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Original Article

Forward to the Past?
Regional Repercussions of the Gaza War

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Abstract
The Gaza war between Israel and Hamas marks the end of the long decade after the Arab uprisings. In this paper, we explore how the conflict has altered the regional political landscape in the Middle East, which bears similarities to the pre-2011 dynamics but includes new elements. On the one hand, the war has taken the region “forward to the past” by revitalizing “Palestine” as a central issue, accentuating the so-called Axis of Resistance, and increasing the prominence of the regimes-people divide in Middle Eastern countries. On the other, the war has generated novel repercussions. “Palestine” today has broader global resonance than previous Arab and Islamic framings. And the regional alliance structure has been altered, with the “moderate Arab camp” fading and new actors, such as the Houthis in Yemen, rising and joining the resistance axis. As we demonstrate, the Gaza war is a critical juncture whose ramifications for both regional and domestic politics in the Middle East will reverberate for years to come.

The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's ensuing war on Gaza mark the end of the long decade following the Arab uprisings in the Middle East. While there is broad consensus that the conflict represents a break with the regional dynamics of the last decade, the nature of this change is the subject of debate among scholars, practitioners, and policy makers.
Some argue that the Gaza war between Israel and Hamas transforms everything and gives rise to a fundamentally new Middle East, though the specifics are contested.¹ A quick glance can identify changes that appear to have turned regional politics upside-down, particularly when compared to the post-2011 decade. Saudi Arabia, which had been involved in a bloody conflict against the Houthi movement in Yemen since 2015, is now warning against escalation, while the United States and its allies have bombèd the rebel group over its Red Sea attacks since early 2024. In addition, the sectarianization of regional politics, a potent force during the post-2011 decade, seems now to be shifting. Geneive Abdo declared in 2013 that the Sunni-Shia divide across the Middle East had supplanted Palestine as the central mobilizing factor in Arab politics.² This stands in glaring contrast to the current situation. Not only does the Palestine issue figure again on top of the regional agenda; the war seems to have reunited Islamists regardless of sect.³ Major regional supporters of Sunni Hamas are Shia movements in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. For their part, Saudi Arabia and Tehran appear to have grown closer, with the Iranian president, Ebrahim Raisi, having visited Riyadh in November 2023 after the Arab League summit was expanded to include the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Such high-level Iranian-Saudi visits were hard to imagine a decade earlier.

Nevertheless, some shifts in regional politics appear far less novel, particularly if one broadens the perspective beyond the post-2011 decade. While Palestine may not have figured prominently on the regional interstate agenda in the 2010s, it played a significant role throughout the 20th century and during the first decade of the new millennium. As well, the so-called Axis of Resistance returned as a prominent factor, just as it was in the pre-2011 decade. While Hamas, in the early years following the Arab uprisings, distanced itself from that camp due to the Syrian war, it has now fully re-engaged. These similarities challenge recent claims that everything has been transformed. Still, this does not mean that nothing has truly changed, nor does it imply that the post-October 7 “new Middle East” will be a simple move “forward to the past.” The Economist may be correct when describing 2023 as “the year everything (and nothing) changed in the Middle East.”⁴

Against this backdrop, we recall the late Fred Halliday’s remark—made in the context of 9/11—that “there are two predictable, and nearly always mistaken, responses to any great international upheaval: one is to say that everything has changed; the other is to say that nothing has changed.”⁵ Instead, this article explores the continuities in the apparent changes and the changes in the apparent continuities. We revisit the frameworks for understanding regional politics in the

pre-2011 decade—as exemplified in the regional reactions to the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war—to identify the dynamics of the earlier period and compare them to today. The analysis reveals that the Gaza war, while reinvigorating the regional politics of the pre-2011 era, also reconfigures it.

We first show how, before the Arab uprisings, Palestine played a critical role in shaping both regional and domestic politics. Second, we demonstrate that, despite the seeming absence of Palestine in the post-2011 Middle East, the issue remains a prominent concern at the popular level, revealing a deep regimes-people divide. Third, we explore the extent to which the Gaza war not only constitutes a break with regional politics since the Arab uprisings, but also a partial return to pre-2011 dynamics. This has unraveled novel features roiling the Middle Eastern order. In the conclusion, we draw on these analyses to explore possible ramifications for both regional and domestic politics in the Middle East over the years to come.

PALESTINE IN REGIONAL POLITICS UNTIL THE 2011 UPRISINGS

“Palestine” has been at the center of Middle Eastern politics for most of the 20th and 21st centuries, at least until the 2011 Arab uprisings. Between the post-WWI mandate system and the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948, the issue emerged as the central influence on regional and intra-Arab politics. Since then, Israeli-Palestinian dynamics of conflict, violence, and peace have had major implications for Middle Eastern order and global relations—and vice versa.

Beginning in the mid-20th century, regional politics were strongly influenced by Arab nationalism, understood as “the general idea about the existence of special bonds between Arabic-speaking people, who are assumed to be part of a single Arab nation constituted by common language, history, culture, and tradition.” This supra-state identity meant that regimes had to balance a narrow “raison d’État” logic with the larger “raison de la nation Arabe.” This tension led to hefty intra-Arab debates about what constituted common interests. Denouncing political rivals for not acting according to the larger “Arab cause” was a common strategy to weaken opponents and increase one’s own legitimacy. But Arab nationalism transcended boundaries and thrived on the connectedness between societies, with the Arab world constituting “a vast sound-chamber in which currents of thought, as well as information, circulated, and enjoyed considerable resonance across state frontiers.”

Palestine was at the heart of Arab regional politics during hot military conflicts between Israel, Palestinians, and Arab states—in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982, 2006, and 2008–09—and cold episodes characterized by diplomatic and symbolic struggles among Arab states over regional hegemony and status. Malcolm Kerr’s study on the “Arab Cold War” of the 1950s and 1960s between conservative monarchies (Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq before 1958) and

“radical” republics (Egypt, Syria, and Iraq post-1958) shows the centrality of Palestine as a reference point. Arab politics could not be reduced to a mere reflection of extra-regional dynamics, like the global Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, or a product of domestic developments within Arab states. Otherwise, coup attempts, interventions in other states, rapidly shifting alliances, and puzzling foreign-policy decisions could not be explained.

Following the 1967 war, some observers argued that the importance of the Arab dimension in regional politics and of Palestine as an Arab symbol was in decline, if not over, especially with the increased role of oil-rich Gulf states and the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979. Such views not only underestimated the continued salience of an Arab supra-state identity among the Arab publics, they also conflated pan-Arabism as a scheme for political unity, such as Nasserism or Baathism, with a broader sense of Arab nationalism, which persisted into the 21st century. The dominant form was a kind of political Arabism, defined by an understanding of “Arabs living in different states (being) linked by special bonds. Arab politics should reflect this reality and accordingly be informed not only by a narrow self-interest but also comply with a number of distinct Arab norms.”

Despite the decline of Arabism at the state level, Palestine remained at the center of regional politics, and it figured prominently in how Arab regimes interacted with Israel. Following the Egyptian-Israeli treaty of 1979, the Arab-Israeli conflict transformed from a zero-sum game into a dynamic of “land for peace” with an eye toward a two-state solution. This transformation significantly shifted the Palestine issue. In 1982, Saudi Arabia put forward the Fez plan, the first Arab proposal to offer recognition of Israel in return for the establishment of a Palestinian state defined by pre-1967 borders. Following Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the United States sponsored peace negotiations in return for Arab regimes’ participation in the coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. These talks led to the Oslo Accords of 1993, which expressed the mutual recognition of Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization as the legitimate political representative of the Palestinian people. The agreement was followed by the Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty in 1994.

Various Arab states, including Saudi Arabia, then tied normalization of their economic relations with Israel to the achievement of progress toward a Palestinian state. However, the combined effects of the rapid rise of Israel’s anti-peace right under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the buildup of illegal Jewish settlements, the increasing authoritarianism of the Palestinian Authority under Yasser Arafat, the suicide attacks of Hamas and other Palestinian organizations, and the declining engagement of US governments undermined the Oslo Accords, culminating in the second intifada in 2000. Due to both that violent uprising and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Saudi Arabia sponsored the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which called on Arab regimes to normalize relations.


The contours of Middle Eastern politics before the Arab uprisings are encapsulated by the reactions to the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. During 34 days of intense fighting, a symbolic rivalry emerged, with an array of actors trying to define the “common Arab interest” in order to discredit their rivals.\footnote{This part draws on Valbjørn and Bank, “New Arab Cold War,” 15–18.} Hezbollah’s leader, Hassan Nasrallah, portrayed the movement as aiming for Arab solidarity, resistance to occupation, and the liberation of Palestine. Other members of the Axis of Resistance, like Hamas and Syria under President Bashar al-Assad, embraced similar goals. On the other side, the so-called “moderate camp” composed of the pro-Western and status quo-oriented governments of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia declared that Hezbollah’s “adventurism” did “not serve Arab interests.”\footnote{André Bank and Morten Valbjørn, “Signs of a New Arab Cold War,” \textit{Middle East Report}, no. 242 (2007): 6–11.}

This bipolar alliance structure in the 2000s is similar to that of Kerr’s “Arab Cold War,” though the later period featured the emergence of nonstate Islamist actors as prominent players. These examples also highlight the importance of an overarching Arab frame of reference. Hezbollah’s presenting itself as primarily Arab instead of Shia allowed it to gain massive backing across the region, not the least among Arab populations and Sunni movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in countries like Egypt and Jordan. Popular support for Hezbollah in the 2006 war put pressure on the moderate states to adjust their positions and public discourses, and those regimes gradually criticized Israeli actions to match domestic opinion.

By the end of the 2000s, regional politics had changed from the heyday of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and 1960s. Still, until the 2011 uprisings, regional dynamics were characterized by a complex interplay of states and nonstate, often Islamist, actors vying for influence. All of this developed alongside a continued sense of political Arabism, especially at the popular level, with Palestine remaining a central symbol, reference point and, often, arena.

### THE ‘ABSENCE’ OF PALESTINE FROM REGIONAL POLITICS, 2011–23

The Arab uprisings constituted a turning point in modern Middle Eastern history.\footnote{While we designate the 2011 Arab uprisings as a crucial turning point in Middle East history, we acknowledge—paraphrasing Zhou Enlai’s remark about the impact of the French Revolution—that it is “still too early to tell” what long-lasting effects they will have on regional politics compared, for instance, to the 2003 Iraq War. For the present discussion regarding the role of Palestine in regional politics, the repercussions of the Arab uprisings seem to differ from the Iraq War in the sense that Palestine did not disappear from the post-2003 regional agenda, unlike in the post-2011 decade.} Popular mobilizations across the Arab world ousted the leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, and civil wars broke out in the latter two states as well as Syria. Politics were transformed throughout the post-2011 decade, with new conflicts replacing the Palestine issue as the central cleavage.

The uprisings had a strong regional dimension. Protesters across borders inspired each other and shared slogans and hashtags, with the primary emphasis on demands for freedom, democracy, and socioeconomic reform.\footnote{Marc Lynch, “The Rise and Fall of the New Arab Public Sphere,” \textit{Current History} 114, no. 776 (2015), 331–336.} During later stages of the uprisings, characterized by authoritarian
retrenchment, repression, civil wars, and proxy conflicts, domestic and regional politics continued to be intertwined, as in previous eras of Arab politics. Rivalries played out as proxy wars within weak states’ domestic theaters, but unlike in the past, the Palestinian issue did not figure prominently. Instead, the primary lines of division were determined by support for the Muslim Brotherhood or by what was described as the “sectarianization” of regional politics.

These changes were not only visible in the dominant rhetoric but also in the behavior of key actors. For instance, Hamas left the Axis of Resistance, moving its external headquarters from Syria to Turkey and Qatar, and the popularity of Hezbollah in the Sunni Arab public evaporated due to its pro-Assad involvement in the Syrian war. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia played out in various arenas, and a major rift emerged between Qatar, on one side, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, on the other. In neither case did Palestine play a central role.

The post-2011 regionalization of the Yemeni conflict illustrates this apparent absence of the Palestinian issue. In the decade before the Arab uprisings, the Yemeni government under President Ali Abdullah Saleh engaged in numerous violent clashes with the Houthi movement, which originates from the Zaydi-dominated northern Saada region. The Houthis gained support among those who felt economically neglected, politically excluded, and religiously marginalized. Although Saudi Arabia had always played some role in the Saada conflict, this was first and foremost an intra-Yemeni affair. However, following the Arab uprisings and after the Houthis took over the capital of Sanaa in 2014, the conflict became regionalized. A coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened militarily against the Houthis, who in turn received support from Iran.

At first sight, the conflict might resemble Kerr’s “Arab Cold War,” with Yemen a theater not only of civil war but also of regional rivalry, at that time between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that the framing and alliance patterns were fundamentally different. While the 1960s conflict was driven by classical Arab-nationalist frames, the post-2011 rivalry was defined by narratives in which both regional and local actors, often instrumentally, emphasized sect-specific identities to mobilize supporters and delegitimize opponents. The Saudis, who backed the conservative Shia Zaydi imamate against the revolutionary republicans in the 1960s, were in the later conflict eager to frame their Houthi opponents as distinctly Shia. Despite the traditional slogan of the Houthis—“God is the Greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, a curse upon the Jews, Victory to Islam”—the Palestine issue did not motivate the combatants.

In the early years of the 2020s, the Palestinian question and the Arab-Israeli cleavage seemed to have largely disappeared. When Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE signed the Abraham Accords for normalization with Israel—without any promises regarding Palestine—reactions

were muted among both the regimes and the publics. Instead, these agreements were driven by the narrow interests of individual states. Morocco received US recognition of its control over the Western Sahara; Sudan got off the terrorism list; Bahrain sought better relations with Washington; and the UAE received access to advanced technologies and beneficial trade relations with Israel. Normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel was more difficult but negotiations were ongoing. A few years later, in the spring of 2023, Iran and Saudi Arabia agreed to a China-brokered rapprochement, while Assad’s Syria was readmitted to the Arab League after a 12-year suspension due to violence against anti-regime protesters. In none of these cases were Palestinian actors consulted or their issue considered salient.

These developments, along with the “de-sectarianization” of regional politics, led to speculation about whether the region was leaving the long post-Arab uprisings decade to enter a new stage. In September 2023, US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan declared, “The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades.” The Economist soon published a special feature on the “new Middle East,” arguing that the center of gravity had moved away from the Mashreq and toward the Gulf. Normalization agreements and regional stability, including a Saudi-Israeli deal, were expected to replace the post-2011 focus on Islamism, sectarianism, protests, and proxy wars. New forms of state-based identities were predicted, such as Saudi and Emirati neo-nationalism, which would be tied to socioeconomic reforms, futuristic mega-projects like NEOM, and infrastructure-led development like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

During this period, the Palestine issue may seem to have been less central for regional rivalries as well as international actors. But this does not mean its importance disappeared for all of them. First, interest in and solidarity with Palestine remained prominent at the popular level. During the 2010s and into the 2020s, opinion surveys in the Arab world showed that the issue was a major concern. According to the Arab Opinion Index, a large majority, ranging between 75 percent and 92 percent, consistently saw “the Palestine cause as an Arab issue,” and between 84 percent and 89 percent of respondents opposed recognizing Israel. Indeed, the Arab public remained “strongly supportive of the Palestinian cause,” according to the Arab Barometer surveys, “meaning that without a viable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the vast majority are unlikely to support their countries making peace with Israel.” Therefore, while Arab regimes persistently disengaged from Palestine, the issue remained highly salient among their citizens, reflecting a regimes-people divide.

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Second, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was punctuated by several episodes of violence after the 2006 Hezbollah war and Gaza violence in 2008–9, and Arabs mobilized in support of Palestinians. In November 2012, Gaza saw eight days of fighting after the killing of Hamas’s military chief of staff, Ahmed Jabari. Seven weeks of war in the summer of 2014, after Hamas kidnapped and killed three Israeli teenagers, left 2,100 Palestinians and 73 Israelis dead. And in 2021, after violent skirmishes at al-Aqsa Mosque during Ramadan, 11 days of Israeli rocket assaults and air attacks on Gaza killed 260 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. With the 2011 uprisings fresh in their minds, Arab regimes suppressed or at least severely restricted pro-Palestinian public opinion, fearing instability. For instance, protests were allowed in Jordan, but they were more harshly policed than in the 1990s and 2000s. Egypt was the exception that proved the rule, with President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood leveraging public support in 2012 to end the fighting between the Israeli army and Hamas. However, after the coup d’état by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the regime in 2014 banned large-scale pro-Palestinian protests and instituted a harsh crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi declared Hamas to be an enemy and destroyed the tunnels that connected Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

Across the Middle East during the long decade after the Arab uprisings, attempts by authoritarian regimes to downplay the Palestine question and their increased repression against domestic and regional opposition had chilling effects. While interest in and support for the Palestinians continued among Arab publics across the Middle East, mobilization seemed to have decreased.

**THE RETURN OF ‘PALESTINE’ IN REGIONAL POLITICS**

Israeli leaders, recognizing these shifts and holding two million Palestinians under blockade for more than 16 years, thought they had sidelined the problem of Gaza. But on October 7, 2023, the status quo collapsed when Hamas executed a complex operation that broke the siege, with its fighters crossing into southern Israel, killing about 1,139 people and taking more than 250 hostages. Supported by the United States and some European governments, Israel vowed to destroy the Islamic resistance group. Its brutal retaliation has left more than 38,000 dead at the time of this writing. Israel has also restricted the entry of aid after cutting water, electricity, fuel, and food, and has uprooted an overwhelming majority of Gaza’s 2.3 million inhabitants from their homes after near-total destruction of the territory’s infrastructure.

The war is a critical juncture that is bringing to an end the post-2011 era and sparking regional shockwaves that threaten to escalate beyond the occupied territories. According to Hamas, the group aimed to bring Gaza and Palestine to the center of any future Arab negotiations with Israel, end the marginalization of the Palestinian issue worldwide, especially amid US unwillingness to broker statehood, and halt Israel’s alleged plan to take over al-Aqsa. Hamas renewed its alliance with the resistance axis—Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and the Houthis in Yemen—with which it had

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cut ties due to Assad’s civil war. The Islamic resistance group has thus pursued a strategy of “unity of arenas,” with armed resistance against Israel unified across fronts in the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The Sunni-Shia divide, a central cleavage of post-2011 regional politics, has nearly faded, and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry appears no longer to shape interactions. Instead, the Gaza war seems to be bringing the kingdom and the Islamic Republic closer together, building on their 2023 détente. Both have called for a ceasefire while advocating for regional stability.

However, while the Gaza war has brought the post-uprising era to an end and refocused attention on Palestine, the effects are not mere replays of the past. In this section, we analyze the return to pre-2011 regional politics but also reveal new patterns. We do this by exploring four aspects of the new period: the scope of popular mobilization (regional and global); the discourses adopted at popular and regime levels; the regional alliance structure, including the stances of key actors; and the interplay between cross-border and domestic politics, which reveals an increasing regimes-people divide.

**Scope of Popular Mobilization around Palestine**

We can see in the new context a re-emergence of an “Arab public sphere,” with the Palestinians at the heart of major regional issues. Popular debates have been infused with references to well-known slogans about Arab solidarity, the liberation of Palestine, and resistance against imperialism. The Gaza war reinvigorated the “Arab sound chamber” in which the Palestinian cause resonates with Arab people, facilitated by both a common language and a shared history.

As before 2011, the war has brought to the forefront a popularly driven Arabism with an Islamic flare embraced by nonstate actors. This trend bears similarity to the “non-statist political Arabism” amplified through trans-Arab media (Al Jazeera and recently Al-Araby TV), which gained momentum with the 2003 Iraq invasion, the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah conflict, and the 2008–09 Gaza war.

The new violence has linked the Arab press to the public sphere, with reporters, analysts, and anchors becoming prominent figures. The Arab sound chamber has expanded over social media, especially Telegram, Instagram, Facebook, and X, with users following journalists on the ground to stay informed of events and the fate of the Palestinians, thus amplifying solidarities across state frontiers. Abu Ubaida, the longtime spokesman for Hamas’s Al-Qassam Brigades—an enigmatic figure, always masked in kaffiyeh, known as Al-Mulatham (“the masked” in Arabic)—has emerged as a cultural, political phenomenon over social media, street art, and banners.

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While this mobilization around Palestine bears similarities to the pre-2011 period, it is wider in scope. The war has triggered memories of injustices around the world and sparked a kind of “Global (South) sound chamber,” with Palestine transforming from a cause that unites Arabs into a transnational rallying cry against settler colonialism. The wave of solidarity with the Palestinians increased as masses in the West, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, South Asia, and East Asia demonstrated and demanded a ceasefire. This has revealed broad government-people divides and solidarity against Western hegemony. In the United States and Canada, solidarity marches attracted activists drawing analogies between indigenous Americans and Palestinians. Ireland emerged as a trailblazer in the European Union through its support for Palestine, a position that finds its roots in its own history of resisting British colonialism; along with Norway, Spain, Belgium, and Slovenia, it formally recognized an independent Palestinian state. Protests in North American and European universities revealed that Palestine resonates well beyond Arab lands. And South Africa’s case against Israel in front of the International Court of Justice put Palestine at the center of movements against colonialism, apartheid, and imperialism.

Discourses Deployed at the Popular and Regime Levels

The current period, as before 2011, has rekindled discourses of Arab-Palestinian solidarity. Social media platforms revealed and amplified visceral rage among Arabs that their brothers and sisters are being killed. A January 10, 2024, study conducted in 15 Arab countries showed that 92 percent of respondents believed the “Palestinian cause is a cause for all Arabs and not the Palestinian people alone,” up from 76 percent in 2022. In another poll, nearly all Saudi participants—96 percent—responded that “Arab countries should immediately break all diplomatic, political, economic, and any other contacts with Israel, in protest against its military action in Gaza.” The complicity of those regimes in tightening the Gaza blockade, or their inaction to alleviate it, reawakened feelings of injustice and memories of humiliation from past tragedies, including the many wars with Israel and the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Resentment of Western double standards and injustice has been expressed across Arab broadcast and social media. Popular frustration with Arab governments has risen to unprecedented levels, with leaders seen as fully co-opted by the West and Israel, thus betraying the Palestinian cause.

While this popular, society-based Arabism is similar to pre-2011 dynamics, the Gaza war has widened the rift between people and regimes, with state-led Arabism reaching a new low. Not only do governments no longer refer to “shared Arab interests,” but some are less prone to hide their pro-Israel stance; some Gulf countries even curb pro-Palestinian sentiment on social


41 Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, “Arab Public Opinion.”

Saudi Arabia launched social media campaigns against Palestinians, using phrases like “Palestinians sold their lands” and attempting to change the perception of Israel as a historical enemy through hashtags like “Israel is not my enemy.” Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are accused of connecting Israel to Emirati and Bahraini ports via a land bridge through Saudi Arabia and Jordan. While Jordanian officials have denied the existence of this route, the hint of such collaboration would have been unthinkable before 2011.

Publics mobilized in response. Consumers in the Arab world, especially in Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, and Morocco, boycotted companies based in countries with pro-Israel stances, such as Starbucks, or those that refused to take a stance on the war. The Arab League, historically seen as the leading advocate for the Palestinian cause, has been superseded by coalitions like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the BRICS bloc of non-Western powers, which have issued much stronger statements. Still, these are words not backed by action.

The Regional Alliance Structure

The Gaza war has accentuated the Axis of Resistance. Before 2011, the alliance of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas challenged the Western-built regional order that was supported by the Arab moderate camp of Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The coherence of the axis during this period was maintained through mutual antagonism against the United States and Israel. After the Arab uprisings, the Axis of Resistance weakened when Hamas temporarily stood against the Assad regime due to the Syrian civil war. The Hamas attacks of October 7 and Israel’s response have driven the axis back together, suggesting a return to the divide between the resistance and the US-supported Arab regimes.

However, the Gaza war has revealed distinctive patterns. Syria under the Assad dictatorship is largely absent, its agency diminished after more than a decade-long war; and Hezbollah lacks its pre-2011 legitimacy. But new actors have joined the fray. The Houthis in Yemen have attacked ships in the Red Sea, disrupting global trade. Pro-Iranian militias in Iraq and Syria have assaulted US military bases and killed American personnel. By proving themselves capable of military
strikes, these groups have gained popularity and tapped into local grievances as governments have lost face, unable to satisfy people’s pro-Palestinian demands. In addition, the Iran-Israel rivalry shifted in April 2024 from proxy conflict to direct confrontation on each other’s territory, with an Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus and ensuing Iranian drone and rocket attacks on Israel.49

As for the current state-based regional order, it is fundamentally different from the pre-2011 structure, as there is no longer a moderate camp and thus no binary opposition between two blocs. Instead, we are seeing a new period of “multiplexity,” with no hegemons and more diverse material and ideological configurations, along with the proliferation of influential nonstate actors.50 Some governments have made Palestine a central focus. Qatar has emerged as a critical intermediary between Hamas and Israel, taking advantage of strong relations with Western officials and militant leaders.51 Turkey, with longstanding military and economic ties despite turbulence in the last decade, has harshly criticized Israel’s war, with official statements transcending Islamist-secular divides and aligning with popular pro-Palestinian sentiment.52 But more important are the differing positions on the Palestine issue taken by Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and, prominently, the UAE. These states no longer constitute a coherent, moderate bloc.

The changes in the regional configuration stand out in Yemen, where domestic and regional factors are intertwined. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, traditionally part of the moderate camp, had been trying since 2019 to extract themselves from the conflict. They have resisted joining the current coalition trying to restore order in the Red Sea and have not participated in US and UK airstrikes against the Houthis.53 Indeed, the Saudis, fearing cross-border attacks, are interested in continuing negotiations with the rebels to end the decade-long Yemen conflict and in keeping a dialogue open with Iran.54 But the Houthis have also changed. After 2011, the group was depicted as distinctly Shia, and the Yemen theater was seen as one of sectarian conflict between Tehran and Riyadh. Now, the Houthis are a key part of the pro-Palestinian resistance, engaging in direct strikes on global commerce in the Red Sea. This has increased their local and regional support.55

The Increasing Divisions Between Regimes and People

The fourth parallel with the pre-2011 period is the regimes-people divide—the large gap between the stances of authoritarian governments and their citizenry—that the Gaza war exposed.

overcome this, ruling regimes have played the “Palestine card” by employing harsh anti-Israeli and pro-Palestinian rhetoric with the aim of gaining legitimacy, or at least appeasing their agitated populations.

Jordan is a case in point. Nearly every day since October 7, the king, queen, crown prince, and government ministers have portrayed the Hashemite kingdom as a staunch supporter of the Palestinians, pointing to actions such as its establishment of a field hospital in Gaza and airdrops of aid. The government also withdrew its ambassador from Tel Aviv and asked Israel to recall its own ambassador from Amman. While receiving some applause from ordinary Jordanians, the kingdom continues to militarily and economically cooperate with the targets of popular rage: Israel, with which it signed a peace treaty 1994, and the United States, its main international donor. However, seeking a safety valve for the regime, the government has allowed pro-Palestine protests, except in the Jordan River Valley on the border with Israel. During Ramadan, in March and early April 2024, these uprisings expanded, not only in size but also in the open display of support for Hamas and the Al-Qassam Brigades. The Hashemite regime then harshly clamped down, arresting hundreds.

Governments across the region have similarly tried to appease their publics. Despite having suppressed almost all protest activities after his power grab in July 2021, Tunisian President Kais Saied has not only allowed pro-Palestinian demonstrations, he has even put himself at their helm, trying to make up for the criticism against his authoritarian rule and the lack of socioeconomic prospects for citizens. Egypt has refused to respond to the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea despite suffering a 40 percent drop in revenue from the Suez Canal, fearing public backlash if it is seen as backing the Israeli war.

These attempts to assuage public anger notwithstanding, the Palestine issue has accentuated the regimes-people divide. Citizens have expressed strong preference for cutting relations with Israel, reversing peace treaties, and abandoning normalization agreements. Jordanians have demanded cutting all relations with Israel and canceling the 1994 Wadi Araba peace treaty, and Moroccans have regularly demonstrated for an end to the Abraham Accords. And, as noted above, the Gaza war has shifted Saudi opinion, as an overwhelming majority favors breaking all ties with Israel. Nevertheless, this has not dimmed the prospects for a Saudi-Israeli normalization agreement, which reportedly remains on the table although at a higher price, including

58 Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, “Arab Public Opinion.”
60 Cleveland and Pollock, “New Poll Sheds Light.”
the creation of a Palestinian state. More broadly, irrespective of popular will, peace treaties and normalization deals with Israel persist.

While the current regimes—people divide marks a continuity with the pre-2011 period, new patterns will determine whether different Arab regimes allow or ban Palestine-related protests. The case of Egypt suggests that if a regime plays the “Palestine card,” it can be akin to playing with fire. Immediately after October 7, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi instrumentalized the rising anger of the public, allowing protests but orchestrating them to signal a pro-Sisi popular mandate ahead of the presidential elections. However, this largely failed, with demonstrators not only chanting slogans invoking the heyday of the 2011 Egyptian revolution but also marching toward Tahrir Square, the key site of the uprisings that ended the reign of Hosni Mubarak. Since that dictator’s ouster, protests and other pro-Palestine symbols, such as flags at football matches and public gatherings, had been forbidden. But given Egypt’s literal connection to the adjacent Gaza Strip and the solidarity of Egyptians with Palestinians, Cairo cannot afford to ignore or disengage from the issue.

This contrasts with Algeria, where the military-led regime has been for decades one of the Arab world’s strongest critics of Israel and supporters of Palestinians, albeit rhetorically. Not only has the government remained relatively calm in denouncing Israel’s bloody retaliation, it has also prevented demonstrations despite overwhelming pro-Palestinian sentiment among the public. This is due to the legacy of the uprisings by the Algerian hirak, which led to the ousting of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in March 2019. Since then, all public protests in Algeria have been forbidden, including those in solidarity with Palestine.

In sum, while Palestine has re-emerged as a mobilizing factor at the popular level akin to the pre-2011 period, regime responses have strongly differed. These variations can only be understood in relation to the legacy of the post-Arab uprisings.

CONCLUSION

The long post-2011 decade in the Middle East is over. Palestine is again at the center of Arab and Middle Eastern politics, and it has been transformed into a global issue connected to movements against colonialism and imperialism. At the regional level, the alliance structure has been altered, with the moderate Arab camp fading and new actors rising. Some of these emerging forces are nonstate groups, like Yemen’s Houthis and Hezbollah, which seem to have captured state institutions. They should now be seen as having evolved into hybrid entities, with complex foreign policies and diplomatic capabilities alongside military capacity.

The Gaza war is not a mere move “forward to the past.” Tracing the continuities and differences with previous eras allows us to explore potential paths forward. First, episodes of Arab-Israeli war and peace have been tied to global dynamics of bipolarity and unipolarity. Most peace negotiations and agreements, including the Oslo Accords, were sponsored by the United States during its period of uncontested hegemony. Today, the unipolar moment is over, requiring us to consider the prospects for peace under the multiplexity that is emerging.

Another important lesson is that ignoring the Palestine issue, especially the question of statehood, in Arab-Israeli normalization deals will not be a recipe for longer-term interstate stability, nor will it lead to acceptance or support by the majority of Arab populations. Among the continuities across historical periods, the Gaza war exposed underlying regimes-people divides that keep resurfacing during pivotal moments in regional politics, even though authoritarian governments are successful in projecting images of stability. While agreements can be forged at the regime level, without popular backing they will produce neither “warm” peace nor stability.

Finally, and even though most Arab regimes remain bystanders in the unfolding drama, the Gaza war will reverberate in both regional and domestic politics. With Palestine again at the top of the agenda, key actors inside and outside the Middle East cannot ignore its repercussions. The historical junctures of the Palestine issue—the 1948 Nakba, the 1967 and 1973 wars, and the 1987 and 2000 intifadas—not only affected the local conflict, they were central to domestic politics in Arab states, leading to upheavals, coups, repression, and instability. These episodes were equally critical for regional politics, altering alliance structures, driving conflict, and creating opportunities for peace. The war, ongoing at the time of this writing with no end in sight, marks another distinct era in this protracted conflict that is likely to profoundly affect the whole region, and the many states interested in it, for years to come.

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