

Israel-Gaza conflict: how could it change the Middle East's political landscape? Expert Q&A

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Is the much-heralded Israel-Saudi peace deal now dead? And how is Iran likely to respond? An expert in Middle Eastern politics explains

The surprise attack by Hamas launched on Israel on October 7 has already led to thousands of deaths in both Israel and Gaza, and sparked concerns that the conflict could escalate across the Middle East. An expert in the politics and relations of this region, Simon Mabon, explains how all the key players are likely to view this dramatic escalation in violence.

Just before the attack by Hamas, Benjamin Netanyahu and Mohammed bin Salman had talked of progress on a “[historic peace deal](#)” between Israel and Saudi Arabia. Is such an agreement dead in the water now?

Not necessarily. The US-led “[Abraham accords](#)”, signed in September 2020, changed the dynamic of what was possible in the Middle East. While Egypt and Jordan had previously established diplomatic relations with Israel (in 1979 and 1994 respectively), the accords signalled that a wider “[normalisation](#)” of relations between Israel and the Arab states was in process – and by virtue of this, that Saudi Arabia, which has never recognised Israel as a state, would also normalise relations at some point.

Speaking to Saudi friends, they had envisaged a revival of the 2002 [Arab Peace Initiative](#), which was driven by Saudi Arabia. Getting Israel to buy into that would have been the win that Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Saudi's crown prince and prime minister, needed to make normalisation happen. Of course, following the shocking attack by Hamas on Israeli civilians, there won't be any kind of peace initiative for now.

Saudi Arabia has not publicly condemned the attacks, but has been [vocal in its calls for de-escalation](#), joining a growing chorus of international voices expressing concern at what comes next. In contrast, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has [criticised Hamas](#) for the murder of Israeli civilians. But Israel knows it's a diplomatic game. In the longer term, the shifting political and economic landscape in the Middle East still points to a desire to establish relations with Israel, and to realign regional politics in such a way that Israel, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are broadly on the same side of history.

Was the attack on Israel an attempt to disrupt this process?

The main driver of the attack on Israel by Hamas, the elected governing authority in Gaza since 2007, is the 16-year land, sea and air blockade of this Palestinian territory. In Gaza, more than 2 million people live in an area a quarter of the size of London with limited access to electricity and water.

But the timing of the attack certainly carries wider significance. It came during the [50th anniversary of the 1973 war](#), when Egyptian and Syrian armies invaded Israel, which I think is symbolically important. And the backdrop of Saudi Arabia's move to normalise relations with Israel is also significant, because Hamas - and potentially others in the region - will see it as a bonus if the conflict serves to disrupt that dynamic.

When MBS said that "[solving the Palestinian issue](#)" was key to the normalisation process, what did he mean?

There's a cynical answer to this, which is that Saudi's leader was looking to use rhetoric to cultivate some support, and to reassure those people (in Saudi and elsewhere) who are concerned about the process of normalisation. To be clear, that's the bigger prize for MBS - not the articulation or realisation of a Palestinian state.

In the context of Israel-Palestine and the "[two-state solution](#)", peace is a mirage - an illusion held up by people seeking to solidify their positions of influence in Israel, Palestine and beyond. If you look at the facts on the ground, there is no two-state solution in process; Palestine is not even recognised as a state by a [large number of countries](#). It has been described as a political football kicked around by political elites seeking to use it for their own advantage, with the Palestinian people being the ones suffering for decades.

If we look at the Abraham accords, the positive spin for Palestinians was that there might be scope for states engaging Israel to put pressure on them, to try and force some kind of resolution. But we're over three years into these accords and nothing has happened.

What's been Saudi Arabia's gameplan?

MBS wants to position Saudi as the driving force of regional affairs - and to ensure that he has the economic power to bring about his "[Vision 2030](#)" transformation of the kingdom away from a reliance on oil. But to do that, he needs to address regional security concerns. He's started doing that with Iran, and has already been doing it tacitly with Israel for a number of years.

There is back-channel dialogue, a lot of collaboration under the table, but recently this has become more open. And it's not hugely popular among some Saudis and other Arab publics, who continue to see the Palestinian cause as important. So, you have a disjunct between elite leaders in the region, who regard Israel as "just another member" of this club of states, and their people, who view the occupation of Palestinian territories as a key element of the Arab portfolio.

Video

What does Israel want from the normalisation process?

Recognition. Saudi Arabia is the last major Arab player not to recognise Israel other than Qatar, which will not recognise Israel because of its politics and long history of supporting members of Hamas and political Islamist organisations who stand against Israel. And Saudi is hugely symbolic - it's the leader of the Sunni Muslim world and the location of the two holy mosques of Mecca and Medina.

For Saudi Arabia to normalise relations with Israel would bring an end, formally, to the Arab-Israeli wars that dominated the 20th century in the Middle East. It would hammer home that the new dividing line (a geopolitical line that, in reality, has been playing out over the past 20 years) is between the Arab states plus Israel, and Iran - although there has been an effort to try to reintegrate Iran into the region as well, culminating in a [China-led normalisation agreement](#) with

Saudi earlier this year.

How does Iran feel about current events?

The attack carried out on Israel was a hugely sophisticated, multi-pronged military operation, beyond anything that we've seen from Hamas before. That suggests some type of strategic involvement from "others" - but there's been [no evidence presented](#) that Iran was involved.

Iran is often viewed as an irrational actor, trying to destabilise things - but that misreads the nature of the Islamic Republic and its foreign policy objectives. Firstly, its leaders are pragmatic - they want the republic to survive. Since its inception in 1979, it has faced a huge number of threats to its survival - and right now, it's got a [very serious one internally](#). So, while there may be an argument to say that a "rally round the flag" type of event might shift focus away from this domestic unrest, I think the stakes are so high that it wouldn't want to risk openly engaging in conflict with Israel right now.

Iran just doesn't have the financial resources. It needs the normalisation of relations with states such as Saudi Arabia and, by extension, the US, to have a cash injection to revive its oil and gas industry, which is in a state of disrepair. It needs a huge cash stimulus to get back on its feet.

However, there is an ideological dimension to the Islamic Republic which we shouldn't ignore. It has positioned itself against the state of Israel for decades, and this is tied into its very essence. In this, Iran is at the vanguard of what it calls the "[axis of resistance](#)" - a loose alliance of Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and, previously, Syria.

Do the other Gulf states have much influence on how this will play out?

The UAE is [invested economically in the West Bank](#), as is Qatar. The UAE has taken a similar line to Saudi Arabia on the attack, calling it "a serious and grave escalation". There's a bit of competition between them in terms of exerting influence in the West Bank, but broadly they're on the same path, given that UAE was involved in the Abraham accords and Saudi has been talking about normalisation.

History has shown us that there has sometimes been a willingness to disregard controversial issues in the region. For example, when the US embassy was moved from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, [most states remained quiet](#) despite it being a hugely symbolic switch. But, of course, the attack on Israel is at an altogether different level of political sensitivity.

Qatar is trying to play a mediatory role in terms of [potential prisoner swaps](#). It has a growing history of trying to engage in diplomatic initiatives, having been involved in [Lebanon in the mid-2000s](#) and has been involved in [dialogue between the US and the Taliban](#). But despite this diplomatic dimension to Qatari foreign policy, it hasn't demonstrated that it's able to exert much influence over Israel.

Video

Where does this leave the Palestinian people?

The Palestinian people are increasingly isolated - caught up in the contours of geopolitical machinations, abandoned by those who should be supporting them. While countries have some dialogue with Palestinian groups such as [Fatah](#) in the West Bank, these groups are so weak and have so little legitimacy that it doesn't really matter what they say. With such huge power disparities, there is limited inclination for the Israelis to engage in peace - even less so since the Hamas attack -

and limited capacity for the Palestinians to engage in peace.

In the wake of the attack, Gazans have been [instructed by Israel to flee their city](#) - but given there is a blockade and you have to have permission from the Israelis to leave through Israeli-controlled checkpoints, there is [nowhere for them to go](#). Gaza is effectively the largest open-air prison in the world, with infrastructure that has been devastated by the 16 years of blockade. The ongoing [Israeli air strikes](#) are further destroying its hospitals, schools, shops and homes.

Hamas as a political entity is not particularly popular, because it hasn't been able to achieve its goals. But as a militant group, it has cultivated legitimacy in certain constituencies. However, the morally repugnant act of killing civilians will, I think, prove to be a major strategic mistake for the organisation. Israel's response to the Hamas attack is being [widely positioned](#) as part of the "global war on terror", positioning Hamas alongside groups such as al-Qaeda and Daesh as Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, seeks to cultivate global support for his actions.

Meanwhile, the [Palestinian Authority](#) (PA), which is the broad umbrella organisation that regulates life in the West Bank and Gaza, is impotent, unable to exert any influence on Israel or the world stage. There's a real frustration among Palestinian people with the PA, who will not come out and condemn Hamas because that would mean condemning resistance against an occupation that has caused such devastation in the years after the [1967 war](#).

The attack has emboldened extremist voices on all sides, from Hamas militants in Gaza to the right-wing settler communities in Israel. The consequences of extremist voices gaining prominence, and the violence that follows, will be devastating.

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My work falls at the intersection of Middle East Studies, International Relations and (International) Political Theory. I am particularly interested in sovereignty and its discontents, space, and nomos, along with the empirical manifestations of these issues. I am Director of SEPAD, the Sectarianism, Proxies and De-Sectarianization Project, funded by Carnegie Corporation, which looks at the way in which the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is shaping sectarianism and politics across the Middle East. It also explores the contestation of sectarian identities in what we have termed de-sectarianization.

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