



The deepening crisis in Gaza

This webinar discusses the crisis in Gaza and its regional and international dimensions.

We are meeting as the truce in Gaza is clearly starting to falter: the latest extension was for one day only; Hamas struggled to find the requisite number of hostages; the list came late and Israel was within minutes of resuming its military offensive. Negotiations mediated by Qatar, with Egyptian and US assistance, are ongoing, but are unlikely to take us beyond a few more days at most. The price Hamas will ask for military and male hostages is far higher than Israel is willing to pay at this stage.

A resumed Israeli offensive will include both a completion of operations in mostly-evacuated northern Gaza, and an elimination of Hamas capabilities in southern Gaza. These will be slow, taking months, and civilians will again be in the firing line. The United States is pushing for more targeted strikes, more humanitarian aid access and a better civilian evacuation plan. But a step change is unlikely, given the physical constraints in besieged Gaza and the deep intermingling of fighters and civilians.

We are going to be seeing the same tragedies as before, with the same international discomfort and regional anger, stretching over a long period. That means the risks of wider escalation are still high. First, in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, there is a volatile mix of anger – at increased government-armed settler violence and land-grabbing, as well as further military raids and arrests – and rising respect for Hamas, which has changed the former status quo of a hopeless, gradual, internationally ignored loss of a prospective state. The group have also secured the release of women and children prisoners. This raises West Bank risks despite Israel's ongoing firm security control.

Second, and more important, are the calculations of Iran and its allies: Lebanese Hezbollah, Shia militias in Iraq and Yemen's Huthis. So far, their efforts have been calibrated to raise the costs of the war for Israel and increase international concerns over regional escalation, in order to put pressure on the United States and Israel to accept a long-term ceasefire that at least partly protects Hamas. If this fails, they then have a choice about whether Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' is prepared to lose the Gaza front altogether, and suffer the loss of regional credibility, or to capitalise on a unique moment to gain regional popular support but risk losing built-up military assets. They likely prefer the former, but it is not a foregone conclusion and risks of miscalculation or pre-emption will endure through the conflict.

The biggest risk is on the Lebanon front, where escalation (paused during the truce) has already significantly changed the status quo. It is hard to see Hezbollah reducing its new military deployment in the south in a way that would give northern Israelis confidence to return home. The progress of the Gaza war will provide continued flashpoints, as will eventual discussions of what comes next.

Washington wants a revived Palestinian Authority to take over in Gaza, but the current (or even any probable) Israeli government does not want to legitimize that track to a two-state solution or 'reward' Palestinians. No Palestinian actor could credibly come to power with Israeli backing. A possible Arab-sponsored administration faces similar hurdles. The UN would be wary of peacekeeping without a clear peace to keep. Israeli security control with UN-sponsored humanitarian services provision is probably the default option.

This is not a long-term solution; like much else in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it risks becoming a long-term non-solution.

Regional dimensions

The war has upended a major trend underway in the region, and that is Israel's gradual integration into the wider Arab world as the US-brokered Abraham Accords in 2020 led to a process of normalisation of diplomatic ties between Gulf countries and Israel. It is clear that the Palestinian issue can no longer be glossed over while Israel tries to advance its region-wide ambitions for economic and

infrastructural projects. This approach had underpinned US engagement – in, for example, plans for an India-Middle East-EU Corridor (IMEC) to connect India, Israel and Greece.

The persistent threat of escalation hangs over everything. Riyadh has been harsh in its criticism of Israel's actions. Given the levels of anti-Israeli sentiment across the region, the price of cooperation will be prohibitive.

Other Abraham Accord partners like Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have benefited in economic and security terms from normalising relations with Israel and will seek to be careful in managing these going forward. Although they are geographically distant from the conflict, Gulf countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been diversifying their economies away from hydrocarbons and towards tourism, sport, and providing attractive investment opportunities. Consequently, they have a strong interest in helping to prevent the conflict from spilling over.

In Morocco, thousands of people have been out on the streets protesting against continued normalisation with Israel. In Egypt and Jordan, there are fears and suspicions, valid or not, that the Israeli objective is the forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza into Sinai. Cairo has rejected this – a mass cross-border displacement would be an intolerable burden on its economy – and is trying to navigate the situation carefully by playing an active role in negotiating a ceasefire. For Jordan, similarly, any resettlement is unacceptable.

Among Arab publics, anti-Western sentiment rises after every conflict, but it has hit a higher note this time with Gazan journalists and individuals streaming live destruction on social media. People have drawn contrasts with the global response to the conflict in Ukraine, and for Arabs this has reinforced the idea of double standards in the application of international law and human rights conventions.

International dimensions

Russia is likely to remain on the sidelines but hopes for a long-drawn out conflict. Russia is not shaping events in the Middle East and Ukraine is still its priority. However, Moscow stands to gain from the diversion of Western public, media and policy attention to Gaza. Russia will hope the diplomatic, economic and political capital extended by the United States will facilitate an erosion of Western unity in support for Ukraine. However, Western support for Israel in material terms is unlikely to divert resources from Ukraine as there is little overlap in systems and munitions.

Russia has broadly supported the two-state solution while ramping up criticism of Israel and support for Hamas (but not its October 7 attack). It is unlikely to go far in supporting Arab and other Middle Eastern states and will be careful not to alienate Israel too much. Prior to October 7, Moscow and Tehran enjoyed a largely positive relationship given the large Russian-speaking population in Israel and the benefits of cooperation to prevent conflict in Syria.

Moscow will use Western support for Israel to strengthen its charges of international double standards and hypocrisy.

Q&A

To what extent is the violence of the Israeli response driven by the new coalition partners?

Very prominently, the far-right coalition partners have laid down a red line against this truce continuing further than Sunday. At the margins, this has made a truce slightly harder to agree, but the fundamental Israeli policy on the Gaza question reflects a wide consensus in society. This is related to the trauma Israeli society experienced on October 7, the events of which forced a radical overturning of assumptions and an extreme sense of insecurity. The war aim of eliminating Hamas was articulated very early by all – including the military, security services, the centre-right, and even more centrist parties, apart from the far right. Coalition partners will continue engaging in incendiary rhetoric, but Israel will pursue its core policy.

How likely is it for members of the UN Security Council to agree to a peacekeeping mission in Gaza? Would Israel agree?

This is unlikely to happen, even though Moscow may be tempted to use discussions to assert itself as co-equal in status with other Security Council permanent members. The UN itself as an organisation is very wary of deploying indefinite peacekeeping forces

without any clear peace to keep, a firm mandate or much clarity on the timeline and parties involved. The UN will have to follow whatever decision the Security Council reaches, but there would be lots of bureaucratic pushback against such a mission.

Israel does not see the UN as a monolithic institution, but in Gaza, its relationship with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is entirely negative. Israel does not think the UNRWA should exist and is not open to the UN playing a major role.

There is an abundance of misinformation and disinformation. What are the prospects of correcting this, if any, or is it too politically sensitive to challenge?

Both sides are producing disinformation which is being widely shared. This is not being challenged within the internal networks of either side or their supporters, and this is unlikely to change. The truth is mattering less and less to how people feel about this conflict. Social media platforms do not have the capacity to verify information. For example, in the instances of the bombing of the Ahli hospital and beheaded babies, both sides remain convinced by their original assumptions. Every bit of new information reinforces them and every contradictory piece of information is seen as propaganda. International media organisations that spend time verifying statements have little scope to change views.

What kind of credible alternative Palestinian body do you see emerging given the hurt and anger the destruction in Gaza has wrought? Does the ongoing Hamas war decrease or increase the possibility of a two-state solution?

In the current context, the emergence of a credible Palestinian body appears highly unlikely. This is not because the Palestinian people are incapable of creating a credible body – they would if there were scope for elections with genuine freedom and representative factions. However, on the one hand, Israel will not abandon security control as it does not believe in the possibility of a Palestinian body that is not a threat. On the other, no Palestinian body that is created in a context of Israeli security control can be credible.

A credible body may emerge if a genuine path towards a two-state solution is mapped out. Before October 7, the two-state solution was a stagnant issue but it is now being discussed internationally. However, polarisation has increased on both sides: Palestinians are horrified and resentful at the current killings and oppression, while Israel is not prepared to make any concessions after the atrocities committed by Hamas.

Meanwhile, on the ground in the West Bank, given how geographically intertwined Palestinian and Israeli communities now are, the prospects of a viable two-state solution are low.

Do public protests pose any risk to the stability of Middle Eastern countries that have normalised relations?

Egypt is facing a harsh economic crisis. The Gaza conflict has also had economic ramifications for the country – tourism, for example, has been hit badly. Israel's natural gas exports have been affected. Egypt has not seen protests in a long time, but authorities are allowing some this time as a pressure release.

In Morocco, authorities are calibrating responses to public protest. In Jordan, public anger is very high and the government is paying close attention to managing protests to ensure they pose no long-term threats to stability.

How can the West address the issue that no one wants to strengthen Hamas while at the same time knowing that it cannot disregard that Hamas is needed for a long-term solution?

There is not yet a consensus that Hamas is going to be needed for a solution. Even if that answer were emerging, Israel would oppose it. Israel is talking to Hamas about hostages, but its war aim of getting rid of Hamas as a force has not changed. It will be difficult for Western countries, especially the United States, to start thinking of Hamas as being part of a potential solution. Countries in the Arab world that support the Palestinian cause may not necessarily want Hamas to continue being influential. Qatar, for example, faces a dilemma – it hosts political leaders and has political offices. It will have to calculate how it retains influence within Gaza and how it manages its relations with Hamas.

What might one expect from the Biden administration in terms of pressuring Israel into accepting peace?

This is the absolute key question. There are a lot of countervailing forces here. The United States much potential influence over Israel, particularly in terms of military aid, given that the conflict has been using up missile defences. However, it is very hard to imagine Washington using that threat, partly because of Biden's long-standing support for Israel, which is a core part of his political persona and probably his own personal beliefs.

With the upcoming presidential race, the Biden administration will not want this to be an issue of vulnerability before Republicans and wider supporters of Israel. There are electoral threats too on the other side – Democratic US voices against what is happening in Gaza are louder than ever before – but it is unclear who they would vote for if not for Biden.

US political dynamics are complex, but ultimate pressure is unlikely to be used against Israel. Moreover, Israel is not ready to bow to such pressure at the moment. Biden's recently stated support for a two-state solution was briefly interpreted as a call for the truce to be continued as a long-term ceasefire – even though this was not what he meant. The immediate reaction in Israel was to go it alone, with or without US support. This response by Israeli society indicates the crisis is being understood as existential.

What effects might public protests in the West have on their governments?

Israeli society has been drifting rightwards over the past twenty years; now there is an even more solid push towards the centre-right. Diaspora solidarity is rising due to perceived antisemitism in response to this conflict.

It is possible to see a distinction between government policy and public opinion, but protests are unlikely to effect much change at the policy level.