



GAZA WAR'S IMPACT ON THE MIDDLE EAST STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE

by Lucas Winter

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Three de facto strategic coalitions dominate the contemporary Middle East geopolitical landscape: the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” the Turkish-led “Political Islam Coalition,” and the U.S.-led “Arab Normalization” Coalition, anchored by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Hamas fits uneasily between the Axis of Resistance and Political Islam Coalitions, receiving tepid support from both but fully trusted by neither. The Arab Normalization Coalition does not support Hamas.
- Members of the three de facto strategic coalitions responded differently to Hamas’ 7 October attacks and their aftermath: “Axis of Resistance” members contributed calculated, largely symbolic military support; the Political Islam Coalition supported Hamas in media and diplomacy; and the Arab Normalization Coalition sought to maintain a neutral distance from the war in Gaza.
- Prior to 7 October, the Middle East was in the midst of a new era of regional détente, in which members of the different de facto strategic coalitions were re-engaging and de-escalating their conflicts. The War in Gaza shifted the regional strategic calculus in ways that are not yet clear. Three scenarios are presented for how these changes may occur, and how China and Russia may seek to benefit from them. The first scenario involves increased Turkish-Iranian policy convergence, the second a deepening of Turkish-Egyptian relations, and the third a “grand bargain” that includes Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. Russia is more likely to benefit from the first two scenarios, while China is likely to benefit most from the third.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East’s contemporary strategic map can be divided into three distinct, de facto strategic coalitions: the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance,” the Turkish-Qatari-led “Political Islam Coalition,”

and the U.S.-led “Arab Normalization” Coalition, anchored by Egypt and Saudi Arabia.¹ Where does Hamas fit into the regional strategic picture? How are each of these three de facto coalitions reacting to the Gaza war? How might the Gaza

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war shift strategic perceptions among the three coalitions? What role might Russia and China play in this shifting regional landscape?

This piece argues that Hamas finds itself at an uneasy location between the Axis of Resistance and the Political Islam Coalition, receiving piecemeal support from each in the first six months of conflict with Israel (October–March 2024). As the piece shows, during this period, the Axis of Resistance attacked nearby targets in purported solidarity with Hamas but in ways that did little to directly impact the Gaza battlefield. Members of the Political Islam Coalition, meanwhile, provided Hamas with media and diplomatic support that has influenced public opinion about the legitimacy of the war, but has had relatively little immediate impact on Israel's campaign. For their part, Arab Normalization countries have sought to keep their distance from the conflict, due to their aversion toward groups affiliated with both the Muslim Brotherhood and the Axis of Resistance.

Continued conflict, however, will likely exert pressure on leaders of these countries to take a more assertive position, especially in Jordan, where a majority of the population identifies as Palestinian in origin.

This piece proceeds in three sections. In the first, it describes the origin, evolution, and composition of each of the three de facto strategic coalitions. The second section explains where Hamas fits in this strategic map and summarizes how each of these coalitions has reacted and can be expected to continue reacting to conflict in Gaza. The third section describes how the shock produced by war in Gaza may impact existing regional strategic trends, in particular the trend in conflict de-escalation, reconciliation, and a deepening of ties that has emerged in recent years. Three different scenarios for how war in Gaza could alter the existing strategic map by bridging various gaps between the strategic coalitions are explored.

PART ONE: THE MIDDLE EAST'S DE FACTO STRATEGIC COALITIONS

BACKGROUND: THE ARAB SPRING AND THE CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC MAP

Prior to the Arab Spring, the Middle East's key fissure was considered to be the Saudi-Iranian strategic rivalry, which also roughly mapped onto a Sunni-Shia division.² The Arab Spring rebellions, however, led to a fracture among U.S.-allied Sunni countries.³ On one side of this fracture was a new and distinct pole of power that was anchored by a Turkish-Qatari strategic partnership and included Muslim Brotherhood parties and movements, many of which ascended to power in the aftermath of the Arab Spring popular rebellions.⁴ On the other were Arab monarchies and, after 2013, the military-led government of Egypt.

The contemporary Middle East, therefore, can be broadly divided into three de facto strategic coalitions: the Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance," the Turkish-led "Political Islam Coalition," and the U.S.-led "Arab Normalization Coalition," which is anchored by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. These three distinct coalitions—explained in detail below—emerged in the early 2010s and crystallized in the ensuing regional conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

The Axis of Resistance is led by Iran and draws ideological inspiration from the anti-imperialist rhetoric and Shia religious symbolism of Iran's Islamic Revolution.⁵ Its "resistance" is to U.S. and Israeli "colonialism."⁶ Subduing Israel and curbing U.S. influence in the region are key strategic goals binding this increasingly formalized coalition.

Orbiting around Iran, the Axis of Resistance includes four regionally relevant actors. The

first two are the hollowed-out governments controlling the war-torn capitals of Syria and Yemen—usually referred to as the "Assad regime" and the "Houthis," respectively. The third and fourth are Shia militias/political parties in Lebanon and Iraq: Hezbollah and the "Iraqi Islamic Resistance," respectively. Iranian influence on all four of these actors is channeled primarily through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Quds Force (IRGC-QF).⁷ They all began referring to themselves as the Axis of Resistance in the early 2010s, and by the middle of the decade, the term became standard in describing Iran and its network of Arab allies and proxies.⁸

THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

KEY COUNTRY

Iran. Over the past two decades, Iran has steadily projected influence westward, across the Levant and toward Israel and the Mediterranean coast. Iran has done so largely by building a network of proxies and influence among the region's non-Sunni populations. This network was created and nurtured by the IRGC-QF, led by Qassim Soleimani until his death in a U.S. strike in early 2020. It is often referred to as the Iran Threat Network and constitutes a pillar of Iran's "Forward Defense" strategy toward Israel and the United States, which since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 are seen as Iran's principal adversaries.

DE FACTO GOVERNMENTS (ALLIES)

Syrian government. The Syrian government controls key areas of the country's territory, including most population centers. Iran and Russia are both present in Syria, and they often compete for influence over networks within the ruling regime. Iran's military influence on the Syrian government is centered on the 4th Armored Division and networks in the military intelligence services, both important elements of the Syrian Armed Forces. Iranian influence is often mediated by Hezbollah members operating in Syria. Syria considers Israel an adversary, primarily by virtue of its de facto annexation of Syrian territory occupied after 1967 in the Golan Heights.

Yemen's AnsarAllah. Yemen's AnsarAllah ("Houthis") control the bulk of former North Yemen, including the capital Sana'a, but are not recognized internationally as Yemen's legitimate government. They are politically and militarily reliant on Iran, but are not dependent on it. Iran has played a critical role in arming the Houthis, allowing them to fight Saudi Arabia to a standstill in the second half of the 2010s. The group's slogan includes the lines "Death to Israel" and "Curse to the Jews." The slogan was allegedly first uttered by the group's founding leader—Hussein al-Houthi—in 2000, while watching footage of Israeli forces responding to the Palestinian Second Intifada.

PARTY-MILITIAS (PROXIES)

Lebanese Hezbollah. Lebanese Hezbollah, which has been nurtured by Iran since its emergence in the early 1980s, is considered Iran's most powerful Arab proxy. Although reliant on Iranian material and military support, it is also deeply rooted in Lebanon's sociopolitical landscape. It is entrenched in the country's Shiite-majority areas: parts of southern Lebanon, Beirut's southern suburbs ("the Dahieh") and most of the Bekaa Valley. Hezbollah operatives are also present throughout government-controlled Syria, including near the Israeli border, often alongside other factions from the Axis of Resistance. Hezbollah fought Israel—its stated enemy—to a standstill in 2006. The group claims to have achieved deterrence with Israel by virtue of its large arsenal of precision-guided missiles that could be used to overwhelm air defenses and strike critical Israeli infrastructure.

Iraqi Islamic Resistance. "The Islamic Resistance of Iraq" is an umbrella group that emerged following 7 October. Its two key members are Kataib Hezbollah (KH) and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba (HAN), both of which are closely linked to Iran's Quds Force. Both militias exert influence in Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces, which are a formal part of the Iraqi state akin to Iran's IRGC. In contrast to Lebanese Hezbollah, these groups are more concerned with curbing U.S. influence in Iraq than with Israel. They form part of a larger Iranian-run network operating across a land corridor that connects Iraq to areas in southern Syria near the border with Israel.

THE POLITICAL ISLAM COALITION

The Political Islam Coalition is led by Turkey, and draws inspiration from a moderate version of the Muslim Brotherhood's Political Islam, one that embraces—or at least tolerates—liberalism, democracy and other symbols of modernity.⁹ The coalition is rhetorically hostile toward Israel—which is viewed as an occupying power of traditional Muslim lands—but willing to engage with Israel politically and economically. Turkey suspended relations with Israel in 2018 due to violence in Gaza, but these relations were re-established in 2022.¹⁰ Qatar's relations with Israel have been largely defined by the Palestinian issue.¹¹ Qatar was the first Gulf country to establish semi-official relations with Israel in 1996, but these ties were severed in 2009 in response to Israel's operation "Cast Lead" in Gaza, though working relations and communication channels have since been maintained.¹² Unlike the members of the Axis of Resistance, which see the United States as a

key adversary, the Political Islam Coalition's two key members—Turkey and Qatar—are both close strategic allies of the United States, a NATO member and a "major non-NATO ally," respectively.¹³

The coalition revolves around the Turkish-Qatari alliance, which emerged in the 2000s and strengthened in the wake of the Arab Spring.¹⁴ In the early 2010s, both Turkey and Qatar provided or intensified diplomatic and material support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organizations, including armed factions in Libya and Syria.¹⁵ In Libya, Turkey helped prop up the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity and eventually established a security alliance with this government.¹⁶ What remains of Syria's political opposition and armed Sunni rebellion is also considered part of this coalition, given their clientelist relationship with Turkey.¹⁷ However, Qatar is Turkey's only regionally relevant ally in the current context.

THE POLITICAL ISLAM COALITION

KEY COUNTRY

Turkey. Turkey is a NATO member and as such is bound with the United States and Western Europe in a security alliance. Since he was elected president of Turkey in 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has pursued policies that are not always aligned with the rest of NATO, most notably following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, in which Turkey has remained neutral rather than siding firmly with Ukraine. Under Erdogan, Turkey has shifted its perspective away from its ties to Europe and toward Arab countries in the south. Expanding Turkish influence has led many to accuse Erdogan of pursuing a "Neo-Ottoman" foreign policy that seeks to restore Turkish influence in Arab countries. In contrast to Arab countries, Turkey retains relatively strong and deeply rooted ties to Israel, although these have also been weakened under Erdogan.

KEY ALLY

Qatar. The alliance between Qatar and Turkey has developed substantially over the last decade, as both countries supported anti-government Sunni protest movements across the region, particularly in Syria and Libya. The alliance solidified following the 2017 Qatar embargo, and has evolved into a security alliance. Qatar is a Major Non-NATO ally and the home to the Al Udeid Air Base, a key U.S. base in the region and the forward HQ of CENTCOM. Qatar's main sources of regional leverage are its financial resources resulting from large natural gas reserves, and its ownership of *al-Jazeera*, the Arab region's most influential media outlet. Qatar has mediated between Israel and Hamas and maintained trade relations with Israel for over a decade, despite a 2009 severing of diplomatic ties.

THE ARAB NORMALIZATION COALITION

The Arab Normalization Coalition is anchored by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the Arab world's wealthiest and most populous countries respectively. It also includes Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as Jordan and Morocco. With the exception of Egypt's military-led government, all of these states are monarchies. The coalition is non-ideological beyond its embracing of the U.S. regional security umbrella. While its member countries are all majority Sunni, religious identity does not play a primary role in foreign policy decisions and indeed the two pivotal governments in this coalition—Saudi Arabia and Egypt—have

both actively curbed the influence of religious organizations in their respective countries.¹⁸

Throughout the mid 2010s, there were attempts to formalize the relationship between these U.S. partner nations into an "Arab NATO" that would be anchored by Saudi-Egyptian leadership, but no formal alliance ever materialized.¹⁹ Israel's relations with these countries are not inherently hostile and indeed had been visibly improving prior to 7 October. Both Egypt and Jordan have decades-long peace treaties with Israel. Bahrain, the UAE and Morocco all signed normalization agreements with Israel in 2020, as part of the "Abraham Accords."²⁰ In the months prior to October 2023, Saudi Arabia and Israel were believed to be moving toward a U.S.-brokered normalization agreement.

ARAB NORMALIZATION COALITION: U.S. REGIONAL ALLIES

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is a vital U.S. security partner and the top importer of U.S. weaponry over the past decade. It is arguably the most important country in this coalition given its economic might and symbolic importance to Islam and Arab identity, as the birthplace of Islam and the Arabic language. In the post-Arab Spring period, Saudi Arabia actively sought to curb Iranian and Turkish regional influence, usually in tandem with the UAE. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has embarked on a "multipolar" foreign policy that seeks to maintain strong and positive relations with the United States, Russia and China, as well as Turkey and Iran. Saudi Arabia does not formally recognize Israel, but negotiations on the matter were ongoing in the buildup to Hamas' 7 October attack. As "Custodians of The Two Holy Mosques," Saudi Arabia's rulers understand the sensitivities involved in normalizing relations with Israel, given the conflicts regarding access and control to Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.

Egypt. Egypt has a peace treaty with Israel and is a U.S. major non-NATO ally. Historically, Egypt was considered an independent pole of Arab power, often in competition with the Gulf monarchies. Egypt's current government, however, is strategically aligned with Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries in part because GCC countries supported its accession to power after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government in 2013 and have kept the Egyptian regime financially solvent in the years since. Egypt shares borders with Israel and Gaza.

Jordan. Jordan also has a peace treaty with Israel and is a U.S. major non-NATO ally. It is considered among the most reliable U.S. regional security partners, though is also small in population and relatively resource-poor. Jordan coordinates closely with Israel along their shared borders, including with the West Bank. Jordan's population is majority Palestinian and Jordanian religious authorities are the formal, though mostly symbolic, overseers of the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem.

PART TWO: RESPONSES TO HAMAS AND 7 OCTOBER

HAMAS: AN AWKWARD FIT BETWEEN THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE AND THE POLITICAL ISLAM COALITION

Hamas' position in this regional strategic constellation lies primarily between the Turkish and Iranian orbits, and Hamas' center of gravity has swung between the two over the past decade. As a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated organization, Hamas fits neatly alongside other Qatari- and/or Turkish-backed, Muslim Brotherhood parties and movements in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria. At the same time, Hamas sees itself as an "Islamic Resistance" movement fighting Israel, and as such is ideologically aligned with the Axis of Resistance.²¹ Indeed, Hamas is an acronym for "Islamic Resistance Movement" in Arabic. And yet, as the only Sunni group in the Axis of Resistance, Hamas fits uncomfortably in the predominantly Shia network. By virtue of straddling the Axis of Resistance and Political Islam Coalitions, Hamas is viewed with some degree of distrust by members of both.²² Despite not being a dependable ally, Hamas' control over Gaza makes the group a strategic asset for both Iran and Turkey, given the important role Palestine plays in the foreign policy discourse of both countries.²³ Relations between Arab Normalization countries and Hamas, meanwhile, are largely transactional, devoid of expressions of ideological alignment or strategic leverage-seeking. Hamas has been a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization since 1997.²⁴

Hamas seized full control of the Gaza Strip by force in 2007, after narrowly winning a plurality of votes in the Palestinian territories' first democratic elections the year before. In the aftermath, Israel and Egypt imposed a full blockade on the strip that eventually led to a 23-day Israel-Gaza war in 2008-2009. Hamas received political and diplomatic support from Erdogan's Turkey and

material military support from Iran, as well as from the Assad government in Syria and from Hezbollah in Lebanon. Shadowing Hamas's Gaza government was a foreign political bureau, based in Damascus, Syria.

The 2011 Syrian uprising forced Hamas to choose between the Syrian government and the armed Sunni rebellion. In the end, the group's leadership opted for the latter and in 2012 Hamas came out publicly in favor of Syrian Sunni rebels; its leadership was expelled from Damascus and relocated to Doha.²⁵ The momentum that Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups enjoyed during the Arab Spring was likely a large factor in this decision. Armed Sunni "Moderate Rebels" allied with Hamas—particularly in Libya and Syria—were at the time viewed and portrayed positively in the West. Following the overthrow of Egypt's elected president Mohammed Morsi in 2013, Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups came under pressure across the region.

Hamas was left without a clear patron, as Qatari support for Muslim Brotherhood groups began to ebb following Morsi's overthrow in 2013.²⁶ In 2017, a new crop of hardline Hamas leaders came to power and began guiding the group back into the Axis of Resistance fold, while also re-establishing ties with Cairo and maintaining the political support of Turkey and Qatar.²⁷ The Egyptian government began engaging as a mediator between Hamas and both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, despite its strong ideological opposition to Muslim Brotherhood affiliates.²⁸ The relationship developed into a pragmatic one that included security cooperation against a perceived common jihadist foe.²⁹

Beginning in 2017, Hamas' newly elected leaders were able to re-establish, maintain and solidify relationships with members of the two friendly coalitions—the Axis of Resistance and the Political

Islam Coalition—while simultaneously mending ties with Egypt and the Arab Normalization coalition. The Political Islam Coalition continued providing material, diplomatic and informational support, mainly via Qatar, which paid for a substantial part of Gaza's reconstruction after the Israeli bombing in 2021.³⁰ Hamas' leaders also re-established and deepened relations with the increasingly formalized Axis of Resistance during this period.³¹ In April 2023, IRGC-QF commander Esmail Qaani met with leaders of Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Beirut.³² Shortly after the visit, the groups simultaneously launched rockets toward Israel from Gaza, Syria and Lebanon, in what was seen as a trial for a multi-front war with Israel.³³

DIVERGENT RESPONSES BY ALL THREE COALITIONS

How then did these three coalitions respond to Hamas' attacks on Israel and its aftermath, especially over the first 10 days of the war? Countries in the Axis of Resistance, Political Islam Coalition, and Arab Normalization Coalitions responded to the outbreak of conflict in Gaza in distinctly different ways. In the weeks following 7 October, several Axis of Resistance members began launching off-and-on strikes at nearby targets associated with either Israel or the United States, purportedly in support of Hamas and Palestinian resistance.³⁴ Political Islam Coalition countries Turkey and Qatar, meanwhile, provided Hamas with political-diplomatic and media-narrative support. In a 11 October speech, for instance, Turkish President Erdogan referred to Israel's initial reprisal attacks as a "massacre" in which Israel was using "disproportionate" attacks on Gaza that were "devoid of any ethical foundation."³⁵ Qatar's *al-Jazeera*, meanwhile, began 24-hour coverage of Gaza-related events immediately following the 7 October attacks. *Al-Jazeera's* reporting, from a pro-Palestinian perspective, challenged and contested Israeli narratives and early attempts at controlling the information

space.³⁶ Arab Normalization countries, in contrast, immediately staked out positions that balanced support for Palestinian rights without directly criticizing Israel.³⁷ Seeking to position themselves as key negotiators, Egypt and Saudi Arabia were the first two countries to host regional summits on the conflict, and media outlets in both countries were decidedly more measured in their coverage of the conflict, as compared to those in the other two coalitions.³⁸

Thus, one may characterize the three coalitions' response to 7 October as follows: the Axis of Resistance responded primarily by providing symbolic military support, the Political Islam Coalition responded primarily by providing Hamas with media and diplomatic support, and the Arab Normalization responded primarily by staking out a neutral position. For the most part, Arab opinion polls reflect popular backing for the Axis of Resistance response, tepid support for the Political Islam Coalition's response, and fairly strong rejection of the position of Arab Normalization countries.³⁹

THE AXIS OF RESISTANCE

The patterns of response by the four key Axis of Resistance members to 7 October varied. Their significance, in the regional strategic context, is detailed below.

Iranian involvement in the first six months of conflict (October 2023–March 2024) was largely done through proxies. Iranian officials regularly met with leaders in the various Axis of Resistance movements, likely helping coordinate their actions.⁴⁰ During this period, Israeli attacks on Iranian assets in Syria increased, but Iranian responses remained muted. On 1 April, however, Israel struck the Iranian consulate in Damascus, killing several important Iranian officials involved in coordinating anti-Israel activities. Iran responded with a largely symbolic missile and drone barrage, bringing the two countries' war "out of the shadows."⁴¹ As of late April 2024, both countries

had de-escalated and returned to proxy warfare.

Iran has four relevant allies and proxies through which to confront Israel: the Syrian regime, the Houthis, Hezbollah and the Iraqi Islamic Resistance. Of the four, only the Syrian regime has refrained from direct involvement in the first six months of conflict; however, Syria remains the critical link between Iran and its proxies, the key expanse in a land corridor joining Iraq to the Mediterranean Sea. Iran's ability to operate in Syrian territory remains a looming threat for Israel. The other three relevant Axis of Resistance members—the Houthis, Hezbollah and the Iraqi Islamic Resistance—all employed varying levels of largely symbolic military force in solidarity with Gaza in the first six months of conflict. As a result, the public standing of its members—especially the Houthis—increased among Arab and global publics.⁴² These attacks drew the United States into strike campaigns in both Yemen and Syria-Iraq, while also intensifying pressures to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria and Iraq.

The Syrian regime has kept the Gaza conflict at arm's length, providing rhetorical support for Hamas and the Palestinians but refraining from any direct actions against Israel.⁴³ The reason for this is a combination of state weakness, distrust of political Islam, and Russian influence. The Syrian military has historically viewed Israel as its key adversary, but over the past decade of civil war, the Syrian state has undergone a major hollowing-out that turned its focus inward, toward stabilizing the fraction of Syrian territory that remains under its control.⁴⁴

Russia, overstretched by the war in Ukraine and satisfied with the current lines of control in Syria, has appeared eager to avoid escalating or otherwise worsening its strained relations with Israel.⁴⁵ Between October 2023 and March 2024, Israel bombed sites in Syria with impunity, striking Iranian figures and assets inside Syrian territory several times.⁴⁶ Despite the strikes, Iranian air and land weapons cargo and personnel regularly shuffled in and out of the country. Various

Hezbollah-led, Iranian-backed militias retained their positions in southern Syria, along the Golan Heights, although in the Spring of 2024 Russia began moving military assets to the area. In sum, despite occasional fire exchanges there was no impactful military activity along the Syria-Israel front in the first six months of the Gaza-Israel war.⁴⁷

Yemen's Houthis came into the global spotlight following 7 October, through a series of attacks claimed to be aimed at ending Israel's campaign in Gaza. These included anti-ship missile strikes, attacks on U.S. UAVs, and the seizure of a commercial ship.⁴⁸ Houthi officials have repeatedly stated that their attacks would end if Israeli halted its campaign in Gaza.⁴⁹ Houthi actions have put some pressure on Israel, insofar as military resources have been sent to the Red Sea port of Eilat and the port has suffered from the drop in Red Sea traffic.⁵⁰ In the regional strategic context, however, the most consequential result of Houthi actions has been pressure on the United States and its relations with key Arab Normalization members Egypt and Saudi Arabia.⁵¹

The Houthis have become popular for their brazen attacks, and in doing so highlight comparative inaction by other Arab countries, particularly those in the Arab Normalization Coalition.⁵² Houthi disruptions of Red Sea shipping have also created political-economic pressures on both countries. For Egypt, the drop in revenues from decreased traffic through the Suez Canal has put additional strain on an already weak economy.⁵³ For Saudi Arabia, the lack of stability in the Red Sea has put pressures on the viability of many of the economic projects outlined in its ambitious economic development program, known as Vision 2030, most notably the futuristic city of NEOM, located in close proximity to the Israeli port of Eilat.⁵⁴

In response to Houthi attacks on its vessels, the United States assembled "Operation Prosperity Guardian," a naval military task force to deal with the Houthi threat.⁵⁵ Neither Saudi Arabia nor Egypt joined the task force. Bahrain was the

only Arab country to sign up.⁵⁶ Saudi hesitation to antagonize the Houthis is due largely to the fact that prior to 7 October, Saudi Arabia was making progress on negotiating an end to its conflict with the Houthis.⁵⁷ In January 2024, the United States relisted the group as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist group (SDGT).

Lebanese Hezbollah forces joined the fray on 8 October, using various types of munitions to target Israeli military positions along the border with Lebanon.⁵⁸ Through March 2024, fighting between Israel and Hezbollah remained contained to the border areas. Israel was forced to divert a substantial amount of its focus toward this front, and Israeli communities along the border were evacuated early in the conflict and had not returned as of March 2024.⁵⁹ Hezbollah consistently hinted at the ability to escalate military actions dramatically, though it failed to meaningfully respond after Israel assassinated Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut in January 2024 while under Hezbollah protection.⁶⁰

Through March 2024, Hezbollah's actions in support of Hamas have arguably been the most consequential for Israel. The Israel-Hezbollah situation is generally viewed as one where both sides are forced to respond to the others' attacks, while also wanting to avoid escalation.⁶¹ Although fighting has remained largely contained on this front, the potential for escalation is latent, and is usually seen as the most likely trajectory for a regional war to break out.⁶²

The Islamic Resistance of Iraq emerged in the days following 7 October, as an umbrella group targeting U.S. forces in the region. Between mid-October 2023 and January 2024, these militias—in Iraq and eastern Syria—used UAVs and rocket-assisted munitions to target U.S. military assets and facilities in the area.⁶³ U.S. forces eventually began responding to these largely symbolic attacks on 26 October, but the U.S. response was limited.⁶⁴

In late January 2024, a UAV attributed to Kataib Hezbollah (KH)—a member of the Islamic

Resistance of Iraq—killed three U.S. service members stationed in Jordan.⁶⁵ In response, U.S. forces killed Abu Baqir al-Saadi, a KH official involved in planning the attacks.⁶⁶ The strike followed an earlier strike targeting a leader from Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, the Iraqi Islamic Resistance's other key faction.⁶⁷ After these strikes, attacks on U.S. forces largely came to a halt.⁶⁸ Both targeted strikes occurred in Baghdad, prompting Iraqi government officials to publicly denounce them as violations of national sovereignty.⁶⁹ In early 2024, Islamic Resistance and other Iraqi Shia militias intensified pressure on their government to negotiate a withdrawal of U.S. troops.⁷⁰ Although the actions in Iraq have had little direct bearing on the Gaza battlefield, they have put pressure on the Iraq-U.S. security relationship.

THE POLITICAL ISLAM COALITION

In the aftermath of 7 October, the Political Islam Coalition contributed to Hamas' position by strongly and effectively challenging the Israeli narrative in the informational and diplomatic domains, while avoiding overt actions that would upset relations with the Jewish state. Turkey's rhetorical support for Gaza stems in part from President Erdogan's "personal, ideological" commitment to the Palestinian issue.⁷¹ In the weeks that followed 7 October, the Turkish president made several attention-grabbing statements at mass rallies held in favor of Palestinians. In the aftermath of the attacks, Turkey and Israel withdrew their respective ambassadors.⁷² Given Turkey's status as a key regional power and its membership in NATO, these symbolic actions are meaningful.⁷³ For its part, Qatar's actions in response to events in Gaza were twofold. First and most visible was its active diplomatic mediation role between Hamas and Israel.⁷⁴ Second and arguably most consequential, was its enabling of a strong challenge to Israeli attempts at information advantage, thorough the non-stop pro-Palestinian coverage on the Qatari-funded *al-Jazeera*. In addition, both Turkey and

Qatar became involved in humanitarian relief efforts.⁷⁵

Turkey initially responded to 7 October with measured rhetoric, indicating the country's attempt to balance between its relations with Israel and its ideological support for the Palestinian cause.⁷⁶ By late October, however, Turkish President Erdogan's tone changed and he began using stronger pro-Hamas, anti-Israel rhetoric, in response to Israel's military operation in Gaza.⁷⁷ Turkey had in the past hosted Hamas leadership and expressed its willingness to provide them with a haven going forward.⁷⁸ Notably, Turkey's leader also spoke out against U.S. strikes in Yemen, calling them a "use of disproportionate force ... [that is] trying to turn the Red Sea into a bloodbath."⁷⁹ Erdogan's rhetorical support for Hamas may be seen as motivated by domestic political calculations as well as by genuine ideological support for Muslim Brotherhood-aligned movements.⁸⁰ There are potential domestic costs to his rhetoric, however, as domestic opponents have seized on the inconsistency between Erdogan's boisterous rhetoric and his lack of meaningful action in support of Hamas.⁸¹

Qatar's key actions in response to war in Gaza have taken place in the political-diplomatic and media-narrative spheres. Diplomatically, Qatar quickly emerged as the key mediator between Israel and Hamas, negotiating several prisoner releases and brokering a late November week-long pause in fighting.⁸² Qatar hosts the head of Hamas' foreign bureau, Ismail Haniyeh, and other high-level officials in Doha.⁸³

Qatar's most consequential involvement in the Gaza conflict, however, came in the media-narrative domain via *al-Jazeera*, the most-watched Arabic-language TV news network. In the weeks and months following 7 October, *al-Jazeera* Arabic shifted to 24-hour a day coverage of events in Gaza, from a pro-Palestinian perspective that is sharply critical of Israeli actions. In the months that followed the initial attacks, several *al-Jazeera* journalists and their family members were either

killed or detained by Israeli forces.⁸⁴ *Al-Jazeera* regularly released investigations that contested the Israeli narrative, most prominently regarding the al-Ahli Hospital bombing and the purported uncovering of Hamas tunnel networks below hospitals.⁸⁵ As a result of this coverage, the Israeli government has campaigned to shut down the channel's local bureaus or otherwise asked it to tone down its coverage.⁸⁶

THE ARAB NORMALIZATION COALITION

From the outset, Arab Normalization Coalition nations sought to keep the Gaza conflict at arm's length.⁸⁷ In contrast to members of the other two coalitions, these countries never supported Hamas. Following Israel's invasion of Gaza, they have been critical of Israeli actions. Ultimately, Arab Normalization countries seek a negotiated solution to the conflict. As the conflict has evolved and drawn international attention, Arab Normalization countries have expressed support for multilateral initiatives, such as South Africa's case accusing Israel of genocide before the International Court of Justice in December 2023, or the January 2024 ceasefire resolution put forth by Algeria in the U.N. Security Council, which received widespread support but was vetoed by the United States.

In the aftermath of 7 October, Egypt and Jordan tightened controls over their borders with Palestinian Territories.⁸⁸ Both have expressed fears of spillover.⁸⁹ While the leaders of Egypt and Jordan both signaled their displeasure with Israel's military campaign in Gaza and even declared red lines with Israel, they also distanced themselves from any association with or support for Hamas.⁹⁰

Saudi Arabia's first consequential post-7 October move was to convene a joint Arab League–Organization of Islamic Cooperation meeting in November to discuss Gaza.⁹¹ The meeting was well attended and put out a joint communique at its

conclusion, but it had little to no consequence on events in Gaza. Saudi Arabia became extensively involved in relief efforts starting in November, later than most other countries.⁹²

Saudi Arabian outlets have not engaged in the type of stark anti-Israeli narrative that its Qatari counterparts have. Media coverage from *al-Arabiya*—Saudi Arabia’s alternative to *al-Jazeera*—has been much more muted than that of its Qatari counterpart. An article in the pro-Axis of Resistance Lebanese daily *al-Akhbar* characterizes the coverage as “more Zionist than Avichay [Adraee],” in reference to the head of the Arab media division of the IDF Spokesperson’s Unit.⁹³ Saudi Arabia, along with the UAE, has also restricted anti-Israel voices on social media, while encouraging some local pro-Israel ones.⁹⁴ In contrast to Turkey, which condemned U.S. strikes on Yemen, Saudi Arabia called for restraint in the wake of these strikes, but did not condemn them.⁹⁵ Still, as Israel’s military campaign in Gaza evolved and intensified in the final months of 2023, Saudi official rhetoric grew increasingly critical of Israel.⁹⁶

A key consequence of the 7 October attacks was the derailing of Saudi-Israeli normalization talks that had been ongoing in the months prior to the conflict.⁹⁷ In February 2024, Saudi Arabia set out its demands for normalization, which essentially mirrored a 2002 Arab Peace Initiative the kingdom had presented on behalf of Arab nations, and which Israel had rejected.⁹⁸ Among others, it called for the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders and a halt to the “Israeli aggression.”⁹⁹

Egypt’s response to the 7 October attacks and the ensuing Israeli campaign was largely reactive. Through March 2024, Egypt coordinated closely with Israel on Gaza-related security and humanitarian matters, including the Egypt-Gaza border crossing and the delivery of humanitarian aid.¹⁰⁰ Egypt did not respond to Houthi missile attacks toward Israel in the weeks following 7 October, even after debris from a Yemeni projectile

landed in Egypt in late October.¹⁰¹ Egyptian government revenues suffered as the Houthi attacks expanded and began diverting traffic away from the Red Sea and Suez Canal.¹⁰² For the Egyptian government, though, the solution to these problems was rooted in Gaza and not Sana’a, and Cairo proved unwilling to escalate against the Houthis in any way.¹⁰³

Egypt, a key mediator with Hamas in recent years, was quickly overshadowed by Qatar in this domain in the aftermath of Israel’s military campaign in Gaza. President Sisi of Egypt hosted a summit on Gaza two weeks into the Israeli military campaign, but it was poorly attended and did not issue any kind of final statement due to a lack of consensus.¹⁰⁴ The Egyptian government cracked down on anti-Israel protests and popular mobilization in the days following Israel’s incursion into Gaza.¹⁰⁵ As with Saudi Arabia, Egypt’s tone became critical of Israel as its campaign in Gaza intensified through the end of 2023, as Cairo voiced its support for various multilateral initiatives, including South Africa’s genocide case before the International Court of Justice.¹⁰⁶

Shortly after the Israeli incursion into Gaza in October 2023, the Egyptian government expressed fears of a Palestinian refugee influx.¹⁰⁷ In the weeks following 7 October, some Israeli officials and pundits suggested embarking on an ethnic cleansing campaign in Gaza that would see much of its population relocated to the Sinai Peninsula.¹⁰⁸ President Sisi characterized such plans as a “red line.”¹⁰⁹ In early 2024, though, Egypt began building an enclosure along its border with Gaza, potentially for the expected spillover from an Israeli advance on Rafah, Gaza’s main town along the border with Egypt.¹¹⁰

Jordan, of all Arab governments, faced the greatest popular pressure to support Gaza in the weeks and months following Israel’s military incursion, due to Jordan’s large Palestinian population and shared border with the West Bank. In the days following the incursion, Jordanian protesters took to the streets, in some cases

seeking to cross the border.¹¹¹ The Jordanian government, however, banned protests along the border and arrested Pro-Palestinian activists.¹¹²

As a strong U.S. ally that officially recognizes Israel, Jordan quickly found itself in a difficult balancing position. Through March 2024, Jordanian leadership has maintained this balance, recalling its ambassador and publicly criticizing Israel

while doing little to upset relations with either Israel or the United States.¹¹³ Yet, Hamas has become increasingly popular in Jordan, and there are fears that popular anger will rise as the conflict continues, possibly leading to political instability.¹¹⁴ The delicate balancing act is unlikely to get any easier.

PART THREE: POTENTIAL SHIFTS IN REGIONAL STRATEGIC COALITIONS IN RESPONSE TO WAR IN GAZA

Prior to 7 October, the Middle East was undergoing a period of Regional Détente, in which members of the three de facto coalitions were patching up the fissures that had emerged in the previous decade. This era of Regional Détente was in part spurred by a shift in strategic perspectives informed by the view that the United States was retreating from the region. As a result, U.S. allies sought to defuse tensions with regional adversaries, on the perceived assumption that U.S. security guarantees were not, in fact, guaranteed. Saudi Arabia's willingness to diplomatically engage with Iran is among the most visible examples of this trend, which has been referred to as "strategic hedging."¹¹⁵ The strategy of "hedging," rather than investing fully in one single partnership, presented both Russia and China with an opportunity to become more involved in regional affairs and in doing so further erode confidence in U.S. regional influence. These developments have brought about a deepening of relations between Russia and China, on the one hand, and key regional actors—Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Egypt—on the other. Especially noteworthy is the "multipolarization of Gulf security," given that Arab Gulf countries are among the United States' strongest regional security partners.¹¹⁶ The multipolar view is most consequential in Saudi Arabia, and can be traced to the national interest-focused approach espoused by the kingdom's

Vision 2030 strategic development plan of the mid-2010s. Events later in that decade—most notably the murder by Saudi agents of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and tepid U.S. support for the war in Yemen, particularly following missile strikes from Yemen directed toward Saudi and Emirati territory in 2019—solidified Riyadh's new multipolar orientation. Thus, Saudi Arabia and other U.S. regional security partners began increasingly asserting their right to "strategic independence" in making foreign policy choices based on their national security interests, even if it strained their security relationship with the United States.¹¹⁷ This trend became manifest following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, as a number of traditional U.S. security partners in the Middle East refused to align with the U.S. and Europe's strongly pro-Ukraine positions, and instead sought to remain neutral in order to preserve relations with Russia.¹¹⁸

REGIONAL TRENDS PRIOR TO 7 OCTOBER

Hamas' 7 October attacks came after over a decade in which the three distinct regional strategic coalitions emerged. This era can be roughly divided into three phases: Arab Spring (2011-2012), Arab Winter/Conflict (2013-2019),

and Regional Détente (2020-2023).

The Arab Spring refers to popular uprisings that occurred throughout the Arab world in the spring of 2011, sparked by anti-government protests that began in central Tunisia in December 2010 and forced the country's longtime leader to flee weeks later.¹¹⁹ Escalation between protesters and the governments of Libya, Syria and Yemen, quickly drew in external parties and led to civil wars. The region's three de facto strategic coalitions emerged during this period and solidified on these battlefields.

The Arab Winter refers to the period of conflict that followed the Arab Spring and during which the three coalitions coalesced. In Libya, factions backed by Turkey battled for control with others backed by Egypt and the UAE. In Yemen, the Iranian-allied Houthis fought a war against a Saudi-led coalition. In Syria, Turkish-backed rebels fought to overthrow the Iranian-allied Syrian government. The fissures extended beyond the battlefield. In Egypt, a Turkey and Qatar-backed Muslim Brotherhood-led, democratically elected government was overthrown by a Saudi and Emirati-backed military government in 2013.¹²⁰ In 2016, Turkish officers supported by Egypt and the UAE unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the Erdogan government.¹²¹ In 2017, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries instituted an economic embargo on Qatar, in part due to its support for Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups.¹²²

Regional Détente began to manifest in 2019, as fighting died down in Syria, Libya and Yemen.¹²³ Alongside the freezing of the three conflicts came a flurry of diplomatic thawing involving Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran, the four key players in the regional strategic landscape. Importantly, regional détente extended to Israel, which signed U.S.-brokered normalization agreements with Morocco, Bahrain and the UAE, while pursuing a similar deal with Saudi Arabia. Turkish-Israeli relations were also warming during the summer and fall of 2023. A few weeks before the 7 October attacks, Erdogan had met with Israeli Prime

Minister Netanyahu, in what was seen as a further sign of deepening relations.¹²⁴ In light of these trends, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan wrote in the summer of 2023 that the Middle East was “quieter than it has been for decades.”¹²⁵

The nascent era of regional détente should not be overstated, given that the three de facto coalitions that hardened during the 2010s remain, as illustrated by their differing reactions to war in Gaza. Yet, given their magnitude, events in Gaza will likely have an impact on regional strategic outlooks. In this context, three scenarios are presented below whereby war in Gaza could alter relations between the region's various strategic coalitions. They are followed by a discussion of how Russia and China may seek to capitalize from these scenarios in order to encourage multipolar drift by U.S. partners and allies.

GAZA AND THE REGIONAL STRATEGIC MAP: THREE SCENARIOS

Three scenarios for how events in Gaza could shift strategic alignments are detailed below. The first of them involves deeper coordination between the Axis of Resistance and the Political Islam Coalition, led by Iran and Turkey, based on their general alignment supportive of Hamas. The second scenario involves deeper coordination between the Political Islam Coalition and the Arab Normalization Coalition, based on shared security concerns stemming from conflict in Gaza. Specifically, the scenario proposes deeper relations between Egypt and Turkey, spurred by humanitarian concerns in Gaza but with potential security implications in the eastern Mediterranean, an area which both countries consider critical to their national security. The third scenario examines the possibility of a “grand bargain” involving Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran, on the one hand, and Israel—backed by the United States—on the other.

SCENARIO 1 – TURKEY AND IRAN

In the first scenario, events in Gaza could spur further alignment in strategic perspectives between Turkey and Iran. The alignment would be limited by several structural impediments, including historical rivalry, sectarian differences and Turkey's membership in NATO. Nonetheless, deepening rhetorical and diplomatic alignment vis-à-vis Gaza could create additional room for cooperation in other arenas, most notably Syria. More generally, an alignment of narratives between the Iranian Shia brand of Islamic Resistance and the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired Sunni brand of Islamic Resistance could be a subtle yet highly consequential result.

Since 7 October, Turkish-Iranian regional perspectives have increasingly aligned. One commentator describes it as a potential "Axis of Revisionism."¹²⁶ Early indications of potential convergence are an emergent shared Gaza narrative—strongly condemning Israel and indirectly supportive of Hamas—and increased bilateral diplomatic engagements between Turkey and Iran.¹²⁷ In January, Iran's president made a historical visit to Turkey, where discussion of Gaza was front and center.¹²⁸

However, there are at least three structural impediments that limit the likelihood and impact of what would otherwise seem to be a natural, Gaza-induced strategic convergence between Turkey and Iran. First, the sectarian divide between the Shia-majority Axis of Resistance and the Sunni-majority Political Islam Coalition remains a latent wedge between these two countries.¹²⁹ Second, Turkey and Iran are on opposite sides when it comes to relations with NATO and the United States.¹³⁰ Third, Turkey and Iran are historical rivals who have had friendly ties but never together headed a strategic alliance.¹³¹

As noted earlier, Hamas represents a bridge between these sectarian divisions, one through which they can cast aside their differences and instead emphasize commonalities: a religiously

informed, trans-national, pan-Islamic foreign policy, one in which Muslim holy sites in Israel and the plight of Palestinians are a strategic priority. Turkey's relations with the U.S. and Western European NATO countries, meanwhile, have arguably become frayed as a result of policy disagreements on Ukraine, Syria, and now Gaza. Historical distrust between Turkey and Iran should temper expectations on the depth of an emergent Turkish-Iranian alliance. Nonetheless, growing alignment absent a formal alliance would be of regional consequence.

This scenario would have implications in the Kurdish territories, most notably in Syria. Syria is both an arena of contestation and a potential zone of cooperation for Turkey and Iran. Turkey occupies swathes of territory in northern Syria, and the Iranian-backed Syrian government refuses to normalize relations with Turkey absent a full Turkish withdrawal.¹³² Yet, both the Syrian and Turkish governments recognize the benefits of normalization.¹³³ Turkey is opposed to U.S. military support for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria, a fact that has created low-level strategic friction between the U.S and Turkey in the past decade.¹³⁴ Iran, for reasons of its own, also opposes U.S. support for the SDF.¹³⁵ Turkey and Iran share an opposition to Kurdish nationalism by virtue of there being a Kurdish minority in both countries, though the perceived Kurdish threat is substantially more acute in Turkey than in Iran.¹³⁶ Iran has long suspected factions in Iraqi Kurdistan of having links to Israel, and in mid-January an Iranian missile strike destroyed what they called an "Israeli spy headquarters."¹³⁷ Turkey, meanwhile, has become increasingly bellicose in its rhetoric toward other groups operating in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹³⁸

A second consequential outcome of this scenario could be the emergence of a unified, cross-sectarian "Islamic Resistance" narrative that would soften the sectarian barriers dividing the mobilized Shia and Sunni movements.¹³⁹ As such, one might identify this scenario as leading to the

emergence of “Moderate Islamic Resistance.” An emergent “Moderate Islamic Resistance” that could drive the Iranian and Turkish camps closer to one another would inevitably put pressure on other countries. For Israel it would likely be perceived as an imminent security threat, while for Saudi Arabia and other members of the Arab Normalization Coalition it would likely create pressure to either align with or reject the concept of a unified Islamic resistance. Military actions by an emboldened “Islamic Resistance” may well be confined to non-state proxy forces, as they have been thus far. Nonetheless, the persistence of such a state-sponsored narrative would presumably create sufficient self-induced pressures on certain governments—most importantly Erdogan’s Turkey—to engage in small escalatory measures. Signs of convergence with the Axis of Resistance would also likely strain relations between the Political Islam Coalition and the United States, potentially to the detriment of the U.S.’s regional security posture.

SCENARIO 2 – TURKEY AND EGYPT

In the second scenario, events in Gaza could spur further alignment in strategic perspectives between Egypt and Turkey. Both countries consider events in Gaza to be directly consequential to their national security and foreign policy identity. Yet while Turkey has provided rhetorical and diplomatic support for Hamas, the Egyptian government views the group with distrust. As conflict in Gaza drags on, though, concerns over spillover from Gaza could prompt the Egyptian government to set aside its ideological distaste for Hamas and engage the group on a pragmatic level. The Turkish government, meanwhile, could come under growing pressures to provide more meaningful material support to Palestinians in Gaza, which would require coordinating with the Egyptian side. Despite the blustery rhetoric of its leader, Turkey is still considered a neutral country when it comes to the Gaza conflict.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, there have been expectations that Turkey would

play a more active role in resolving the conflict.¹⁴¹ Deeper Turkish-Egyptian coordination would likely impact events in Libya and the broader Eastern Mediterranean, with important regional and strategic consequences as detailed below.

The Political Islam Coalition and Arab Normalization Coalition diverge in their approach to Sunni Political Islam of the type embodied by Hamas. Since the overthrow of Egyptian President Morsi in 2013, the Egyptian government has been hostile toward the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey, meanwhile, remains a champion and key supporter of the group.¹⁴² Prior to 7 October, both countries sought to reduce bilateral tensions resulting from these policy differences. Notably, Turkey began cracking down on Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders living in Turkey, in a conciliatory gesture toward Cairo.¹⁴³ These and other measures quickly brought about a “180-degree turn” in relations, going from “rupture to all-out partnership.”¹⁴⁴ 7 October has not reversed this trend. Officials from Egypt and Turkey have met several times in the months following the attacks.¹⁴⁵ Their heads of state met privately at the November summit in Riyadh.¹⁴⁶ In February 2024, Turkish President Erdogan visited Cairo for the first time in over a decade.¹⁴⁷ For some, this Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement has essentially brought down the barriers separating what this paper calls the Political Islam Coalition and the Arab Normalization Coalition. As one analyst notes, the rapprochement “served as a final burial ceremony for what was once an emerging third axis in the Middle East.”¹⁴⁸

Erdogan has sought to position Turkey as a key non-military patron and benefactor for Hamas, Gaza, and the Palestinian cause more broadly.¹⁴⁹ To effectively do so, Turkey requires cooperation with Egypt—which borders Gaza and has historically had influence within the strip.¹⁵⁰ Turkey was an early provider of aid to Palestinians in Gaza via Egypt, and since then the countries have coordinated a number of aid shipments.¹⁵¹ Turkey has proposed a “multi-country guarantor system” through which regional states provide

Palestinian security and the United States and Europe do the same for Israel.¹⁵²

Deeper Turkish-Egyptian policy convergence and security coordination could have an important impact in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean more broadly. Turkey and Egypt were on opposite sides of the Libyan conflict.¹⁵³ During the second half of the 2010s Egypt strengthened security ties with Greece and Cyprus, both of which are considered Turkish adversaries in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁵⁴ It is in this broader geographical region—Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean—that a meaningful convergence in strategic perspectives could emerge and have a major impact. Turkey and Egypt also appear to be synchronizing their security policies in the Horn of Africa. Both countries have recently deepened their security relationship with Somalia, for instance.¹⁵⁵

While there is no immediate threat for the United States from Turkish-Egyptian strategic convergence, it would likely raise Israeli concerns, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean. The consequences in Libya would also be meaningful, as the two countries would likely push their allies to strike a deal and end that country's civil war, in a way that primarily accommodates the security concerns of both Egypt and Turkey.

SCENARIO 3 – SAUDI ARABIA, IRAN AND TURKEY

In the third scenario, events in Gaza could greatly accelerate regional détente by aligning perspectives in all three coalitions. The lynchpin of this scenario is Saudi Arabia, which may eventually be pressured to be more deeply involved in resolving the conflict. The kingdom would presumably approach this role by strengthening its attempts to mediate and become the bridge that helps unify the positions of Arab and Muslim countries.

Saudi Arabia is arguably the key regional country able to strike a grand bargain between the

disparate regional actors.¹⁵⁶ It is the only country that could plausibly mediate between Iran, Turkey and Israel.¹⁵⁷ Saudi Arabia's deliberate policy of strategic hedging has allowed it to preserve the ongoing movement toward rapprochement with all three of these countries.¹⁵⁸

Saudi Arabia is heavily invested on peace and prosperity in the region, having made substantial investments in sports and tourism.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and accompanying mega-projects are premised on a peaceful, politically stable regional environment.¹⁶⁰ It also involves investments in the high-tech post-oil economy, which makes Israel a natural partner.¹⁶¹

The November 2023 joint Arab-Islamic summit hosted by Riyadh is the most visible example thus far of Saudi Arabia's ability to unify Muslim countries. Saudi leader Mohammed bin Salman met individually with both the Iranian and the Turkish heads of state at the summit.¹⁶²

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister has met or spoken regularly with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts since 7 October.¹⁶³ Saudi Arabia's positions in international forums, such as the International Court of Justice and the UN Security Council, have aligned with those of other Arab and Islamic countries.¹⁶⁴

Yet, Saudi Arabia's ability to partner with Iran in a grand regional bargain should not be overestimated. Although Saudi Arabia and Iran have been moving toward one another in recent years, they have been regional rivals for much of the past half-century.¹⁶⁵ Despite the rapprochement, there have been no significant bilateral agreements and tensions remain.¹⁶⁶ Saudi Arabia could, however, plausibly unify Arab countries around the Palestinian issue, as it has done before.¹⁶⁷ Palestinian rights have historically been a cause *célèbre* for Arab nationalists.¹⁶⁸ Speaking as the representative of the Arab position would give Saudi Arabia important leverage to present itself as the mediator between Israel, Iran and Turkey, the region's three non-Arabic

speaking majority countries. Already, Saudi Arabia has hosted meetings with officials from Qatar, UAE, Egypt, Jordan and the PLO, in what could form the kernel of an Arab bloc.¹⁶⁹ Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia has done away with Islamic activism both domestically and as a tool of foreign policy.¹⁷⁰ As a result, Saudi Arabia may not put its full weight of support into Islamic initiatives regarding Gaza, opting instead to do so under Arab auspices.

RUSSIA: BENEFITS MOST FROM SCENARIOS 1 AND 2

Russia stands to benefit the most and likely has greatest leverage in the first two scenarios, both of which involve Turkey. Russia and Turkey have grown closer since 7 October.¹⁷¹ Russo-Turkish relations remain tricky, given Turkey's status as a NATO member, its strategic location vis-à-vis the Ukraine conflict, and historical mutual distrust. Turkey has managed to effectively balance relations between Russia and NATO, but the balancing act has become increasingly difficult as Russia-NATO relations deteriorate.¹⁷² For Russia, deepening strategic relations with Turkey has unique advantages, as it not only bolsters Russia's geopolitical position in the Black Sea region, but it also serves to weaken Turkey's bond with other NATO countries.¹⁷³ Using the Middle East as an arena for further weakening U.S.-Turkey ties is obviously to Russia's strategic advantage. The question of Turkey's reliability as a security ally is latent, and it is increasingly common to read arguments that "It's Time to Reconsider Turkey's NATO Membership."¹⁷⁴

Russia has simultaneously cultivated relations with both Turkey and Iran since its 2015 military intervention in the Syrian civil war.¹⁷⁵ Moscow's intervention sided with the Iranian-backed Syrian government and against the Turkish-backed Sunni rebels. Russo-Turkish relations quickly became strained when Turkish jets shot down a Russian Su-24 fighter jet along the Syrian-Turkish border.

In the aftermath of the failed 2016 coup attempt against Erdogan, however, President Putin of Russia reached out to offer Erdogan support, and in doing so cemented a relationship that endures into 2024.¹⁷⁶ This all despite the two leaders being on opposite sides in a number of conflicts—Syria, Libya, the Caucasus, Ukraine.¹⁷⁷

Russia and Iran have often behaved as strategic allies but tactical adversaries in Syria.¹⁷⁸ As with Turkey, a history of rivalry and distrust make the Russia-Iran relationship a complex one. The two countries have avoided conflict in Syria, and since its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia has decisively moved closer to Iran in various ways.¹⁷⁹ This deepening has intensified since 7 October.¹⁸⁰

Russian political theorist Alexander Dugin—whose ideas are considered influential among top Russian military and political leadership—has long considered Iran and Turkey as the key powers in "the Islamic World," through which Russia should project influence in the Middle East.¹⁸¹ The idea of a Russo-Iranian-Turkish axis based on a shared Eurasian history and identity is one that appears to have resonance in all three countries, particularly among leaders in Russia and Turkey.¹⁸²

Orchestrating Turkish-Iranian reconciliation in Syria remains a priority goal for Moscow. For many years, Russia has sought to do so via the Astana Process, an alternative to the UN negotiation process.¹⁸³ Russian attempts at normalizing relations between the Assad government and Turkey have yet to yield anything tangible, and thus act as a metaphorical brake on meaningful strategic convergence between Turkey and Iran. But the value of talks appears clear to all, and there is no indication that they will not continue.

Turkish-Egyptian entente, meanwhile, would be of great consequence for Russian naval projection in the Eastern Mediterranean. Russia's naval presence on Syria's Mediterranean coast is important to the Kremlin.¹⁸⁴ Furthermore, as noted above, Scenario 2 would lead to further thawing of the Libyan conflict, where Russia—through its

Private Military Corporations—retains a military foothold.¹⁸⁵ Russia is believed to be seeking a military naval presence in Libya.¹⁸⁶ As such, it has demonstrated great interest in having a presence in the Eastern Mediterranean. A Turkish-Egyptian-Russian strategic triangle in this area would likely be of concern to other regional countries, most notably Israel.

CHINA: POSITIONED FOR INVOLVEMENT IN SCENARIO 3

China is better positioned than Russia to be involved in a grand bargain. With Russia-United States relations strained by the Ukraine conflict, Russia would likely be squeezed out of any grand regional bargain, though not for lack of a desire by Moscow, which sees itself as an indispensable regional player. China, in contrast and despite increasingly adversarial relations with the United States, is positioned to play an important role in any such negotiation, despite its relatively light regional footprint.

China's role as mediator of Saudi-Iranian détente gives it a key role in any regional bargain involving these two countries.¹⁸⁷ Like Saudi Arabia, China is seeking to avoid regional conflict and has staked its regional policies on economic growth, stability and prosperity. Saudi and Iranian officials have both expressed gratitude and support for Chinese positions on the conflict.¹⁸⁸ A few weeks after hosting the November 2023 summit that included most key regional players (excluding Israel), Saudi Arabia dispatched its deputy foreign minister to meet with his Iranian counterpart in Beijing. The meeting was the first of the "Iran-China-Saudi Arabia Joint Committee," a tripartite committee established as part of the Chinese-mediated Saudi-Iranian rapprochement of 2023.¹⁸⁹ Saudi Arabia has made it very clear that its "multipolar" foreign policy is not zero-sum when it comes to relations with the United States. Indeed, it and many other U.S. security partners have been increasingly turning toward Russia and China in

recent years.¹⁹⁰

China's relations with Israel and Turkey are not as strong as they are with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Indeed, China-Israel relations have arguably deteriorated since 7 October, with China consistently taking a position supportive of the Palestinian cause in international forums.¹⁹¹ In early March, China's foreign minister referred to the war in Gaza as a "disgrace for civilization."¹⁹² In addition, China's relations with Turkey have never been on strong footing when compared to its relations with other key regional players.¹⁹³ Although the countries are broadly aligned in their pro-Palestinian rhetoric, there are no indications that events in Gaza have led to any meaningful shifts in their relationships.

A prominent Chinese role in Scenario 3, therefore, is contingent on the participation of the United States as the link between a Chinese-backed block of Arab countries and Iran, on the one hand, and U.S. allies Turkey and Israel, on the other.

PART FOUR: CONCLUSIONS

The first section of this paper outlines the contours of the Middle East's regional strategic map by highlighting three distinct de facto strategic coalitions that have emerged in the decade following the Arab Spring. The paper argues that Hamas sits between two of these strategic coalitions—the Axis of Resistance and the Political Islam Coalition—and as such may be thought of as a bridge between the two. The second section of this paper shows how members from each of these coalitions have responded to 7 October and its aftermath, in ways that demonstrate the policy and ideological preferences in each of these coalitions. The third section situates conflict in Gaza within broader regional trends and explores three scenarios on how the conflict may shift the dynamics between these strategic coalitions, as well as the role of Russia and China in these dynamics.

Although the actual regional strategic impacts of Gaza are yet unclear, it does appear likely that the conflict will put pressure on existing U.S. regional strategic partnerships. In Iraq, the government is under pressure to expedite the withdrawal of U.S. forces in response to U.S. strikes on Islamic Resistance leaders.¹⁹⁴ In Yemen, the U.S. military campaign has been met with tepid support from key Red Sea Arab allies Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and there is reason to think that Saudi Arabia is actively displeased with U.S. decisions of striking Yemen and redesignating the Houthis as a SDGT.¹⁹⁵ Pressures on Arab countries whose governments normalized ties with Israel are likely to continue.¹⁹⁶ Jordan, bordering the West Bank and with a substantial Palestinian population, is especially vulnerable in this regard. U.S. support for Israel has degraded U.S. public approval in Arab countries while conversely, the popularity of U.S. adversaries such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis has risen.¹⁹⁷ The realignment has become evident in international forums, most notably the UN General Assembly and Security Council. The

fact should not be overblown: historically, the United States and Arab governments have been on opposite sides of Palestine-related votes.¹⁹⁸

At the regional level, it seems clear that the three scenarios presented in this paper are unfavorable for the United States in the context of great power competition. The first scenario is problematic insofar as it completes Turkey's shift away from the U.S. regional security orbit by paving the way for a Turkish-Iranian led regional order, from which Russia would likely benefit. The second scenario is problematic insofar as it could create a potential security threat for one U.S. ally—Israel—based on the policies of two other U.S. allies—Egypt and Turkey. Russia's presence on the Syrian coast and its growing interests in Libya, alongside its strong relations with Turkey and Egypt, further complicate this scenario from the U.S. perspective. And while on its face the third scenario may seem most favorable to the United States, it is possible that a grand bargain cements a regional division wherein the United States and Israel are on one side, while Turkey, Iran and Arab countries—with tacit support from China—are on the other.

The effects of Gaza on the regional strategic map should not only be considered at the regional level. Indeed, the conflict is taking place in the backdrop of broader strategic shifts at the global level. 2012 may emerge as a critical year for understanding the interplay between these trends. In the Middle East, it marks the shift from the “Arab Spring” to the “Arab Winter.” Globally, it marks the start of the era of Xi Jinping in China, and the return of Vladimir Putin to power in Russia. As China and Russia became increasingly assertive on the global stage, the Middle East's strategic map coalesced into the three factions noted above. This three-way division has disadvantaged the United States, insofar as it has created a split between its allies in the Political Islam Coalition and the Arab Normalization Coalition. For Russia

and China, in contrast, the three-way split has worked to their advantage. Putin's Russia and Xi's China have forged close strategic ties with all three coalitions, something that has manifested in their approach to the Gaza conflict, where both have sought to align their positions with the pro-Palestinian narrative that is dominant across the region and, more broadly, the Global South.

Russia and China have largely sought to remain on the periphery of Gaza-related developments.¹⁹⁹ They have voted in tandem, and against the United States, at the UN Security Council.²⁰⁰ Their officials, like those of the United States, have regularly interacted with Arab governments and Turkey, though in contrast to the United States, Russia and China have largely mirrored the Arab-Turkish narrative on Gaza.²⁰¹ Unlike the United States, Russia and China also have maintained close contacts with and influence in Iran.²⁰² The Arab-Islamic ministerial committee that emerged

from the Saudi summit in Riyadh, for instance, visited the capitals of all five permanent Security Council members; it began its travels and outreach by going to Beijing and Moscow, before visiting Washington.²⁰³ China and Russia's pro-Palestinian stance has increased their popularity among Arab publics, as compared to the United States.²⁰⁴

As detailed throughout this paper, the Gaza war seems on balance to likely be detrimental to U.S. regional posture. At the same time, the conflict has shown that the United States remains an indispensable actor in the Middle East. From the U.S. perspective, most of the shifting pieces in the regional strategic landscape appear to involve splintering security partnerships and strengthened adversaries. As a result, this volatile region is arguably more complex than it has been for decades, and it is unclear whether simply shoring up existing partnerships will be enough to maintain the U.S.'s position in the region.

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SOURCES

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