

The Gulf States and the Israel-Hamas War

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With the exception of Qatar, the Gulf states share the goal of ending Hamas's control of the Gaza Strip, weakening the Iranian-led axis, and dealing a blow to Muslim Brotherhood ideology. However, their main priority is to safeguard the regional detente achieved in recent years, especially vis-à-vis Iran. Therefore, the risks that a regional conflict entail could propel them to prefer a quick end to the conflict over the benefit that could accrue from defeating Hamas. Regarding "the day after," it is possible they would be willing to be part of an effort to bring stability to the Gaza Strip, within a strategic reality whereby Hamas is stripped of its military and governmental capabilities, the United States retains an active role in the region, and the Israeli-Palestinian political process is renewed.

The war between Israel and Hamas has put the Gulf states in a complex position: some have diplomatic relations with Israel, while others – particularly Saudi Arabia – have been engaged in contacts aimed at establishing ties. Just recently, they finalized a series of reconciliation agreements, in the hope that these would foster regional stability and allow them to turn their attention to domestic matters. In addition, both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have demonstrated independent and active foreign policies that encourage the expectation they will take a more active role in regional developments. The monarchical regimes in the Gulf feel threatened by the public relations and military achievements that Hamas's October 7 massacre could grant to their rivals – Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood – and they would like to see Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip end and Hezbollah weakened. Moreover, they are afraid that any achievements by Hamas and Hezbollah would boost members of Iran's regional alliance and the Muslim Brotherhood ideology. In other words, they fear that the achievement recorded by Hamas on October 7 could give credence to the Muslim Brotherhood's argument that political Islam can succeed where Arab regimes have failed.

How Robust are the Abraham Accords?

The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain are both eager to safeguard their framework of relations with Israel, but the pictures from the Gaza Strip have aroused major public backlash against Israel and diplomatic relations. The

monarchies' sensitivity to public opinion in the Arab world is evident in their response to the explosion at the al-Ahli hospital on October 17. In face of the anger that the report generated across the Arab world, the Gulf regimes ignored the Israeli version – which claimed that the blast was caused by a misfired Islamic Jihad rocket – and joined the harsh regional condemnation of Israel. Concern for the Palestinians was expressed by [Anwar Gargash](#), a senior diplomatic adviser to the UAE president, who described the Israeli response to the Hamas massacre as “disproportionate.” He added that the attack proved that the Israeli policy of ignoring the Palestinian issue had failed, and that Israel must not resume it when the war ends.

At the same time, Abu Dhabi in particular is worried about any achievement linked to Hamas's ideological identification with the Muslim Brotherhood. In a [statement](#) at the United Nations, Reem al-Hashimy, the United Arab Emirates Minister of International Cooperation, described the Hamas attacks as “barbaric and cruel.” The Foreign Ministry in Abu Dhabi [blamed Hamas exclusively](#) for the escalation and said that it was “appalled” that Israeli civilians were abducted as hostages. No less important were comments from the head of the UAE Defense and Foreign Affairs Committee, Dr Ali Rashid al-Nuaimi, [who said that](#) events in Gaza would not change the fact that “the Abraham Accords are there to stay.” Even when after a month of fighting the Palestinian death toll began to rise sharply, UAE leaders [made it clear](#) that their country would retain diplomatic relations with Israel. UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed was the first Arab leader to speak with the Israeli leadership in the aftermath of October 7. He reportedly also spoke to Arab leaders, including Syrian President Bashar Assad, warning against interfering in the conflict or using it as an excuse to attack Israel.

Around a month after the outbreak of the war, when the extent of the devastation in Gaza had already led to mass protests across the Arab world, Saudi Arabia hosted an emergency joint conference of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation to discuss the situation in Gaza. Among those participating in the meeting were Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who became the first Iranian President to visit Riyadh in many years, as well as Syria's Assad. Notably absent was the President of the UAE, who instead sent his deputy to the summit, apparently as part of the ongoing tensions with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. To a large extent, the summit was a Saudi attempt to show that it is present and active in the Gaza crisis and is not letting Iran take all of the regional glory thanks to Tehran's support of Hamas and its vigorous opposition to Israel and the United States. Iran and Assad, for their part, used the summit to bolster the normalization that they have been enjoying in the Arab world.

As expected, the summit did not lead to any practical resolutions and the joint [closing statement](#) included a call for a ceasefire, for humanitarian aid to be allowed into the Gaza Strip, and for an end to the Israeli blockade, alongside a demand that the UN Security Council pass a binding resolution to that effect. It was reported that behind the scenes, the UAE, Bahrain, and apparently also Saudi Arabia [blocked](#) a proposed resolution that would have obligated any member of the Arab League with diplomatic ties with Israel to sever relations, as well as a call to disrupt oil supplies to Israel's allies, along the lines of the "oil embargo" imposed by Arab states in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War.

Future Normalization

The timing of the Hamas attack bolsters the prevalent assumption that the organization and Iran sought to derail contacts between Israel and Saudi Arabia ahead of a possible normalization agreement. This claim was raised by US President Joe Biden, when he said that one of the reasons that Hamas attacked Israel was that "[the Saudis wanted to recognize Israel](#)," and by Hamas spokesman in Lebanon, Osama Hamdan, who [declared](#) that the October 7 attack was a message to Arab countries who are considering normalization with Israel. Hamas was no doubt inspired by the idea that normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia – the most important Sunni country and the guardian of the Islamic holy sites – would be a symbolic blow to efforts to delegitimize and eliminate Israel, along with a concern that any such agreement would increase measures that strengthen the Palestinian Authority. The normalization agreement was also apparently supposed to include a defense alliance between Washington and Riyadh and cooperation on the issue of civilian nuclear power – developments that would be gamechangers in the strategic balance to Iran's detriment.

Indeed, a few days after the start of the war, [Saudi officials announced](#) the suspension of talks with the United States over normalization with Israel. The announcement was expected and was carefully worded not to terminate the process forever, and at the same time, to intimate that at least for the time being, Riyadh is distancing itself from Jerusalem. [A statement issued by the White House](#) in late October, which insisted that bin Salman told Biden that he was keen to continue normalization talks after the war, also confirms that Riyadh is in no hurry to give up on the promises that the US made during normalization talks between the two countries. The Saudi announcement suspending normalization talks came after a [telephone conversation](#) between bin Salman and Iranian President Raisi, the first since the two countries renewed ties in March 2023.

The Gulf states have confronted the tension between not wanting to allow Hamas and Iran to appropriate the Palestinian issue and to maintaining ties with them by issuing general condemnations of Israel, calling on all sides not to escalate the situation and calling for a ceasefire. Thus while Saudi Arabia is highly critical of Israel, it has also not spared Hamas. For example, Prince Turki al-Faisal, a former head of Saudi intelligence, [said](#) that the Hamas atrocities opposed the principles of Islam and were not “heroic.” In Saudi-controlled media outlets, the dominant line is to [accuse Iran](#) of being behind the barbaric Hamas attacks and to describe the Palestinians as victims of the Islamic Republic – in sharp contrast to Riyadh itself, which [sought to improve](#) the lives of the Palestinian people by means of normalization talks. It also accuses Hamas of sacrificing the people of Gaza for a hopeless military escapade. The [interview](#) by senior Hamas official Khaled Mashal to al-Arabiya created waves across the Middle East, after the interviewer, Rasha Nabil, leveled several harsh allegations against Hamas and even compared the organization to ISIS. Saudi journalist Abdulaziz al-Khamis went further during an interview with Israeli network Kan, [saying](#) that if the war ends without the destruction of Hamas, it would be a disaster for Israel and for the entire free world. It is thought that this is also the official position of the Saudi Royal House, which wants to see Hamas ousted from power in the Gaza Strip but is afraid that Israel will not get the job done.

The main concern of the Gulf states is that the [conflict will spread](#) to arenas closer to home. Their primary concern is Yemen, where Iran’s use of the Houthis as a proxy to attack Israel could lead to the collapse of the ceasefire and once again expose Saudi Arabia to Houthi attacks. In addition, the Gulf states are home to US military bases, which are also potential targets for Iran and its proxies. Saudi authorities see how the United States has stood steadfastly by Israel’s side, both in terms of public messaging and deploying troops and other military assets to the region. For Riyadh, this is an encouraging sign that Washington would respond in the same way if Saudi Arabia were to come under attack.

The Palestinian issue is very important in the Gulf states, and the gap between the highly positive public attitude toward the Palestinians and the more balanced approach of the leadership is evident. Moreover, the increasing risk of a regional war increases the level of anxiety in the Gulf and could encourage Arab regimes to prefer a quick resolution of the Gaza war over any benefit they might enjoy from destroying Hamas.

Conclusion

In the Israel-Hamas war, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which seek to position themselves as key actors in the Arab world, have been relatively passive. Apart from formal statements and humanitarian aid, they have left the diplomatic arena to Qatar, given that they remain dependent on US protection from a possible attack by Iran. At the same time, both countries could still play a stabilizing role the “day after Hamas.” This depends on Israel delivering a fatal blow to Hamas; the resumption of the Israeli-Palestinian political process, which would include the Palestinian Authority; and significant United States involvement in the region. In addition, while it is impossible to imagine Israel and Saudi Arabia moving any closer to normalization while the war continues, Riyadh has left the door to normalization open. It is likely, however, that once the war is over, the Palestinian element in any normalization agreement will be more prominent than it was before the Hamas attack.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE see how Iran has no problem using its proxies and how the United States is mustering its military force to defend Israel. These developments could encourage it to move closer to Israel and the US. Even now, the joint effort by Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to stop the Houthi missile fire from Yemen is a good omen for future cooperation, which could even be expanded.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen