

MIDDLE EAST DIALOGUE

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ABOUT THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

The Middle East Institute (MEI) is a center of knowledge dedicated to narrowing divides between the peoples of the Middle East and the United States. With over 70 years' experience, MEI has established itself as a credible, non-partisan source of insight and policy analysis on all matters concerning the Middle East. MEI is distinguished by its holistic approach to the region and its deep understanding of the Middle East's political, economic and cultural contexts. Through the collaborative work of its three centers — Policy & Research, Arts & Culture, and Education — MEI provides current and future leaders with the resources necessary to build a future of mutual understanding.

Cover photo: Doha Bay with the skyline of the city in the background taken from the Museum of Islamic Art on Nov. 16, 2022, Doha, Qatar. [Photo by Buda Mendes/Getty Images.](#)

Photo on right: Palestinians look for their belongings among the rubble of their destroyed houses as Israeli attacks on Gaza City continue, Oct. 16, 2023. [Photo by Mustafa Hassona/Anadolu via Getty Images.](#)

Executive Summary

- The need for a cease-fire in Gaza is immediate and urgent. Suggestions toward attaining an end to the conflict address the resumption of security/governance in Gaza through the withdrawal of Israeli forces, the provision of security guarantees to Egypt, and the disarming of Hamas. Arab-Palestinian negotiations are required to move forward on the issues of political leadership, legitimacy, and reconciliation of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), while the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is integral to establishing governance in any “day after” plan.
- Iran would not oppose legitimate and meaningful political steps toward a Palestinian state, particularly should such steps be endorsed by Hamas.
- Saudi Arabia is emerging as a key force in the region’s de-escalation politics and geopolitical stabilization effort.
- While Iran remains committed to not provoking a wider war, fears abound that miscalculations could result in a worst-case outcome, with concerns that Washington is not primed to respond effectively to deescalate in light of its own domestic challenges.



The Middle East Dialogue

The Middle East Dialogue,¹ a panel of regional and extra-regional experts convened by the Middle East Institute's (MEI) Conflict Resolution and Track II Dialogues Program and the Middle East Council for Global Affairs (MECGA), met in Doha, Qatar, on May 21-22, 2024,² to explore regional political and economic dynamics. This meeting brought together policymakers, academics, and experts from across the Middle East and North Africa region and the United States, including the Gulf states, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Yemen, and Turkey. This moderator's report provides a summary of the issues and recommendations discussed.

Abstract

Following the regional rupture caused by the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attack and Israel's war on Gaza, the Middle East is working on the emergence of a coalition-building process that fundamentally centers on the resolution of the Palestinian issue. It is argued that Israel has been strategically diminished by the events of the last several months, with its show of military force more an expression of its weakness and lack of options than a demonstration of its strength. Israel has lost its international credibility as some European countries move to recognize the state of Palestine and the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigates its top leaders alongside those of Hamas. The United States has seemingly ignored the impact of this war and continues to be blind to the Palestinian "portion of the equation," as the region's publics have responded with a seismic shift away from Washington.

Meanwhile, the region is reestablishing its own deterrence mechanisms and alliances, led primarily by the Gulf's geo-economic agenda, and could be viewed as a new strategic axis.

With both rapprochement with Iran strengthening and talks to establish parameters for normalization with Israel under way, Saudi Arabia sees itself and its Gulf neighbors as a key force in a wider geopolitical stabilization effort. Regional actors are also seen to be exercising more maturity in the face of Israel's aggression, with the Palestinian issue becoming the central focal point of bilateral and multilateral engagement. However, this does not detract from the urgency surrounding the status of the current war and its destabilizing effect across the region. While Iran remains committed to not engaging in a wider war, fears abound that miscalculations could result in a disastrous escalation, with concern that Washington is not primed to respond effectively in light of its own domestic challenges.

The De-escalation Agenda in the Region: Israel and Palestine

There is widespread consensus that Israel has overreached in its response to the Hamas attack, exacerbating and unintentionally exposing its role as an aggressor in the wider Arab-Israeli conflict, with the full backing and support of the United States. However, the frameworks needed to bring the war to an end or to de-escalate remain uncertain.

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According to an assessment of the war from one program participant, there has been a fundamental change (across the West) in the perceptions of the Israel-Palestine conflict: “We’ve moved away from the argument that it is Palestinians at fault, that they are the obstacle to peace. There is a growing realization

1. The Middle East Dialogue is a process that began in 2012, following the Arab uprisings and the outbreak of war in Syria. Noting how the regional political landscape has been upended by the events of the last decade, the Dialogue was created to provide space for experts, officials (former and current), and emerging changemakers to convene and discuss priority areas related to security, political dynamics, and the changing regional order. Over the years, different Dialogue participants have convened to map out and better analyze the region, seeking solutions and recommendations on the evolving regional order and conflict de-escalation. The Middle East Dialogue now runs parallel to separate Dialogues that convene stakeholders with material investment and involvement in the region. This includes the Arab States Dialogue, Israel-Palestine Dialogue, and established dialogues between the United States, Russia, and Turkey, respectively. These concurrent Dialogues seek to inform each other, provide ongoing learning and knowledge-sharing, and feed into a holistic analytical understanding of the trajectory of the MENA region.

2. This meeting was held before the Israeli escalation in Lebanon and the killing of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024.

that Palestinians are a vulnerable population that has been brutalized in unconscionable ways.” The academic went further, noting that “this kind of security pressure is not sustainable for Israel. There was a sense that the Iron Dome protected them, and the walls, checkpoints, and apartheid state kept Palestinians contained,” which has led to the conclusion that “for the first time since ‘67, Israel is on the decline on every metric.”

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On the Palestinian side, Saudi Arabia’s priority focus remains to seek a functional governance mechanism to install in the Occupied Territories in the short term, with a longer-term emphasis on reforming the PLO. A Saudi official acknowledged that there is no ready “peace camp” in Israel, instead there is only “PTSD, knee-jerk reactions, which — if they become entrenched — will be a huge obstacle that can snowball into an impossible obstacle to overcome.”

For Iran, Hamas will remain an “important player” in the mix of Palestinian politics, according to one former official from Tehran. With other militant and political factions allied to different groups in Palestine, however, a Lebanese participant noted that “Israelis will not help in reconciliation [of Hamas and Fatah]. That role must fall to those regional actors who influence and support such Palestinian factions.”

A Palestinian participant noted that the majority of Palestinians no longer support Abu Mazen (Mahmoud Abbas) but stopped short of endorsing any electoral process in the short term: “You can’t ask people who are barely surviving to make political decisions.” Instead, the participant endorsed the proposal from Saudi Arabia for a two-to-three-year interim period of continued governance under the Palestinian Authority (PA)/Abbas that would allow for a material process of transition, succession, and organization of the Palestinian leadership into a proper governing force. Owing to the dire and urgent moment of conflict, the respondent promoted the need for unity among Palestinians, calling for regional partners and the international community to “enable a conversation among Palestinians that doesn’t reflect

imposed international agendas, in a need to build legitimacy and trust in leadership, before a timeline and framework for elections can happen.” However, this approach was called into question by a fellow Palestinian researcher, who argued that there is “no vacuum or political space in which to reorganize Palestinian leadership and a political framework.”

Iran, the Axis of Resistance, and the Region

Iran considers itself on a trajectory of establishing security in the region by exposing the various weaknesses of Israel’s security infrastructure, including its dependence on US weapons and intelligence. A broad, post-Oct. 7 reputational rehabilitation of actors, such as the Houthis and Hezbollah, has shaped an Iranian view “that armed non-state actors have rebalanced the regional order when it comes to deterrence against Israel and stability.”

Nevertheless, Iran, like Saudi Arabia, views the rapprochement between the two countries as integral to regional stability. One Iranian participant pointed to the managed responses from both Tehran and Riyadh in the wake of the Oct. 7 attacks as a marker of the commitment to rapprochement, such that they believe both countries can — and should — play key roles in resolving the war in Gaza and the establishment of a Palestinian state. To that end, the participant noted, Iran would not oppose legitimate and meaningful political steps toward that outcome, particularly should such steps be endorsed by Hamas: “Iran does not need to recognize the state of Israel to endorse a Palestinian state.”

“While there is clear alignment on the need and desire for regional stability — in a manner that includes Iran — there remain significant disagreements between Iran and its Arab neighbors over how to achieve it.”

Meanwhile, across the region, while there is clear alignment on the need and desire for regional stability — in a manner that includes Iran — there remain significant disagreements between Iran and its Arab neighbors over how to achieve it. One Iranian

participant noted that Iran primarily seeks a “weakened and deterred Israel.” For Iran, however, its threat perception stems not only from the Gaza war, but Israel’s direct aggression against it and regional allies (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq): “To accept Iran does not mean to accept every policy; it means to not use their power to [seek regime change or otherwise meddle domestically].” A Saudi official, however, sought to convey to Tehran that “it is in Iran’s interest not to learn the wrong lesson that ‘the Saudis accept Iran for what it is.’ ... Saudi Arabia does not want to threaten or hurt Iran, and Saudi Arabia is serious about confidence-building measures, but Saudi Arabia will not turn a blind eye to Yemen and elsewhere.”

The Gaza War: Cease-fire and a Palestinian State

There is widespread condemnation of the Oslo Accords across the region. Participants individually cited their concerns with the process, lamenting its abject failure and calling for new forms of political alignment that would move the region firmly away from Oslo and reestablish a concrete and irreversible path toward a Palestinian state. However, the Gaza war remains a unique conflict theater, where a cease-fire cannot be reached without agreement on the establishment of the Palestinian state, or at the very least a governance plan and pathway for the Occupied Territories. This sentiment was made evident in various exercises and scenario-planning sessions for the “day after” in Gaza that focused on the parameters of how to re-establish governance and rule of law in the Strip, facilitate the withdrawal of troops, introduce peacekeepers, etc., within the context of a long-term durable agreement.

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Across the region the idea of removing or destroying Hamas is not perceived as a productive policy, nor, many participants argued, was the scapegoating of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as the sole architect and driver of the current war and the wider aggression in other parts of the Occupied Territories. This view was deemed “reductive” analysis that does not take into effective account the political and societal shift toward the hard right in Israel that has given power to extremist voices in the public space.

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A United Nations official noted that up to 300,000 people have already fled Gaza,³ meaning a new wave of displacement is already upon us. However, with UNRWA weakened significantly — if not entirely delegitimized by the US and Israel — there are no 1948 legal refugee parameters for these newly displaced Palestinians. Furthermore, the official noted, there is no commitment within cease-fire negotiations on humanitarian aid and access, including the permanent opening of the Karem Abu Salem crossing or other land borders, such as those with Jordan.

Participants agreed that policy and thinking in Washington will not change toward Israel, with one Gulf participant noting that, “Washington is in a dismal state, and not in a position to apply pressure of any kind.” Meanwhile, the region should take the opportunity to use its leverage to exert pressure [on the US] — specifically by Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. Another Gulf participant called on the region to harness global anger and solidarity, including using legal mechanisms at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the ICC as legitimate avenues to exert pressure on the US/Israel.

3. At the time of the meeting. The number is now, expectedly, higher.

Additionally, an Arab economist noted the high cost of continuing the war, and the lack of focus on the cost of not reaching a cease-fire. The participant raised the specter of the Indo-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as an example of how much Israel is risking, noting that the effects of the war on the IMEC is a central focus for the European Union in particular.

Conclusion

Participants all agreed that the need for a cease-fire is immediate and urgent, and that any resolution should encompass the issues of resumption of security/governance in Gaza through the withdrawal of Israeli forces, the provision of security guarantees to Egypt, and the disarming of Hamas. However, while a resolution should be predicated on reform of the PLO and the Palestinian National Movement, there are few options or recommendations at this time for reviving Palestinian leadership. The urgency of the situation sees major powers in the region, like Saudi Arabia, willing to lean heavily on Abu Mazen and the PA now while committing to a longer-term plan of institutional and leadership reform. While this appears to have the backing of Palestinian participants, there are longer-term legitimacy questions across the entirety of the Palestinian population — in the Occupied Territories and throughout the region — that threaten this approach. It is believed that Arab-Palestinian negotiations are required to move forward on the question of political leadership, legitimacy, and reconciliation of the PLO.

“Tehran would not necessarily block a move toward a two-state solution should Palestinians, including Hamas, decide to pursue that as part of their political aspirations.”

There remains widespread regional dissent about the formation of an “Arab peacekeeping force,” although there is endorsement of the idea of a major international security peacekeeping effort. Participants noted that UNRWA, as the only functioning state

infrastructure in Gaza, is integral to reestablishing governance in any “day after” plan. The organization should be directly engaged and included in bilateral and multilateral negotiations on post-war plans, and on the eventual creation of a Palestinian state to which reconstituted or newly formed governance structures would transfer.

While all participants agree that the current Israeli leadership seeks to prolong the war, there is less focus on engaging other actors in the Israeli political space to shore up the shift from war to a cease-fire and a two-state solution. While Iran firmly opposes normalization with Israel, Tehran would not necessarily block a move toward a two-state solution should Palestinians, including Hamas, decide to pursue that as part of their political aspirations, which (as a policy) should be encouraged by Arab partners.



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