

The Détente in the Middle East: Characteristics and Implications for Israel

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The continuation of the détente trend in the Middle East, coupled with the war between Israel and Hamas, is contributing to Israel's isolation in the region. In this article, we assess the regional détente implications for Arab countries and highlight the importance of advancing normalization between Israel and these countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, to counterbalance Iran's growing influence and that of its allies, which could endanger Israel.

There have been [considerable changes](#) in the geopolitical map in the Middle East in recent years. Key Arab countries, along with Iran and Turkey, have taken steps to reduce tensions between them. Some have gone even further, renewing diplomatic relations, deepening economic cooperation, and in several cases, initiating military collaborations. These moves are largely driven by a desire to end a decade of conflict and choose dialogue and cooperation. These changes are not based on values, moral decisions, or deep ideological or religious reconciliation, such as between Sunnis and Shiites, but rather on pragmatic, strategic considerations.

The Main Motives Behind the Détente

Doubt regarding American support. The inherent uncertainty regarding American military backing among its traditional allies in the Middle East is pushing the Arab countries to try to improve their own situation. The Gulf states are improving relations with Iran and allowing China and Russia to gain influence in the region at the expense of the United States. For example, in 2023, China brokered the agreement to renew relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while Russia mediated between Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Turning attention toward domestic affairs. The Arab countries also have an interest in resolving external conflicts in order to focus on effectively handling pressing domestic affairs. The poorer countries or those in economic crisis are striving for economic rehabilitation, while the wealthy oil producers are eager to complete projects—some of which are very ambitious—that are crucial for their long-term stability and prosperity.

Iran factor. The threat from Iran is leading its neighbors to approach it cautiously, avoid escalating tensions, and recognize its strength, including, perhaps, its nascent nuclear status. In their eyes, economic measures aimed at blocking it have apparently run their

course. Some of them, particularly the Gulf states, are also concerned about the increasing tension in the conflict between Iran and Israel, and by improving relations with Iran, they aim to stay out of “the line of fire.”

The Détente in the Arab World

The starting point of the détente was at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019 when the UAE completed its dialogue with the Assad regime. This led to the reopening of the UAE’s embassy in Damascus and accelerated the discourse between the Assad regime and central Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia. Syria’s return to the Arab world reached its peak when it rejoined the Arab League in 2023 at the Riyadh Summit, with the participation of the Syrian President. Most Arab countries, including some that previously sought to overthrow the Assad regime, renewed diplomatic relations with Syria and provided economic aid. A notable exception is Qatar, which insists that Assad be removed as a condition for renewing relations, due to his crimes against humanity. In September 2024 Saudi Arabia [reopened](#) its embassy in Damascus.

After extensive negotiations led by Saudi Arabia, several key Arab countries also renewed relations with Qatar, following a political and economic boycott imposed on the emirate in 2017. The al-Ula Declaration in January 2021 led to the renewal and normalization of relations. Qatar’s relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia even improved compared to the years before the crisis. However, Qatar’s relations with Bahrain have only gradually improved. It was not until July 2024 that Bahrain and Qatar agreed to restore their ambassadors to Doha and Manama.

Another development is the April 2022 agreement between Saudi Arabia and the Iran-backed Houthi rebels, who control large areas of Yemen. The sides reached understandings that include a ceasefire, which has been upheld since. Riyadh has long been eager to put the war in Yemen behind it due to the heavy economic, military, and reputational toll it has taken. The United States shares this goal, as the war has resulted in 150,000 casualties and has indirectly affected twice that number. Ending the war would facilitate internal reforms and ambitious projects. Despite the Houthis’ involvement in the war against Israel, which has impacted freedom of navigation in the Red Sea since October 2023, it has not led to renewed fighting with Saudi Arabia.

Between Iran and the Arab Countries

The détente trend also includes an easing of tensions and improved relations between Iran and the Sunni Arab countries, primarily the Gulf states. This détente began in September 2019 following Iran’s attack on major oil facilities in Saudi Arabia, which did not elicit a US response. The attack marked a turning point for the kingdom, causing its leadership, especially Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to recognize Iran’s military superiority. This prompted a shift in Saudi policy toward Iran that included

attempts at dialogue (which ultimately succeeded) and conciliatory declarations emphasizing the importance of cooperation between the countries. It is not clear, however, whether this shift also resulted in a cessation or decrease of Saudi support for subversive elements within Iran.

In Iran's view, this process, which peaked with the renewal of relations with Saudi Arabia in March 2023, presents an opportunity to enhance its regional standing and strengthen deterrence against Israel. This is particularly significant given the normalization process between Israel and Arab countries and Israel's efforts to form an anti-Iranian regional coalition. From Iran's perspective, improving relations with the Arab world is a diplomatic achievement and another expression of the change in the regional balance of power in its favor and greater recognition from Arab countries, including those in the pro-Western camp, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The improvement of Iran's relations with Arab countries could also offer it an opportunity to expand its economic and commercial ties in the region as part of its "resistance economy." This approach aims to increase self-reliance and reduce economic dependence on the West by diversifying income sources and boosting trade with regional markets. However, to date, the improvement of relations with its neighbors, including the renewal of ties with Saudi Arabia, has not led to the desired economic results for Iran. This is due to Saudi Arabia's reluctance to invest in the Iranian economy due to the imposed sanctions and the structural problems facing Iran's economy.

The renewal of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023 was perhaps the most important so far in the détente, as the ideological and geostrategic competition between them has been a central factor in the region in recent decades. As stated above, Saudi Arabia initiated the process of rapprochement, which has included reopening diplomatic missions, positive statements by leaders of both countries, and historic visits, but not much more. Although Riyadh has no illusions about the possibility of changing Iranian policy in the region, the agreement itself is still an achievement that has reduced tensions and improved the kingdom's strategic positioning, especially given the regional tension caused by the war in Gaza. The extensive American aid to Israel since October 2023 also does not significantly change Saudi Arabia's sense of doubt regarding American support because the lack of American response to the attack on Saudi Arabia's territory in 2019 only highlights the unique nature of the Israeli case.

Iran's efforts to improve its relations with the Arab world have increased following the war in Gaza. Since October 7, 2023, Iran has led a diplomatic campaign to end the war in order to preserve Hamas's governmental and military capabilities. Senior Iranian officials have highlighted reports about the suspension of talks on Israel's normalization with Saudi Arabia, presenting them as evidence of Hamas's success and

Israel's weakness. From Iran's perspective, the war in Gaza provides additional proof that normalization between Arab countries and Israel is futile. This is in accordance with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who declared a few days before Hamas's attack that normalizing relations with the Zionist regime amounts to "betting on a losing horse." Iran continues to work on strengthening its relations with the countries in the region, as expressed by Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani, who stated in August 2024 that Iran is striving to upgrade its relations with Egypt and that Iran and Bahrain have agreed to resolve disagreements and renew their relations. The new government in Tehran, led by Masoud Pezeshkian, is committed to continuing the trend of improving relations, as seen during the term of the previous president, Ebrahim Raisi.

Between Turkey and the Arab Countries

Turkey's increasing regional ambitions, its support for Qatar during the years that it was boycotted, and its backing of the Muslim Brotherhood caused tensions between it and several Gulf states as well as Egypt between 2017 and 2021. Since then, relations have improved, and visits by senior officials have become frequent. Turkey, facing an economic crisis, sought aid and foreign investments, and in March 2024, it was agreed that official talks would begin between Turkey and the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on a free trade agreement. The Gulf states find Turkey's defense industry attractive, as evidenced by the 2024 agreement for the sale of drones to Saudi Arabia (the largest defense export agreement in Turkey's history, including the transfer of technology and at least partial production in Saudi Arabia). Egypt's interest in Turkish drones may also be a factor in the thawing of relations between Turkey and Egypt since 2022.

Although the gaps between Turkey and Syria are still great, efforts have been made, some with Russian mediation, to bring about a thaw between the two countries. Turkey's president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, stated at the beginning of July 2024 that an invitation to dialogue for Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, is expected soon. The main points of disagreement are the Turkish areas of control in northern Syria and Syria's demand for the withdrawal of Turkish forces, as well as the Turkish demand to repatriate the millions of Syrian refugees in its territory. However, Assad denied in a speech before the Syrian parliament on August 25 that Syria demands a Turkish withdrawal as a condition for holding negotiations. If the sides can overcome the existing barriers to renewing relations, Turkey will have successfully restored its relations with all the Arab countries, some of which have suffered greatly due to the consequences of the Arab Spring, which led in part to civil wars and struggles over regional influence.

The Détente Until Now

From the perspective of the countries participating in the regional détente, its objectives have been achieved. It has been beneficial for all of them, as it has brought some out of diplomatic isolation, improved economic conditions for others, and enhanced the security situation for still others. Below are several main points that characterize it:

- The détente, as the name suggests, is an easing of tensions. Its purpose in the view of the participating countries, some of which remain adversaries below the surface, is not to become close allies but rather to develop normal relations to the extent possible in order to achieve common objectives.
- Despite its limited objectives, some of the countries appear to be going beyond the initial expectations. The trend continues, and other countries are also seeking to join it.
- Non-state actors are also involved in the détente. For example, the talks between Saudi Arabia and Hamas, as well as between the United Arab Emirates and Hezbollah, before and during the war in Gaza, should be considered part of it.
- Various circumstances, particularly the consequences so far of the war in Gaza, have led to Israel's increasing isolation in the region. However, Israel has indirectly benefited from the countries' need to improve their strategic positioning, as seen in the thawing of Israel's relations with Turkey from 2022 until October 2023.
- The détente has somewhat eased the strategic positioning of many Arab countries by enabling them to distance themselves from the consequences of the war in Gaza, particularly the risk of the war expanding into their territory.

At the core of this détente is the countries' fundamental need to hedge and manage risks, and they are doing so at an accelerated pace. The détente so far hasn't solved all conflicts in the region and was not aimed at doing so. While this trend should not be underestimated, it remains in some cases a superficial reconciliation with few accomplishments, especially regarding other ongoing points of tension in the Middle East. This is evident in Iraq, which Iran sees as its central sphere of influence, although Iraq is also crucial for Turkey and the Gulf states that seek to extend their influence in the region. Similarly, in Libya, there is a risk of significant deterioration and a return to the pre-2020 ceasefire conditions, which could reignite tensions between Turkey and Egypt. In addition, the Houthis' attacks in the Red Sea have posed significant challenges for Egypt, particularly due to the impact on revenues from the Suez Canal.

Israel and the Détente

Although Israel is not a central part of the détente trend, as it primarily involves internal Muslim dynamics, it is still affected by the process. From Israel's perspective, the improved strategic situation of the Gulf states—especially Saudi Arabia—resulting from agreements with Iran and the Houthis is seen as positive, as it strengthens the countries that currently maintain a relatively moderate stance toward Israel. In addition, the improvement of relations between Iran and the Gulf states does not necessarily prevent bettering relations between the Gulf states and Israel. In fact, formal arrangements between Iran and the Gulf states could even restrain Iran's actions against them, especially as they are accompanied by incentives, despite easing Iran's diplomatic isolation. Furthermore, the détente has not prevented criticism from Iran and Turkey about the fact that Arab countries have relations with Israel or that they have been too lenient with Israel on the Palestinian issue since the outbreak of the war in Gaza, but it has limited this criticism to a level that the Arab countries will tolerate.

The Arab countries have sought to maintain their military partnership with the United States, in which Israel is involved. This was manifested in the recent confrontation between Israel and Iran, while simultaneously improving their diplomatic and economic relations with Iran and Turkey. However, Iran's growing influence as a nuclear threshold state could lead several Arab countries to strengthen their ties with it out of fear. Under pressure, they could distance themselves from Israel, at least publicly. Furthermore, as the security situation of these Arab countries improves due to the détente, their perceived need for Israeli assistance may diminish.

Over the years, Israel saw the divisions in the ranks of the Arab world as beneficial, and this perception may still exist. In this view, the regional détente does not serve Israel's interests, particularly when it involves improved relations between Muslim and Arab countries without American involvement. This is especially true if relations between Iran and the Arab world, even if superficial, improve. As Israel becomes further excluded from the détente, its sense of being isolated and that its interests are being harmed will grow stronger.

However, since the détente is driven by the deep and ongoing needs of key countries, it demands Israeli attention, particularly given its implications for Israel's efforts to integrate into the region and counter its adversaries. The détente highlights the importance of both normalization between Israel and Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, and making progress on arrangements with the Palestinians, to position itself as part of a regional alternative to the pro-Iranian axis.

With the Biden administration's initiative to advance Israeli–Saudi normalization still on the table, it is important to consider how it would align with the détente. On the

one hand, even before signing a normalization agreement with Israel, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated (for example, on April 14, 2024, when Iran attacked Israel) that it is a reliable and important military partner for Israel and the United States, offering potential for deeper military cooperation. On the other hand, closer ties with Israel, with or without a normalization agreement, could make it difficult for Saudi Arabia to simultaneously maintain normal relations with Iran and continue to maneuver between the two as it has done in the past.

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