



# New (Dis)Orders in the Mediterranean: Regional Dynamics

by **Julien Barnes-Dacey**

The 7 October attacks recentred the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the attacks were also a watershed moment for the wider Middle East, pushing the region towards the climax of two decades of confrontation unleashed by the US invasion of Iraq. Israel responded to the attacks by going on the offensive against Iran and its allies, fundamentally weakening Tehran's influence. This US-backed response was welcomed by regional states as an opportunity to address Iran's destructive influence, but this position has turned into deep concern amid ongoing escalation. Israeli belligerence – which crossed a threshold with the September attack on Qatar – is reordering regional threat perceptions with Israel now assuming the role of lead destabiliser.



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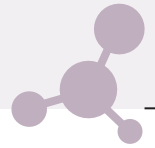
## 1 GAZA FIRST

The brutal 7 October attacks and their aftermath have *recentred the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the heart of regional dynamics*, unravelling Israeli and US attempts to bypass the issue through regional normalisation and economic integration. The Abraham Accords, an attempt to move beyond the question of Palestine and create a new alliance structure uniting Israel and Arab Gulf States against Iran, has faded as the viable vision for the expansion of this approach.

While Israel succeeded in forcefully delinking Hezbollah from the crisis *regional security and political dynamics have remained intimately tied to the ongoing conflict in Gaza*. The Houthi movement in Yemen – though also motivated by wider factors – has only halted Red Sea maritime strikes in response to pauses in Israeli aggression in Gaza, and Israeli and US ambitions to secure Saudi-Israeli normalisation have unravelled due to Israel's unwillingness to support a meaningful political pathway towards a Palestinian state. These dynamics could ultimately suck in regional actors who have sought to retain a distinction between the issues, namely the UAE whose normalisation agreement with Israel remains of strategic importance to Abu Dhabi.

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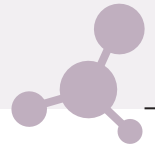


Further Israeli steps to annex parts of the West Bank could force Abu Dhabi's hand.

While Israel has now entered into a Gaza ceasefire in the framework of Donald Trump's 20 point-plan, conditions on the ground remain horrendous and Israel is repeatedly violating the agreement. The ceasefire deal provides wide space for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to collapse the deal as many expect to be the eventual outcome and it is very hard to anticipate the emergence of a viable political agreement to guarantee mutual rights and security. Netanyahu has been quick to reassert his opposition to any eventual Palestinian state. *The current Israeli government appears politically and ideologically committed to ongoing conflict* with the Palestinians in an approach marked over the past two years by gross breaches of international law, the continued moving of the goalposts to block a sustainable ceasefire and political track, as well as the greenlighting of settlement expansion in, and further moves toward the de facto annexation of, the West Bank. This position is justified by Hamas's survival on the ground in Gaza, its own violations of the agreement (which are albeit far less significant than those of Israel), as well as its unwillingness to move toward full disarmament – which is in turn tied to Israel's refusal to fully withdraw from Gaza. This points to the complications hanging over any prospect of moving the current ceasefire towards a more sustainable phase two and the standing up of the proposed International Stabilisation Force (ISF) given the unwillingness of potential contributing nations to enforce disarmament on Hamas. But while Hamas will inevitably play some role in Gaza's post-conflict future, it has effectively been removed as a serious threat to Israeli security.

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Despite the desperate situation in Gaza and widening regional insecurity, *Netanyahu has faced minimal international pressure*. President Trump did effectively impose the ceasefire deal on Israel, but he has not responded to its open rejection of key elements of the agreement and ongoing violations of the deal. US efforts to move towards the next stage of the ceasefire agreement are reported to largely reflect Israeli ambitions. *US political and security support for Israel has been a critical dynamic in empowering continued conflict* and a serious Trump push for meaningful peace in Gaza will put him in direct opposition to an Israeli leader who has been extremely successful in ensuring US backing for ongoing maximalist policies. While European public opinion is turning against Israel, forcing governments to slowly consider more forceful measures in response to Israeli policies, this pressure has been relieved by the ceasefire deal.



## 2 THE END OF IRAN'S REGIONAL ORDER

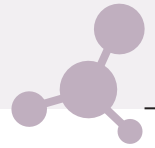
The 7 October was a watershed moment for the wider Middle East, pushing the region towards *the climax of two decades of confrontation unleashed by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and Iran's accompanying regional ascendancy*. Israel's response to the attacks have upended regional dynamics, securing significant Israeli tactical gains – but there are big questions about the extent of any Israel strategic vision to lock in these gains.

Israel responded to the attacks by going on the offensive against Iran and its regional allies in a fashion that has *fundamentally weakened Tehran's influence*, hitherto seen as a formidable block limiting Netanyahu's freedom of regional manoeuvre. At the heart of this was the war on Hezbollah, including the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, which defanged a group long seen as Iran's key tool of deterrence against Israel. The collapse of the Iran-allied Assad regime – which can partly be seen as a by-product of Hezbollah and Iran's weakening but likely also derives from wider factors – compounded this rebalancing with Tehran losing its position of dominant influence in both Lebanon and Syria, key theatres alongside Iraq (where its position remains more secure) for its forward defence security strategy.

The weakening of Iran's regional resistance network – especially the threat posed by Hezbollah missiles – helped enable a direct Israeli bombing campaign against Iran that extended into US strikes on its nuclear facilities, critically weakening Tehran's strategic position. But this shift towards direct confrontation was also marked by unprecedented Iranian missile strikes on Israel that succeeded in penetrating Israel's Iron Dome missile defence systems and left Israel highly dependent on significant, costly – and possibly unsustainable over the longer-term – US THAAD missile interceptor deployments. *While the public narrative was one of a great Israeli security success, Israeli vulnerabilities were also exposed.*

*The confrontation between Israel and Iran may not have yet reached its climax.* Ambiguity over the fate of Iran's nuclear programme following the US bombing of the country's nuclear facilities, alongside the seeming collapse of meaningful negotiations with the US, means there is *a strong risk of renewed Israeli military action*. While there has been a clear sense since 7 October that Iran wants to avoid a sustained regional war – marked by its unwillingness to fully back regional allies such as Hezbollah in their attacks on Israel and still calibrated response to Israeli strikes – *Tehran is likely to be less restrained in future rounds of direct conflict given lessons learnt from previous exchanges, the perceived need to restore some deterrence and existential undertones fuelled by Israeli regime change messaging during the 12-day war.* The 12-day war demonstrated Israeli superiority, but

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Iran also demonstrated unanticipated strike capabilities. This could pose a significant challenge to Israel in a new round of conflict, especially if Trump is unwilling to provide extensive support. Iran is also reported to have quickly rebuilt its ballistic missile capabilities, possibly with some Chinese assistance.

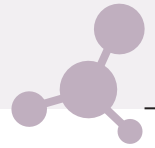
The situation will be further complicated if Iran decides to further advance its nuclear programme – which does not appear to have been totally destroyed by US strikes – whether as a means of securing new leverage in negotiations or as a perceived necessary deterrence measure in the face of wider setbacks.

### 3 ISRAEL AS THE NEW DRIVER OF REGIONAL DISORDER

*Iran's weakening was initially tactically welcomed by regional states – namely the Arab Gulf monarchies – who saw an opportunity to address Iran's destructive regional influence. But this position has turned into deep concern as Israel's efforts have fuelled deeper regional escalation, directly exposing Arab Gulf states to new threats amid an Israeli attempt to forcefully impose its own order on the region.*

Israel's regional belligerence – which crossed a significant threshold with the September attack on a Western-allied state, Qatar – is reordering regional threat perceptions. The lead destabiliser role, long assumed by Iran, resulting in closer ties between Arab states and Israel, is rapidly being assumed by Israel. Its actions are seen as a direct threat to Arab Gulf states and a driver of wider instability which threatens Arab Gulf economic development plans aimed at cementing internal transformations and their roles as global connectivity hubs.

The Levant is a key theatre for these dynamics, with initial *Israeli actions in Lebanon and Syria seen as an enabler for possible positive change* – but now representing a key obstacle to the success of stabilising transformations. Israeli strikes helped open up space for actors to try and cement pathways free from the destructive hand of Iranian interference. This dynamic is reflected in new state-building and reform projects underway in Syria and Lebanon aimed at rebuilding central states with meaningful control over domestic institutions and security forces. But this is a very fragile process and *the line between possible state regeneration and ongoing state collapse is very delicately poised*, particularly in the security sphere. Internal competition and external pressure on central governments to assert full dominance – in terms of demanding Hezbollah's full disarmament and capitulation in Lebanon, and the full integration of forces not affiliated with the new authorities in Syria – *could provoke new unravellings, especially given the deep economic challenges hanging over both countries*. There is a possible opportunity to move forward in a stabilising direction in the Levant if new governments can embrace necessary reform and



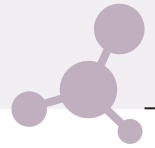
**Israel appears to be actively seeking to fuel state weakness and fragmentation in Syria**

secure strong external backing, but success will partly depend on the degree of inclusivity and the willingness of dominant forces to advance in a non-zero-sum fashion that avoids pushing former elites towards violence. This will in turn depend on the pressures imposed on them by external sponsors.

*Israel appears to be actively seeking to fuel state weakness and fragmentation in Syria*, with ongoing Israeli strikes and support for the Druze minority in Suwayda governate a direct challenge to the new government's control and stabilisation efforts. While there are significant political and security challenges posed by the new authorities in Damascus – as marked by violence against the Alawite and Druze communities – Israeli positioning looks like a deliberate effort to foment further discord. Damascus has shown a willingness to strike a de-escalation deal with Israel, but its completion is being complicated by ongoing Israeli demands seemingly intended to torpedo prospects of success (as was long the case with Gaza ceasefire talks). From a strategic perspective *Israel appears to fear that a reconstituted Syria will eventually emerge as a strong and Turkish-allied Islamist state that poses a greater challenge than Assad ever did*. This position is matched by ongoing Israeli efforts in Lebanon where it has not withdrawn from five military positions in the south, is maintaining a drumbeat of military strikes across the country and demands Hezbollah's full dismantling, a maximalist position that goes beyond the ceasefire agreement and risks fuelling internal conflict by pitting the Lebanese army against Hezbollah. There is a significant risk of wider escalation in 2026. While the US has opposed Israeli positioning in Syria, the hardline Israeli position in Lebanon is seemingly backed by the US despite a more pragmatic position initially supported by Tom Barrack, Trump's point man in the Levant.

#### **4 NEW FAULT LINES AND SHIFTING ALLIANCES**

*Instead of widening Abraham Accords, key regional players such as Arab Gulf states, Turkey and Iran are increasingly united in their concern about the destabilising threat posed by Israel*. Arab Gulf states are drawing closer to each other after a period of estrangement in a bid to forge a counterweight to Israel, while also tightening diplomatic ties with Tehran to ensure they are not targeted if there is renewed Israeli/US conflict with Iran (as occurred after the 12-day war in June when Tehran launched calibrated missile strikes on the US Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar). Israel's Doha strikes exposed how Gulf capitals have continued to misread their leverage in Washington, a sobering reality for Gulf rulers, but one that reflects a clear trajectory since 2019 when the first Trump administration failed to retaliate in response to alleged Iranian-backed attacks on Saudi oil fields (which pushed Riyadh to initiate new diplomatic outreach with Iran to contain



tensions). While President Trump condemned the Israeli attacks on Qatar and eventually forced Netanyahu to apologise for the strikes, the US inability to prevent Israel's military action in Doha was a stark wake up call for regional actors.

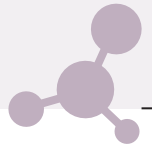
On the security front Arab Gulf states remain highly dependent on Washington. But these dynamics are also pushing *Arab Gulf efforts to secure greater autonomous control over military hardware, as well as ongoing diversification efforts*, as marked by the new Saudi-Pakistan security alliance. This provides Riyadh with at least the ambiguity of a Pakistani nuclear umbrella. This reflects Saudi fears about the regional security environment but also concern that Israeli-US strategy could be pushing Iran towards a nuclear weapon, increasing the Kingdom's need for its own nuclear deterrence. Regional states will not take aggressive steps against Israel and are wary of alienating President Trump, but appear to be seeking new deterrence structures to restrain Israel action.

An overlapping element of these shifts has been *the re-emergence of Turkey as a key regional player – based on profound influence in the new Syria – and the manner in which this is drawing it into sharp confrontation with Israel*, a fault line that could emerge as a key driver of regional instability and which risks making Syria ground zero for new proxy conflict. Given close ties with HTS established in Idlib, Ankara has a very strong relationship with the new government in Damascus, and is quickly building out relations, including in the security sphere, a step that is provoking significant Israeli concern, accompanying military action, as well as support for an autonomous Druze zone in southern Syria. This is occurring as Turkey embarks on talks to end the conflict with the PKK which, if successful, would fundamentally reshape Turkish and regional security dynamics. As part of this effort Ankara is working to see the Syrian Democratic Forces and north-eastern Syrian reintegrated into a centralised Syrian state, but this process is faltering, highlighting ongoing fragility and concern about the makeup of the new Syria.

## 5 NO TIME FOR US RESTRAINERS?

*US policy has been a key determinant of escalatory regional dynamics.* Despite finally pressing Israel into a ceasefire, Trump has largely followed the Biden administration's policy of *strong support for Netanyahu and the backing of ongoing maximalist Israeli positions towards the Palestinians and Iran.* These dynamics have not acted as a platform to pivot towards deal-making as some hoped and the role of US 'restrainers' seems increasingly constrained when it comes to the Middle East. While Israeli strikes on Doha – as well as its destabilising policy towards Syria – have provoked some US frustration, it has not resulted a fundamental shift of approach.

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**European engagement is not a serious driver of regional dynamics**

Such is the Trump way that there are clear exceptions, which hangs out the possibility of unexpected transformations of US regional policy. Trump quickly abandoned a loudly trumpeted military operation against the Houthis in Yemen. He has also played a key and unexpected role supporting stabilisation efforts in Syria, welcoming engagement with the former al-Qaeda leader Ahmed al-Sharaa and lifting highly restrictive US sanctions.

**6 EUROPEAN MARGINALISATION AND NEW TRANSACTIONALISM**

*European engagement is not a serious driver of regional dynamics, not least because it brings no meaningful security cards to the table. On Gaza, internal divisions have inhibited any meaningful European position despite the fact that the bloc's position as Israel's greatest trading partner gives it important – but totally unused – leverage. Europeans have largely been frozen out of the ceasefire process and efforts to transition into a second phase. On Iran both the US and Tehran increasingly reject any meaningful European role in diplomatic efforts.*

One marker of European intent is the European Commission's new Directorate-General for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf (DG MENA) and the newly released Pact for the Mediterranean, premised on *a new equal partnerships and development-based approach to the region*. This approach reflects new global power realities and the European inability to pursue an approach driven by political conditionality. This could result in more effective bottom-up engagement on the ground. But it is also centred on a new transactionalism that sees *economic support as the key ingredient to address the most important issue shaping European regional positioning: stopping the flow of migrants*.

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