ISRAEL POLICY FORUM

Israel-Hamas War: The Arab World

Exploring the Role of Key Arab States



Jordan

Despite Jordan's close security ties with the U.S. and Israel, the Jordanian Foreign Ministry's initial statement in the wake of October 7 refrained from condemning the Hamas massacre or mentioning the terror organization by name, and instead referenced Israeli provocations and the need for deescalation. In the weeks since, the messaging from the Hashemite Kingdom has been consistently critical of Israel's military response, with top figures including Queen Rania and Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi consistently rebuking Israel for the destruction and high civilian death tolls in Gaza. While affirming the need for a two-state outcome, King Abdullah has implied that Israel bears fundamental responsibility for the conflict. In a joint statement, he and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi referred to Israel's attack on Gaza as "collective punishment." Jordan has recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv and announced that it would not advance a joint water-for-energy project.

Jordan's outrage at Israeli actions—past, current, and ongoing—comes at a nadir in the countries' ties, amid a far-right Israeli government that has sidelined Jordan's role on the Temple Mount and hastened de facto West Bank annexation. Jordan is also responding to domestic pressures. Its population, believed to be over 50% Palestinian, holds overwhelmingly hostile views toward Israel and disapproves of Jordan-Israel ties. But Amman remains aligned with Washington and is unlikely to cut ties with Jerusalem. While uniquely sensitive to developments in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, the Hashemites have no love for Hamas and other radical actors. If the Biden administration's vision of a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority returning to Gaza is to come to fruition, Jordan will play an integral role due to its influence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. While its rhetoric on the ongoing conflict may be distasteful, neither the U.S. nor Israel can afford to alienate Amman to the point that it cannot stomach cooperation with Israel.



Egypt

Due to its proximity to Gaza and historic role in the Strip, Egypt is in regular contact with Hamas and Israel and has pushed for de-escalation. Like Jordan, it has called for Israel to end the war. Despite Egyptians' overwhelmingly negative views of Israel, President Sisi has been reserved in taking public steps against it. Egypt's Rafah crossing remains the only functioning point of entry into Gaza, amplifying the reliance on Egypt to coordinate aid, the exit of hostages and other foreign nationals from Gaza, and the limited evacuation of Palestinians for medical treatment.

The Egyptian government sees Hamas as a radical, hostile actor. It has blockaded Gaza since Hamas seized control in 2007. But Egyptian officials talk to Hamas, and alongside Qatar, Egypt helped facilitate negotiations between Israel and Hamas to enable short pauses in the fighting in exchange for the release of hostages held by terror groups in Gaza.



Qatar

Qatar has long taken an independent, Janus-faced approach to its regional foreign policy, especially in regards to the Israeli-Palestinian arena. Qatar is a longstanding U.S. ally and the two countries maintain close military ties. Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar is the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East and serves as the regional headquarters of CENTCOM. In 2022, President Biden designated Qatar a major non-NATO ally of the United States. Qatar has also had relations with Israel since the mid-1990s, when an Israeli trade representation office opened in Doha. While that office has since closed and the countries do not have formal diplomatic relations, Qatar and Israel continue to maintain back-channel ties and hold occasional dialogue between high-level officials. In parallel, Qatar also has friendly relations with Hamas, Iran, the Taliban, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other anti-Western militant and terror groups across the region and supported anti-establishment Islamist causes during the Arab Spring. It also leverages its state-owned Al Jazeera media network to project soft power and criticize other Western-aligned states in the region, including Israel. Since 2012, Qatar has hosted the Hamas leadership in Doha and, with Israel's coordination and approval, has provided humanitarian aid to Hamas-run Gaza, which, in practice, bankrolled the Hamas regime.

Since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war on October 7, 2023, Israel and the United States have relied on Qatar's ties and leverage with Hamas and influence in Gaza. Alongside Egypt, Qatar facilitated indirect negotiations between Israel and Hamas, which allowed for the release of four Israeli hostages in mid-October and a seven-day pause in late November that saw the release of over 100 hostages and the entry of aid into Gaza. Since the war began, Mossad Chief David Barnea has reportedly traveled to Doha multiple times and President Isaac Herzog openly met with the Qatari emir at COP28 in Dubai. Qatar's public messaging, however, has been overwhelmingly critical of Israel's military operation; the Qatari foreign ministry has condemned Israeli attacks on Gaza without mentioning Hamas' culpability. Unlike other Sunni Arab countries, Qatar stands to lose influence in Gaza if Israel succeeds in dismantling Hamas. Qatar's role in the current conflict—supporting Hamas, while also serving as an irreplaceable Israeli partner—has been met with ambivalence from Jerusalem.



UAE

The United Arab Emirates is the poster-child of the 2020 Abraham Accords, which saw the UAE along with Bahrain (and later Morocco and Sudan) open ties with Israel. With informal ties dating back even before the normalization deal, Abu Dhabi and Jerusalem now boast strong economic and security ties. The Emirates' approach to the Palestinians has been complicated, especially vis-à-vis Gaza and Hamas. For the past decade, Emirati leader Mohammad bin Zayed (MBZ) has hosted exiled Palestinian security chief Mohammed Dahlan, the man who led Fatah's abortive war against Hamas in Gaza in 2007 before falling out with PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Today, Dahlan serves as an advisor to MBZ. From 2020, the UAE significantly reduced its funding for the United Nations Palestinian refugee agency UNRWA, coinciding with the Abraham Accords and the normalization of ties with Israel. The UAE is wary of Islamist groups like Hamas, and Qatari support for the Palestinian terror group was reportedly among the reasons the Emirates, along with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Egypt, imposed an economic and diplomatic blockade on Qatar in 2017.

Abu Dhabi has previously condemned Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israel, and October 7 was no different, with the UAE rebuking Hamas in an official statement—a marked difference from Qatar. The UAE also supported Israel by cautioning the Syrian government—with which the Emirates normalized ties in 2022—to stay out of the fighting during the opening day of the war. Yet as the conflict has dragged on and the death toll climbs, the UAE has become more vocally critical of the IDF. UAE statements have switched to condemnation of Israel's actions. The UAE sponsored a U.N. Security Council resolution calling for a humanitarian ceasefire, which the United States vetoed. In early December, MBZ also hosted Russian President Vladimir Putin. The two discussed the Gaza crisis, which the Russians have exploited in its information war with the U.S. as a means to highlight Western hypocrisy on Ukraine. Nevertheless, ties between Israel and the UAE remain. Unlike Jordan and Bahrain, the Emiratis have refrained from recalling their ambassador. As Ali al-Naumi, chairman of the UAE Federal National Council Defense, Interior, and Foreign Affairs Committee said in late October, "the [Abraham] Accords are our future."



Bahrain

Like the UAE, Bahrain is a signatory of the Abraham Accords and shares official ties with Israel. Distinct from Abu Dhabi, however, Bahrain is somewhat less independent in its foreign policy; where the Emirates are seen as a regional power, Manama is widely understood as a Saudi proxy. The country is also a close strategic partner of the United States, hosting the American Fifth Fleet.

In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, Bahrain joined the UAE, in denouncing Hamas. The Bahraini government has repeated these criticisms, with Crown Prince Salman blasting Hamas in even more pointed terms in late November, describing the terror organization's mass-murder and kidnappings as "indiscriminate." Nevertheless, Bahrain has also gone further than the UAE in reprimanding Israel for its conduct. Most notably, Bahrain recalled its ambassador from Tel Aviv and suspended economic ties with Israel. Among the most significant differences between Bahrain and the UAE is the presence of a vocal pro-Palestinian constituency among the Bahraini public. The small Gulf country has seen a number of protests against Israel since the start of the war with Hamas. Authorities have cracked down on some demonstrations while allowing others to proceed.



Saudi Arabia

Before October 7, the prospect of a U.S.-brokered Saudi-Israeli normalization deal was the source of significant buzz. As the most influential Sunni state and the location of Islam's holiest sites, Saudi Arabia is seen as the ultimate prize in Israel's quest to expand its regional ties. A Saudi agreement could be a greenlight for other Arab and Muslim countries to establish their own ties with Israel. Although Saudi Arabia reportedly set out an ambitious list of demands from the U.S., including expansive, NATO-style security guarantees, informal normalization was proceeding apace, with important steps like the opening of Saudi skies to Israeli commercial airliners. Early on in 2023, Biden administration officials projected, perhaps optimistically, that a deal could be reached within the year.

That was then. The war in Gaza that began with Hamas' brutal October 7 terrorist attack and mass kidnapping has upended the near-term trajectory of Israel-Saudi normalization. Indeed, many, including President Joe Biden, have contended that Hamas timed its assault to disrupt budding relations between Jerusalem and Riyadh. Saudi leaders have condemned Israeli conduct in the Gaza Strip, while hosting officials from hostile countries including Iran's Ebrahim Raisi and Russia's Vladimir Putin. Yet, on a more fundamental level, this does not mean that normalization is off the table. The Saudis have no love lost for Hamas, which they see, much like the UAE, as an extension of Muslim Brotherhood threats to security. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman has even stated to President Biden that normalization could be back on the agenda after the war. In a meeting with Secretary Blinken in January, MBS reportedly stressed that his country remains interested in normalization with Israel if it is leveraged to advance an end to the war and progress toward Palestinian statehood. Riyadh will not want to be seen as cozying up to Israel unless it can credibly claim it is for the Palestinians' benefit as well.