwithstanding, Iranian officials likely view the attacks and their ties to Hamas as a positive development bolstering their regional influence and delaying regional peace plans with Israel. Iran-Hamas relations comprise an important conflict driver as they allowed Hamas to carry out the attacks and will continue affecting the Israel-Hamas war even if Iran's involvement remains an indirect one.

Geopolitics

Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is of special diplomatic importance when evaluating foreign regional policy approaches since the October 7 Hamas attacks. Jordan's political leadership finds itself in a dichotomy between preserving peace with Israel and expressing the country's pro-Palestine sentiments since many Jordanians, nearly 40% of the population, are of Palestinian descent. Bilateral relations between Israel and Jordan, formally established after the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in 1944, have been strained under Netanyahu's government and have worsened as a result of the recent escalation. The peace treaty is already



widely unpopular among the Jordanian public due to the significant Palestinian element in the population. Mass protests in solidarity with the Palestinians have been a regular occurrence in Jordan.

King Abdullah took a public stance against Israel when, as a reaction to the bombardment of the al-Ahli Hospital in Gaza City on October 17, he cancelled the regional summit he was to host with US President Joe Biden and Egyptian and Palestinian leaders on October 18. The Foreign Ministry also recalled Jordan's ambassador from Israel as a condemnation of the developing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, notifying Israel that its ambassador to Amman will be allowed to return only when the war ends. More recently, Jordan's King voiced his demand for an immediate ceasefire by describing the attacks on Gaza as "Israel's ugly war against civilians". Queen Rania of Jordan, who is of Palestinian heritage, publicly echoed these criticisms by condemning Israel's military operations. Additionally, the Kingdom initiated a resolution calling for an immediate and sustained humanitarian truce at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in October. Jordan's UN Ambassador Mahmoud Hmoud spoke on behalf of the 22 members of the Arab delegation to stress the need for a cessation of hostilities in Gaza. Jordan rejected Canada's amendment to the draft resolution, which focused on condemning the October 7 attacks as responsible for the ongoing crisis and stressing Israel's right to self-defence.

Jordan's explicit signalling of support for a ceasefire and upholding international humanitarian law through condemning statements and diplomatic gestures reflect Amman's advocacy for a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. Yet, as much as Jordan is characterised by its pro-Palestine rhetoric, King Abdullah declared on October 17 that Jordan, which shares a long border with the West Bank, will not be open to Palestinian refugees. This announcement arguably reflects the Kingdom's concerns about violence spillover and of a potential displacement of Palestinians into Jordan resulting from the escalation of settler and IDF violence in the West Bank. A Palestinian displacement would affect Jordan's demographic, with a realistic possibility of creating an identity crisis over "who is a Jordanian" and societal polarisation. The latter is linked to political mobilisation, creating conditions for intra-state conflict. Notably, Jordan's refusal to admit Palestinians enjoys domestic and broader Arab support, so the regime's stability is not likely to be threatened by divisions on the refugee issue. Moreover, economic, security and intelligence coordination between Jordan and Israel continues to exist, even if it only does so behind the scenes. The Kingdom needs to balance its pro-Palestine sentiments with maintaining relations with Israel to tackle external risks like refugee waves and ensure domestic cohesion.



Lebanon

Relations between Israel and Lebanon reveal tensions and conflict, dating back to when Israeli forces temporarily occupied part of the south of Lebanon soon after the State of Israel declared independence. Israel also invaded Lebanon from 1982 until 2000 as part of its war against the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO). In recent years, the Hezbollah-Israel conflict has encompassed cross-border drone attacks without leading to serious escalation. But in response to Israel's military actions following the October 7 attacks, the Lebanon-Israeli border has witnessed increased violence, particularly rocket and missile attacks, as well as armed clashes between the Israeli army and Hezbollah fighters, adding a further layer of complexity to the Israel-Hamas war. These incidents intertwine with Hezbollah's historic alignment with Hamas.

Whilst some Lebanese officials have signalled their opposition to Israel, such as Hezbollah-allied Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, who stated that “the decision to escalate on the northern front of occupied Palestine rests with the Israelis, not with Lebanon”, it is unlikely that Beirut will enter the Israel-Hamas war directly. Lebanon's fragile economic and political situation makes it extremely vulnerable to the long-term costs of conflict escalation. But the Lebanese lawmakers trying to minimise tensions on the southern border arguably do not include the 15 Hezbollah members of parliament. So far, the Lebanese government has been unable to form a cohesive response to the Israel-Hamas war due to the political crisis, which has resulted in the lack of a president since October 2022. What is more, Lebanon's reliance on humanitarian aid renders the country unable to provide financial support towards Gaza, despite the country's pro-Palestine sentiments, as seen in the nationwide solidarity protests. Public opinion on Israel has historically been low, but the ongoing war provides an opportunity for Lebanon's political apparatus to divert attention away from domestic problems. It should be emphasised that all previous engagements with Israel involved Hezbollah, not the largely sectarian Lebanese government. Hezbollah media, for example, the Al-Manar news channel, are much more likely to effectively collectivise grievances against Israel in Lebanese society than the politically divided official media, like the National News Agency.

Regardless of Hezbollah's political wing 'Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc' anti-Israel rhetoric, they ultimately appear unwilling to escalate the conflict. By supplementing Lebanon's failing state and being relatively independent of state institutions as a state within a state, Hezbollah enjoys significant support from its Shia community owing to its extensive financial and social services. The organisation may be concerned that this support may be severely impacted by the necessity of a war budget amid the country's political and economic crises. Interestingly, there are contrasting interpretations of Hezbollah militant leader Hassan Nasrallah's speech on November 3. While it is claimed that Nasrallah avoided committing Hezbollah to a more



direct role in the war, others perceive his speech as threatening escalation with Israel. It currently appears as though Hezbollah's border skirmishes with Israel focus on diverting Israel's attention and resources away from Gaza and on the Lebanese border. Additionally, Hezbollah's significant rocket and missile arsenal potentially serves as a deterrent for a scenario where Israel escalates military action in Southern Lebanon.

Hezbollah's role in the Israel-Hamas war will probably continue impacting the fragile political balance and sectarianism within Lebanon and exacerbate tensions with Israel. A war between Israel and Hezbollah as part of a second front in the Israel-Hamas war would prove costly for Lebanon. IDF rocket fire into Lebanon has already resulted in the displacement of around 60,000 people from Southern Lebanon. Simultaneously, Hezbollah is a larger, more influential, and better-equipped organisation than Hamas, so Israel may not wish to expand the number of capable adversaries participating in its war against Hamas.

Iran

Among the regional players, Iran emerges as a pivotal actor, leveraging its historic antagonism towards Israel and strategic alliances in the Middle East. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran and Israel have maintained a conflict-laden relationship marked by geopolitical tensions. Despite the absence of direct military confrontation or outright war between the two countries, Iran's influence is deeply embedded in the region through support for proxy agents, including Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon. Iran also provides significant material support, training, and financial aid to Hamas, thus indirectly contributing to the war as an influential regional player.

Following Hamas' initiation of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, conflicting reports regarding Iran's involvement emerged. While some American news outlets, such as the Wall Street Journal, claimed Iranian security officials helped plan the attack, officials from Israel, the US, and Iran, as well as Hamas leadership, denied these claims. Furthermore, whereas numerous speculations about Iran's involvement in the attack have been made, there are, at the time of this report, no well-documented links, and the evidence of Iranian proxies following direct orders from Tehran is "both slim and contradictory". Iran's mission to the UN issued a statement in which it dismissed the claims of its involvement, referring to the October 7 attacks as being "fiercely autonomous and unwaveringly aligned with the interests of the Palestinian people." Iranian officials are publicly expressing their reluctance to engage in a full-scale war with Israel. Hossein Amir Abdollahian, Iran's foreign minister, emphasised in a recent interview that Iran is not actively seeking to escalate the conflict. He mentioned



the region's volatile situation and the potential for a regional diffusion of the Israel-Hamas war, indicating a cautious stance.

Tehran's belligerence in the conflict is, nonetheless, likely to grow as its proxies increasingly challenge Israel. As Iran-backed Houthi forces in Yemen escalate their attacks on Israel and its shipping vessels in the Red Sea, Tel Aviv vowed to retaliate, thereby widening the current conflict to the southernmost parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Similarly, as skirmishes between the Lebanon-based Hezbollah, one of Iran's most capable proxies in the region, and the IDF intensify along Israel's northern border, the prospects of renewed war in Southern Lebanon increase. Yet both Hezbollah and the Houthis are part of Iran's deterrence strategy in the Middle East, as they enable Iran to inflict strategic damage on its opponents were a war to break out. That is illustrated by the Houthis' missile attacks on Saudi oil installations. Consequently, if these proxies were to be engaged by Israel, which achieved military superiority in the region, Tehran may be induced to act directly to safeguard its agents. Therefore, a war between Iran's proxies and Israel will inherently introduce Tehran into the conflict as a belligerent.

Despite denials of direct involvement and plausible deniability for its proxies' activities, Iran reaffirmed its "unflinching support of Palestine", which reflects a long-standing strategy to co-opt the Palestinian struggle for liberation and autonomy. Indeed, Iranian officials praised the incursion and stood supportive of Hamas. Iran's top authority, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, commented: "We kiss the hands of those who planned the attack on the Zionist regime. The Zionist regime's own actions are to blame for the disaster."

Consequently, Iran's response to and level of involvement in Hamas' attacks are deemed as strategically ambiguous. Iran's authorities navigate a balance between ideological commitment to Hamas and sympathy towards the plight of Palestinians with their pragmatic assessments of regional interests and associated risks of direct military confrontation with Iran and the US, given that, domestically, Iran already suffers the consequences of Western-imposed sanctions. However, as the fighting intensifies in Gaza and militant attacks by Iran-backed armed groups increase, there is a realistic possibility of Iran getting directly involved, as Abdollahian publicly warned the US, prompting a wider regional escalation.

Saudi Arabia

Before October 7, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Israel had started a US-brokered normalisation process. Leverage over Israel would strengthen military and nuclear support from the US with the potential to grant the Kingdom major non-NATO ally status and benefit from the innovative Israeli economy. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy approach, as developed by



Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), aligns with the aforementioned as it revolves around its Vision 2030, a plan seeking to build an independent defence industrial base and diversify the Kingdom's economy. On September 20, by referring to rapprochement, MBS declared his intentions to “get Israel as a player in the Middle East” and that “every day we get closer”.

Since October 7, Saudi Arabia's priority in safeguarding relations with the US and Israel has remained unchanged due to national security and regional stability interests. During the Bloomberg New Economy conference on November 8, Saudi Minister of Investments Khalid al-Falih stated that the normalisation process with Israel “remains on the table” but that it is “contingent on a pathway to a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian question”. Therefore, the Kingdom does not ignore the Arab street's pro-Palestine sentiments. Such ignorance would affect Saudi Arabia's status as a middle power striving for the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the Middle East region.

That being the case, Saudi official and media narratives frame the Israel-Hamas in a manner criticising both warring sides. Following the October 7 Hamas attacks, the Foreign Ministry released a statement calling for the “immediate halt to the escalation between the two sides, the protection of civilians, and restraint”. Turki bin Faisal Al Saoud, former director of Intelligence, denounced Hamas for killing Israeli civilians while emphasising that there are no “heroes” in this war. Al Arabiya, a Saudi-owned news channel, broadcasted an interview with the former head of Hamas, Khaled Meshaal. The interviewer challenged Hamas's claims about “true resistance” by calling the October 7 attacks a “declaration of war”. Saudi newspaper Asharq al-Awsat directly condemned Khaled Meshaal as well as current Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar for their lack of support for Palestinians in Gaza. When Saudi Arabia hosted an Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh on November 11, MBS reiterated calls for a ceasefire, accused Israel of “crimes” against civilians in Gaza, and stressed that “we are before a humanitarian catastrophe”. Saudi Arabia fundraised at least \$115 million for humanitarian and development projects as of mid-November.

Although the Kingdom is presented as “the most influential country in the Middle East”, Riyadh has not actively participated in the Israel-Hamas negotiations, let alone in any conflict resolution diplomatic efforts, unlike Qatar and Egypt. The Saudi leadership possesses vested interests in this conflict considering that normalising relations with Israel is still on the table. Riyadh's intention for rapprochement remains an essential component of the Kingdom's strategy, as illustrated by statements of senior officials and the Saudi media's opposition to Hamas's narratives. However, such a position could be perceived by Arab and Muslim countries as being pro-Israel. The Kingdom can avoid regional tensions and domestic unrest by continuing to criticise Israel over the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and renewing calls



for a ceasefire. It could then be argued that normalisation with Israel and the US will remain frozen so long as the war in Gaza goes on.

Qatar

The State of Qatar holds a noteworthy position on the Israel-Hamas war, which is reflected in its foreign policy. On one hand, Qatar hosts Al Udeid Air Base, the biggest US military base in the Middle East. Indeed, Secretary of State Antony Blinken recently praised Qatar as a “very close partner” to the US. On the other, the leadership supports Hamas by donating up to 30 million dollars a month and hosting some of the organisation's leaders. In 2017, the UAE, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Yemen cut diplomatic ties with Qatar due to the accommodating “terrorist and sectarian groups that aim to create instability in the region”, according to a statement by the Saudi Press Agency. Subsequently, the country distanced itself from Hamas so as to become a more reliable American ally through diplomacy, lobbying, arms trade, and media campaigns.

Since October 7, Qatar, like Egypt, has been at the forefront of the release of hostages as a deal-broker between Israel and Hamas. As a result, Doha’s ties to and influence over Hamas have been put to use while boosting the country’s profile as a top mediator and peacemaker in conflicts and hostage situations, including between the US and Iran, and often in partnership with Washington. At the time of the report, Qatar's role in de-escalating the conflict through diplomacy had successfully led to the release of 78 hostages with a seven-day humanitarian truce that was extended twice as part of the Qatar-brokered deal towards the end of November. Qatar has also worked to renew the truce, pushing for a “comprehensive ceasefire”. Meshal bin Hamad Al Thani, the Ambassador of Qatar to the US stated that “the presence of the Hamas office shouldn’t be confused with endorsement but rather establishes an important channel for indirect communication”. Similarly, based on a statement by the Foreign Ministry, Qatar strengthens “regional and international action and solidarity within the framework of de-escalation”. Simultaneously, Al Jazeera, a Qatar-based news network, is criticised for promoting Islamist movements. Antony Blinken reportedly asked the Qatari prime minister to "turn down the volume on Al Jazeera's coverage because it is full of anti-Israel incitement", amid concerns of inflaming public opinion in the Arab world, thus heightening regional tensions.

Qatar’s mediation efforts, which arguably signal a neutral stance towards the war, underpin the country’s sympathy towards the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Gaza, supplemented by the country’s aid delivery. Qatar has already sent tons of food and medical supplies to Gaza. The Qatar Ambassador to the US stated that humanitarian aid is delivered to Palestinian citizens in coordination with the US and Israel. Additionally, Palestinian solidarity



rallies, like the one held in Doha on October 13, have been staged. As such, the Qatari public opinion is probably another factor driving Qatar's humanitarian assistance. Still, such pro-Palestine sentiments are unlikely to affect Doha's position as an established peacemaker, especially since Qatar, a minor regional power compared to other Gulf countries, is generally perceived as not having vested interests in the Israel-Hamas war. It is highly likely that the Qatari leadership's trustworthiness, coupled with their experience in crisis management and leverage on Hamas, will allow the country to continue negotiating settlements between the two warring parties.

Egypt

Egypt has played a significant role as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, using existing experience and networks with both warring parties. Egypt's mediation efforts contributed to the ceasefire agreement in November, with Qatar co-leading the negotiations. Cairo's role in this conflict reflects its national interests. The war in Gaza has put significant pressure on the country's struggling economy by raising energy prices and decreasing tourism. But Egypt's role as a mediator reflects its foreign policy objectives too. De-escalation is necessary for the Egyptian government to avoid responsibility for Gazan refugees in the Sinai Peninsula or for the Gaza Strip itself. President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi has rejected any proposal requiring Egypt to administer Gaza's security after military operations conclude.

While Hamas is a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, an organisation banned in Egypt, Cairo has maintained communication with Hamas officials bilaterally. In particular, relations with Hamas are vital for Egypt as the organisation has proved an essential security partner in countering the Islamic State insurgency in the Sinai, as seen in past military operations between Hamas and the Egyptian military. Moreover, Egypt's leverage on the organisation has made Cairo a favourable US partner in the region, especially in terms of mediating the Israel-Palestine conflict even before the October 7 attacks. Although Cairo reportedly pushes for accelerated aid delivery through the Rafah crossing, the only entry point to Gaza, the government is arguably reluctant to open the crossing considering the militant threat in the Sinai. As of November 10, only 700 trucks entered Gaza since October 21, representing 11% of the supplies the enclave received before the war. Egypt's pleas for fuel and more aid to enter Gaza are counterbalanced by its leadership wanting to avoid an influx of Gaza refugees and by Israel's control over the Palestinians approved to leave Gaza and its inspection of aid trucks.

Despite Egypt's unilateral mediation, multilateral channels have also been utilised. Egyptian officials have met with multiple heads of state to pressure Israel for a humanitarian resolution. Cairo has sought to gather global support for a ceasefire in Gaza, as illustrated by Foreign



Minister Sameh Shoukry's call on Moscow to use its permanent seat at the UN Security Council (UNSC) and push for a ceasefire agreement. Shoukry also joined a delegation touring the capitals of permanent UNSC member states to call for de-escalation. Even so, as illustrated by the failure of the Cairo Peace Summit, the prospects of Egypt acquiring broad support for a ceasefire remain limited.

Concerning public opinion, Egypt has seen nationwide pro-Palestine rallies. Although El-Sisi's government has cracked down on public protests in the past, pro-Palestine rallies have been allowed. There have been solidarity marches and protests across Egypt. Despite the approval of specific protests, some Egyptians were arrested for organising in locations not sanctioned by the government. Due to restrictive protest laws, Egyptians have also participated in boycotts of Western brands to voice their opinions. This popular stance is possibly fuelled by the media's framing of the conflict. For instance, Egyptian state-owned media outlet Al Ahram Online referred to the victims of the October 7 attacks as 'soldiers' and neglected to point out the Israeli civilian casualties. Al Ahram uses the term 'death toll' for Israeli civilians and uses the term 'martyrs' for Gazan civilians. Even though Al Ahram has not explicitly supported Hamas, it has published statements from its leaders, like Ismail Haniyeh, and praised the strategic aspects of the October 7 attacks.

The war in Gaza exacerbates Egypt's economic crisis and steers the population's sentiments. The pro-Palestine rallies may represent a political opportunity for dissatisfied citizens seeking to mobilise against the financial crisis and the crackdown on civil opposition. Still, such mobilisation is unlikely to pose risks to the stability of Egypt's military-backed regime in the short term. Cairo's leverage over Hamas will continue being used to exert the country's influence and yield results. Accordingly, negotiating future pauses in fighting remains a realistic possibility. At the same time, as fighting spreads further south into Gaza, Cairo will continue pushing for a humanitarian truce while claiming a diplomatic victory by deterring any forced displacement of Palestinians to Egypt.

Security

Regional Rivalries, Global Consequences

Iran, Israel's most significant geopolitical rival in the region, has significant stakes in the Israel-Hamas war. It has emerged as the primary backer of Hamas, both financially and



militarily. Despite this, direct Iranian military involvement remains unlikely. Domestic divides and economic pressures mean that Iran's primary mode of exerting pressure on Israel and the US is via its local allies and proxies, Hezbollah and the Houthi movement. Increasing activities of the Iran-backed axis of resistance groups are fuelling broader regional instability. Since October 7, over 1,200 attacks between militant organisations and Israeli and American targets have been recorded in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and the Red Sea.

Hezbollah poses a significant threat to Israel. The Lebanese Shiite organisation has a substantial arsenal of rockets and missiles as well as a global network of allegiances and criminal operations. So far, Hezbollah seems reluctant to escalate into a full-scale confrontation against Israel. It is unlikely the group will engage in a cross-border ground offensive similar to the one carried out by Hamas on October 7. Instead, Hezbollah has been pressuring Israel on its northern border with a strategy of controlled confrontation. Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, defied some worried expectations during his speech on November 3 by falling short of declaring war against Israel. Despite this apparent show of restraint, tensions are likely to remain high. Some analysts argue that a redline for Hezbollah is the continued existence of Hamas. If this were to be threatened, then the Lebanese group would likely escalate the conflict into an all-out war with Israel. If we are to understand the dismantling of Hamas as the physical elimination of the majority of its membership and military capacity in Gaza, then this objective would seem difficult to achieve in the short term due to significant logistical challenges, a lack of Israeli tactical clarity, and, perhaps more importantly, the fact that Hamas' infrastructure is embedded in civilian locations in Gaza. A more likely short-to medium-term scenario would see Israel increasing its military presence in Gaza to severely hamper Hamas' operational capacity through more focused operations on concrete military targets. This strategy would place Israel in a better position to achieve its security objectives while limiting casualties in Gaza and deterring a more decisive military response on the part of Hezbollah.

As Hezbollah and Israel continue to exchange rocket fire, the probability of a full-scale Israeli offensive in Lebanon remains uncertain but precarious. Hezbollah rocket barrages and anti-tank missiles have killed both military personnel and civilians, causing Israel to evacuate residents from Kiryat Shmona and other communities. Israel has responded by intensifying missile strikes on Southern Lebanon. As of November 23, Israeli attacks in Lebanon reportedly killed at least 15 civilians and more than 85 Hezbollah fighters, in addition to displacing thousands from the south. Thus far, these clashes have largely stuck to the previously established controlled confrontation strategy. As tensions look unlikely to deescalate in the short term, the chances that one side will be incited to launch a major operation against the other increases. The catastrophic 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah War remains



fresh in the minds of many Israeli strategists, as does Hezbollah's participation in the conflict in neighbouring Syria. When faced with such a capable opponent, an Israeli offensive would prove to be costly for both sides. What is more, the probable damage to Lebanese civilian infrastructure would likely only entrench Hezbollah's support in the failing state. The IDF have previously signalled that they are ready for a two-front war. Privately, however, despite Israel's military superiority, the IDF's capacity for managing multi-front engagements is in doubt, a concern that has been echoed by American counterparts who have advised Israel not to escalate tensions with Hezbollah. In a region already strained by a myriad of humanitarian and security crises, such a conflict would be disastrous for the Levant and beyond.

Compared to Hezbollah, the Houthi movement has a smaller capacity for regional escalation. Thus far, all Houthi long-range missiles launched from Yemen have been successfully intercepted by Israel's anti-ballistic missile system Arrow, meaning that Israel has yet to take any associated casualties. Regardless, the Houthi movement has other means of exerting pressure on Israel and signalling their support for Hamas, as demonstrated by the recent attacks from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen on primarily Israeli-linked commercial vessels in the Red Sea. Roughly 10% of global trade passes through this maritime channel. An escalation of attacks on merchant vessels is likely to incur a robust response from the US. The US is arguably wary of direct retaliation against the movement owing to the ongoing tenuous ceasefire in Yemen. Yet, at the end of November, a US Navy warship captured five armed Houthi militants attempting to escape an Israeli-linked tanker off the coast of Yemen. Even more recently, the US shot down a Houthi drone. These incidents show that belligerent exchange between the US and Iran's proxies with the potential to escalate the fighting beyond Gaza remains a realistic possibility as the US increases its regional military presence. Whilst Iran has denied responsibility for these Houthi attacks, Washington disagrees with a recent White House statement alleging significant financial and strategic support from Tehran towards the Houthis. Presently, there are indications that Washington is considering the creation of a multinational naval force to enhance maritime security, particularly in the Red Sea. Houthi attacks in the Red Sea could be aimed at impacting global energy markets in addition to opposing Israel. Whilst the price of crude oil has stabilised following the October 7 Hamas attacks, persistently high prices could significantly influence the challenges faced by President Biden in the forthcoming US elections. Regardless, impacting global trade by attacking vessels is a way through which the Houthis inflict pressure on Israel, as security risks for shipping companies transporting goods through the Red Sea increase.



Refugees and Radicalisation

Compounding this multifaceted conflict is the ongoing refugee crisis. As of the end of November, there were over 1.8 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Gaza, or nearly 80% of the population. As Israeli airstrikes continue to attack Gaza, an increasing number of Palestinians seek opportunities to enter Egypt through the Rafah crossing. The Rafah border is a crucial logistical corridor in ensuring the survival of Palestinians relying on goods and humanitarian aid. As the border has briefly opened to bring Palestinian foreign passport holders and the critically sick and injured into Egypt, the resulting refugee flows have the potential to contribute to wider regional unrest.

Refugee flows between neighbouring countries can become a mechanism of conflict diffusion by comprising a spillover effect and catalyst for further conflict. Arguably, targeted violence, in this case, Israeli violence towards Palestinians, increases the chances of international conflict resulting from countries' desire to protect their ethnic kin. Such instances so far have been evident in the increased pressure on Israel by Arab states and the involvement of the aforementioned militant groups. As Israel continues its missile attacks on civilian areas in Gaza, it remains likely that more militant groups will get involved in the war. As for direct military confrontation between Israel and neighbouring Arab states hosting Palestinian refugees, outright interstate conflict is less likely than scenarios of militarised interstate disputes or the use of limited military force. Still, that is conditional on the actual number of Palestinian refugees, the risks they would pose to the stability of the states that receive them, and continuous efforts by Egypt and Qatar to mediate the Israel-Hamas war to prevent such negative externalities an influx of Palestinian refugees would create. Furthermore, public reaction serves as a pivotal factor in understanding this potential. Following the events on October 7, Arab governments were quick to condemn the violence by holding an emergency meeting at the headquarters of the League of Arab States, calling for the immediate cessation of the Israeli offensive in Gaza. Several Arab states are conscious of Israeli desires for permanent population transfers. An Israeli policy of mass displacement is likely to provoke widespread public dissatisfaction and civil unrest in the region, a factor unlikely to be overlooked by Arab leadership. These heightened tensions represent a new low in Arab-Israeli relations, exacerbated by the increasing number of Palestinian civilian casualties, IDPs, and refugees.

The threat of radicalisation, a process through which people become increasingly motivated to use violence for political ends, comprises another point of concern. Refugees endure an unequal share of the war's adversities, especially children and young people who get separated from their families. Refugees also face the burden of being labelled as a negative



externality to states that receive them, putting them at further risk of exposure to violence as a result of tensions with the local population or the disruption of a host country's ethnic balance, for instance. Studies have linked the mistreatment of refugees, like in situations of violence within refugee camps, with the increase in radicalisation. Lebanon's Ein el-Hilweh Palestinian camp has seen many violent incidents which resulted in casualties even before Israel invaded the Gaza Strip. One-sided violence against refugees can induce the latter to support and justify radical positions, although that does not always lead to the joining of militant groups and the carrying out of acts of violence or terrorism. Nevertheless, the threat of radicalisation of Palestinian war victims and refugees is likely to grow as Israeli military operations in Gaza continue. On a similar note, Europol recently noted that outrage over the conflict, particularly over the humanitarian and refugee crises, is highly likely to drive an increased risk of terror attacks. Jihadist groups have begun to use the conflict as a recruitment tool for disaffected youth, like Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in Central Asia. Militant groups operating in the Middle East region, which has been exposed to consistent terrorist threats, can capitalise on the refugees' despair as a recruitment tool and generally leverage the opportunity presented by the war to carry out increased operations. That would pose a severe security threat to civilians in this region. As fighting intensifies in the south of Gaza, Hamas may try to lure Palestinians who have faced targeted violence and displacement and indoctrinate them into their dogmatic anti-Israel ideology with the consequence of committing new fighters to the Israel-Hamas war. Such a risk in relation to the Israel-Hamas should not be overlooked by those who prioritise containing transnational spillovers of violence in the Middle East.



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