

# Will Stability Rise from the Middle East Rubble?

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Articles & Testimony

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**Though it may seem counterintuitive, the Middle East stands a decent chance of becoming more stable in the coming year if Trump takes advantage of Iran's weakness to broker good deals.**

**G**iven the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon, and the direct military exchanges between Israel and Iran, it seems hard to imagine any promising prospect for the Middle East in the coming year. To many observers, Donald Trump's return to the White House only adds to the uncertainty. But while one usually should expect the worst in the Middle East, I see possibilities for some new, positive alignments to emerge.

This is not to dismiss or ignore the devastating losses Palestinians have suffered in Gaza; the destruction in parts of Lebanon, including in the southern neighborhoods of Beirut; or the resolve among Israelis—and not just those on the right—never again to be as vulnerable as they were on October 7, 2023. Those who must be engaged in peacemaking are currently lacking in trust, and understandably so. But peacemaking is probably not the right objective for the coming year. Instead, the focus should be on ending ongoing conflicts and building a basis for stability and security; if done well, that will re-establish a foundation for peacemaking.

Such an outcome becomes more likely if new alignments do emerge in the region. Here, perhaps counterintuitively, I have some hope. Hamas's terror attack in 2023—followed the next day by a barrage of rockets fired into northern Israel by Hezbollah in southern Lebanon—unleashed an Israeli military campaign that has inflicted great damage, but which has also profoundly weakened Hamas and Hezbollah. Their respective leaders, Yahya Sinwar and Hassan Nasrallah, and most of their leadership cadres, are now gone.

## Proxies Down

**H**amas may still exist, but it no longer has a military. On October 6, 2023, it had [five brigades \(https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/order-battle-hamas%E2%80%99-izz-al-din-al-gassem-brigades-part-2\)](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/order-battle-hamas%E2%80%99-izz-al-din-al-gassem-brigades-part-2) comprising 24 battalions. Today, it no longer has any [organized units \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-assesses-hamas-defeated-military-in-all-of-gaza-is-now-a-guerrilla-terror-group/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-assesses-hamas-defeated-military-in-all-of-gaza-is-now-a-guerrilla-terror-group/). Several thousand people may still carry arms, and small groups of two or three can offer local resistance, but the military and most of the military infrastructure (weapons depots, labs, production facilities) are gone. More than half of Hamas's [tunnels \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-it-uncovered-800-shafts-hamas-tunnels-below-gaza-2023-12-03/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-says-it-uncovered-800-shafts-hamas-tunnels-below-gaza-2023-12-03/) have been destroyed, and public sentiment in Gaza has turned against the group, with a recent [Zogby poll \(https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/tbi-comment-new-polling-by-zogby-research-services-reveals-palestinian\)](https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/tbi-comment-new-polling-by-zogby-research-services-reveals-palestinian) showing that only 7% of Gazans want it to remain in control of the enclave.

Moreover, the top Islamic scholar in Gaza, Salman al-Dayah, has now [issued \(https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-828193\)](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/article-828193) a fatwa (a non-binding Islamic legal ruling) criticizing Hamas for triggering such a devastating war. Given that the likely result of its attack was going to be widespread death and destruction of civilians and civilian infrastructure—as Hamas's leaders well knew—al-Dayah [writes \(https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj4vw118xvdo\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj4vw118xvdo) that Hamas is guilty of “violating Islamic principles governing jihad.”

True, Hamas may never have been wildly popular in Gaza. But the anger toward it, and al-Dayah's fatwa against it, indicates that the Gazan public wants the war to end, and that it would most likely welcome an interim administration overseen by an international coalition with Arab participation. The United Arab Emirates has already said it will [take part \(https://www.dailysabah.com/world/mid-east/uae-proposes-temporary-intl-mission-to-restore-order-in-gaza\)](https://www.dailysabah.com/world/mid-east/uae-proposes-temporary-intl-mission-to-restore-order-in-gaza) in a transitional arrangement to administer Gaza, preside over its reconstruction, ensure law and order, prevent smuggling, and pave the way for eventual Palestinian governance under a genuinely reforming Palestinian Authority (PA).

With Hamas destroyed militarily and increasingly unable to reconstitute itself, an alternative to its rule in Gaza is within reach and achievable in the coming year. Moreover, it is not just Hamas that has been weakened. Hezbollah is by far the most important Iranian [proxy force \(https://theconversation.com/how-much-influence-does-iran-have-over-its-proxy-axis-of-resistance-hezbollah-hamas-and-the-houthis-221269\)](https://theconversation.com/how-much-influence-does-iran-have-over-its-proxy-axis-of-resistance-hezbollah-hamas-and-the-houthis-221269). It has trained all the other proxy militias, helped develop their ability to build their own weapons, acted as Iran's shock troops in Syria, and brandished its [150,000 rockets \(https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-826273\)](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-826273) as a deterrent against Israel striking Iranian nuclear infrastructure. But that deterrent is now essentially gone.

According to Yoav Gallant, Israel's defense minister until early November, [roughly 80% \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/gallant-says-hezbollah-retains-only-about-20-of-its-rocket-capabilities/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/gallant-says-hezbollah-retains-only-about-20-of-its-rocket-capabilities/) of Hezbollah's rockets are gone. Israel has decimated the group's leadership, dismantled its command and control, undermined its communications, and generally weakened its position in Lebanon. By mid-November, there were already signs of Hezbollah and Israel moving toward a ceasefire (which is not surprising, given that Iran needs to preserve Hezbollah and give it a chance to recover).

## Maxed Out

**A**t a minimum, the Iranian-led “axis of resistance” has been dealt a profound blow, as has Iran following Israel's [destruction \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-strike-on-iran-took-out-radar-sets-to-guide-ballistic-missiles-report/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-strike-on-iran-took-out-radar-sets-to-guide-ballistic-missiles-report/) of its strategic air and missile defenses (S-300 radars that Russia cannot replenish or

rebuild any time soon). Accordingly, some leading Iranian strategists—like former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi, who advises Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—have **[begun to talk \(https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-adviser-iran-can-produce-nuclear-weapons/\)](https://jewishchronicle.timesofisrael.com/khamenei-adviser-iran-can-produce-nuclear-weapons/)** of developing a nuclear weapon to bolster Iran’s deterrence. But doing so would be especially dangerous with Trump back in the White House. The president-elect has always taken a tough line on Iran, and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has already **[said \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-he-trump-see-eye-to-eye-on-iran-after-holding-3-calls-within-days/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-says-he-trump-see-eye-to-eye-on-iran-after-holding-3-calls-within-days/)** that he and Trump have spoken and see “eye to eye” on the Iranian nuclear program.

Because Trump is presenting himself as someone who will end wars, not start them, I suspect that rather than involve the United States directly, he would prefer to give Netanyahu a green light to take out Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, while providing the Israelis with whatever additional means they may need to do so.

That said, we should remember that Trump’s **[policy \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKsxggdQX0k\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKsxggdQX0k)** toward Iran is “maximum pressure,” the goal of which is not necessarily to produce regime change but to produce a change in the regime’s behavior. It is not difficult to imagine him using the threat of Israeli force, and stronger enforcement of oil sanctions, to see if he can produce a new nuclear agreement. After all, he has repeatedly **[said \(https://stljewishlight.org/news/world-news/trump-says-he-would-have-gotten-iran-nuclear-deal-in-second-term/\)](https://stljewishlight.org/news/world-news/trump-says-he-would-have-gotten-iran-nuclear-deal-in-second-term/)** that doing a deal with the Iranians would be one of his second-term goals.

Of course, the Iranians showed little willingness to deal with him the first time around. They answered his maximum-pressure policy with what they called maximum resistance—a strategy that included attacks on Saudi Arabia’s **[oil-processing facility \(https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/14/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-refineries-drone-attack.html)** at Abqaiq, the country’s most important; Houthi **[missile attacks \(https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia\)](https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia)** on the Kingdom; the mining of oil tankers; and **[harassing ships \(https://news.usni.org/2020/04/15/video-iranian-attack-boats-harass-u-s-navy-coast-guard-vessels-in-persian-gulf\)](https://news.usni.org/2020/04/15/video-iranian-attack-boats-harass-u-s-navy-coast-guard-vessels-in-persian-gulf)** in the Persian Gulf. In response, Trump ultimately **[ordered \(https://www.jagreporter.af.mil/Post/Article-View-Post/Article/2539536/the-killing-of-qassem-soleimani/\)](https://www.jagreporter.af.mil/Post/Article-View-Post/Article/2539536/the-killing-of-qassem-soleimani/)** a targeted strike on Qassem Suleimani, the leader of Iran’s Quds Force and one of the closest people to the Supreme Leader.

Iran was more careful after that. It did not begin to accelerate its nuclear program and ramp up proxy attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria until after **[Joe Biden \(https://www.project-syndicate.org/columnist/joseph-biden-jr\)](https://www.project-syndicate.org/columnist/joseph-biden-jr)** had won the 2020 election, and now its proxies are dramatically weaker than they were during Trump’s first term.

Could the Iranians look for a way out with Trump? Given that Khamenei has always argued that the “ **[arrogant powers \(https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/10/05/2784035/ayatollah-khamenei-role-of-arrogant-powers-policies-in-recent-bitter-events-in-iran-is-obvious\)](https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2022/10/05/2784035/ayatollah-khamenei-role-of-arrogant-powers-policies-in-recent-bitter-events-in-iran-is-obvious)**”—principally the US—will never be satisfied with Iranian concessions until the Islamic Republic no longer exists, he may not be inclined to give in at this point. But regime survival is his most important preoccupation, and he has occasionally made tactical adjustments in the face of what he sees as high costs or risks. Thus, I would not be surprised to see the Iranians turn to Russian President Vladimir Putin to broker an agreement with Trump. Given Trump’s interest in Putin, and the latter’s desire to give Trump a win so that he will limit US support for Ukraine, the Russians might well come up with something. I am not sure how real and meaningful it would be, but it cannot be ruled out.

## A New Dawn?

**E**ven if a deal between the Trump administration and Iran proves unlikely, the weakening of the Iranian axis and the shifting balance of power in the region does make a realignment possible. US Central Command has already

succeeded in [integrating \(https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3940149/us-central-command-weekly-update/\)](https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3940149/us-central-command-weekly-update/) the air and missile defenses of a regional coalition that includes all of America's Arab partners (not least the Saudis) and the Israelis. Regional integration was one of the Biden administration's principal objectives, and it is worth recalling that during Trump's first term, there was talk of fostering a NATO-like alliance in the Middle East. The trend toward security integration is likely to continue, with the new administration also promoting its vision—largely shaped by Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner during his first term—of broader economic integration and development.

Moreover, Trump has said that he wants to [expand \(https://jewishinsider.com/2024/10/trump-says-expanding-abraham-accords-will-be-absolute-priority-if-he-wins-election/\)](https://jewishinsider.com/2024/10/trump-says-expanding-abraham-accords-will-be-absolute-priority-if-he-wins-election/) the Abraham Accords—namely, to include Saudi Arabia among the countries that have normalized diplomatic relations with Israel. The Saudis made it clear to the Biden administration that they would be prepared for a peace deal with the Israelis provided they got a [defense treaty \(https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/02/middleeast/us-saudi-treaty-israel-palestinian-statehood-intl/index.html\)](https://edition.cnn.com/2024/05/02/middleeast/us-saudi-treaty-israel-palestinian-statehood-intl/index.html) with the US and a credible pathway to a Palestinian state. Can Trump meet these requirements? Can he deliver a defense treaty that requires 67 votes in the Senate (meaning he would probably need at least 14 or 15 Democratic senators)? Is he willing to push an agreement that offers something meaningful to the Palestinians, even though this would almost certainly break the current Netanyahu government?

In any case, the Saudis will not normalize relations with Israel as long as the war in Gaza is ongoing. While the Israeli military [seems ready \(https://www.npr.org/2024/11/10/g-s1-33621/israels-ousted-defense-minister-says-the-military-has-done-all-it-can-in-gaza\)](https://www.npr.org/2024/11/10/g-s1-33621/israels-ousted-defense-minister-says-the-military-has-done-all-it-can-in-gaza) to end the conflict, especially as a means of securing the remaining hostages' release, it remains to be seen if Netanyahu will get on the same page. Still, Trump has told Netanyahu that he wants the war to be [over \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-told-netanyahu-he-wants-gaza-war-over-by-time-he-enters-office-sources/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-told-netanyahu-he-wants-gaza-war-over-by-time-he-enters-office-sources/) by the time he takes office, so the incentives guiding the prime minister would appear to have changed.

The bottom line is that a Saudi-Israeli normalization deal would transform the region. If it is not achieved in the short time that Biden has in office, it is certain to be a Trump objective in the coming year. And even if it proves impossible, Israel's decimation of Hezbollah and Hamas, together with Iran's weakening, could bring greater stability, if not peace, to the region. At a minimum, Iran will have a reduced interest in causing trouble—unless the regime itself feels existentially threatened.

Should greater stability in the region be achieved, Israel's approach to the West Bank will likely become an issue. If the Trump administration wants a Saudi deal at some point, it will have to do something about the right-wing ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich's efforts to make a Palestinian state impossible. That means ending the ongoing settlement building and the attempts to force the PA's collapse. It also means pressing—on its own, and with key Arab partners—for genuine reforms of the PA, probably with a newly empowered and independent Palestinian prime minister. This was a goal of the first Trump administration, and I suspect that the Saudis, Emiratis, and others will be more open to pressing for it now.

Though it may seem counterintuitive, there is a chance that the region could become more stable in the coming year. Of course, this is the Middle East, where things can always go awry. Iran's weakness could lead it to rush for a nuclear weapon. The Israelis could find it hard to get out of Gaza. Economic weakness in Egypt could become much more problematic. And the Houthis could continue to threaten shipping in the Red Sea or resume missile attacks against Saudi Arabia if the Kingdom normalizes relations with Israel. All of the above is possible. Whether the incoming administration can take advantage of Iran's weakening to achieve greater regional stability will be one of its biggest early tests.

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