

# THE GEOPOLITICAL FALLOUT OF THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

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'The situation in Gaza is effectively back to the pre-2005 days' | Photo Credit: AP

One strategic shift and two tactical realignments. These were the driving forces of geopolitics in West Asia in recent years, until October 7. All were interrelated. The United States, the reigning superpower of the region since the end of the Second World War, had begun shifting its strategic focus to more conventional rivals such as Russia and China. But, to maintain its hold over and interests in the region, what the U.S. sought to do was to bring two of the pillars of its regional policy, Israel and the Gulf Arabs, closer. The Abraham Accords were a result of this policy, which was rolled out by the Donald Trump administration and embraced by the U.S. President, Joe Biden. A common Jewish-Arab front in a relatively peaceful West Asia would allow the U.S. to free up resources from the region which it could use elsewhere.

On the other side, the U.S.'s deprioritisation of West Asia led Gulf Arabs to make their own tactical changes in foreign policy for a more predictable and stable relationship in the region. This opened an opportunity for China, which has good ties with countries across the Gulf, to play the role of a peacemaker. The result was the Iran-Saudi reconciliation agreement. The U.S.'s response to the Saudi-Iran détente was to double down on the Abraham Accords. The Biden administration invested itself in talks between the Saudis and the Israelis. It was so confident about prospects of a deal that it unveiled the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) proposal earlier this year, which hinged on Arab-Israeli peace, and sold it as an alternative to China's outreach into the region. Then came the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel.

Hamas, which has been controlling Gaza since 2007, looked at these two realignments differently. For Hamas, a Sunni Islamist militant group, the coming together of Iran, a Shia theocratic republic which also has been its patron for years, and Saudi Arabia, a Sunni monarchy that has been wary of the Hamas brand of political Islam, is a welcome development. But it saw Saudi Arabia normalising ties with Israel, which has been occupying Palestinian territories at least since 1967, as a setback.

In 1978, when the Camp David Agreement was reached, Egypt got the Israelis to sign the Framework For Peace Agreement, which became the blueprint for the Oslo process in the 1990s. Jordan signed its peace treaty with Israel only after the first Oslo Accord was signed in

1993. But when the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Morocco signed the Abraham Accords in 2020, Israel did not make any concessions for the Palestinians. This was the clearest sign yet that Arabs, especially Gulf Arabs, were ready to delink the Palestine question from their engagement with Israel, which boosted Tel Aviv's efforts to localise the Palestine issue — to treat it as a mere security nuisance while continuing the occupation without consequences. When Saudi Arabia and Israel were in talks, nobody expected the Benjamin Netanyahu government, the most far-right government in Israel's history comprising settler extremists and ultra-Orthodox Zionists, to offer concessions to the Palestinians.

So, understandably, one of the goals of the October 7 Hamas attack was to break the walls of localisation, re-regionalise the Palestine issue, and thereby scuttle the Saudi-Israel peace bid. Israel's vengeful onslaught on the Gaza Strip, which followed the Hamas attack, killing at least 11,500 Palestinians, a vast majority of them women and children, made sure that Hamas met its goal, at least for now.

Both the Arabs and Israel were ready to sidestep the Palestine question and chart a new course of partnership. But new regional realities emerged after October 7. The Palestine issue has now come back to the fore of the West Asian geopolitical cauldron.

Second, Israel's disproportionate and indiscriminate attack on Gaza has triggered massive protests across the Arab Street, mounting enormous pressure on monarchs and dictators. Arab countries, which witnessed violent destabilising street protests and civil strife just 10 years ago, cannot completely turn away from the growing pan-Arab sympathy with the Palestinians and the antipathy towards Israel.

Third, there is always the Iran factor. Ever since the Palestine issue got re-regionalised, Iran has stepped up its pro-Palestine rhetoric and called for collective action against Israel, while its proxies, the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon, have launched limited attacks on Israel. Iran is trying to claim the leadership of the Islamic world, bridging the Shia-Sunni divide. This has left Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries with difficult choices. They can either ignore the anger in the Arab Street, letting Iran take up the cause and go ahead with the planned peace agreement with Israel or halt the talks and return to the original King Abdullah Initiative, which called for the formation of an independent Palestine state based on the 1967 border in return for Arab recognition of Israel. The Saudis convened an Islamic summit on Gaza, which saw the landmark visit by Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to the Kingdom, and reiterated its call for the creation of a Palestine state based on the 1967 borders for peace and security in the region. In effect, Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi Crown Prince, has relinked the Palestine issue with peace talks with Israel. This is a setback for both America and Israel.

The U.S. might still hope that the situation would be conducive to reboot the Abraham Accords once the dust settles. This is entirely possible. But a key challenge is that it is still not clear what Mr. Netanyahu's endgame is in Gaza. He has already signalled that Israeli troops would continue to play an overall security role in the enclave — which means, Israel would reoccupy the territory from where it withdrew in 2005. The U.S. had proposed that post the war, the Palestinian Authority, which runs parts of the West Bank with limited powers, should take over Gaza as well. But Mr. Netanyahu has shot down that proposal. So, if Israel reoccupies the territory, home to 2.2 million people living in distress and misery, the current wave of violence would only be the beginning of a long spell.

The Iran-Saudi reconciliation, under Chinese mediation, itself was a setback for the U.S. In recent years, Arab countries have also shown an increasing hunger for autonomy. The UAE and Saudi Arabia refused to join American sanctions against Russia after the Ukraine war. Saudi Arabia continued its Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) Plus

cooperation with Moscow, defying Washington's requests and diktats. China is playing an increasingly greater role in the Gulf, which includes secret plans to build a military facility in the UAE. The current crisis is expediting these changes in the regional dynamics. With the Saudi-Israel peace plan derailed and the Iranian President having visited the Kingdom to discuss Israel's war on Gaza, what Washington is witnessing is the limits of the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords and the widening scope of the China-brokered Iran-Saudi détente.

The situation in Gaza is effectively back to the pre-2005 days, but the geopolitical reality is entirely different from the early 2000s when the U.S. was the sole superpower in the region. Russia and China may not replace America in West Asia in the near future given the U.S.'s huge military presence, but the growing footprint of other great powers is offering space for better manoeuvrability for regional players. By tying itself deeply with Mr. Netanyahu's brutal, endless war on Gaza, the Biden administration has put the U.S. in a difficult position in a region that is already in a flux.

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