

From October 7 to the Gaza Ceasefire: A Changed Middle East Awaits the Trump Administration

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Brief Analysis

Important strategic changes abound in the region, but policymakers should take care not to underestimate the persistence of old challenges or the potential emergence of new threats.

Between Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel sixteen months ago and the latest ceasefire and hostage release agreement in Gaza, the Middle East experienced rapid and significant shifts in its balance of power.

Yet caution is warranted before declaring the emergence of a "new Middle East." History shows that initial bouts of optimism for the region often give way to disappointment. For instance, the Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-11 aimed to overthrow autocratic regimes, but they ultimately saw a return to repressive governance (as in Egypt and Tunisia) and prolonged civil wars that eroded state frameworks (in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Sudan).

So far, the ceasefire in Gaza—the epicenter of the region's recent reverberations—remains fragile but has withstood several initial tests (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/opening-floodgates-gaza-deal-and-trumps-presidency>). This moment provides an important opportunity to assess the true scope of the transformations in the Middle East.

An Evolving Regional System

The basic political structure of the Middle East has typically been divided into three main camps: a predominantly Shia camp led by Iran, a Sunni Islamist camp with roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, and a moderate, pro-Western Sunni camp. Despite recent upheavals, these divisions remain intact.

Yet the past year has witnessed a significant weakening of the Iranian-led "axis of resistance." This trend began with Israeli military operations against Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran and culminated in the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. Interestingly, the prime beneficiary of this weakening is not the moderate bloc led by Saudi Arabia, but the

Islamist bloc led by Turkey.

Key Arenas of Regional Struggle in 2025 and Beyond

Going forward, the main focus of competition between these camps will most likely be in Syria. Turkey's growing influence there stems from important domestic concerns such as addressing Kurdish political and security challenges and alleviating the burden of Syrian refugees. Yet its broader regional agenda, often described as "Neo-Ottomanism," remains ambiguous. Sustaining influence in Syria—in part by becoming a leader in the country's reconstruction efforts—is **crucial for Turkey's ambitions (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-breakdown-episode-three-turkey-turns-enemy-ally>)** to become a regional hub for commerce, transportation, and energy. Qatar, Turkey's partner in the Sunni Islamist bloc, will also play a significant role in these efforts.

Lebanon remains a key arena for competition as well, particularly between Iran's camp and the Saudi-led moderate Sunni camp. For the first time in two years, the moderate camp has helped secure the selection of a president and permanent prime minister in Beirut, while Iran's ability to support Hezbollah has been constrained by the loss of its Syrian transfer route. Yet Hezbollah **retains influence (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanons-new-prime-minister-approaches-next-crossroads-hezbollah>)** among Lebanon's Shia population and will try to use this lever to rebuild its power.

At the same time, Israel's ceasefire agreement with Hezbollah **has eroded (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/so-far-so-good-israel-lebanon-ceasefire-largely-holding>)** the "unified fronts" concept central to Iran's regional strategy. Only the Yemeni Houthis, with their ability to **disrupt maritime trade (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/despite-houthi-pledge-limit-attacks-red-sea-remains-highly-volatile>)** along key routes, continue to pose a security challenge. But this challenge is limited—the Houthis' strategic influence on the broader struggle for regional dominance remains minimal.

Elsewhere, Jordan's unique characteristics will make it an **increasingly contested arena (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jordans-election-positive-sign-amid-gaza-war-tensions>)** for all three camps. The pro-Western Sunni camp views Amman as an integral partner, while the Sunni Islamist camp sees the kingdom's large Palestinian population as a significant source of influence. Now that the Shia camp is largely blocked in Syria, it will seek to expand its use of Jordan as **a transit route (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-and-iran-are-trying-ignite-israels-eastern-fronts>)** for weapons, funds, and expertise to Lebanon and the West Bank. Meanwhile, President Trump has called on Amman to accept Palestinian refugees from Gaza, pointedly noting that the kingdom receives a great deal of U.S. assistance. All of these external pressures and power struggles could destabilize Jordan.

The Impact of Leadership Changes

The deaths of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Hamas leader Yahya al-Sinwar raise questions about the role that individual leadership figures play in shaping regional events. Emerging figures such as **Ahmed al-Sharaa (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/12/11/syria-rebel-leader-jolani-hts-al-qaeda-islamic-state-isis/>)** in Syria and **Joseph Aoun (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/will-lebanons-new-leaders-walk-walk>)** in Lebanon may play significant parts in their respective arenas. Elsewhere, Hamas has been stripped of an entire layer of political and military leadership, so its emerging leaders will have to decide whether to align with the Sunni Islamist camp or stick with the Iranian camp. More likely, the movement will try to jump back and forth between these camps in order to increase its prospects of holding onto power in Gaza in the short term and gaining influence in the West Bank in the long term.

Iran Remains a Potential Flashpoint

Assuming the Israel-Hamas conflict does not reignite, the region's most destabilizing potential flashpoint is the possibility of military confrontation between Israel and Iran, particularly if Israel decides to strike the regime's nuclear facilities. Their exchange of blows in April and October 2024 demonstrated each government's willingness to engage in direct military actions against perceived existential threats.

At the same time, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei now faces a critical decision: whether to pursue a rapid nuclear breakout or reenter negotiations with the United States. Competing voices within Iran may advocate **a more moderate strategy (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/making-iran-choose-between-bomb-and-bankruptcy>)** aimed at improving relations with the West and addressing the country's severe economic crisis.

Challenges for Israel

As noted above, the main challenge for Israel and its partners will be neutralizing the Iranian nuclear threat and preventing Tehran from reestablishing its regional proxies. But other challenges loom:

Obstacles to normalization. Despite closer ties between Israel and the moderate Sunni bloc, attempts to normalize Israeli-Saudi relations might face significant hurdles. The Gaza war has heightened Riyadh's rhetorical commitment to the Palestinian cause and increased its demands on this issue. U.S. policies perceived as favoring Jerusalem—such as green-lighting Israel's settlement expansion in the West Bank, military presence beyond the separation lines in the Golan Heights, and delayed withdrawal from southern Lebanon—could further hinder normalization. Ultimately, successful diplomacy will depend on the willingness of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman to prioritize long-term regional stability over domestic political considerations.

Challenges from post-Assad Syria. Israel has achieved two significant strategic gains from the Assad regime's fall, and both are likely to persist under Syria's current leadership. First, the last hostile regular army on Israel's borders has been destroyed, and Ahmed al-Sharaa likely lacks the capacity to rebuild its most formidable capabilities. Second, Hezbollah's capacity to bolster its power through overland smuggling routes has been greatly disrupted.

Yet regime change has not eradicated other longstanding threats in Syria. Chief among these are the diverse Islamist terrorist organizations that continue to operate there and the potential emergence of new Israeli-Turkish military friction. Despite Sharaa's responsible conduct thus far, regional experience indicates that radical opposition leaders often fail to truly moderate once in power.

Potential Hezbollah rearmament. Israel has achieved remarkable successes against the group over the past year due to unique circumstances that are unlikely to recur. The shock and paralysis inflicted by the exploding pager operation facilitated Israeli counterterrorism activities in south Lebanese villages with minimal resistance from the group; indeed, Hezbollah's elite Radwan Force largely withdrew from the area before Israeli ground troops arrived. After the previous war in 2006, however, Lebanese political constraints and the lack of international adherence to UN Security Council Resolution 1701 prevented long-term changes to the status quo and enabled Hezbollah to reestablish itself. Hence, U.S. involvement in monitoring the new ceasefire agreement will be a central factor in curbing the group's efforts to rearm once again.

What about the Palestinian conflict? Assessing the future of this issue is perhaps the most complex task of all. In the wake of October 7, the Palestinians credit themselves with bringing their issues back into the global spotlight, and they believe they cannot be ignored again in the future. For Israelis, the war has taught them that Palestinian terrorism is a tangible threat that cannot be solved through diplomatic means. Both peoples are in trauma, filled with mutual distrust that will make them hesitant to make painful concessions. In all likelihood, the coming years will continue to be marked by varying degrees of friction between them.

Under these conditions, the Trump administration's main long-term challenge will be to establish a pathway toward a political settlement that preserves Israel as a Jewish and democratic state. In the immediate term, U.S. officials will

have to contend with continued uncertainty about Gaza—which is partly caused by Israel’s refusal to articulate a concrete end-state that would enable international and regional actors to collaborate effectively.

Great Power Outlook?

The Gaza war has highlighted the crucial role that U.S. power continues to play in shaping the region’s future, while Russia’s influence has weakened due to its military losses in Syria and Ukraine. Yet China’s economic and technological presence remains largely unaffected and may even grow, especially with the Gulf states. Indeed, Trump’s energy policies could push these states closer to Beijing, a stable energy importer. Chinese advancements in artificial intelligence **could further strengthen** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/semiconductors-ai-and-gulf-policy-considerations-united-states>) its regional standing. As their local concerns over Russia fade, Gulf states remain cautious about antagonizing Beijing, and this posture will influence their strategic decisions on U.S. ties, Iran, and Israel.

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