



Political Implications of the Gaza War for the Middle East

Sara Nowacka

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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