



Commentary

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By International Crisis Group

The Gaza War Reverberates Across the Middle East

As war rages in Gaza, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to escalate, causing grievous harm to civilians and threatening stability across the Middle East. Crisis Group experts offer a 360-degree view of how various capitals in the region view this crisis and their own interests therein.

THE 7 OCTOBER attack by Hamas on Israeli communities ringing the Israeli-besieged Gaza Strip saw 1,400 Israelis killed and over 200 hostages taken (with most still in captivity), provoking a furious response by the Israeli military. Since then, Israel's heavy-handed retaliation has taken thousands of lives. The campaign will claim countless more if Israel continues to

pursue its stated goal of destroying Hamas's military capacity. Hundreds of thousands have been displaced, many without a home to return to as Israel razes much of northern and central Gaza to the ground. But while the violence has been most profoundly felt in Gaza and Israel, it also has ramifications across the region, as Crisis Group outlines in the following survey.

Egypt

SINCE ISRAEL BEGAN bombing Gaza after the Hamas attacks on 7 October, Egyptian officials have been worried about the possibility that Palestinians in the coastal strip would stream into the Sinai Peninsula through the Rafah crossing on the Egyptian border – either fleeing the conflict or expelled by Israel. Fears of mass Palestinian displacement have been fuelled by, among other things: Israel's imposition of what Defence Minister Yoav Gallant described as a "total blockade" barring the import of food, electricity and fuel into Gaza; intimations by current and former Israeli officials that they wish to kick out the population; and the 21 October warning by Israeli authorities to the 1.1 million Palestinians in northern Gaza to

relocate to the southern part of the strip. Cairo's stance is no doubt also informed by the rising civilian death toll as the ground invasion proceeds, as well as by reported European and U.S. pressure to open Rafah to Palestinians who wish to cross.

Egypt has strongly signalled to its regional and international partners that it does not want to be the landing spot for displaced people from Gaza, for reasons both principled and pragmatic. Cairo recalls what happened in the 1948 war that followed Israel's independence, when many present-day Gaza residents and their forebears left or were forced out of villages in what is now Israel. Israel did not allow the Palestinians who departed to return to their

homes when the war ended, and Cairo believes that this pattern could too easily repeat itself after the current fighting ebbs. Many people now living in Gaza would then become refugees for a second or a third time, further frustrating Palestinian aspirations to statehood and shifting the burden of care for the displaced onto Egypt. On 21 October, President Abdelfattah al-Sisi stated that “the liquidation of the Palestinian cause without a just solution is beyond the

In sum, Egypt does not want to be drawn into Israel’s conflict with the Palestinians.

To reduce the prospect of Palestinians leaving Gaza en masse, Egypt has called for delivery of humanitarian aid to the strip and voiced strong opposition to an Israeli ground invasion. But as Egypt began preparations in al-Arish, a northern Sinai city, to send relief convoys into Gaza, Israel struck areas near the Rafah border gate on four occasions between 9

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realm of possibility. In no case will it happen at Egypt’s expense. Absolutely not”. In hewing to this position, Cairo enjoys support from other Arab capitals and the Palestinian militant groups, as well as the public in Egypt and other Arab countries.

Concerns related to security in Sinai – where the government has been battling jihadist cells – also undergird Cairo’s stance. Jihadist activity has died down over the past few months. Should a significant number of people come to the peninsula from Gaza, it could start up again, for example if members of Palestinian jihadist groups establish logistical, ideological and operational links with confreres based in Sinai. Moreover, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to separate Palestinian militants from the mass of new refugees. These militants could very well try to launch attacks on Israeli targets from Egyptian territory, inviting retaliation from Israel and unsettling its relations with Egypt. The humanitarian implications could also be serious. Much of northern Sinai’s population has itself been displaced for years, due to the counter-insurgency campaign. An influx of Palestinians could strain local infrastructure and available resources. Should Palestinians arrive in large numbers, it would present significant absorption challenges for all of Egypt, perhaps destabilising the whole country.

and 16 October, thus preventing its use. In the ensuing standoff, Egyptian officials asked the U.S. to mediate and, since 21 October, Israel has allowed small quantities of food, water and medical supplies through the crossing into Gaza. Yet, concerned about the possibility of diversion to Hamas’s military wing, Israel has continued to block fuel deliveries. By 31 October, according to local authorities and international NGOs in Gaza, this approach had brought hospitals and other humanitarian operations to the brink of collapse. On that day, the White House said 66 aid trucks had crossed in the past 24 hours but acknowledged that the cargo did not come close to meeting the enormous need in the strip. Along with Qatar, Egypt has also been involved in negotiations over the release of Israelis and others taken hostage by Hamas on 7 October.

While Egypt appears to have refused any suggestion of accepting Palestinian refugees in exchange for external aid and debt forgiveness – a prospect that has reportedly been dangled by U.S. and European officials – the turmoil will continue to present Cairo with opportunities to extract concessions from its creditors and ease its quite significant economic difficulties. Concerned about the conflict’s destabilising effects, which could boost irregular migration from Egypt to Europe, the European Union

is considering a partnership agreement with Egypt focused on migration and economic cooperation mirroring a similar deal reached with Tunisia in July – the core of which would be a major financial support package. Likewise, concerned with the war’s impact on Egypt’s stability, Gulf Arab states are reportedly

contemplating increasing their deposits in the Egyptian central bank to bolster the country’s fragile economy, in spite of their previous reluctance to continue bankrolling Cairo. These financial injections could provide Egypt with much-needed economic relief, somewhat brightening its short-term domestic outlook.

Jordan

ISRAEL’S ASSAULT ON Gaza in the wake of Hamas’s 7 October attack has outraged Jordanians, as has the resulting humanitarian catastrophe. Speculation that Israel wishes to drive out Gaza’s Palestinian population has also stoked decades-old fears that it correspondingly plans to force West Bank Palestinians into Jordan. Jordanians have taken to the streets across the country on a daily basis. The size of demonstrations in front of the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Amman and in the city centre is unprecedented. For many Jordanians, today’s crisis marks the first time they have ever joined a public protest. Worried about unrest both at home and abroad, King Abdullah II warned that “the whole region is on the brink of falling into the abyss”.

Jordanian commentators, especially those of Palestinian origin, angrily argue that Western countries have given Israel a blank check in Gaza, while the Palestinian people are routinely dehumanised in Israeli and Western media. Queen Rania, who is of Palestinian descent, denounced Western countries for their “glaring double standards”, saying in an interview with CNN on 24 October that Western journalists who demand that anyone representing Palestinian points of view first condemn Hamas’s attack should “have their humanity cross-examined and present their moral credentials”. That she

“[Jordan] reaffirmed its commitment to restarting an Israeli-Palestinian peace process.”

delivered this message on such a high-profile platform suggests that the monarchy is worried about backlash from the country’s Palestinian-origin population – most of whom are refugees from the 1948 or 1967 wars. (Jordan is the only Arab country to have granted citizenship to Palestinian refugees.)

Indeed, Jordan’s leadership has had to do some damage control with this constituency. On the war’s second day, reports suggested that the Jordanian government was allowing the U.S. to send weapons to Israel through Jordan. The government promptly denied the report, stressing its opposition to Israel’s actions in Gaza. It has also reaffirmed its commitment to restarting an Israeli-Palestinian peace process that would lead to a two-state solution guaranteeing Palestinians their rights and freedoms.

The perception that Israel may want to expel Palestinians from Gaza and potentially even the West Bank also shapes the thinking of Jordan’s political elite. In a discussion at the Politics and Society Institute in Amman, with the participation of former Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher, among others, panellists expressed the conviction that Israel’s long-term plan is to use its military campaign to force the Palestinian population from Gaza into Sinai and then also kick Palestinians out of the West Bank. They said the type of uncritical support that Western states are giving Israel at the moment – should it persist – could have ripple effects. They worry it will encourage the Israeli right wing, which has long called for the “transfer” of all Palestinians to Jordan, to train its sights on Palestinians with Israeli citizenship, pushing

those people out as well and turning Jordan into the de facto Palestinian homeland.

The fears are driven in large part by not only the conflict's history but also recent statements by Israeli politicians. At least one member of the Israeli Knesset has openly called for a "second Nakba". (Arabs commonly use the word *nakba*, which means "catastrophe", to refer to the displacement in 1948 of 750,000 Palestinians from the territory of what soon became Israel.) Israeli settlers in the West Bank have distributed leaflets threatening Palestinians with forcible removal if they do not relocate to Jordan. The Israeli Knesset is set to vote on a proposal by far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir to allow the use of live fire in suppressing demonstrations by Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Even if it is not the most likely near-term scenario, the forced displacement of more Palestinians from the West Bank is a spectre that deeply concerns many in Jordan because of the severe repercussions it would have. Already, the stratospheric level of popular opposition to Israel risks forcing the government to

reconsider its peace treaty with the latter. On 1 November, Jordan recalled its ambassador to Israel, saying the emissary would return only when Israel ends its assault on Gaza. Mass displacement into Jordan would be economically ruinous, and the new demographic reality of Jordan becoming the de facto Palestinian state would almost certainly destabilise the political order, which has historically privileged Jordanians of non-Palestinian origin.

Jordan has an additional concern as custodian of Jerusalem's Muslim and Christian holy sites; if the fighting in Gaza produces an explosion in Jerusalem and the West Bank, it could jeopardise Amman's effective role in administering these places and supercharge public fury. Jordan has frequently expressed disquiet regarding Israeli violations of the historical Status Quo at these sites, including Israel's green light to Jews to pray on the plaza atop the al-Aqsa mosque-Temple Mount compound. For the time being, however, the situation at these sacred places is quiet, and Amman has not explicitly mentioned it since the events of 7 October.

Lebanon

GIVEN THE HISTORY of enmity between Israel and the powerful Shiite militia-cum-party Hizbollah, Lebanon is the country most likely to become embroiled in full-scale war by the burgeoning Gaza crisis. Near constant exchanges of fire in recent weeks only reinforce this impression. True, all of Lebanon's major political parties have declared that they do not want such a war to occur. Yet, even in less anxious times, Hizbollah has pursued its own foreign policy – including judgements about when and how to deploy its massive arsenal – without subjecting its decisions to domestic political review.

Thus, while Hizbollah itself says it would prefer to avoid a broader conflict, no combination of Lebanese actors can prevent it from engaging in clashes at the Lebanon-Israel border – even though such hostilities leave the country at constant threat of being drawn into punishing conflict with its powerful southern neighbour.

Hizbollah's declarations that it does not intend to go to war with Israel sit somewhat uneasily with standard party rhetoric. The party considers itself, along with Hamas, a member of the "axis of resistance", an alliance of state and non-state actors opposed to Israel and the U.S.

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that also includes Iran, Syria, the Houthis in Yemen and a number of militant groups operating in Iraq and Syria. Hizbollah has emphasised close cooperation between the components of this alliance as a strategic objective in recent years, and party officials have routinely warned Israel – since well before the current crisis – that it may come to face a multi-front war. Such admonitions are a key element of Hizbollah’s deterrence posture.

Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah repeated warnings along these lines in a 3 November speech, while the party’s external sponsor Iran added ominous cautions to Israel not to escalate. Israel and the U.S., for their part, sent strongly worded messages back, and the U.S. moved substantial naval assets to the eastern Mediterranean Sea to deter Hizbollah and, by extension, Iran. To keep a lid on escalation, Washington also reportedly worked quietly to dissuade Israel from taking punitive action against Hizbollah for attacks emanating from Palestinian militants based in Lebanon.

Still, whether Hizbollah will be pulled toward restraint or action is not yet clear. Since 2006, when it fought a terribly destructive war with Israel, its backing for its ally Hamas in rounds of conflict with Israel, such as in April 2021, has been limited. It has generally offered verbal support and, reportedly, strategic advice and intel-

their own risks. On the war’s second day, Hizbollah carried out an unprovoked attack in the disputed Shebaa Farms area, which Israeli forces occupy and where Israel and Hizbollah have exchanged fire in the past. In the following days, cross-border incursions by Palestinian groups drew Israeli fire that killed Hizbollah fighters, initiating an escalatory dynamic that has been slowly building up since. Until 28 October, fighting was restricted to a strip of land along both sides of the border some 5km deep, the approximate range of the guided anti-tank ammunition that Hizbollah has been using. Since most civilians on both sides either fled or were evacuated, all reported casualties appear so far to have been combatants. In his 3 November speech, Nasrallah reported 57 losses (Israel claims to have killed 70). From its side, Hizbollah claims to have killed or injured 120 Israeli soldiers; Israel acknowledges six soldiers and one civilian killed. In the last days of October, both Hizbollah and Israel struck up to 15km into enemy territory, raising the likelihood of civilian casualties and, with it, the danger of accelerated escalation.

A Hizbollah spokesman said the group uses these tactics to pursue several interrelated objectives. At the top of the list are tying down Israel’s military in the north and using the threat of a new front in the war to make Israel

“Other Lebanese political forces are less relevant, in part because they are weaker than ever vis-à-vis Hizbollah.”

ligence sharing, without directly participating in attacks on Israel from Lebanese soil. Yet given the serious threat to Hamas and the centrality of the Palestinian struggle to its ideological outlook, Hizbollah may yet feel compelled to come to its partner’s aid in the current conflict. In his speech, Nasrallah warned that Hizbollah could escalate based on the extent of the Israeli war in Gaza and/or civilian casualties in Lebanon caused by Israeli bombing or shelling.

In the meantime, border clashes are creating

think twice about how much it escalates in Gaza. Hizbollah also aims to keep Washington focused on the possible expansion of the conflict, and the implication that the U.S. itself could be drawn into a years-long conflict in the Middle East, thus allowing Russia and China to deepen their influence in the region at its expense.

Other Lebanese political forces are less relevant, in part because they are weaker than ever vis-à-vis Hizbollah. Lebanon has a caretaker government whose legitimacy is hotly disputed.

A senior adviser to the prime minister, Najib Mikati, admitted that the most the premier can do is try to push the nation's interest in avoiding a broader conflict – especially during a disastrous economic crisis – to the forefront of Hizbollah's calculations. "The decision is clearly not in the government's hands", the adviser said. A parliamentarian aligned with a Hizbollah ally claimed that his party has communicated its concerns about further military escalation to Hizbollah's political representatives; he also acknowledged that these counterparts operate separately from Hizbollah's military leadership.

Hizbollah's leaders also appear impervious to any anti-war pressure that might arise from among Lebanon's Shiites, who would likely bear the brunt of war with Israel, though they would almost certainly fall in line should the party decide to pursue such a conflict. The Shiite population is concentrated in Lebanon's south

as well as in Beirut's southern suburbs and parts of the Beqaa Valley. Israel has focused its bombardment on these areas in the past, in particular during the 2006 war, saying it was targeting Hizbollah assets. Still, an analyst close to Hizbollah projected confidence that party supporters do not fear a large-scale conflict and might even, influenced by reports of atrocities from Gaza, push the party heads to intervene more forcefully.

Should war break out, Hizbollah also hopes that action in the name of defending the Palestinian cause might bolster its support among Lebanon's Sunnis. But it may struggle in that regard. While multiple Lebanese Sunni militant groups have already declared their willingness to fight alongside the group, many others still recall the bitter Shiite-Sunni street battles of May 2008, sparked by talk of disarming Hizbollah, which tainted the Shiite party in their eyes.

Türkiye

IN THE IMMEDIATE aftermath of the 7 October attacks, Ankara undertook intense diplomacy to push the sides to de-escalate and forestall a broader confrontation. Using balanced rhetoric, it called on both sides to exercise restraint as Israeli bombardment reduced parts of Gaza to rubble and Hamas continued to fire rockets into Israel. Turkish officials also said they were ready to mediate between the parties in the service of de-escalation and to work toward a two-state solution on the basis of 1967 borders – potentially with Ankara and other outside actors serving as guarantors. Türkiye's government reportedly asked key Hamas leaders, including chairman Ismail Haniyeh, to leave the country, but Ankara denied it had done so, likely wanting to avoid condemnation by pro-Hamas domestic constituencies.

As Israel's military campaign has expanded, Türkiye has become more pointedly critical of it. Reflecting overwhelming public opinion, Turkish officials view the campaign as vastly disproportionate and outside the bounds of

a justified response to the 7 October attacks. "[Israel's] attacks on Gaza have long exceeded the limits of self-defence and have turned into open cruelty, massacre and barbarism", Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said on 26 October. He separately defended Hamas fighters for "trying to protect their territory". Turkish officials worry that Israel's ground offensive in Gaza, as it progresses, will inflict further misery on innocent civilians. They stress the urgency of humanitarian aid deliveries to Gaza, and they have pressed this issue in Türkiye's diplomatic engagement with the parties. Not surprisingly, Ankara strongly condemned Israel's 30 October strike on the Turkish-Palestinian Friendship Hospital in Gaza, an attack that particularly frustrated Turkish authorities because they had long since shared the facility's coordinates with Israeli authorities.

The war has already dimmed prospects for improving Turkish-Israeli relations, which the sides fully restored a year ago after a turbulent decade. Much of the trouble was linked to the

Palestinian situation in Gaza. Ankara cut ties with Israel in mid-2010, after Israeli forces raided the *Mavi Marmara*, a ship in a Turkish civilian flotilla that was carrying humanitarian aid to the coastal strip. Israeli soldiers killed ten Turkish crew members in that incident. It

organisation. Indeed, Ankara invested years of effort in trying (unsuccessfully) to transform Hamas from an “armed resistance” into a potential partner in a two-state solution scenario, principally by strengthening its political wing. Indeed, members tied to that wing have

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took six years for Israel and Türkiye to restore ties, only to see them ruptured again 2018. In May of that year, Ankara downgraded relations and expelled the Israeli ambassador after Israeli soldiers killed 60 Palestinian protesters on the Gaza border. In 2021 and 2022, as part of its turn to a more pragmatic foreign policy and in an attempt to break out of its isolation in the eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye once again resumed full diplomatic ties with Israel. Among other things, the two countries had been mulling construction of a gas pipeline that would run from Israel through Türkiye and from there to Europe. But the fate of that project is now increasingly uncertain. On 28 October, Israel recalled its diplomats from Türkiye – unhappy about what Foreign Minister Eli Cohen called “grave statements” critical of Israeli conduct in the war.

The war in Gaza also adds a degree of unpredictability to Ankara’s attempts at normalising relations with Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Relations were upended in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab popular uprisings, when Ankara supported groups connected to these states’ *bête noire*, the Muslim Brotherhood. Some pro-government commentators have said the war could lead to Israel’s increasing regional isolation and, as a result, help Ankara foster improved ties with these countries.

Meanwhile, Türkiye’s approach to Hamas complicates the picture. Unlike the U.S., some other Western states and Israel, Ankara has never designated the group a terrorist

found refuge in Turkish cities. Israel has long criticised Ankara for its stance and, amid the two countries’ most recent normalisation process, Ankara reportedly took steps to limit some of Hamas’s room for manoeuvre in Türkiye. Many Hamas members, including Haniyeh, the aforementioned leader of the movement’s political arm, reportedly left for Qatar as a result. The extent of Türkiye’s leverage over Hamas’s political component today is unclear, but it has likely diminished in the last few years as the group’s Iran-backed military wing – over which Ankara has no influence – asserted its dominance.

Still, this history, combined with Erdoğan’s shift to squarely pro-Palestinian rhetoric that at times is explicitly pro-Hamas, will limit prospects for Ankara to carve out a mediation role for itself in the current crisis. The deterioration of Turkish-Israeli ties also narrows the space for Ankara to act as an honest broker. Instead, Qatar, Türkiye’s main partner in the Gulf, has been at the forefront of efforts to secure the release of hostages. Nevertheless, Ankara’s channels to Hamas’s political arm could prove useful down the line.

The war in Gaza also throws a spanner into Türkiye’s relations with the U.S. and EU, which had shown signs of improvement even a few months ago, but will now face increasing strain so long as the war continues. Türkiye and Western states differ over how they regard Hamas and how to respond to Israel’s military actions. Even in the first days after Hamas’s attacks, when Turkish officials were trying to present a

balanced perspective on the conflict, Erdoğan and others criticised the U.S and the EU for what they later described as *carte blanche* for Israel to deal with Hamas as it pleases. Erdoğan reacted sharply when the U.S. deployed two aircraft carriers to the eastern Mediterranean, questioning its intentions. The attack on Gaza's Al-Ahli hospital on 17 October – responsibility for which remains disputed – triggered large pro-Palestinian protests in Türkiye, including at NATO's Kürecik radar base in Malatya, in the country's east, as demonstrators accused

Israel of having carried out the strike. The U.S. shut down its consulate in Adana in southern Türkiye as a security measure.

As long as this crisis lasts, Türkiye's leaders will continue to be pulled in at least three directions, toward favouring the public's strong affinity for the Palestinian struggle; the state's Western alliances; or Ankara's commitment to an activist foreign policy that would normally have it seeking a prominent role in trying to resolve the conflict.

Iran

IRAN HAS SOUGHT to distance itself from accusations it had a direct role in the 7 October Hamas attacks, notwithstanding its longstanding support for the group and its praise for the operation after it took place. Since then, it has loudly warned of the regional ramifications of an expanded Israeli campaign in Gaza. "The entire Islamic world is obliged to support the Palestinians and, God willing, it will support them", declared Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on 10 October. "But this action was carried out by the Palestinians themselves".

For Tehran, the crisis brings opportunities. It is undoubtedly pleased that some of the Arab countries that have weighed normalising relations with Israel, its primary Middle Eastern adversary, are now issuing strong criticisms of Israeli actions. It has played up the notion that Hamas's 7 October attack exposed Israel's vulnerability, and it has taken advantage of every occasion to condemn what it contends is U.S. complicity in stoking the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, trying to magnify the reputational damage Washington is already suffering in the region.

But there are substantial risks as well, including that Iran's penchant for brinkmanship will rebound on it. Iran-backed groups

have ramped up attacks on Israel as well as U.S. forces in the region, with more than two dozen incidents since mid-October in Syria and Iraq piercing what had been a lull in hostilities between Washington and Tehran. That lull is widely believed to be part of informal de-escalatory understandings between the two adversaries.

Tehran, perhaps paradoxically, might see these attacks – along with rhetoric from Iranian political and military officials threatening further escalation if Israel continues along its present course – as an effort to manage conflict risk. In other words, Iran and its comrades in arms may well be seeking to dissuade Israel and its allies from pursuing a broader campaign in Gaza or Lebanon that could draw in other regional actors, eventually embroiling Iran to Israel's detriment. Such is the longstanding logic of Iran's "forward defence" policy, which seeks to exploit multiple points of vulnerability for the U.S. and its Middle Eastern partners so as to be able to respond if and when it comes under attack. But the U.S. and its allies are in turn warning the "axis of resistance" of the risks of opening multiple fronts, implying that "axis" operations would be met by overwhelming U.S.

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and/or Israeli firepower. The Biden administration has underscored this message by deploying military assets to the Middle East and engaging in a round of retaliatory airstrikes in eastern Syria – while making clear that more is in the offing if the armed groups continue to hit U.S. forces.

Against this backdrop, an Israeli ground incursion into Gaza puts Tehran on the horns of a dilemma: if it restrains itself and Hizbollah from intervening to prevent Hamas from being destroyed, it will lose credibility with its other local allies, having appeared to blink vis-à-vis its adversaries. But if it encourages Hizbollah or other regional partners to intervene more robustly than they already have, it might prompt Israel, backed or directly assisted by the U.S., to significantly degrade Hizbollah's capabilities. In the first scenario, Iran risks losing face. In the second, it risks losing a highly valued right hand in Syria and Lebanon – one whose capacity to strike U.S. and Israeli

assets helps shield Tehran from possible action against its nuclear program, which is operating at alarmingly advanced levels given the collapse of diplomatic efforts to contain it.

Iran might try to square this circle by encouraging its allies to escalate their attacks on Israel and the U.S. in a calibrated manner. But this strategy will have its limits. As noted, the U.S. has made clear that it will retaliate for attacks against its troops, and there is little question Israel will do the same, making the risks of escalation – particularly in the event of mishap or miscalculation – significant.

For nearly four decades, Iran's forward-defence policy has helped it deter foreign attackers by projecting power through allies and partners across the region. The conflict in Gaza is testing the limits of that policy in an unprecedented fashion by threatening to draw Tehran directly into the entanglements it has sought to avoid.

Iraq

HAMAS'S 7 OCTOBER attack on Israel and the unfolding conflict have pushed prominent Iran-aligned armed groups to break a unilateral truce with U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria that had lasted for nearly a year. These groups, which are affiliated with the above-referenced "axis of resistance", began observing this truce two months before the government of Mohammed Shia al-Sudani assumed power in Baghdad in November 2022. Their representatives sit in both parliament and the cabinet. But on 8 October, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Harakat al-Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah and the Badr Organisation – all part of this cluster – vowed to hit U.S. assets across the region should the U.S. intervene directly in the war.

Over the past two weeks, Iraqi groups, now dubbed the Islamic Resistance (Muqawama Islamiya), have claimed drone and rocket attacks on bases where U.S. forces are stationed, including Ain al-Asad in Anbar and

Harir in Erbil, both in Iraq, as well as al-Tanf just across the Syrian border and al-Shadadi in north-eastern Syria. No fatalities have been reported so far, and it appears that the groups are targeting the bases' surroundings – rather than the actual facilities – to cut down the chance of U.S. soldiers being hurt and manage the risk of escalation. To date, the U.S. has retaliated only against these groups' sites in Syria, most likely because of the potential for escalation, which could jeopardise the US presence in Iraq. This logic was evident also during the year of the truce, when occasional attacks and counter-attacks stayed within Syria. Meanwhile, the groups have so far kept a promise not to target diplomatic missions. Nonetheless, the U.S. has withdrawn non-essential personnel from its Baghdad embassy and reduced staffing at its Erbil consulate. It has told the government on several occasions that the attacks must cease.

The Sudani government, which has sought

“[Prime Minister] Sudani’s speech at the 21 October Arab summit in Cairo was one of the strongest in its denunciation of Israel’s actions in Gaza.”

to mend ties with the U.S. over the past year, is in a precarious situation. Because the government relies to a large extent on political support from Iran-linked groups, the U.S. and other Western countries initially viewed it as tilting toward Tehran, in contrast to Sudani’s more Western-leaning predecessor, Mustafa al-Kadhimi. Sudani has worked hard to address these concerns support. But the Gaza crisis threatens to reverse some of his progress. Elite and public opinion are strongly behind the Palestinians, and some political factions have made clear their deep frustration with Israel’s Western partners. For example, the government has come under pressure from the Sadrist movement, Iraq’s largest Shiite party outside the government and parliament, which has urged lawmakers to pass a measure demanding the withdrawal of the approximately 2,000 U.S. troops who remain in the country (ostensibly on a counter-ISIS mission). The government and its backers have made clear that no such motion will be tabled, but they have been full-throated in their support of the Palestinian cause. Sudani’s speech at the 21 October Arab summit in Cairo was one of the strongest in its denunciation of Israel’s actions in Gaza.

Sudani will likely continue to walk a tight-rope, his priorities being to preserve good relations with the U.S., to the extent possible, while still offering robust support for the Palestinians

and seeking to assist with practical needs like humanitarian aid. It will be a tall order, but one way his government can proceed is to serve as an intermediary, taking advantage of work it has been doing in the Gulf in recent years, where it has been a go-between for Iran and Saudi Arabia, while also improving its ties with Egypt and Jordan. It can also serve as an interlocutor between Arab countries and Iran. It can do the same for others. The U.S. has, for example, passed messages to Tehran via Baghdad.

Sudani may not, however, be able to control the actions of Islamic Resistance factions should Hizbollah react to an Israeli ground invasion in Gaza by opening another front on Israel’s border with Lebanon. Such a scenario would likely see intensified attacks by Iraqi groups on U.S. assets in Iraq and Syria. Groups with special expertise may also travel to Lebanon to support Hizbollah logistically. Still, despite the Iraqi armed groups’ aggressive rhetoric, they do not presently seem inclined to enlarge their role in a way that would jeopardise their governing power or attract U.S. or Israeli retaliation in Iraq (or Syria) – leading to an escalation that neither side wants. On 2 and 3 November, the Islamic Resistance issued statements claiming two strikes on Israeli targets. These may be a signal of intent, however, as no such attacks have been confirmed.

Yemen

THE LATEST GAZA crisis has shone a spotlight on a group in Yemen, at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula. The Houthi rebel movement (which calls itself Ansar Allah), which drove the internationally recognised government out of the capital Sanaa in 2014, is still another member of the Iran-led “axis of resistance”. Abdul

Malik al-Houthi, the movement’s leader, and other major figures have repeatedly declared their readiness for military action if the U.S. intervenes by force of arms on Israel’s side.

The rekindling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has provided the Houthis with an opportunity to reinforce three points essential

to their political agenda. The first is their commitment to the Palestinian cause. Given the widespread sympathy for the Palestinians in Yemen, the movement sees taking the lead in defending that cause as a way to broaden its

war with the U.S.-supported Saudi-led coalition since 2015 they have built up their capabilities to the extent that they can hit Israel and U.S. assets in the Middle East. To be sure, the effectiveness of the Houthis' long-range weap-

“The Houthis are clearly underscoring to both domestic and international audiences ... that their military power is growing.”

popular support. The second point is that the Houthis are becoming more tightly linked to their “axis of resistance” counterparts, with the movement’s recent statements appearing to reflect full coordination in military operations. As they boast of this growing relationship, the Houthis are also for the first time projecting themselves as a player outside their immediate geographical area. By all appearances, they wish to be seen not just as a recipient of support from other axis members but as an active backer of their regional endeavours. The Houthis and their partners no doubt hope that by beefing up their network in this way, they can better signal to Israel and the U.S. the costs of escalation in Gaza and elsewhere in the region.

The third point the Houthis are clearly underscoring to both domestic and international audiences is that their military power is growing. They claim that in the course of their

ons remains unclear. So far, Houthi attacks on Israel have either fallen short of their target or been foiled, including a 19 October missile intercepted by the *USS Carney* over the Red Sea and a 31 October projectile shot down by the Israelis. In addition, a drone attack near the Israeli-Egyptian border failed on 27 October. Israel attributed the attempt to the Houthis, and Egypt says the drone originated from the southern Red Sea area, consistent with the Israeli claim. In considering future strikes, the Houthis will likely weigh the risk that any further escalation could jeopardise their advantageous position inside Yemen, especially against the backdrop of the informal truce that remains shakily in place and negotiations with Saudi Arabia about a lasting ceasefire, which would almost certainly break down if the Houthis get involved in a larger war in the region.

Gulf Arab States

THE SIX MEMBERS of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain) are divided over the latest Gaza war, as they are over many issues.

Immediate reactions to the outbreak of hostilities largely tracked prior positions. The UAE, which normalised relations with Israel in the 2020 Abraham Accords, aligned itself with Israel: it denounced Hamas for killing and kidnapping Israeli civilians, calling the attacks a “serious and grave escalation”. By contrast,

Qatar, which maintains discreet communications with Israel but has steered clear of forging formal links, held Israel responsible for the escalation in violence and called for restraint. Reportedly, Doha was also furious with Hamas for carrying out the attack; Qatar’s leadership had long supported Hamas’ political wing, which maintains an office in the capital. At the political centre of the group, Saudi Arabia, which at least prior to 7 October was toying with the idea of normalisation and was negotiating terms with the U.S. (which is to be part of

any deal), walked a line between the two sides. It released a statement urging de-escalation by both parties and the protection of civilians, while recalling its earlier warnings that the situation might erupt due to the continued occu-

worried about domestic fallout from the war, given the outcry in the kingdom and in the rest of the Arab world over Israel's devastating campaign. While Saudi Arabian citizens have not taken to the streets in support of the Pal-

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pation. It also warned of catastrophic consequences should Israel launch an all-out ground invasion of Gaza.

But three weeks into the Gaza war, the Gulf Arab states' positions have evolved.

The UAE has turned its focus from criticising Hamas to criticising Israel's campaign in Gaza. It has used its seat on the UN Security Council to upbraid Israel for its use of disproportionate force, while at home it has cancelled many events to show support for the Palestinian struggle. It is also working to raise funds for humanitarian aid.

Qatar has acted as a mediator, trading on its channels to both Israel and Hamas. It won the release of four hostages and mediated a deal among Israel, Hamas and Egypt (in coordination with the U.S.) that would allow for the evacuation of foreign passport holders or Palestinians in critical medical condition from Gaza. Doha's role has earned it praise – from U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and, notably, Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi. The emirate has also received virulent criticism from ardent Israel supporters in the U.S. Congress, who accuse it of harbouring and funding terrorists. Qatar continues to face calls from members of Congress to close the Hamas office and expel its leaders. It has indicated it has no intention of doing so.

Saudi Arabia has kept a lower profile, continuing with business as usual by hosting investment forums, rather than cancelling them as an expression of solidarity with the Palestinians. At the same time, Riyadh is

estonians as Arabs have done elsewhere in the region, they may be staying home only because they fear government reprisal. Nevertheless, the public's anger is palpable in ways that cannot escape Riyadh's notice.

The kingdom appears to have put normalisation talks with Israel on ice, despite continuing U.S. pressure, at least until the dust settles. The White House claims Saudi Arabia has assured the U.S. that it will resume the normalisation discussion after the war's end. Should talks get going again, addressing the Palestinian question – which was already on Riyadh's wish list for the negotiations – would no doubt vault to the top of the pile of issues to be addressed.

Framing normalisation as a means of aiding the Palestinian cause could be a way for Riyadh to prevent domestic backlash. But it is not clear that the kingdom yet has a clear view on what a satisfactory solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict could look like. Even without such a vision, Riyadh already appears to be pushing hard for resumption of the peace process, presumably without Hamas (which it has chastised through circuitous channels, though not directly, at least not in public) but including the Palestinian Authority based in Ramallah.

For now, all the Gulf Arab states except Qatar largely remain bystanders in an unfolding drama. They are deeply concerned about the potential for regional destabilisation, if not a Middle East war, but they are limiting themselves mainly to quiet attempts to impress on the Biden administration the necessity of reining in Israel as it continues its onslaught in Gaza.

Morocco

SINCE ISRAEL AND Morocco established diplomatic ties in December 2020, the kingdom has steadily expanded its relationship with Israel, despite protests from pro-Palestinian civil society groups.

The king has driven the process of normalisation with Israel, consistent with the 2011 constitution, under which he sets the country's foreign policy priorities and orientation, relegating parliament to a ratifying role at his discretion. Morocco has fast-tracked its military

On 11 October, Rabat chaired an emergency Arab League meeting to rally support behind this position. A majority of Arab governments signed on to the resulting resolution, repeating the two elements above and emphasising the need to revive the peace process. Only Algeria, Libya, Iraq and Syria expressed reservations about the peace process language, with Algeria expressing concern that it appeared to equate “the inalienable right of the Palestinian people to self-determination” with “the practices of the

“Rapidly deteriorating conditions in the Gaza Strip led Moroccan civil society groups to take to the streets to express solidarity with the Palestinians.”

cooperation with Israel by signing a memorandum of understanding on arms sales and intelligence sharing. It has bought Barak MX missile defence units, the Skylock Dome anti-drone system and Heron drones from Israel. Rabat has also promoted the narrative that the two countries face a common enemy, accusing the Western Sahara independence movement, the Polisario Front, of collaborating with Hizbollah in Lebanon, which, like Israel, it dubs an Iranian proxy. In July, following Israel's official recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, Rabat completed the upgrade of the two countries' bilateral links, with a first-ever exchange of ambassadors. Yet, throughout this time, the Moroccan Support Front for Palestine, which is Morocco's main pro-Palestine civil society organisation, and others have continued to organise demonstrations lambasting normalisation.

Against this backdrop, in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attack, Morocco adopted a carefully balanced position intended to avoid either antagonising Israel or the Palestinians. In a 7 October statement, the Moroccan foreign ministry condemned attacks on civilians on both sides and called for de-escalation.

Zionist entity [Israel] that violate international legitimacy charters and resolutions”.

Soon, however, rapidly deteriorating conditions in the Gaza Strip led Moroccan civil society groups to take to the streets to express solidarity with the Palestinians and push the government to abandon its diplomatic balancing act in favour of a more pro-Palestinian stance. On 15 October, the Moroccan Support Front for Palestine staged a massive demonstration in Rabat, with an estimated 300,000 people calling for an end to Israel's military campaign and closure of the Israeli embassy. Since then, pro-Palestinian demonstrations have taken place across the country almost daily, with crowds bringing together Moroccans from across the political spectrum, including Islamists and left-wing activists. As a precaution, on 18 October, Israel evacuated its embassy in Rabat.

The authorities have so far tolerated this mobilisation, while ignoring the calls for an end to normalisation with Israel. Big foreign policy decisions remain the monarchy's exclusive domain, and normalisation with Israel is a strategic choice that reinforces Morocco's diplomatic position on the Western Sahara conflict,

which remains the government's top priority. It also bolsters Moroccan national security, in the monarchy's view, by offering Rabat an opportunity to upgrade its military capabilities vis-à-vis the Polisario Front and its main backer, Algeria. Yet a further deterioration in the humanitarian situation in Gaza or a regional escalation could stoke tensions in Morocco by highlighting the

growing divergence between popular sentiment in support of the Palestinians and Rabat's foreign policy priorities. While a strong mobilisation could force the monarchy to suspend or freeze open diplomatic engagement with Israel, the king is very unlikely to give in to requests to reconsider a normalisation agreement that he continues to see as in the nation's interest.

Tunisia

IN TUNISIA, THE present crisis has reawakened strong anti-Israel sentiment and significantly boosted President Kais Saïed's popularity. Beforehand, the president had been espousing populist rhetoric inspired by a mix of Arab nationalist nostrums, left-wing ideas and anti-Western conspiracy theories. He has now woven in the Palestinian issue. On 7 October, Saïed issued a communiqué expressing his "total and unconditional solidarity with the Palestinian people" and calling on "the international community ... to put an end to the perfidious occupation of the whole of Palestine".

In making this and similar statements, the president was riding a wave of public anger at Israel and its Western backers, as well as encouraging more of the same. A wave of protests against Western support for Israel followed. On 12 October, thousands marched in Tunis, answering a call from the main trade union, UGTT, and several civil society associations. Three days later, the opposition National Salvation Front, whose main leaders are in jail on charges of plotting to undermine state security, organised a demonstration to denounce "unconditional" French and U.S. support for Israel. On 16 October, in a special session, Tunisia's parliamentarians unanimously called for an emergency vote on a law criminalising any attempt to normalise relations with Israel. (The

legislature in neighbouring Algeria met with a similar objective.)

Part of Saïed's motivation in taking a strident stance and whipping up popular anger may be to deflect attention from the country's dire economic straits. (By contrast, Algeria – though its rhetoric is staunchly pro-Palestinian – has imposed strict controls on demonstrations, fearing that they could spiral out of the state's control.) Tunisia suffers from high rates of poverty and unemployment. It is also carrying a massive foreign debt burden on which it may well have to default in 2024 or 2025. The government has been engaged in contentious negotiations with the International Monetary Fund over a loan that would help it remain solvent, but this deal remains unlikely as negotiations have halted; the 2024 draft finance bill circulating in Tunis does not mention the IMF as a source of external funding.

Public anger at Israel is also being directed at Tunisia's Jewish community. Crowds have vandalised a monument associated with this community, which numbers around 1,500 and, separately, burned down the mausoleum of Rabbi Yossef Maarabi, which dates to the sixteenth century, in the country's south.

Protesters have also targeted the diplomatic missions of Israel's Western allies, particularly France, Germany and the U.S. On 17 October,

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following the lethal blast at the al-Ahli hospital in Gaza City, thousands of Tunisians, including members of parties and civil society organisations from across the political spectrum, marched to the French embassy. They denounced the French media for its allegedly pro-Israel bias and called for the expulsion of the French and U.S. ambassadors. In the following days, more demonstrations took place, including some calling for expulsion of the German ambassador, who in a speech broadcast on national radio had declared that Israelis were victims of “Palestinian terrorism”. Dozens of demonstrators also staged sit-ins in front of the French cultural centre and embassy in Tunis, shouting anti-French slogans.

In its messaging to outside actors, Tunisia has taken a hard-line anti-Israel stance. On 17 October, Saïed declared that the “Zionist entity” – a term also used for Israel by other anti-normalisation countries such as Algeria, Libya and Syria – has disregarded “human rights and

committed atrocities while posing as a victim in front of the world”. He then called on “all peoples and free men throughout the world who believe in universal human values to act to put an end to the crimes of the worldwide Zionist movement”. On 27 October, in contrast to Algeria’s vote in support of a UN General Assembly resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian truce in Gaza, Tunisia abstained. Tarak Ladab, Tunisia’s permanent representative to the UN, said the “grave and unprecedented” situation in Gaza required a “clearer” position than that outlined in the resolution.