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The Middle East Paradoxon: Can a New Regional Order Emerge After Disruption?

Developments in the Middle East have increasingly been drawn into the whirlpool of disruptive politics. Logics of conventional politics to bring about change or mitigate shocks have been left with limited explanatory power. This obviously culminated in US President Trump's "Riviera Plan" for the Gaza Strip as a shock-and-awe tactic to shift the goal post and make everything else look reasonable that comes afterwards. His erratic style of negotiation or rather power-based imposition of outcomes is part of a strategy of disruption, plus intended disorientation at times. Equally part of it is the nature of warfare by the Israeli government in Gaza or the uninhibited display of fantasies of expulsion and ethnic cleansing by parts of the cabinet led by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Political disruption is like a big bang on the table that makes established notions fall apart, today most notably international law, international humanitarian law, starting from the Geneva Conventions and far beyond. In short: All kind of norms that we have been used to uphold in the

past decades. In this context and through this prism we have to view the events unfolding in the Middle East.

Consequential Israeli Miscalculation

In decade-long dead-locked situations, abrupt game changers and disruptions may lead to new openings, however often with massive collateral damage. 9 September 2025 was the most recent game changer in the Middle East. This date stands for a major miscalculation by the Israeli side.¹ On that day, smoke emerged from the residential Leqtaifiya district in Doha where the remnants of the Hamas political leadership were just in the process of studying the most recent peace proposal for Gaza. None of the top ranks were killed. But this unprecedented military provocation against a major non-NATO ally, as Qatar is defined by the US itself, changed the calculation of numerous actors and led through some detours to the so-called Trump Peace Plan for Gaza.

¹ "Israel's Qatar attack was a costly failure", in: *axios*, 16 September 2025: <https://www.axios.com/2025/09/16/israel-qatar-strike-failed-hamas-survive>

One change that 9 September brought about was a swift and very rare display of Arab unity. This stands in sharp contrast to the year 2017 when the UAE and Saudi Arabia were at the verge of invading Qatar. Thanks to US diplomatic intervention, they had refrained from their plans and started an attempt to isolate Qatar, which entirely failed in the long run. After the Israeli attack on Qatar on 9 September this year all Arab states made sure to stand united. They were joined by important Muslim states like Turkey, Pakistan, Indonesia etc.

A valid question is how long Arab-Muslim unity will last, especially regarding their policies towards Israel. Most probably, not for long. But the 9 September attack has brought about or rather reinforced a shift that is even more meaningful than Arab (temporary) unity. It is a gradual realignment. This trend has evolved for a couple of months and years already. Scepticism among Arab Gulf states has risen sharply about the reliability and credibility of the United States. On 17 January 2022 the Houthi rebels in Yemen bombed three oil tanker trucks and an airport extension infrastructure in Abu Dhabi's port. No repercussions followed despite the fact that the United States has major military air bases in the region. The UAE since then has given up on the idea that the US would be rushing to their defence. Now Qatar was bombed by the key US ally Israel. What are US security guarantees worth? Arab politicians have kept asking this rather rhetorical question to their Western interlocutors when they visited their capitals.

The bombing of Qatar was a shock with severe repercussions, including a Qatari threat to stop its mediation efforts on Gaza altogether and its good offices in general, among others for US interests. After it became clear that the Israeli attack was a failure, Trump attempted to restore the last remnants of credibility by arm-twisting Netanyahu to call the emir of Qatar from the Oval Office in his presence and apologize. But it was clear to everyone on the Arab peninsula that the Israeli government had followed a consistent pattern of eliminating political leaders of terrorist organizations who were either main (mostly indirect) interlocutors, often at critical moments when they were just preparing an answer for a truce proposal as in Beirut or Teheran.

Saudis Turn to Pakistan

Arab unity and an accelerated process of Arab realignment were two consequences of 9 September. The third one is something that goes more unnoticed. A new strategic military agreement was just signed between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan which places Saudi Arabia under Pakistan's nuclear shield. This is important against the background of

Netanyahu's major aspiration to finalize a further edition of the Abraham Accords with Saudi Arabia. Obviously, the disruption of this plan was part of Hamas' calculations in launching the massacre against Israelis on 7 October 2023. But there was a larger context behind the Israeli-Saudi-US negotiations.

The question in the past years was: Would Saudi Arabia, that has been striving for a nuclear shield for some time, opt for nuclear technology delivered by Israel or Pakistan? For Israelis it was a hard choice. They would have swallowed to deliver nuclear technology to Saudi Arabia if this had been embedded in a triangular agreement with the US, since Israel would have retained some kind of control about Saudi nuclear aspirations. Now this opportunity and this control is lost. Saudi Arabia turned to Pakistan instead. In addition, if the US had allowed nuclear technology to be delivered to Saudi Arabia, it would have been easier to sell this to the American public in parallel with a new Abraham Accord sealed between Israel and Saudi Arabia. This triangular deal lies now in shatters.

Unexpected Midwife of Trump's Peace Plan

The fourth repercussion that came out of 9 September is the so-called Trump Peace Plan for Gaza. Trump advisors saw the rare opportunity of Arab unity as a diplomatic trigger point. It remains entirely unclear if the Peace Plan will change anything substantial in the long run towards a political horizon between Israelis and Palestinians. But it brought the living Israeli hostages home as one first step. Most of the "deals" that Trump has made so far have been in a rush (which by itself diminishes negotiating power), accompanied by a loud mediatic launch with few concrete or clearly sequenced steps, with weak or no subsequent deadlines of road-map character, and with no or insufficient conditions and guarantees.

Therefore, also this Peace Plan is in great danger of being derailed. On the other hand, it does constitute a rupture that has triggered new dynamics. It is the most serious attempt to change realities after 7 October. Gradualism may be the only tactic that works under these circumstances. But it needs to be carefully crafted.² And given the fact that Trump himself, for whatever it's worth, will remain personally involved in the Gaza process, means something novel.

In any case, the plan is a major setback for the ultra-nationalist elements in Netanyahu's cabinet and puts the political survival of this government at stake. There will not be a "Riviera", a cynical Trumpian real estate paradise in Gaza without Palestinians, but Palestinians will remain on at least parts of this land. The degree of Israeli withdrawal,

² "Why Gradualism Can Help in Gaza: Phased Peace Agreements Have Worked Before in the Middle East", Amr Hamzawy, in: Foreign Affairs, 13 October 2025: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/middle-east/why-gradualism-can-help-gaza>

however, will remain a beacon of contention as well as the disarmament of Hamas. At the very end of the 20 points of the Peace Plan, probably someone like Qatar in a last-minute objection has squeezed in the notion of “statehood” for the Palestinians. Netanyahu, however, has made clear more than once that a Palestinian statehood will never come to existence as long as he is alive, and probably beyond.

Best Buddies or Best Business?

Trump’s policy approach of a loud bang, of threats and disruptions can lead to change after decades of deadlock. Put his narcissism, material greediness and other aberrations aside, the focus of realpolitik should be on the outcomes of such behaviour. There are some openings, too, like a possible breaking point between him and Netanyahu, not least because of Trump’s and his family’s interests in good business with the Arab states, and the Arab elites’ interests in business with the West, and especially Trump.

Considering the overall landscape in which these developments are taking place, there is a great paradox that has emerged between Israel and the Arab states in the past years. At the very moment when the Israeli government has embarked on a path of unprecedented political and military disruption that is guided by a messianic belief of impunity from violations of international norms, and despite the cruel history between Israelis and Palestinians, no Arab state is capable of threatening Israel militarily or willing to invade the country as it used to be decades ago. Leaving Iran aside as an aloof ideological enemy, compared to the 1960s and 70s, Israel is in a safer place regarding its immediate Arab neighbourhood. Major threats to the country’s polity and society emerge rather from within as a consequence of occupation and polarization. Almost all Arab states have signed agreements of normalization with Israel or are openly or not-so-openly striving to do so.

A Safer Israel with Foregone Soft-Power Options

However, after the disproportional kind of warfare in Gaza conducted by the Israeli government, Israel has foregone the initial solidarity of a wide spectrum of states worldwide, including its moral high ground and soft power potential immediately after 7 October. What has also been lost is the possibility to obtain further Abraham Accords the cheap way, i.e. by eclipsing the Palestinian question and focussing on business only.

In the future, new agreements of normalization with Israel cannot be less than an “Abraham Plus”, and old agreements must be amended in order to include in some way or the other a tackling of the Palestinian question. Even the business-oriented autocratic Arab elites will not

be able to rush towards normalization and ignore the boiling mood in their own societies. Already now, some Arab and a few Western commentators have criticized the Arab states for agreeing to the Trump plan as a betrayal to the Palestinian people (despite it being a huge progress compared to the absurd Riviera Plan).

It will be interesting to follow to what extent Arab unity remains during the thorny path of implementing a vague Peace Plan for Gaza, while the carrot of normalization with Israel and increased standing with Trump is dangling in front of Arab rulers. Nevertheless, further realignments will be taking place at the same time away from the US. One of the beneficiaries of this new hedging is China. The diversification of relations will lead to weakened US credibility and influence in the region in the long run despite the signing ceremony of the Trump Peace Plan in Sharm el-Sheikh.

New Middle East Order with a New Hegemon?

Meanwhile, Netanyahu is counting on a continued strong engagement by his most important ally in Washington. His concept is the formation of a new order in the Middle East with Israel as a hegemon. Its power would rely on military deterrence, precision hits against targets deep in neighbouring territory, and proxy groups as neighbours in preferably weak or even fragile states, such as the Druze in Syria.

However, a real hegemon does not only act with weapons and hard power, it has at least some ingredients of soft power as well. The question is if Israel will retain a minimum of soft power in the region while its democracy is at stake at home due to the judicial overhaul pursued by the Netanyahu government, due to a brain drain of the most capable of minds from start-ups and other high-tech branches into European countries or the US, and due to a possible decline of the economic edge Israel has had for years. Israel’s economy is under increasing pressure because of this intensive and multi-front warfare.

The Israeli government has sent strong signals to the effect that it prefers benevolent proxies as neighbours to stable states. Even Jordan, a long-term pillar of stability despite its delicate social fabric and the first state that signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, has become an object of aggressive rhetoric. In Syria, the military and political support of the Druze community by Israel has made the Kurdish SDF in the Northeast of the country reconsider its preliminary agreements of integration with Damascus and raise its price. Israeli interventions have caused ripple effects throughout its neighbourhood.

Syria may also become the arena of a new regional power struggle between Turkey and Israel. Ironically, Turkey has profited most by Israel’s elimination of the Hezbollah leadership in Lebanon, a weakening of Iran, and the

window of opportunity that brought about the toppling of Bashar al-Asad in Syria by Islamist forces. First direct negotiations between Syria and Israel after 25 years under US auspices have been an encouraging sign to ease tensions on the Golan borderlands and in relation with the Druze. The results remain open, though. The US also plays a bridging role between Damascus and the SDF in the Northeast. Turkey's reconciliation process with the PKK helps, too, in case it comes to a successful ending. Not all signs in the region stand for confrontation but also for renewed diplomatic dynamics and possibilities. All scenarios remain open in a whirlpool of disruptions.

All Scenarios Remain Open

In a positive scenario, these developments could lead to a more stable order. Some have called the notion idealistic to aim for something as ambitious as an OSCE for the Middle East, a new structure of security cooperation that would include all states of the region, perhaps one day even Iran. But certain tendencies in this direction have already emerged. As a consequence of realignment away from the US even Saudi Arabia and Iran have proven to get along with each other and bet on diplomacy rather than regional competition. Arab unity after 9 September is another example. The new Syrian government has made clear that it strives for a no-conflict neighborhood, including Israel, and that it will pursue a non-aligned foreign policy bridging East and West, similar to Iraq. In the best case, a new concept of "no problems, no harm" might emerge after a phase of exhausting disruptions, cruelties and disasters.

However, developments can also lead towards more instability, low-level conflicts, renewed escalations, fragmentation and turmoil. Will Netanyahu pursue his idea of "Greater Israel" with a carte blanche by the Trump administration and thus lead to more destabilization in the region? In the long run, breaking pro-Israeli proxy groups out of fragile nation-state projects will lead to a highly unstable neighborhood for Israel and further radicalization. This is not in the interest of Israel's security, as also Israeli opposition and civil society voices have criticized. Such a negative scenario would have repercussions for the entire region with new refugee flows and more wars.

The question is who will then be able to stop a hegemon who has miscalculated his own long-term security parameters due to narrow domestic and ideological interests? The alliance between Israel and the US is still strong but for Trump every relationship is transactional and conditional. In today's Middle East all cards remain on the table, and it will probably need a few more disruptions to decide if for the better or for worse.

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