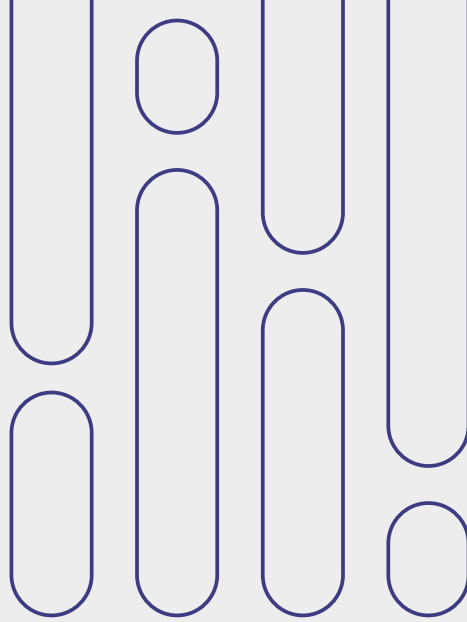


STUDY

The Middle East Conflict and Indications of Change in the Strategic Environment

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The protracted conflict in the Middle East, reignited by Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, has shattered the region's strategic stability, rendering an uncertain future. This war has drawn in various international and regional actors, as Israel and Iran both maneuver to establish a new status quo. The United States is also deeply involved, seeking to recalibrate its regional strategy and forge new power dynamics that align with its interests. While Israeli and US military actions primarily target the Iranian "Axis of Resistance," these efforts also aim to counter a rising trend among regional states to pursue independent security frameworks, free from polarizing alliances. Additionally, Washington appears focused on limiting the influence of Russia and China in a region it views as crucial to its global strategy. These shifts unfold amid the diminishing role of international organizations in mitigating conflicts, fueling concerns about the future of the international order as polarization intensifies and violent confrontations escalate.

The multifaceted conflict unfolding in the Middle East, marked by a web of competing interests among regional and international actors, signals significant shifts not only in the balance of power but also in the structural framework of the regional system, including its rules and alliances. Former US President Joe Biden captured this transformation, stating that the region will not revert to its pre-October 7 state, prior to the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Similarly, Israel's Ambassador to the United States Michael Herzog remarked that Israel was one state on October 6 and a different one on October 7. These statements reflect more than just observations on the

upheaval; they underscore a deliberate US-Israeli intention to leverage the conflict as a catalyst for broader regional change. The implications of this “strategic earthquake” suggest an era of profound reconfiguration for the Middle East, with long-term consequences for its alliances and power dynamics.

This study posits that the unprecedented expansion of the current multifront conflict in the Middle East stems from a strategic intention to overhaul the region in alignment with evolving regional and global power dynamics. The visions and projects emerging from this turmoil appear aimed at recalibrating strategic balances, presenting both opportunities and challenges for regional and international actors with vested interests. The unfolding events suggest the groundwork for a “new Middle East,” where certain nations may consolidate significant influence, while global powers bolster their foothold in the region. Simultaneously, efforts are likely to curtail the influence of rival powers and contain their projects. This process of reconfiguration signals a transformative phase in the region’s geopolitics, as shifting alliances and strategic recalculations redefine the roles of key players.

This study aims to examine the proposed hypothesis through the lens of the realist school of thought, which emphasizes the concepts of power and balance of power. To achieve this, the study will adopt an inductive approach, systematically gathering data and identifying interrelated patterns to connect them to broader, overarching dynamics. This method, like other scientific approaches, begins by defining the problem or phenomenon under investigation, analyzing its details, identifying its root causes and progressing from specific observations

to general conclusions. As part of this methodology, the case study approach will serve as a tool to explore the objectives of the conflicting parties and their impact on the Middle East's conditions and strategic balances. Based on this framework, the study will be structured around the following key themes: the regional environment and the roles of the Middle Eastern actors before Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, the nature of the multifront dispute, the approaches of actors and the strategic implications of the dispute.

The Regional Environment and the Roles of the Middle Eastern Actors Before Operation Al-Aqsa Flood

In the lead-up to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, the Middle East was witnessing intense competition among regional and international powers. For over two decades, starting with the US invasion of Iraq, the region has endured persistent chaos and instability fueled by conflicting regional interests. This instability was exacerbated by a shift in US priorities, marked by a gradual retreat from its traditional role as the region's foremost security guarantor. The absence of a viable alternative framework to ensure security and stability further deepened the crisis. The United States' strategic pivot away from the Middle East stemmed from its recalibrated international priorities, focusing on East Asia and the Pacific to counter China's growing influence, which challenges its global dominance. This vacuum allowed regional powers to exploit the reduced US presence, using force to expand their

influence. Consequently, the interplay between international actors and the ambitions of regional powers significantly shaped the Middle East's dynamics and strategic balances before October 7.

This balance can be better understood by analyzing the strategies and objectives of the active international and regional actors prior to that date, as follows:

1- Global Actors' Orientations

The Middle East, as a critical sub-region of strategic importance to major international powers, has drawn varying levels of attention from the United States, China and Russia. This interest has been shaped by the intensifying global competition among these powers in recent years, resulting in significant repercussions for the region's political, economic and security dynamics. The influence and strategic outlook of these powers toward the Middle East can be outlined as follows:

A- China's Multifaceted Approach to Enhancing Cooperation and Expanding Its Presence

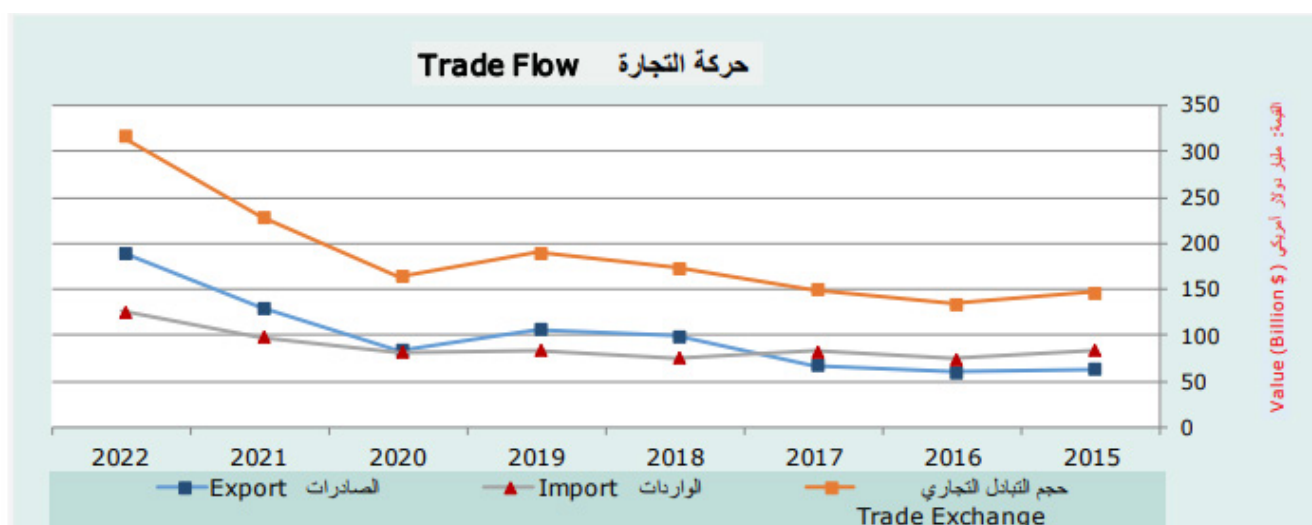
China has longstanding and multifaceted historical ties with many Middle Eastern countries, but its presence in the region has gained substantial momentum in recent years. This surge stems largely from China's efforts to solidify its global influence through strategic diplomatic relations and geoeconomic engagements. Over the past decades, China has successfully expanded its footprint in the region by implementing ambitious economic plans and establishing robust partnerships with key regional players. As of 2022, China's total annual trade volume with Middle Eastern and North African countries reached approximately \$368.4 billion — more than dou-

ble that of the United States. Moreover, Chinese exports to the region grew significantly, rising from \$140 billion in 2018 to \$226 billion in 2022. China has also played a central role in advancing major infrastructure initiatives, notably through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁽¹⁾

Energy, travel, industrial cooperation and technology supply chains have significantly contributed to the rapid expansion of trade between China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Trade between the two sides experienced remarkable growth, doubling by 140% from 2015 to 2022, reaching a total of \$316.4 billion in 2022.

Strategic partnership agreements signed with most GCC countries have undoubtedly deepened these ties, fostering stronger economic and diplomatic relations. Chart 1 illustrates the consistent growth in exports and imports between China and the GCC over this period, highlighting the dynamic nature of their evolving trade relationship.

Chart 1: The Volume of Trade Between China and GCC Countries



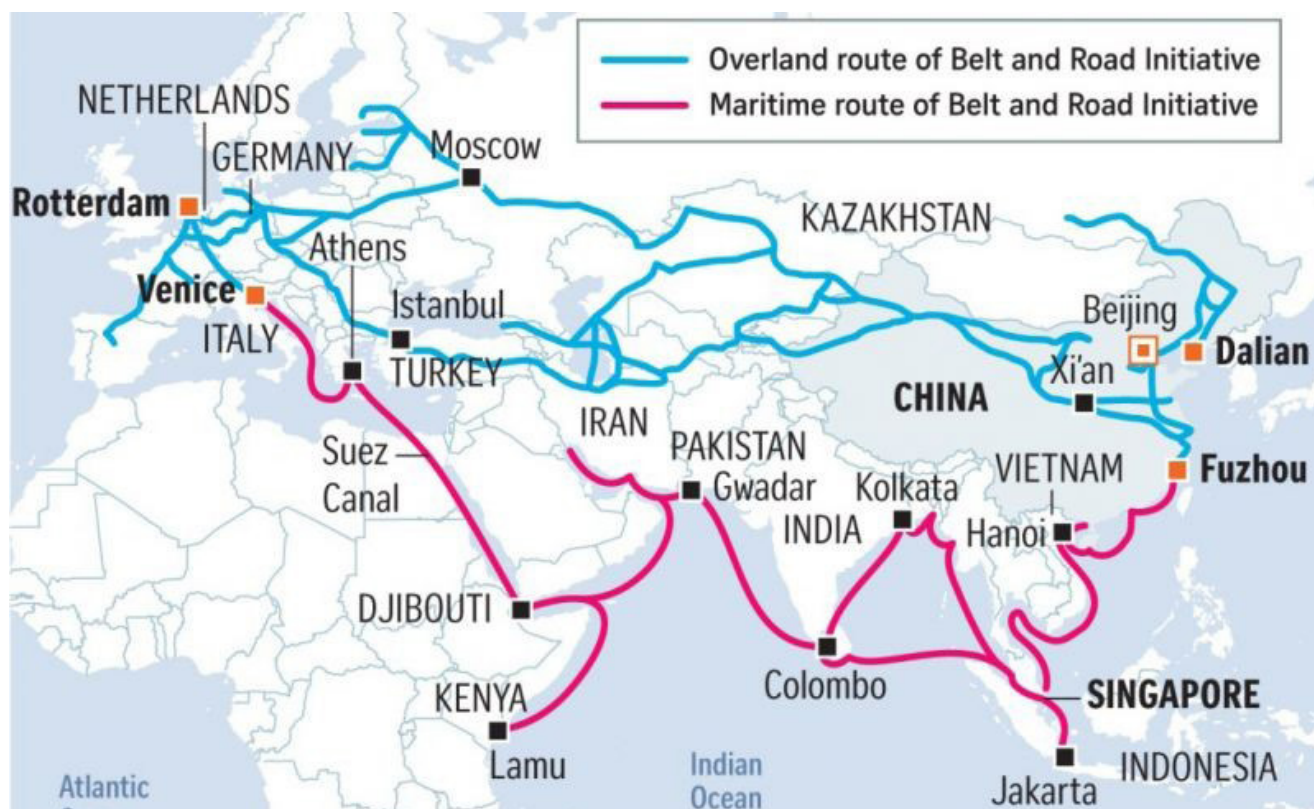
Source: The statistics office of the GCC, <https://n.9cl/azjgz>

In the months preceding October ,7 Chinese investments in Egypt's vital Suez Canal exceeded 20\$ billion .Agreements were signed between Egypt's Suez Canal Economic Zone and Chinese entities ,including a 6.75\$ billion deal with China Energy and an 8\$ billion partnership with Hong Kong's United Energy Group ,aimed at enhancing Egypt's clean energy production capacity .Beijing has actively encouraged its state-owned enterprises to channel investments into the logistics ,transportation and energy sectors within Egypt and the broader region. This strategic economic engagement has positioned China as a key trade partner and a critical player in fulfilling its energy demands .As China's regional interests expand ,it seeks to ensure uninterrupted access to essential shipping routes and regional markets .Consequently ,Beijing has bolstered its security and military footprint in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean ,establishing military bases and conducting joint naval exercises with Iran and Russia⁽²⁾.

In addition to its economic interests ,the Middle East serves as a critical passage for China's broader ambition to transform the international system ,or at least reassess the existing global power dynamics and reposition itself within the global hierarchy .This ambition was further fueled by the strategic competition initiated by the United States ,particularly in response to Washington's shift of resources from the Middle East to the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean ,aiming to curb China's rise and thwart its efforts to alter the international system .As the United States focused its efforts on containing China with-

in its own sphere ,Beijing responded by increasing its influence in regions traditionally considered vital to US interests⁽³⁾. A key highlight of China's growing presence in the region was its successful mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran ,leading to the restoration of diplomatic ties after years of estrangement and conflict .This breakthrough had a significant impact on regional relations ,paving the way for renewed diplomacy and greater stability .The mediation exemplified China's Global Security Initiative ,championed by President Xi Jinping, which proposes an alternative to the Washington-led security framework that is increasingly seen as ineffective .This diplomatic success not only enhanced China's influence in the region but also bolstered its standing on the global stage. China's security initiative aligns closely with its broader economic and political ambitions ,both regionally and globally. These aspirations are most notably articulated through the BRI) see Map ,(1 which serves as a framework for trade and economic cooperation ,fostering stronger economic ties with the Middle East and integrating the region into China's global strategy .This initiative suggests that China has crafted a new security paradigm ,offering an alternative to the US-led approach that often drives the region toward competition and conflict .Ultimately ,China's strategy seeks to bolster its economic and security interests while challenging Washington's dominance ,aiming to reshape the global power structure in its favor.

Map :1 China's Belt and Road Initiative via the Middle East



Source :“The Belt-and-Road initiative and the rising importance of China’s Western cities“, Asia Green Real Estate ,accessed February,2025 ,5

B- US Approximations to Reclaim Its Clout

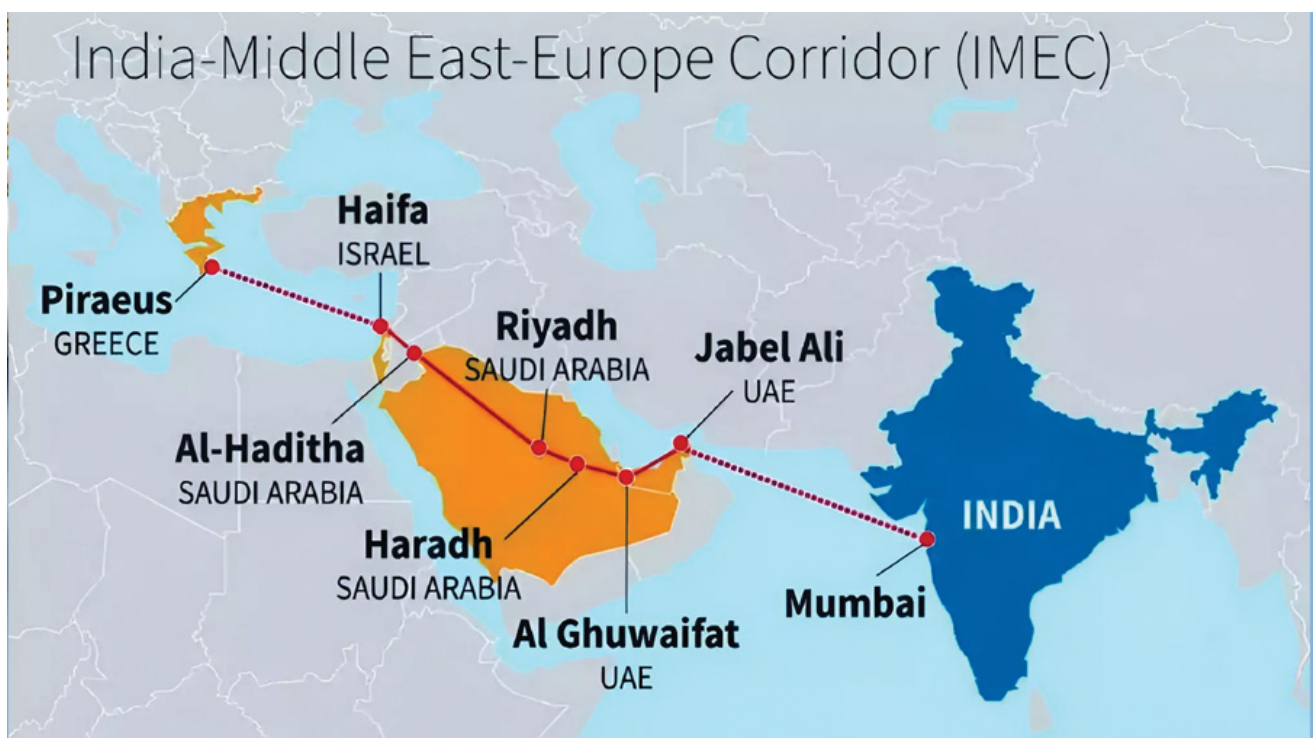
The Biden administration recognized the need to reassess its policies in the Middle East, as its previous approaches inadvertently benefited its competitors. This shift is part of a broader review of the US strategic direction, acknowledging past missteps and reassessing the region’s significance to the United States’ global influence. The Middle East plays a crucial role in supporting the United States’ global strategy, particularly in countering Russia’s growing geopolitical influence and addressing China’s challenges. The vacuum left by Washington’s reduced engagement has been seized by China and Russia to form regional partnerships, expand their influence and en-

engage in strategic competition with the United States. Meanwhile, regional dynamics have increasingly moved in directions contrary to US interests, such as changes in oil policies, a growing push for independence and a shift toward reducing reliance on Washington, notably through the Saudi-Iran rapprochement. This shift allowed Iran to mitigate the corrosive effects of Western sanctions and undermined Washington's strategy to isolate the country.

In response to shifting regional dynamics, Washington devised an integrated strategy to reclaim its influence in the Middle East. This strategy primarily focused on rebuilding relationships with partners who had lost confidence in the United States as a security provider and strategic ally, especially the Gulf states. It also aimed to restore deterrence against adversaries and establish new regional arrangements that would align with US interests. To implement this strategy, the Biden administration prioritized building an integrated defense system that included not only Washington's allies in the region but also Israel. This system would serve as a collective shield to protect US security and strategic interests in the Middle East. By strengthening defense ties with the region, the United States sought to reinforce its position as a key security provider. Another significant aspect of the strategy was the expansion of the Abraham Accords. The Biden administration worked to widen this agreement, creating a political umbrella that would solidify an alliance against the Iranian axis. The accords were viewed as an essential tool to counter Iran's influence in the region and to consolidate ties between Israel

and Arab states, further aligning regional interests with those of the United States. Finally, the United States pushed forward with the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) (see Map 2). This initiative aimed to link Washington's regional allies to its international partners, stretching from Southeast Asia to Europe. Biden considered this project a historic turning point, positioning it as a direct counter to China's BRI.⁽⁴⁾

Map 2: The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor



Source :Akhil Kumar Vivek N.D» ,India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor «,The Diplomatist, August 2024 ,20, accessed February 2025 ,5, <https://bit.ly/4jNlw86>.

C- A Vital Sphere for Russia in the Context of Its Dispute With the West

Since Russia's intervention in Syria, its presence in the Middle East has grown significantly, and the region has gained even more importance for Russia following its war with Ukraine. The Middle East has become a critical region for Russia, pro-

viding it with key leverage in its ongoing conflict with the West. Washington's gradual withdrawal from the region has also played a role in strengthening ties between Middle Eastern countries and Russia, as many in the region sought new alliances outside of US influence.

One of the most prominent aspects of Russia's interest in the Middle East is its involvement in Syria, which provides Russia with strategic advantages, including permanent access to the warm waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Russia's influence in the region has expanded beyond Syria, reaching Libya, West Africa, Central Africa and the Horn of Africa. This expansion has bolstered Russia's geopolitical standing and has also provided significant support in its war against Ukraine. Additionally, Russia has found opportunities to circumvent Western sanctions due to the more neutral stances of some Middle Eastern countries, which have not fully aligned with US sanctions against Moscow. An important symbol of Russia's growing ties with the region was President Vladimir Putin's visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where he highlighted the UAE's role as Russia's main trading partner in the Arab world. During these meetings, discussions focused on enhancing trade, particularly in advanced technology.

One of Russia's significant achievements in expanding its influence in the Middle East has been its economic partnership with OPEC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, through the formation of the OPEC+ alliance. This collaboration has been instrumental in helping Russia mitigate the economic repercussions of the Western boycott imposed after its war on

Ukraine. By coordinating oil production levels, the alliance has supported global oil prices in a way that has bolstered Russia's economy and strengthened its ties with key energy-producing states in the region. Additionally, Russia, alongside China, has played a pivotal role in inviting Middle Eastern countries to join the BRICS group. The inclusion of the UAE, Iran and the potential future membership of Saudi Arabia signals the growth of a political and economic bloc that challenges the dominance of the Western-led G7 group, spearheaded by the United States.

The Middle East has long been a vital market for Russian arms exports, a relationship that predates the Russia-Ukraine war. However, the conflict has expedited deeper strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran, particularly in the military domain. Reports suggest increasing collaboration in high-tech and defense sectors, with both nations moving toward a strategic partnership agreement to solidify these ties. This development highlights a growing alliance that is altering regional dynamics. A notable example of this partnership is the joint naval exercises conducted by Russia, China and Iran in the northern Indian Ocean. These exercises marked a significant milestone as Iran collaborated with two major global naval powers on this scale for the first time in the Middle East. Such cooperation underscores the advanced level of relations between the three countries and their shared interests in counterbalancing Western influence. The region's role as a key player in the broader geopolitical competition is evident, as Moscow leverages its partnerships to apply diplomatic and

economic pressure on the EU, project military power in the Middle East and Africa, and maintain a strategic presence on NATO's southern flank.

Russia and China have capitalized on their balanced relationships with competing regional powers, enabling them to establish broader and deeper partnerships and expand their political and economic influence. This strategic equilibrium has allowed them to secure varying degrees of support and alignment on specific issues, particularly within the context of their conflict with the United States. In many cases, they have managed to neutralize active regional powers, preventing them from adopting polarized stances in the global arena. In contrast, the United States has pursued a different strategy, focused on enhancing its influence by forming regional blocs and building alliances to regain its diminishing foothold in the Middle East. This approach has subjected the region and its nations to heightened international pressure and polarization, driven by the competing agendas of major global powers.

2- Regional Actors' Orientations

Before October 7, the competition between regional projects driven by external orientations highlighted an imbalance and disparity in positions. On one side, there was the Israeli right-wing project supported by the United States, while on the other, there was the Iranian project, which cannot be understood separately from its connections with Russia and China. Additionally, there was the Saudi and Gulf project, which emerged from a new regional vision for security and stability, characterized by a largely independent stance from external allianc-

es. The roles and objectives of these forces can be explained as follows:

A- Israeli Efforts to Turn the Tide of the Regional Dispute

During the first months of 2023, before the outbreak of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Israeli escalation against the Palestinians intensified. Israeli authorities killed 220 Palestinians in the West Bank, issued 2,600 administrative detention orders and the number of prisoners in Israeli jails reached 5,200. Additionally, 41,000 settlers stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque and settlers carried out hundreds of attacks against Palestinians. Following the rise of the most extremist government in Israel's history, the Israeli occupation continued with its settlement policies and the targeted assassinations of resistance leaders. These developments likely contributed to the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, as Israel sought to establish a new reality regarding the Palestinian issue and impose a security-focused view of the conflict. Israel aimed to exploit internal Palestinian divisions, the decline in the US commitment to the principles of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, especially the two-state solution and the reduced priority of the Palestinian issue in the official Arab and Islamic spheres. Additionally, Israel sought to capitalize on regional chaos, including tensions between Iran and its regional axis and the Gulf states.

Israel focused on expanding the Abraham Accords as a framework for regional integration and achieving a diplomatic breakthrough, leveraging an Arab trend that suggested the Palestinian issue could be advanced through positive incentives and new approaches for both Palestinians and Israelis

in the context of the peace process. Washington not only supported Israel's efforts to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough by promoting the expansion of the Abraham Accords, but also framed Israel as a crucial security partner within an integrated regional project. The goal of this project was to establish a strategic axis aligned with Washington and directed against Iran and its regional allies. Israel's objective was to reshape the regional dynamics by overcoming the issue of Palestinian state recognition, integrating into a security structure that would allow it to alter the course of the historical conflict in the region. Moreover, Israel sought to establish itself as a leading regional power in an alliance to confront Iran, solidify its role as a key regional trading partner and serve as a vital corridor for trade between Asia and Europe, capitalizing on its position as a crucial link in the Asia-Europe development project. Since Israel imposed its siege on the Gaza Strip, the Palestinians have faced significant internal divisions, a situation in which Israel has invested heavily to marginalize the Palestinian cause. Despite numerous attempts at reconciliation, these efforts have consistently failed due to the presence of two contradictory projects: one led by the Palestinian Authority and the other by the armed resistance factions. Israel has taken advantage of this fragmentation to exert more military pressure on the factions while simultaneously implementing a settlement policy in the West Bank to create a new strategic reality on the ground. The rise of the extreme right-wing movement in Israel has further exacerbated the situation, imposing new realities, particularly regarding the holy sites. The internal

dynamics in the United States, beginning with the Trump era and continuing into the present, have had a profound impact on the Palestinian cause. Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and his success in securing the approval of four Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel marked a pivotal shift. During this time, there were also efforts, under the auspices of the United States and Saudi Arabia, to resolve the peace process and find a just solution to the Palestinian issue. These arrangements, which included expanding the Abraham Accords, were framed as a trade-off for a resolution to the Palestinian cause, alongside the creation of a framework for regional economic cooperation known as the PLO Development project. This economic initiative aimed to shift the region's approach from conflict to mutual interests. However, this path did not align with the interests of either Iran or Israel. Iran, perceiving it as a strategy that would sideline its influence, celebrated after October 7 that it had effectively nullified it. On the other hand, Israel's most extremist government rejected any commitment toward the Palestinians. As a result, the conflict intensified and expanded, as both Israel and Iran saw their relevance and stakes in it grow.⁽⁵⁾



B- Iran Enhancing Its Regional Gains

The ideological perspective, combined with aspirations for regional hegemony, remains a key factor in shaping Iran's approach to the Middle East. Prior to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Iran's strategy to enhance its regional influence was reinforced by its efforts to restore and strengthen ties with its regional axis, which stretched from Syria and Lebanon in the north to Yemen in the south. Iran succeeded in consolidating cooperation within this axis through the so-called strategy of "unity of the arenas." This strategy aimed to ensure that if any one member of the axis was attacked, the entire bloc would respond collectively. Furthermore, Iran bolstered its regional defense strategy by emphasizing forward defense and the use of proxies, primarily to deter Israel and the United States — its most significant adversaries — from targeting Iran or its vital interests. Iran's geopolitical approach also sought to fortify its position by cultivating deeper relations with China and Russia, hence, it adopted a more eastward looking foreign policy. This alignment was strategically timed to capitalize on China's growing influence in the region and to counter the declining power and presence of Washington in the Middle East.⁽⁶⁾

In addition, Iran has recalibrated its approach toward the Gulf states, responding positively to the Chinese diplomatic initiative aimed at restoring relations with Saudi Arabia. This shift in policy aligns with Iran's broader interests, helping to alleviate economic pressures and reduce its regional isolation. Iran's strategy, therefore, hinges on two distinct approaches: one that emphasizes diplomacy with the Gulf states and an-

other that focuses on strengthening its elements of power, deterrence and forward defense, particularly in relation to the United States and Israel. Undoubtedly, Iran has managed to make progress on both fronts, capitalizing on the evolving dynamics of regional interactions. The increasingly interwoven relations among major powers in the region, along with changes in the regional landscape — including the waning influence of the US security umbrella and China’s expanding strategic presence — has provided Iran with new opportunities to assert itself more effectively.

3- Saudi Arabia’s Expanding Role as a Catalyst for Regional Stability

Before October 7, Saudi Arabia’s actions in the Middle East represented a model for regional powers to carve out independent roles amid global competition. These actions stemmed from a visionary project aimed at achieving a significant developmental leap across economic, social, cultural and political sectors, all of which required a secure and stable regional environment to support Saudi goals and enhance the kingdom’s role both regionally and internationally. Within this vision, Saudi Arabia sought to carve out an autonomous path by diversifying its partnerships with international powers. This strategy allowed the kingdom to avoid becoming entangled in frameworks or alliances that might draw it into costly regional conflicts and competition. This was particularly important after Riyadh recognized the need to exercise caution regarding overreliance on Washington as a security guarantor and ally, given the changing nature of Washington’s policies and

its competition with other great powers. In this context, Saudi Arabia strategically fostered a partnership with China and maintained a balanced relationship with Russia, positioning itself as one of the most prominent emerging middle powers on the international stage.

Saudi Arabia has actively worked to establish a stable Middle East free from polarization and power struggles by maintaining a balanced approach toward competing global powers, particularly the United States and China. The kingdom has responded constructively to positive initiatives from both sides — whether security, diplomatic or economic — ensuring that these align with its national interests. In the context of economic and trade partnerships, Saudi Arabia has engaged with both China's BRI and the United States' development project while forging an independent path amid competing and polarized visions. Riyadh has tied the regional integration framework proposed by Washington to cooperative efforts that avoid conflict with Iran. Diplomacy has been the cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's strategy to ease tensions with Tehran, reflecting its commitment to de-escalation. Additionally, Saudi Arabia has refrained from joining the Abraham Accords without a clear and viable roadmap for addressing the Palestinian issue.

Prior to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, the Middle East region, and its security framework in particular, was heavily influenced by the rivalry of major powers and their competing economic, political and security projects, as well as the divergent interests of key regional players. The region was shaped by a US-led initiative aimed at establishing a new regional balance,

integrating Israel as a dominant power within a broader axis, while opposing an Iranian-led axis that adhered to an ideological perspective. Tehran's approach directly countered the vision of Israel and Washington, emphasizing its ideological and strategic objectives. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia championed a diplomatic approach to restore regional security and stability, steering clear of alignment with the polarized blocs. Some interpret Operation Al-Aqsa Flood as a reaction to these escalating regional rivalries and the culmination of frustrations over unfulfilled expectations. More specifically, it has been framed as a consequence of intensifying competition, as various actors sought to challenge the existing order and assert a new status quo in the region.

The Nature of the Multifront Dispute and the Approaches of Actors

The conflict in the Middle East was sparked by the intensification of contradictions between regional and international powers, reaching an unprecedented peak of interest clashes among key actors. The dimensions, arenas and participants in this conflict can be outlined as follows:

1- Regional Conflagration

Numerous regional actors have become entangled in the ongoing conflict, most notably the Palestinian resistance factions, alongside Iran and its regional allies on one side, and Israel on the other, as these parties represent the direct participants in the hostilities. The conflict has expanded to encompass seven distinct fronts, where significant regional interactions have

unfolded. The regional dimensions of this conflict can be outlined as follows:

A- An Existential Conflict and an Israeli Attempt to Forcibly Dismantle the Status Quo in the Occupied Territories

Hamas initiated the current Middle East conflict through its large-scale operation on October 7, 2023, targeting Israel with a missile strike involving 2,200 rockets and a coordinated assault on the Gaza border. This attack, unprecedented in scale, inflicted significant casualties, with Israeli reports confirming the deaths of 1,300 people, injuries to nearly 3,000, and the capture of around 200 hostages. Operationally, the attack was unexpected, both in timing and impact. Hamas pursued several objectives, primarily seeking to reassert its role within the Palestinian cause amid a severe blockade and declining financial support. It also aimed to counter the perceived US-Israeli strategy to marginalize the Palestinian issue and to refocus Arab, Islamic and global attention on the Palestinian cause. Hamas hoped the operation would ignite widespread resistance in the West Bank and beyond, yet this mobilization did not materialize as anticipated. Instead, Hamas encountered a massive military response, not only from Israel but also bolstered by the United States and Western allies. This response was marked by unprecedented military, political and diplomatic backing. Israeli narratives successfully framed the events as an existential threat to Israel, overshadowing Palestinian grievances and the violations they endure. Consequently, Israel's actions were broadly legitimized under the banner of self-defense, enabling it to conduct widespread military op-

erations with considerable impunity.

In response to Hamas' attack on October 7, 2023, Israel launched a swift counteroffensive to regain control of settlements around the Gaza border. The following day, Israel initiated Operation Iron Swords, focusing on rescuing the hostages and dismantling Hamas. Ahead of a ground invasion in northern Gaza, Israel conducted a devastating aerial campaign, one of the most destructive in modern times. This campaign aimed to displace Gaza's population toward the southern border with Egypt while enforcing a brutal siege that cut off essential supplies such as food, water and fuel. The humanitarian crisis deepened, compelling Hamas to manage the dire situation while navigating a humanitarian catastrophe described by many as a massacre. In November 2023, international mediation led to a temporary truce and limited prisoner exchanges between Hamas and Israel. However, these efforts did not halt the conflict. By December 2023, Israel resumed its operations, with the Israeli right-wing leadership committed to eradicating Hamas. The campaign included the siege of Rafah and efforts to control the Philadelphi Corridor, signaling Israel's broader strategy to neutralize Hamas' leadership and tighten its grip on the Gaza Strip.

Israel's attacks on Gaza were accompanied by extensive accusations of war crimes, with allegations of a systematic campaign to annihilate the strip. Nearly 50,000 people were reported killed, the majority being women and children, while approximately 100,000 others were injured. Additionally, many individuals remain unaccounted for beneath the rub-

ble of destroyed buildings. In alignment with its stated objectives, Israel reportedly succeeded in assassinating key Hamas figures. These included Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas Political Bureau Deputy Chief based in Lebanon Saleh al-Arouri and Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, who was widely viewed as Haniyeh's successor and the alleged mastermind behind Operation Al-Aqsa Flood.

The International Criminal Court (ICC) stated that Israel's actions in Gaza provide sufficient grounds to suspect a campaign of genocide against Palestinians. This raises questions about Israel's objectives in the ongoing conflict, as its stated goals — defeating Hamas and recovering the hostages — may differ from the outcomes on the ground. Some analysts argue that Israel could have concealed aims, such as implementing ethnic cleansing as a solution to systematic apartheid policies against Palestinians. This perspective is supported by claims that ethnic cleansing might serve to eliminate any future resistance in the occupied territories. American political scientist John Mearsheimer has speculated that Israel's strategy may include making Gaza uninhabitable through widespread violence, starvation and devastation, forcing Palestinians to flee.⁽⁷⁾

Israel also extended its operations beyond Gaza, launching an intensified campaign in the West Bank aimed at dismantling resistance networks, targeting key resistance leaders and suppressing potential uprisings. This included incursions into Palestinian camps and villages, with the involvement of settlers in violent attacks. The year 2023 became the deadliest for Palestinians in two decades, marked by escalating clashes and

resistance operations inside the Green Line. In response to this intensifying unrest, Israel conducted targeted actions against resistance fighters, particularly from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, focusing on strongholds like the Jenin and Tulkarm refugee camps. These operations aimed to weaken organized resistance in the West Bank while increasing the pressure on Palestinian communities in the region.

Several factors have driven the continuation of Israel's war on the Gaza Strip, despite widespread international and regional opposition. Among the most significant is Israel's perception of the conflict as an opportunity to address long-term existential threats. By targeting resistance factions, Israel aims to weaken the Iranian axis and dismantle the deterrence equation that these groups seek to uphold. The war has also provided political advantages for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, delaying internal scrutiny over his accountability for the events leading to the conflict and potentially preserving his political future. The escalation aligns with the agenda of the far-right factions dominating Israel's government, further fueling the military campaign. Additionally, Netanyahu has leveraged the context of the US presidential elections, which limit Washington's ability to exert pressure on Israel. Strong international support for Israel, particularly from Western allies, has emboldened its leadership to pursue broader objectives, including attempts to reshape the regional balance of power and address security challenges more comprehensively.

Despite Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declaring in September that Hamas' military wing no longer operates as

an organized force but is engaged in an insurgent-style rebellion against the Israeli military, the conflict shows no signs of resolution. Following over a year of a devastating war in Gaza, Israel has shifted some focus to Hezbollah on its northern border while continuing operations in Gaza. Israeli leaders view the war as existential, maintaining that no permanent ceasefire is possible until Hamas is fully eradicated. Given the substantial obstacles to achieving this objective, and in spite of the recently concluded ceasefire deal in the final days of the Biden administration, the conflict in Gaza remains open-ended and without a clear resolution in sight.

Israeli political discourse has shifted from focusing on self-defense and confronting resistance factions in Palestine and Iran-affiliated groups to addressing broader changes in the Middle East. This shift is evident in Israeli leaders' statements about rejecting the establishment of a Palestinian state and disregarding international resolutions. Furthermore, Israel aims to impose a new *fait accompli* on the region, reflecting its regional superiority. This confidence stems from Israel's military and technological strength, its successes since the war began in Gaza and its right to use force without restrictions. Additionally, Israel benefits from unwavering US protection, which shields it from responsibility or prosecution, along with diplomatic and military support from Washington.

The Israeli government, unable to achieve its political and diplomatic objectives before October 7, has attempted to impose these through military action. Netanyahu pushed forward with the invasion of Rafah despite weak US objections and

regional concerns. He also focused on controlling the Salah al-Din and Philadelphi axes to strengthen Israel's hold on the Gaza Strip, eliminate Hamas and prepare for the post-conflict phase. This phase aims to eradicate resistance to the occupation and any prospects for a Palestinian state. In defiance of the peace agreement with Egypt, which was brokered by the United States, Netanyahu has pursued an unrestricted approach to securing Israel's position in the region.

With Hezbollah out of the conflict, the collapse of the Assad regime and the state of concern in Iran following Trump's return to the White House and the possibility of being exposed to more Israeli pressures and attacks, the parties and mediators are looking for a lasting ceasefire agreement between Hamas and Israel.

B- The Conflict on the Lebanese Front and Unprecedented Israeli Pressures on Hezbollah

After October 7, 2023, the rules of engagement between Hezbollah and Israel escalated. Initially, the exchanges were limited to the usual border skirmishes and a calculated escalation. However, Hezbollah later became a support front for Hamas, allowing Palestinian resistance groups in Lebanon to launch attacks into Israeli territory. As Israel's retaliation targeted Hezbollah due to its lack of knowledge about the locations of Palestinian resistance forces in Lebanon, Hezbollah began bombing Israeli military sites, including radar and surveillance equipment along the border. The pace of these operations increased as Israel responded with airstrikes on southern Lebanese villages and towns. This situation persisted

for nearly three months, with both sides adhering to a form of restrained engagement, avoiding deeper incursions or attacks. The mutual exchanges led to widespread displacement, near-total evacuation of border areas and significant damage to infrastructure.

The United States and France attempted to mediate a ceasefire on the Lebanese front, but Hezbollah insisted on linking it to the Gaza conflict. As the situation unfolded, the clashes escalated uncontrollably. Israel intensified its attacks on Hezbollah leaders, targeting prominent figures like Fuad Shukr, a senior military commander, and several field commanders. In September 2023, Israel escalated further by destroying thousands of mobile and wireless communication devices used by Hezbollah, resulting in 42 deaths and 3,500 injuries. It was widely acknowledged that Israel was behind the attack, which Hezbollah's leader regarded as a declaration of war.

Israel continued its attacks on the southern suburbs, targeting leaders of the Radwan Force, accusing them of planning a ground assault on northern Israel. It killed 16 of the division's leaders, including Ibrahim Aqil, the commander, and Ahmed Wahbi, a former commander. Israel then expanded its strikes across southern Lebanon, reaching Tyre and western Bekaa, and carried out another raid on the suburb, reportedly targeting Ali al-Karaki, the military commander of the southern sector. In retaliation, Hezbollah attacked the Northern Corps' main warehouses at Israel's Nimra base and missile and artillery units at Yoav barracks. It also bombed the Rafael military industries complex near Haifa. As Israeli bombing intensified,

Hezbollah's retaliation reached 120 kilometers east of Haifa, triggering Iron Dome sirens from east of Haifa to east of Tel Aviv, near Ben Gurion Airport, signaling the collapse of the established rules of engagement.

Israel's attacks on Hezbollah were unexpected, targeting the group's leadership and causing significant disruption within its ranks. The party had believed it had ample time to regroup, but Israel launched an unprecedented assault on Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, followed by a ground attack aimed at both military and civilian infrastructure. Despite this, Hezbollah's resistance in the south remained strong, and its battalions appeared unaffected by the attacks in the southern suburbs. Over time, Hezbollah regained its operational strength, increasing its missile and drone strikes, including targeting the Israeli prime minister's home. Israel views Lebanon not as a supporter of Gaza but as a long-term threat, an Iranian ally whose influence must be dismantled. This war against Hezbollah is seen as a precursor to broader changes on Israel's northern front.

There is no doubt that the Israeli strikes have thrown Hezbollah off balance, and pushed it to accept a truce under which a ceasefire was agreed upon, but it kept Israeli forces in the areas it controls. More importantly for the conflict, it removed Hezbollah from the so-called unity of the arenas, as Iran and Hezbollah left the Palestinian factions alone to confront the Israeli killing machine. Following the recent election of Lebanese President Joseph Aoun, discussions have resumed inside Lebanon about disarming Hezbollah and resolving the polit-

ical crisis, with unprecedented pressure on Iran after Hezbollah lost much of its influence and power.

C- The Houthis' Rise as a Key Player in Regional Dynamics

On November 19, 2023, the Houthis entered the ongoing Middle East conflict, launching military operations targeting southern occupied Palestinian territories, particularly the Eilat region. Simultaneously, the group carried out attacks in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, initially focusing on vessels bound for Israel. The scope of the Houthi operations soon expanded, with attacks not only targeting ships with direct links to Israel but also including container ships, oil tankers, LNG carriers, bulk carriers and other vessels from various countries. These attacks expanded beyond the Red Sea, reaching the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean.

In response to the Houthis' actions, the United States took escalatory measures, forming the Operation Prosperity Guardian alliance with the UK on December 19, 2023. Simultaneously, Washington reclassified the Houthis as a terrorist group and launched a campaign of sanctions and pressure to halt Houthi attacks on Israel and regional shipping. Following this, the EU initiated a new naval mission, Mission Aspides, on February 19, 2024, to counter the Houthi threats. In turn, Iran, Russia and China conducted joint military exercises called Maritime Security Belt-2024 from March 11 to March 15, 2024, near the Gulf of Oman, aimed at ensuring the safety of maritime trade. These developments highlight the growing conflict in the Red Sea and an increasing Western military presence in the region.

Houthi operations have significantly disrupted trade through the Red Sea. In January 2024, the capacity of container ships in the region was 80% lower than expected, compared to levels seen between 2017 and 2019. Despite facing numerous airstrikes from the United States and Israel, the Houthis have conditioned the cessation of their attacks on the end of Israel's war in Gaza.

The Houthis have sought to solidify their position in the regional conflict by aligning themselves with the Iran-led resistance axis against Israel and the United States. This alignment allows them to export their internal crisis abroad, while also disregarding the Yemeni peace plan. Under the banner of supporting Gaza, the group has mobilized internally, restored its legitimacy and generated revenues from the passage of ships through the Red Sea, helping mitigate shortages of essential goods. Through these actions, the Houthis position themselves as a key regional player, gaining support from Eastern axis countries like China and Russia, who seek to influence regional dynamics and reshape the international system.

The formation of the US-led international alliance to protect the Red Sea in December 2023 underscores this perspective. While the alliance's stated objective is to counter Houthi attacks and safeguard trade routes in the Red Sea, there may be unspoken aims linked to the rising strategic importance of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa in US global strategy. This could prompt Washington to militarize the region, part of a broader effort to reposition itself and expand its influence. The goal would be to secure control over the Bab al-Mandab Strait, dis-

rupt China's BRI, counter Russia, Iran and Türkiye's growing presence, protect Israeli interests and play a key role in reshaping strategic dynamics in East Africa.

D- Redefining the Rules of Engagement Between Iran and Israel

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood served as a practical test of Iran's regional strategy and its forward defense doctrine, which it has developed over recent years. Iran coordinated its regional axis under the strategy of "unity of the arenas," prompting Hezbollah to join the conflict by launching attacks on northern Israel in support of Gaza, aiming to ease pressure on the resistance factions. Hezbollah linked the northern battle's outcome to the cessation of fighting in Gaza. Meanwhile, the Houthis entered the fray with an operation from the Yemeni front, and resistance forces in Iraq targeted US troops in Iraq and Jordan while also striking Israeli-occupied territories. Operation Al-Aqsa Flood thus introduced a new confrontational dynamic between Iran and Israel, leading to a shift in the regional power balance that extends beyond the previous, more limited approach to conflict between the two nations.

In response to the Israeli raid on the Iranian consulate in Damascus in April 2024, which resulted in the deaths of several members of the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and was viewed by Tehran as an attack on its sovereignty, Iran launched Operation True Promise 1. This operation involved a direct missile and drone strike on Israel, although the impact was limited due to the advance information provided by the United States regarding the attack. In retaliation, Israel

targeted Iranian air defenses in Isfahan, near nuclear sites, to uphold its deterrence posture. This exchange exposed vulnerabilities in Iran's military defenses, as did the assassination of Haniyeh in Tehran, which also highlighted weaknesses in Iranian intelligence. Despite Iran's promises to retaliate, the ongoing US military buildup and concerns over the potentially disastrous consequences of a broader conflict led Iran to delay its response. Tehran cited the need to allow the truce negotiations over Gaza to proceed. However, these negotiations ultimately failed to secure a ceasefire and Israel expanded its confrontation with Hezbollah. This escalation began with the detonation of thousands of pagers used by Hezbollah members, followed by the assassination of 16 senior party leaders, including Hezbollah's iconic leader Nasrallah and the Deputy Commander of the Quds Force Abbas Nilforoushan. This was seen as an unprecedented assault not only against Hezbollah but also Iran, particularly in light of the direct Israeli threats aimed at both Iran and its leadership.

To save face, restore deterrence and avoid losing the trust of its allies, Iran took a significant risk by launching Operation True Promise 2 on October 1, 2024, despite the potential for brutal Israeli retaliation. Without prior warning, Iran targeted Israeli military sites with ballistic missiles. Both Washington and Israel assessed this attack as being more substantial than the previous April 2024 strike. The impact of the attack was significant, particularly since the United States responded by deploying the advanced THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) system in Israel. The operation, to some extent,

helped restore deterrence and Hezbollah was able to reorganize its ranks and adjust to the evolving conflict dynamics. This included adapting to the new rules of engagement following Israel's ground attack on southern Lebanon.

In response to the Iranian missile attack, Israeli fighter jets crossed Iraqi airspace and launched long-range missiles targeting various sites within Iran. Unconfirmed reports suggest that similar strikes also targeted Syrian and Iraqi air defense systems, though Iraqi sources have denied these claims. According to Israel, 20 sites in Iran were bombed, all identified as military targets, with a particular focus on Iranian missile production centers and ground-based air defense systems. Israel warned that it might select additional targets for future strikes, signaling to Tehran that Israel's reach could extend throughout Iranian territory. In contrast, Iran downplayed the impact of the airstrikes, stating that they caused only limited damage and affirmed its right to respond to the violation of its sovereignty in accordance with international law. Notably, Israel refrained from targeting Iranian nuclear facilities or the energy sector, likely due to pressure from the United States and a reluctance to escalate the conflict further. However, this attack marked a significant escalation in tensions, breaking the established rules of engagement. Furthermore, it represented an unprecedented attack on Iranian territory by external forces not witnessed since the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s.⁽⁸⁾

Iran has threatened to launch Operation True Promise 3 in retaliation against Israel, but such an escalation carries high risks, especially considering the weakened capabilities of the

“Axis of Resistance.” Some experts speculate that Iran may reconsider its nuclear strategy in response to mounting Israeli threats and the limited effectiveness of missile strikes and proxy actions against a technologically superior adversary like Israel. Although Iran has yet to make a decisive move to develop nuclear weapons, its perception of nuclear capabilities as a key element in its broader security strategy may be growing. There are also calls within Iran for the supreme leader to reconsider his fatwa against acquiring nuclear weapons. The Iranian Parliament has urged a reevaluation of Iran’s nuclear doctrine, signaling potential shifts in its strategic approach. Moreover, in October 2024, the Iranian Parliament discussed a draft law proposing the formation of a defense-security alliance between the resistance factions and their supporting countries, aimed at countering external threats and providing mutual support in times of crisis. This alliance seeks to reinforce Iran’s regional influence, ensuring its investments in the “Axis of Resistance” remain intact despite Israeli strikes. The move also aims to bolster Iran’s strategic depth in West Asia, potentially preparing for direct confrontation with the United States and Israel. By uniting with other powers that oppose US hegemony and regional influence, Iran seeks to recalibrate the regional balance and strengthen its position in light of upcoming geopolitical shifts.⁽⁹⁾

But after Iran’s regional influence was eroded and the conflict proved the limits of its capabilities and the weakness of its bets on the doctrine of forward defense and the fragility of the regional alliance on which it relies in confronting the United

States and Israel, in addition to the military strike that targeted it, it returned to opening up a space for diplomacy with the West by submitting proposals to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to stop enriching uranium above 60% and allowing the return of international inspectors, in addition to opening a channel of dialogue with European powers to discuss controversial issues, as Iran wants to stop the escalating attacks that may end up targeting the political system if it continues with its hostile policies.

E- Syria's Exit From the Conflict

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood unintentionally led to a strategic change in the Syrian arena, as the Assad regime fell within 13 days, with the armed opposition launching a large-scale attack that ended with Bashar al-Assad fleeing from Syria and putting an end to more than five decades of Assad family rule. This development is now seen as a strategic earthquake that opens the door to profound geostrategic realignments in the Arab Levant and the Middle East as a whole, as Syria faces renewed challenges as an arena of conflict with regional and international powers seeking to entrench their influence.

Undoubtedly, the armed Syrian opposition has benefited from the weakening of Hezbollah after a series of Israeli attacks, and Iran has also been weakened after strikes that lasted for more than a year against its militias and positions in Syria. It seems that when the Syrian opposition began the attack in order to retake Aleppo, it discovered that the Assad regime was in a state of collapse, and it also found an unwillingness on the part of its allies to provide support to it, similar to what

happened in 2015, which emboldened it to advance toward Damascus, marking a new phase in the conflict over Syria.

F- Arab and Saudi Efforts to Avert Complete Chaos

Saudi Arabia has placed the Palestinian issue at the forefront of its concerns, a stance emphasized by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman during the opening of the ninth session of the Saudi Shura Council in September 2023. He reiterated that the kingdom would continue its efforts to establish an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, stressing that Saudi Arabia will not establish diplomatic relations with Israel until this goal is achieved. This position holds significant weight in the regional context, offering an alternative vision to those espoused by Washington and Iran, challenging the frameworks of regional realignment. Saudi Arabia's commitment to the Palestinian cause was further reinforced when the kingdom submitted a statement to the International Court of Justice on February 20, 2024, denouncing the legitimacy of the Israeli occupation, which has persisted for 57 years. The kingdom called for an end to the occupation, signaling its unwavering support for Palestinian rights. In response to recent Israeli attacks on Lebanon, the Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement urging all parties involved to exercise restraint and avoid dragging the region into another war, reflecting the kingdom's desire for peace and stability in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia is actively working within an Arab, Islamic and international framework to build consensus in response to unprecedented challenges concerning the Palestinian issue.

This is evident in Riyadh's hosting of the Extraordinary Arab and Islamic Summit, which served as a platform for the kingdom to assert its leadership on the matter. The summit's final statement made it clear that peace with Israel would not be achievable until it withdraws to the 1967 borders, condemned Israel's aggression against Lebanon and Gaza, and called for an immediate ceasefire. In his speech at the summit, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman condemned what he described as "genocide" committed by Israel against the Palestinians, highlighting the kingdom's strong stance against Israel's actions and its commitment to advocating for Palestinian rights on the global stage.⁽¹⁰⁾

Saudi Arabia, along with Arab and Gulf powers, supports diplomacy as the framework for resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It maintains its commitment to the rights of the Palestinian people to an independent state and the principle of a two-state solution, aligned with the historical Arab Peace Initiative (see Figure 3). The kingdom remains at an equal distance from both sides in the regional conflict, reflecting careful strategic calculations. As a result, it has refrained from directly intervening in the conflict's arenas, even those far from its borders that impact its security and economic interests, such as the Prosperity Guardian Alliance to protect security and stability in the Red Sea. This cautious approach underscores the precision with which regional powers are undertaking their strategic decisions and regional positions in response to the conflict.

Figure 3: The Arab Peace Initiative in 2002



The Gaza war highlighted a unification of positions among some major Arab powers, although effective collective action remained limited due to the complexities of the conflict and the deeply intertwined nature of global and regional relations. At the same time, China's influence in the region, along with its relations with the United States' allies, continued on a separate path from Washington, emphasizing the shifting dynamics that limit the scope of US influence in the region. The Gulf states, having tested their understanding with Iran over the past year, found this engagement to be a key strategic option, contributing to a significant degree of security and stability for the region. This understanding helped to address various challenges and prevented the Gulf states from becom-

ing directly involved in the ongoing conflict, which could potentially escalate across the entire region. However, if the conflict expands, it may jeopardize the security of the Gulf states, especially since Tehran continues to view them as crucial US allies. The potential normalization of relations between some regional countries and Israel could signal an intention to form alliances aimed at confronting Iran and its allies, further complicating regional security dynamics.

Some Arab countries may have found opportunities to counter Washington's pressures, particularly regarding the push for normalization with Israel and distancing from China, by leveraging the conflict. In this context, Saudi Arabia's position has been the most reflective of the broader Arab stance. The kingdom ramped up its diplomatic efforts to halt the conflict, convening an Extraordinary Arab and Islamic Summit in November 2023 to address the situation in Gaza. The summit condemned Israeli aggression and described the resulting situation as a humanitarian catastrophe. Additionally, Saudi Arabia formed a ministerial committee, led by its foreign minister, tasked with presenting the summit's resolutions and Arab and Islamic demands to the United Nations and other world powers. This committee played a pivotal role in persuading many nations to recognize the Palestinian state and supported its efforts for UN membership through voting in the General Assembly. The committee's efforts even extended to the formation of an international alliance aimed at bolstering recognition of Palestinian statehood.

2- Global Power Interventions

The multifront conflict has exposed the true extent and limitations of external powers in shaping regional dynamics, particularly in conflict scenarios, as they seek to establish a new equilibrium that safeguards their interests and bolsters their global ambitions. The strategies and roles of these global powers can be summarized as follows:

A- US Military Engagement and the Foregrounding of the Middle East

The United States addressed the conflict through multiple avenues. First, the Biden administration extended unwavering political support to Israel and its far-right government, endorsing Israel's absolute right to self-defense. It spearheaded a media campaign to amplify Israel's narrative of the events and resisted regional and international calls to halt the conflict and the atrocities in Gaza. Moreover, the United States provided diplomatic cover to shield Israel from global censure, consistently using its veto power in the Security Council to block resolutions aimed at resolving the crisis or ending the conflict. While the administration engaged in mediation efforts to project itself as a neutral actor, its reluctance or inability to pressure Netanyahu underscored the limitations of Washington's diplomatic influence. This hesitancy was reflective of Biden's political calculus, prioritizing electoral considerations — first his own and subsequently those of Kamala Harris in the 2024 US presidential election — over exerting pressure on Israel. Some analysts attribute this disparity between the United States' strategic power and its inability to champion a

lasting ceasefire to a lack of political will or diminishing influence in the Middle East. Despite its extensive interests and historical dominance in the region, and the recent conclusion of a ceasefire deal before Trump's assumption of office, the United States appears less capable of influencing outcomes in the evolving regional landscape.

Economically, the United States extended substantial support to Israel during the conflict. In April 2024, Biden approved a \$26 billion aid package for Israel, with approximately \$14 billion allocated for military support. Prior to this, over \$10 billion in assistance was provided to bolster Israel's air defenses and replenish its ammunition stockpile depleted during the Gaza war. Biden proudly highlighted that his administration has provided more aid to Israel than any previous US administration, underscoring the depth of the financial backing extended to Israel during this period.⁽¹¹⁾

Militarily, the United States has enhanced its presence and repositioned assets across the Middle East in response to the ongoing conflict. This buildup includes the deployment of aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, naval vessels and squadrons of F-35, F-15, F-16 and A-10 fighter jets. Recently, Washington deployed three THAAD systems, along with 100 accompanying personnel. This marks only the second instance of THAAD deployment in the region, the first being to the UAE following the Houthi attacks in 2019. Additionally, the United States has maintained a robust military presence over the past year, with approximately 40,000 troops, at least 12 warships and four Air Force fighter jet squadrons stationed throughout the region.

This strategic posture aims to protect allied nations and serves as a deterrent against potential threats.⁽¹²⁾

US forces have carried out targeted strikes on militias in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as part of efforts to deter the Iranian axis, which has orchestrated coordinated attacks against Israeli positions. Amid rising tensions in the Red Sea, particularly due to the Houthi campaign, Washington has also initiated a multinational naval security mission. This initiative operates under the Combined Maritime Forces framework and is led by Task Force 153. Its primary objectives are to address security challenges in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, ensure the freedom of navigation and bolster regional stability.

Over the past year, Washington tested its regional defense systems in coordination with Western and regional allies to counter Iranian retaliatory strikes following Israeli attacks. While these efforts succeeded in repelling some attacks, such as those in April 2024, the response fell short during Iran's ballistic missile attack in early October 2024. In response, Washington deployed the THAAD air defense system to bolster Israel's protection. These events underscored a significant shift in US strategic focus; despite the Biden administration's initial "pivot to Asia," it has expended considerable political, financial and military resources in the Middle East instead.⁽¹³⁾

Although Washington pursued diplomatic efforts to contain the conflict and prevent its escalation, these initiatives did not yield positive outcomes. Biden's proposal in May 2024 to end the Gaza war, followed by rounds of negotiations, including in August 2024, failed to achieve a resolution. This failure

stemmed from Israel's premeditated evasion of any settlement aimed at ending the conflict and Hamas' insistence on conditions that demanded an end to the war and Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. It should be noted that the ceasefire agreement reached during the last days of Biden's presidency remains tenuous.

It cannot be denied that Washington's stance on the conflict was largely motivated by a desire to realign the region in a way that serves US interests. By supporting Israel, the United States weakens Iran's regional axis, bolsters its own influence and furthers its aspirations for a regional structure that includes Israeli support. This approach also limits the influence of China and Russia while drawing the Gulf states back into alignment with Washington. Consequently, it can be argued without a doubt that the Israeli project has received unparalleled US backing.

However, some of the pressures that Biden attempted to exert on the Israeli government, in an effort to shift its stance and ease the pressure on his administration amid the genocide carried out by Israel in Gaza, cannot be overlooked. These pressures were partly driven by protests across US universities and the movements that formed to oppose the Biden administration's policy, which gained momentum during the electoral campaign. Biden feared the damage to the United States' reputation due to its position on the war. As a result, Biden tried to pressure Netanyahu by accusing him of failing to make sufficient efforts to free the hostages, aiming to embarrass him

domestically after his rejection of the deal. This strategy was also motivated by Biden's belief that Netanyahu's actions were boosting Trump's chances, who showed stronger support for Israel's more hardline policies.

But Biden, who holds a firm ideological and strategic belief in Israel's existence, was unwilling to leverage potential US pressure on Netanyahu or his government. He backed down from halting some arms imports to Israel and supported all the policies adopted by Netanyahu, from the invasion of Rafah to the occupation of the Philadelphi Corridor and even the ground attack on Lebanon, despite initially opposing these measures. However, it seems that, no matter how critical the differences in views between the United States and Israel may be, they cannot alter the United States' unwavering commitment to Israel, even if Netanyahu's actions lead to a large-scale regional war. Netanyahu took advantage of the minimal US pressure during a crucial election year and the attacks on Israel to push forward with his plan and his extremist agenda. The United States may find itself, in this context, following Israel's lead into a widening regional war that it never intended.

B- China's Cautious Approach and Alignment to Avoid Ramifications

In contrast to Washington's unequivocal support for Israel, China condemned Hamas' October 7 attack but refrained from labeling Hamas a terrorist organization, which angered Israel. Following the attacks, China called for both sides to reduce tensions promptly, reaffirmed its support for an independent Palestinian state and advocated for a two-state solution to

resolve the conflict. Additionally, during a meeting with his Russian and Iranian counterparts, China's foreign minister stated, "We will support the Palestinian people's struggle for their national rights."⁽¹⁴⁾

China's engagement with the Middle East conflict following the October 7 attacks adhered to its established approach of non-interference, political neutrality and extreme caution in getting involved in the region's complex conflicts. Beijing's initiatives were primarily political and diplomatic, focusing on supporting multilateral efforts to halt the violence in Gaza and contain the broader conflict. It actively participated in the UN Security Council's attempts to negotiate a ceasefire and address the humanitarian crisis. Notably, China vetoed a draft resolution proposed by the United States on October 15, 2023, arguing that the proposal contained divisive elements, lacked balance and did not strongly call for an end to the violence. However, China supported two resolutions introduced in the Security Council that ultimately failed due to the US veto. One, proposed by Russia on October 16, 2023, called for a ceasefire, the protection of civilians and the provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza. The second, submitted by Brazil on October 18, 2023, advocated for a humanitarian truce and the entry of aid into Gaza.

China supported the Arab draft resolution presented by Jordan on behalf of the Arab Group at the 10th emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly, titled "Illegal Israeli Actions in Occupied East Jerusalem and the Rest of the Occupied Palestinian Territories." The resolution, vot-

ed on October 27, 2023, garnered 121 votes in favor, 14 against and 44 abstentions. It called for an immediate, permanent and sustainable humanitarian truce, demanding a cessation of hostilities and the unrestricted provision of essential goods and services to civilians across Gaza.

China also took part in the Cairo Peace Summit 2023, held on October 21, 2023. The summit called for an immediate end to the ongoing war in Gaza, which has resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians. It emphasized the importance of adhering to international law and humanitarian standards, particularly ensuring the uninterrupted flow of humanitarian aid to those in need in Gaza. The summit also warned of the risks of the conflict spreading to other regions. During the summit, China's envoy to the Middle East Zhai Jun delivered a speech that highlighted China's position on the Gaza conflict. He stressed the need to prevent the escalation of the war, calling for an immediate ceasefire and an end to hostilities. Jun condemned the indiscriminate use of force, underscored the urgency of opening humanitarian relief corridors and urged Israel to restore essential supplies like water, electricity and fuel to the Gaza Strip, while calling for an end to the collective punishment of Gaza's residents.⁽¹⁵⁾

Chinese officials have made high-level visits to the region in efforts to halt the fighting and engage with the parties involved in the crisis, including both Israel and Hamas. China has also facilitated reconciliation talks between Hamas and Fatah. Despite showing a clear interest in further involvement

and mediation, China's efforts in this regard have remained relatively modest.⁽¹⁶⁾

China has observed the crisis from a distance, as it has largely been created by Israel and its Western allies, who have supported the heavy-handed approach of Netanyahu's extremist government. The United States has provided arms, material support, diplomatic cover and intervened to deter Iran-aligned armed groups that back the Palestinian resistance, prolonging the conflict and exacerbating the humanitarian disaster in the region, which has become the worst since World War II. This has undermined the credibility of the West and the international system and China views this situation as an opportunity to advance its efforts to challenge the US-led international order.

Despite the opportunity to expand its regional influence and compete with Washington's role in the Middle East, China has adhered to its neutral stance on regional conflicts and the principle of non-interference. As a result, China did not participate in the mediation efforts regarding the ceasefire and the release of the hostages, which were led by Qatar, Egypt and the United States. Instead, China positioned itself as a potential mediator, with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi calling for an international peace conference and reaffirming Beijing's support for a two-state solution.

It is surprising that China, which has a significant interest in the safety of maritime transport through the Red Sea and Bab al-Mandab and relies on the region as a crucial part of its global BRI, did not join the Prosperity Guardian Alliance

formed by Washington to address the disturbances caused by the Houthis. These disturbances, particularly attacks on tankers, posed significant risks to Chinese economic interests, potentially raising trade costs and threatening Chinese investments in the region. Instead, China chose to deploy a naval fleet to the Gulf of Aden, officially for anti-piracy operations. However, this move appears to be more of a response to tensions in the Red Sea,⁽¹⁷⁾ possibly signaling China's intention to remain an independent international actor, unwilling to be drawn into a US-led coalition.

Recently, China's position, which traditionally supported the Palestinian and Arab stance, has shifted toward balancing the rights of the Palestinian people with Israel's security concerns.⁽¹⁸⁾ This shift became evident when China refrained from condemning Israel for killing Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar, similar to its lack of condemnation after the assassination of Haniyeh. This suggests a Chinese repositioning in the region, adhering to its longstanding principle of neutrality and non-alignment, particularly after Israel expressed dissatisfaction with China's previous support for Palestinians, resistance factions and Iran. China's recalibration could be motivated by its desire to limit US and Israeli influence in the region, which may be undermining China's own interests. Additionally, the expansion of the conflict into Lebanon and the potential threat to Gulf oil facilities, crucial for China's energy needs, exacerbates economic concerns for China, which is already facing a recession.⁽¹⁹⁾

China's cautious approach to the conflict can be attributed to

its longstanding principle of non-interference, which is a cornerstone of its foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East. This principle is enshrined in the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. Beijing likely perceives that the ongoing conflict does not pose a direct threat to its vital interests in the region. At the same time, China may be keeping its options open for future engagement, potentially positioning itself as an independent mediator in regional peace processes. This approach mirrors its successful role in facilitating dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which not only strengthens China's influence in the Middle East but also enhances its standing on the global stage.

C- Russian Exploitation of the Conflict

Russia took an early and proactive role in the crisis, reaching out to the relevant parties and regional countries to discuss a ceasefire. Moscow's position emphasized that force alone cannot resolve the conflict and stressed the necessity of returning to negotiations based on international legitimacy. This legitimacy includes the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, coexisting peacefully and securely alongside Israel. The Russian Foreign Ministry urged both Palestinian and Israeli sides to cease fire immediately, reject violence, exercise restraint and begin a negotiation process supported by the international community to achieve a long-awaited, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East.

Following China's lead, Russia placed responsibility for the conflict's outcome squarely on the United States. Moscow argued that the escalation was a direct result of Washington's

chronic failure to implement relevant UN resolutions and its obstruction of the Middle East Quartet's efforts, which includes Russia, the United States, the EU and the UN. While Russia did not take sides in the conflict or designate Hamas as a terrorist organization, it left open the possibility of assuming a mediation role, given its positive relations with both Israel and Hamas. Russia's experience in regional conflicts, including in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen as well as its strong ties with Iran positioned it as a potential alternative mediator, especially in light of what it viewed as US bias. Indeed, Russian President Putin proposed a mediation initiative, which was well-received by both Israel and Hamas.

Based on this initiative, Russia hosted two delegations from Hamas in October 2023 and January 2024, led by Mousa Abu Marzouk, the head of Hamas' international relations office, to discuss conflict resolution strategies. Moscow continued with its diplomatic efforts by receiving leaders from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah for talks in February 2024, aiming to foster Palestinian reconciliation and unify their positions, which in turn bolstered Russia's influence. However, Israel criticized Russia for hosting these resistance delegations, interpreting it as support for Hamas' attack on Israel.

Despite these actions, Russia did not hesitate to criticize Israel's displacement policy, which it saw as a direct factor in the actions of Hamas on October 7. Putin reiterated the Palestinians' right to establish an independent state on their historical land and he rejected Israel's siege on Gaza and its planned ground operations. Russia, through Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, condemned the Israeli bombing as a viola-

tion of international law, warning of a catastrophe that could have lasting consequences. Additionally, Russia opposed Israel's obstruction of humanitarian aid and challenged Israel's justification of attacks on civilian areas, refugee camps and hospitals, with it claiming that Hamas was using these places for military purposes.

On the humanitarian front, Russia provided food aid to civilians in the Gaza Strip and Russian media outlets expressed significant sympathy for the suffering of the Palestinians, criticizing the US position and the Western media's bias toward the Israeli occupation. Russia's stance, largely shaped by its rivalry with the United States, appears to have unsettled Israel. In response, Israel, which had previously refused to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, decided to receive him after October 7. Some voices within Israel even suggested aligning Israeli positions more closely with the West regarding the Russia-Ukraine war.⁽²⁰⁾

Russia submitted two draft resolutions to the UN Security Council in response to the ongoing conflict. The first called for a permanent humanitarian ceasefire, condemning violence against civilians, securing the release of prisoners, providing humanitarian aid and allowing for civilian evacuations. However, this resolution was rejected by the United States, the UK, France and Japan. The second resolution, which sought a humanitarian truce, was vetoed by the United States. In line with its position on the conflict, Russia, alongside China, vetoed a US-backed resolution that granted Isra-

el the right to self-defense, classified Hamas as a terrorist organization and accused it of targeting civilians. Russia also vetoed a resolution submitted by the UAE in December 2023, accusing Washington of monopolizing the negotiations and rendering the resolution meaningless. Additionally, Russia supported an Arab-led resolution in the UN General Assembly in October 2023, calling for a permanent humanitarian truce leading to an end to hostilities. These actions revealed a clear alignment between Russia and China in confronting the United States' stance on the conflict and demonstrated their joint efforts to counter the West's influence in the Security Council deliberations.⁽²¹⁾

Unlike China, Russia has been more directly involved in the regional military scene, particularly through its military cooperation with Iran. This relationship, which gained significant momentum following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has intensified with the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Reports suggest that Russia may deliver advanced Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 air defense systems to Iran, which would be crucial in light of the ongoing attacks between Iran and Israel. Russia's involvement also extends to supporting armed groups engaged in the conflict, especially the Houthi group, which is in direct confrontation with the United States and the West in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. This aligns with Russia's broader geopolitical interests, especially as the United States diverts more focus toward the Middle East, potentially easing pressure on Russia in the ongoing war with Ukraine. Addi-

tionally, Russia conducted joint naval maneuvers on October 19, 2024, with Iran and Oman in the Indian Ocean.⁽²²⁾

Undoubtedly, the Russia-Ukraine war has significantly affected Russia's ability to continue its global activity, as the fall of the Assad regime exposed the decline of Russia's influence, while it did not provide any support to the former Syrian president while the opposition was advancing to regain the lands it lost in 2015 due to Russia's support and the backing of Assad in cooperation with Iranian militias, as Russia's interests in Syria are now under threat, including its military bases and its presence on the Mediterranean coast, which may weaken its regional and even global role.

It is evident that the door to confrontation has been opened in the region, with the traditional rules of engagement being transgressed and significant alterations to the combat doctrines of the forces involved. This conflict has now spread across multiple fronts, from Iran in the east to Palestine in the west and from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq in the north to Yemen in the south. As a result, it has become a major threat to the security and stability of the entire region. The situation continues to evolve, with the potential for the conflict to expand further, involving more countries and exacerbating tensions. Additionally, international powers are becoming increasingly involved, driven by their desire to influence regional dynamics and, by extension, their standing on the global stage.

The Strategic Implications of the Conflict

While countries and groups are embroiled in critical conflicts, with no clear horizon for a settlement to end the current regional war, the strategic shifts accompanying the conflict and the changes in the regional balance of power can be summarized as follows:

1- Strategic Shifts

The conflict has revealed a series of strategic transformations in the region, the most significant of which are the following:

A. Unprecedented War Amid a Lack of Regional Security Frameworks

The conflict in the region is distinct from other historical conflicts due to its multiple fronts and arenas, crossing borders with several countries involved, such as Iran, Israel, Yemen and Iraq, some of which do not share direct borders with Israel (see Figure 4). Additionally, the conflict is multidimensional, with these countries connected to non-state armed groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthi group in Yemen, Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria and the resistance factions in Gaza and the West Bank. This conflict spans seven different fronts, creating a highly complex and exceptional situation that has led to significant chaos in the region. It points to an extended crisis that may persist, as the involved parties pursue their battles with high stakes, zero-sum strategies and an ambition to reconfigure the regional power structure.

Figure 4: The Multiple Conflict Fronts Across the Middle East

Israel says it is under attack in a 'multi-arena war'



Source: Neri Zilber and Raya Jalabi, "Israel Warns of Regional Conflict Risk as Iran Tensions Increase," *The Financial Times*, December 26, 2023, accessed February 5, 2025, <https://bit.ly/4gumUtu>.

This conflict is unfolding in a region that lacks any formal frameworks for regional security, occurring during a time when alliances are fluid and flexible. Some regional powers are hesitant to align with either of the main parties to the conflict, Iran or Israel and the Palestinian issue further complicates the stances of these powers. The scope of the regional confrontation has expanded in an unprecedented manner, reaching the Horn of Africa and the northern Indian Ocean.

With the Houthis now involved in the conflict in occupied Palestine, the Red Sea region and its borders have become part of the ongoing struggle, with forces from nearly 40 countries operating in the area. This marks a significant shift in both the scope of the war and the direct parties involved. Operation Prosperity Guardian, led by the United States in response to the attack and the Houthis' support of the so-called Axis of Resistance, underscores Iran's ability to link various conflict arenas in the Middle East, testing its defensive strategy and doctrine. The overlapping roles of international and regional powers and the multifaceted nature of the conflict indicate the intensity of intervention and a determined effort to bring about fundamental changes in the regional balance of power.

B. Renewed Hostilities Amid Shifts in Military Doctrines

The desire to bring about a fundamental change in the regional balance of power led the parties involved in the conflict to develop new doctrines and strategies to address this ambition. As a result, the conflict shifted from a calculated scope and gray areas to a more aggressive and direct confrontation. On October 7, 2023, Israel faced a severe blow, exposing weaknesses in its military doctrine in the face of threats from multiple fronts. It suffered heavy human losses, the likes of which it had not experienced since its establishment in 1948. However, the conflict also highlighted Israel's ability to adapt its military doctrine. For the first time, Israel was engaged in a prolonged war, which challenged the longstanding perception of its reliance on a "lightning war" strategy that typically lasted only a few days. This flexibility and adaptability

align with Israel's ambitions in the region, aimed at bringing about a radical shift in the regional power balance in its favor. The support Israel received from the United States further reinforced this new doctrine and helped it adjust to this new pattern of military engagement. Thus, Israel seemingly transformed the October 7 attack from a security breach into an opportunity to deliver decisive blows to its regional adversaries.⁽²³⁾

Iran's axis suffered a significant setback with the first test of the forward defense theory against Israel. This event seems to mark a shift in Iran's national security and military strategy, transitioning from its reliance on non-state military allies in the region to a more integrated approach. This new strategy combines direct intervention with the use of proxies, moving away from the previous "gray zone" strategy. In this context, Iran appears to have adopted a more offensive hybrid model, moving away from the strategic patience that characterized its earlier approach, which involved delaying responses until the right moment. Now, Iran is required to confront Israel's escalation with rapid and decisive responses, aiming to prevent its adversary from gaining too much ground.

The most significant shift in Iran's strategy is its increased reliance on the power of ballistic missiles, which have proven successful in penetrating Israel's formidable air defenses. This highlights the central role of Iran's missile force in its new national security strategy, positioning it as a key asset in Iran's military capabilities. This development could provide Iran with a valuable bargaining chip in future negotiations

with the West. Additionally, Iran's missile prowess may open up a lucrative arms market, particularly with countries like Russia, and could lead to increased technological and military cooperation with other powers. While there is ongoing debate about altering Iran's nuclear doctrine, it appears that Iran is closely monitoring the moves of President Trump, known for his unpredictable and forceful approach. This could delay any significant changes in Iran's nuclear strategy, but it may not entirely rule out such adjustments, especially if the conflict shifts the regional balance in Iran's favor.

C. A New Pattern of Weapons Deployment and Offensive Operations

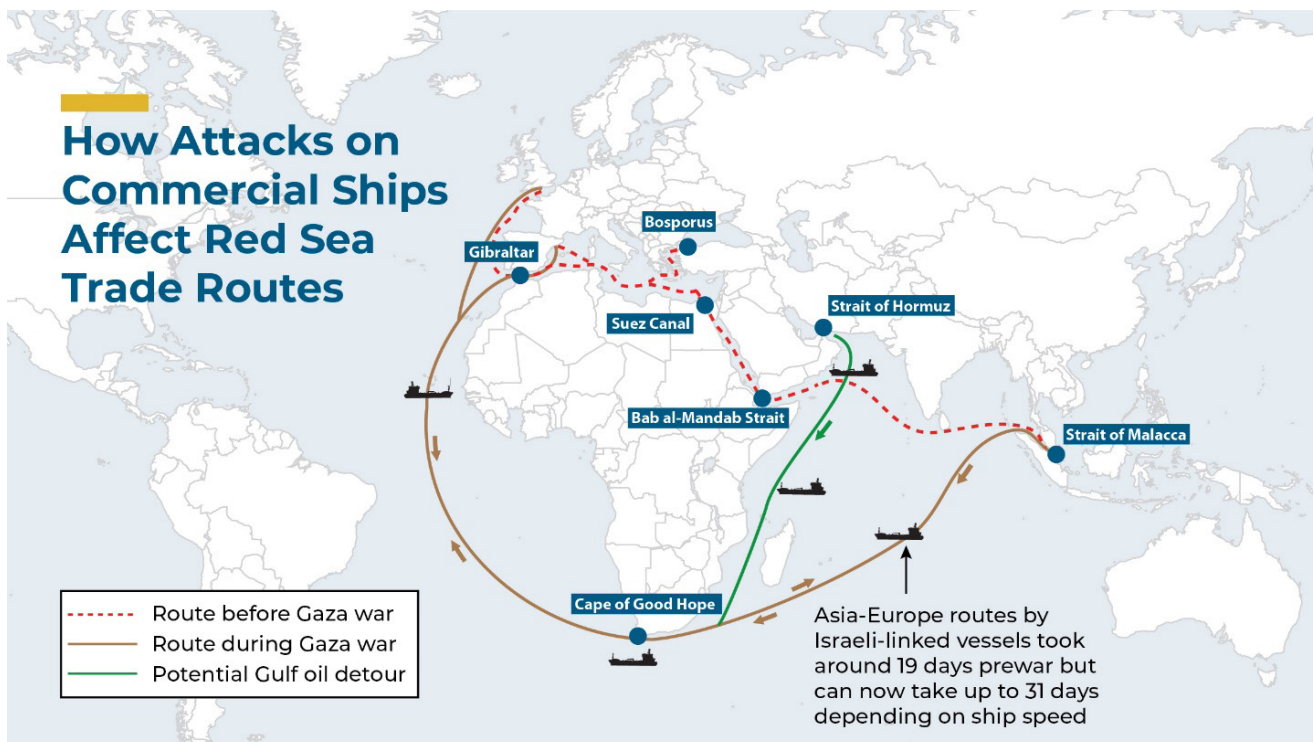
At the operational level, the ongoing conflict has demonstrated that the region is witnessing an unprecedented war, where advances in weaponry, cyberwarfare and other cutting-edge tools are at play. The Israeli army, for instance, is not fighting alone but is supported by powerful allies, particularly the United States and the UK. This highlights that, while geopolitical factors remain significant, the role of modern technology in military conflicts cannot be overstated. The conflict serves as a testing ground for new, unconventional tools, including cyberattacks like the one on Hezbollah's communications devices and the use of hundreds of drones and remotely guided strikes. Iran has also tested long-range ballistic missiles, including hypersonic missiles, which have crossed multiple borders into occupied territories. Meanwhile, the Houthis' long-range missiles and aircraft have also targeted Israel. In response, Israel has deployed advanced weapons to penetrate

fortified positions, such as massive bombs weighing hundreds of tons used to destroy tunnels and kill high-ranking officials, including the assassination of Nasrallah in Beirut. Additionally, modern devices and multilayered air defense systems have been crucial in exposing military operations and defending against the barrage of missile and drone strikes. This military revolution is likely to have profound implications for regional security and stability, particularly given the ongoing chaos and unrest both within countries and among regional powers.

D. Increasing Prospects of Broader Regional Conflagration Although the parties involved in the conflict are keen to avoid a full-scale war, the complex reality of the situation is likely to lead to a prolonged struggle with no clear end in sight. The region may find itself trapped in a state reminiscent of the mid-20th century, where a situation of “no war, no peace” prevails. In such a scenario, no party will be able to decisively resolve the conflict without incurring heavy losses. This is because, although countries typically avoid wars they do not want to engage in, and politicians and strategists often seek to de-escalate tensions before a full-blown conflict ensues, the danger in the Middle East lies in the geopolitical stakes between two competing regional projects, as well as the involvement of international powers looking to expand their influence in the area. These tensions have the potential to spiral into a wider war, triggered by accidents or strategic errors, where leaders might lose control over the situation. The US secretary of state has warned that the continuation

of this conflict increases the risk of unpredictable and uncontrollable outcomes. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the decision to escalate the war does not rest solely with national states; it also lies with groups that have their own interests and existential fears, and who possess capabilities that surpass the military strength of the countries they operate within. These groups control sensitive locations of international importance, and their actions could affect major regional and global actors (see Figure 5).⁽²⁴⁾

Figure 5: The Impact of the Houthis' Attacks on International Trade Flows



Source: “Houthi Ship Attacks Are Affecting Red Sea Trade Routes.” The Washington Institute, December .2023 ,7 <https://:n9.cl/mfxj1>.

E. A Question of Occupation That Cannot Be Bypassed

The Palestinian national movement is facing a historic dilemma. While Palestinians endure apartheid, a war of extermination, ethnic cleansing and forced displacement, they are also

suffering from deep internal divisions and the lack of a unified political or resistance strategy to confront their current plight. The cause, which once garnered broad regional support, now finds itself mired in competition between conflicting regional powers, with little consensus or effective solidarity. This situation is particularly evident as the Palestinian people face a new catastrophe, with the residents of the Gaza Strip enduring the most brutal military campaign in their history, all while lacking any meaningful international protection or the enforcement of basic rules and standards. The inhabitants of the besieged Gaza Strip remain under relentless bombardment, trapped in a dire situation with no escape or hope. This ongoing tragedy underscores the brutal and inhumane nature of the Israeli occupation, revealing a reality that is both unimaginable and unacceptable in the 21st century.

The crisis has revealed that the Palestinian cause remains inextricably linked to broader issues in the region, making it impossible to separate them. The historical rights of the Palestinians cannot be overlooked, nor can a reality be imposed upon them by the occupation. This understanding suggests that the conflict surrounding the central issue in the region will persist, as any attempt to liquidate it contradicts the historical process, which consistently affirms the impossibility of suppressing national liberation struggles. Furthermore, Israel's ability to endure the moral and humanitarian challenges posed by the potential liquidation of this issue appears to be limited. The war has not only placed the Palestinian cause back on the agendas of governments and international organi-

zations but has also redefined it for new generations, particularly those whose Arab and Islamic connection to the Palestinian cause had faded. In fact, the issue has garnered significant attention from popular sectors in Western societies, eroding the Israeli narrative. Today, the Palestinian cause enjoys widespread sympathy, and many concepts regarding Palestinian resistance have shifted, with the right to resist occupation now widely recognized as legitimate and indisputable.

F. The Middle East's Return to the Global Spotlight

The current reality in the region challenges the narratives that once suggested the diminishing importance of the Middle East in global politics. The conflict has reengaged competing powers, notably the United States, which, instead of withdrawing, has deployed its forces more assertively in the regional theater. However, it is evident that the United States lacks a clear understanding of the limits of military power in this conflict, reminiscent of its previous interventions in the region where it ultimately exited without achieving its objectives. Washington's inability to secure significant results through military force is compounded by its involvement in multiple global conflicts, which competing powers are keen to exploit. Despite the apparent superiority of the United States in the operational theater so far, it has not succeeded in forming the regional alliance it seeks. Countries in the region that pursue a third path, such as the Gulf states, continue to prefer an impartial stance in this conflict, primarily supporting the Palestinian cause. They remain reluctant to allow their relationship with Washington to come at the expense of their ties

with China, Russia or even Iran. This highlights the growing aspirations to create a new regional balance, moving beyond traditional US dominance.

The failure of US diplomatic initiatives to decisively halt the war highlights a long history of diplomatic setbacks in the region since the peace agreements between Israel, Egypt and Jordan. This failure may be attributed to Washington's biased stance in the conflict, which undermines any genuine diplomatic efforts. Undoubtedly, the absence of effective diplomacy adds to Washington's burdens. Regional conflicts are complex and do not resolve automatically; they require an influential force that can engage all parties, a role that only the United States is capable of fulfilling. However, the lack of a diplomatic approach risks eroding US regional influence, making it difficult for Washington to restore its standing. Moreover, this failure affects its global reputation as a guarantor of international security and stability, while fueling propaganda that casts doubt on the effectiveness and relevance of the global order led by the United States.⁽²⁵⁾

2- Limits of Change in the Strategic Equilibriums

The conflict has highlighted significant shifts in the regional balance of power, reflecting changes in regional security dynamics. It also underscores the transitional phase in the global system, marked by the growing influence of middle powers. This can be further understood as follows:

A- Tipping the Balance of Power in Favor of Israel and Regional Reconfiguration

The conflict has underscored Israel's substantial military su-

periority and the clear imbalance of power between it and other regional actors, despite the unprecedented challenges and losses it has faced. It highlighted the Israeli army's true capabilities, including advanced technology, precise intelligence, effective joint operations, air superiority and robust air defenses besieging the occupied territories. Additionally, Israel's ability to manage operations across multiple fronts simultaneously was evident. On the global and regional stage, the conflict demonstrated Israel's considerable political and diplomatic influence, as it managed to neutralize many governments during the confrontation. Moreover, it revealed Israel's growing leverage over US administrations, including the Biden administration, which appeared relatively subdued in dealings with the Israeli prime minister. Some observers suggest this dynamic reflects the behind-the-scenes coordination between the two sides.

Israel's military superiority has emboldened it to consider objectives beyond achieving victory and ensuring its own security, instead envisioning a radical reconfiguration of the Middle East. In this new regional order, Israel sees itself as the dominant and most influential power, aiming to expand its geographical boundaries based on religious interpretations and prophecies, disregarding the rights of Palestinians, including their aspiration for an independent state. This approach involves leveraging military power across the region as deemed necessary to counter perceived threats to its security, targeting any regional actor without exception. This strategy reinforces Israel's deterrent power, allows it to dictate terms and enables

intervention in the internal affairs and policies of neighboring states. Ultimately, it reflects an ambition to alter the strategic landscape and redefine regional power dynamics.

Israel's regional ambitions are evident in statements by members of Netanyahu's government and official maps displayed at various forums, which omit any mention of a Palestinian state. Some maps even controversially include Jordan within Israel's borders. Several ministers in the right-wing government openly reject the two-state solution. Netanyahu, in his address to the United Nations, presented maps showcasing countries with ties to Israel or those seeking normalization, alongside a map of nations aligned with Iran. These visuals reflect his government's vision for the Middle East, aligned with Israel's strategic goals. This approach also aligns with a broader US-backed initiative to divide the region into two blocs, enabling Israel to consolidate influence and assert regional dominance. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has also voiced concern over what he termed "Israeli expansionist ambitions," warning that Israel's aspirations extend beyond Gaza to areas between the Tigris and Euphrates, as demonstrated by maps publicly displayed by Israeli officials.⁽²⁶⁾

President Trump's remark, "When I look at the map of the Middle East, Israel is a very small spot. In fact, I said, 'Is there a way to get more space?'" hints at potential behind-the-scenes understandings or promises aimed at facilitating Israel's territorial expansion at the expense of its neighbors. Such ambitions might extend beyond full control of historical Palestine to include annexing parts of Lebanon or erasing borders with

Syria as part of a “Greater Israel” project. This scenario gains plausibility amid US political competition to demonstrate loyalty to Israel, the shift of Israeli society toward the far right, its sense of regional military superiority and its ability to evade accountability. These factors collectively fuel Israel’s pursuit of regional dominance by weakening neighboring powers through military force or strategic infiltration.⁽²⁷⁾

The transformations in Syria have proven the depth of the strategic changes that Operation Al-Aqsa Flood led to, as the equation changed radically, as Iran lost Syria as a strategic ally and a prominent member of the “Axis of Resistance” after the fall of Assad. It even lost the land line of communication that it had established over decades from Tehran to Lebanon and as a result the military supply line to its main ally Hezbollah was cut off. It may also have lost the forward deterrent force that it relies on to secure its nuclear program, which may whet the appetite of Israel and the United States to launch an attack on Iran while avoiding any counterattack by Hezbollah.

In return, Türkiye regained its former influence in Syria, and the door was once again opened for its regional project in its traditional Arab and Islamic surroundings. Israel also exploited the event in order to impose a new regional *fait accompli*, and extended its control over the demilitarized zone in the Golan Heights. It even stationed its forces within the borders of Syria, violating all international resolutions and Syria’s sovereignty. It launched the largest air attack in its history in order to weaken Syria’s strategic capabilities and remove it from the regional power equation, in addition to ensuring that no

qualitative weapons would fall into the hands of the Islamic opposition factions that seized power in Syria.

B- Iranian Losses and Alternative Options for Survival

In contrast to Israel's rising discourse of regional hegemony and US support for Israeli actions, the repeated setbacks suffered by Iran and its regional allies have placed this axis in a difficult position. While there are signs of resistance and efforts to unify and coordinate among fronts — commonly referred to as the “unity of the arenas” strategy — Iran's calculated approach has only achieved minimal deterrence. As the conflict continues on multiple fronts, Iran is losing the power it had invested in some of its allies and regional forces. For instance, Hamas' strength in Gaza has diminished under intense Israeli military pressure, even though the outcome of the battle is still pending.

Hezbollah has also suffered a significant setback, not only from the assassination of its long-time leader Nasrallah, but also from Israel's unprecedented ability to inflict heavy losses on both senior and mid-level leaders as well as the party's weapons depots. These developments have revealed a clear Israeli military and intelligence superiority over Hezbollah, potentially leading to the expansion of ground operations in Southern Lebanon. Such actions could push the group back south of the Litani River and destroy its key capabilities along the border, which would expose Iran's regional influence and weaken critical elements of its deterrence strategy. Especially after Syria left the “Axis of Resistance” with the fall of the Assad and Iran lost its military presence in this arena, which

was an important base of communication within the framework of the “Shiite Crescent” project, with what this means in terms of a huge ideological and strategic decline in Iran’s regional influence, and perhaps a prelude to more losses in the Iraqi arena and in Yemen, in light of Israel’s desire to avail of every opportunity to bring about a radical change in the balance of power with Iran.

On the other hand, Iran’s ability to endure the worsening economic situation may push the regime into an unprecedented legitimacy crisis, especially following direct attacks on Iranian territory by Israel. The prospect of any retaliation from Iran triggering even stronger responses from Israel could significantly weaken the leadership’s capabilities. As a result, it appears that the ongoing conflict is not only diminishing Iran’s military strength but also limiting its ability to mobilize its regional proxies due to the potential repercussions of such actions.

While Russia and China’s cooperation with Iran is significant, it remains limited and shaped by the interests of each country. This was clearly evident in their muted response to Israel’s October 2024 attack on several military sites in Iran, which did not match the level expected from nations with such close relations to Iran. This has led some in Iran to reassess the notion of Russia and China as strategic allies, a view that now seems misleading. This situation also highlights the limitations of Iran’s eastward looking policy, as it cannot rely on these countries in any regional equation against the US-Israel axis. Consequently, Iran may shift its focus toward

diplomacy with the West as a means to reduce tensions and safeguard its influence and interests, rather than opting for confrontation that could lead to significant strategic losses.⁽²⁸⁾ However, it is important to note that the pressure on Iran has prompted a response, including missile attacks on military sites in the occupied territories. Tehran demonstrated its willingness to confront Netanyahu's threats, which reached the extreme of threatening regime change. Netanyahu's statement to the Iranian people on September 30, 2024, at the United Nations — "Israel stands by your side" and "The moment when your country will be liberated is closer than people imagine" — was a direct threat to the Iranian establishment and marked a red line for Iran's leadership.⁽²⁹⁾ This situation could lead to a significant shift in Iran's strategy, potentially resulting in fundamental changes to its military doctrine. Such a shift could involve greater engagement of its forces beyond its borders and retaliatory strikes from within Iranian territory aimed at Israel. This would represent an attempt to establish a deterrent balance and curb Israel's efforts to shift the regional balance of power against Iran and its allies as well as target regional powers aiding Iran, as evidenced by an IRGC commander's threat to attack any country that allows Israel to use its airspace in strikes against Iran.⁽³⁰⁾ The exchange of attacks between Iran and Israel has undoubtedly recast regional power dynamics, with this new equation likely to endure beyond the current confrontation. While Iran may reconsider its nuclear doctrine as a means of deterring its adversaries and addressing the power imbalance, altering

this doctrine is unlikely to provide an immediate solution to Iran's strategic challenges. Moving toward nuclear weapons could provoke conflict in the short term, and in the long run, even the most advanced deterrence might not shield the Iranian establishment from threats both internally and externally. Domestic and international enemies will continue to exploit Iran's vulnerabilities, including weak intelligence, insufficient conventional weaponry (such as air defenses), a deteriorating economy and declining legitimacy.⁽³¹⁾

C- Saudi Arabia as a Regional Balancing Power and a Spearhead for Stability

Regional powers are actively working to counter Israel's attempts to impose its will by force, with Saudi Arabia taking a leadership role in efforts to end the current conflict. The kingdom is facing unprecedented pressure from the United States to abandon its longstanding position on the Palestinian issue. However, due to its Islamic and Arab identity, Saudi Arabia has remained steadfast in its commitment to the Palestinian cause, proving to be a significant obstacle to the US-Israeli agenda, which seeks to bypass Palestinian historical rights. Instead, Saudi Arabia is spearheading international efforts to establish a new reality regarding the Palestinian issue. These efforts present an alternative to the current regional polarization and conflict, advocating for cooperation with regional and international partners. Saudi Arabia is also leading Arab and Islamic initiatives to build consensus on the Palestinian issue and address the challenges it faces.

In addition, Saudi Arabia's pragmatic approach during the

current conflict has played a key role in preventing the region from descending into a full-scale war. By avoiding alignment with the US axis, the kingdom has managed to steer clear of direct confrontation with Iran. It has also maintained a balanced distance from the conflicting international parties seeking to exploit the crisis to enhance their positions at the expense of regional powers and their interests. This stance could serve as a crucial foundation for future regional stability, offering a path to security if a broader conflict or continued escalation can be avoided.

Israel continues to promote the possibility of normalizing relations with Saudi Arabia, despite its ongoing efforts to undermine the Palestinian cause. However, Saudi Arabia's firm stance on linking normalization to the resolution of the Palestinian issue has shifted the dynamics not only in its bilateral relations with Israel but also in the broader regional context. Through statements by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the minister of foreign affairs, Saudi Arabia has made it clear that normalization will not occur without a just settlement of the Palestinian issue. This position has been further reinforced by the kingdom's significant efforts to gain international recognition for a Palestinian state, challenging Israel's attempts to erase the Palestinian cause. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has managed to remove the normalization issue from the ongoing negotiations with the United States on a strategic partnership agreement, signaling its success in decoupling normalization from its relationship with Washington.⁽³²⁾

Unlike the regional powers that are actively engaged in a multifront confrontation, Saudi Arabia, along with certain Gulf and Arab states, has emerged as a distinct third force in the region. This bloc holds a unique perspective on regional security, seeking to maintain a balance that prevents any one power from gaining the upper hand. The kingdom is determined to avoid dragging the region into further chaos and conflict, and it is particularly concerned that the United States, in the absence of China's role in the crisis, may exploit the situation to impose its agenda. Saudi Arabia fears that such moves could push the region back into a state of conflict, with the United States providing full support to Israel in ways that would undermine the status and interests of the Arab countries involved.

Despite the growing polarization between the United States and China, Riyadh is unlikely to sever ties with Washington or enter into a full alliance with Beijing. Instead, Saudi Arabia is likely to pursue a cautious and pragmatic approach, strengthening relations with both powers to serve its core interests. The kingdom may leverage its growing ties with China to extract maximum benefits from the United States, recognizing that it cannot afford to abandon either pole. The United States remains the primary security partner for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, with an unmatched military presence and deep coordination in defense matters. In contrast, China has shown no inclination to become a regional security actor, and its stance on the Gaza conflict suggests it is not willing to bear the costs or consequences of military involve-

ment in the region. While China's growing economic influence is essential, particularly in energy and trade, the United States is unlikely to oppose stronger Saudi-China economic ties, though it may be hesitant to allow deeper cooperation in sensitive defense, security or technology areas. Thus, Riyadh aims to balance its vital interests with both Washington and Beijing, avoiding the role of a flashpoint in the US-China rivalry. By doing so, the kingdom can maximize its benefits and enhance its regional and international standing, while potentially positioning itself as a future mediator to calm tensions and manage conflicts between the two global powers.

The GCC demonstrated its proactive approach to regional diplomacy with its first high-level summit with the EU in Brussels on October 16, 2004, as well as its participation in joint ministerial meetings with Brazil, India and Russia. Additionally, the GCC has initiated informal dialogue with Iran, signaling a deliberate effort to establish a balanced and disciplined strategy amid the ongoing regional conflict. The current crisis in the region presents significant challenges to the interests of Gulf states, especially as traditional powers in the Arab world seem incapable of stabilizing the situation. In response, the Gulf states are focusing on attracting influential international powers to prevent the region from becoming further polarized. Their goal is to foster balance in the face of escalating regional competition. Furthermore, the Gulf states appear to be prioritizing engagement and integration with Iran rather than positioning themselves against it in a direct conflict. This approach reflects their hope that a new formula

for regional balance can emerge — one that avoids confrontation and fosters cooperation. There is no better evidence of Saudi Arabia's pioneering regional approach than its position on developments in Syria and its readiness to provide support for the stability of the country and to prevent it from collapsing and becoming chaotic, in addition to its rejection of Israeli violations and attacks on Syria's sovereignty.⁽³³⁾

D- The United States' Return Under a Multipolar Order

Washington's ability to establish a new strategic balance can be evaluated by assessing its influence over four critical issues: Iran's regional influence, Israel's integration into the region, China's exclusion and the weakening of regional countries' participation in the BRI. This perspective on the Middle East must be understood through the lens of US strategy, which aims to maintain dominance over the international system amid a campaign by competing global powers to challenge the US position on the world stage. The same principles guiding the US approach to conflicts in Ukraine, the South China Sea and the Pacific are now being applied to the Middle East. According to former US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, countries like China, Russia, Iran and North Korea are seeking to resolve regional disputes through coercion or force. They aim to exploit economic and energy dependencies of other nations and undermine the foundations of US power, including its military and technological supremacy, dominant currency and unmatched network of global alliances and partnerships. In response, Washington feels compelled to address these threats head-on, aiming to weaken

the influence of countries such as Iran, China and Russia in the region, while also limiting their ability to establish an alternative regional approach to US policies. This was evident in the aftermath of China's mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which led to regional peace and undermined the security framework that relied on confronting Iran under US guidance. Furthermore, Washington seeks to ensure that investments from the Middle East are directed toward the West rather than to China as a crucial element of sustaining US global superiority, particularly in the technological domain. Equally important is Washington's aim to rebuild the trust of its regional allies and mitigate their drift toward positions at odds with US interests, reviving historic alliances to bolster its international standing and leadership.

The United States has likely succeeded in reaffirming its regional presence and significance, particularly its unparalleled military presence, which no other international power can replicate. This serves as a key message to countries in the region that may be questioning the reliability of China and even Russia as dependable partners, especially amid ongoing crises and conflicts. While Chinese efforts have been limited to diplomatic and political efforts in addressing the region's challenges, its inability to provide the essential element required by the region —namely, the presence of a strong security partner committed to ensuring stability and promoting peace — has become evident. This highlights the enduring role of the United States as the dominant security provider in the region.

There is no doubt that US intervention in the Middle East conflict has benefited Washington by leveraging the crisis to revitalize alliances and forge new partnerships. By fueling geopolitical competition, the United States has been able to attract allies, as seen in Europe and Southeast Asia. A notable example of this strategy is the defense agreement between the United States and the UAE, where the level of defense partnership was elevated to that of a “major defense partner,” similar to the US relationship with India. This agreement also includes pioneering initiatives in technology and artificial intelligence (AI), aimed at distancing Abu Dhabi from military and technical cooperation with Beijing. This strategic move is significant for Washington’s broader regional goals of containing China’s influence in both East Asia and the Middle East. Furthermore, this shift has implications for Saudi Arabia, which is negotiating with the United States on security and nuclear cooperation. These developments appear to be part of a coordinated effort by Washington to recast regional realities and create a new cooperation framework that strengthens its influence and redefines regional power dynamics.

In addition, Washington has exploited this conflict to deal a powerful blow to Iran and its regional axis, potentially succeeding in dismantling Iran’s deterrence capabilities over the long term. This effort is part of a broader strategy to build a new regional security framework, similar to the one formed in April 2024 between the United States and European and Arab countries, aimed at confronting Iran’s attacks on Israel. The war has clearly demonstrated Washington’s superiority

and its crucial role in influencing the direction of the conflict in the region. Israel would not have launched attacks on Iranian territory and military installations in such a manner without US assistance, particularly the deterrent force that ensures protection from Iran's potential retaliation. This includes measures like the deployment of THAAD air defense systems, strategic bombers and B-52 aircraft to strike Houthi positions, among other actions. These moves highlight that Israel alone does not have the practical capabilities to inflict severe damage on Iran or sustain such a war without unlimited US support. This underscores Washington's significant ability to shape the conflict on both the Lebanese and Gaza fronts, and to deescalate hostilities if it chooses to do so, although this ability is sometimes hindered by bias, duplicity, partisan competition and electoral considerations.⁽³⁴⁾

The ongoing conflict sheds light on the transformations within the international system, which no longer retains its previous unipolar structure. While the United States is no longer the sole architect of the region's dynamics, the system has not yet transitioned to a fully multilateral model. A key indication of these transformations is the complete absence of international institutions' roles, alongside clear and blatant violations of rules and standards, signaling the erosion of the rules-based system Washington claims to uphold. This reality is further underscored by unprecedented US bias and double standards, especially when contrasting Washington's stance on Russia's war in Ukraine with its approach to Israel's actions in Gaza and Lebanon.

Washington's approach has heightened concerns among regional countries due to a noticeable shift in its traditional stance on the Palestinian issue. This shift aligns closely with and supports the Israeli perspective, accompanied by a reluctance to activate US diplomatic capabilities. Instead, Washington appears to use diplomatic channels as a façade to obscure its evident bias toward Israel. This approach leaves Israel ample room and active support to escalate its use of force, aiming to impose a new regional reality while receiving all the means and guarantees necessary to pursue this strategy.⁽³⁵⁾

Moreover, Washington's strategic priorities reflect a firm conviction that its most significant security threat lies outside the Middle East, with a primary focus on countering the rise of China. This perspective drives efforts to redirect resources away from the region while maintaining a presence that serves to constrain China's influence there. However, this dual approach limits Washington's capacity to decisively recalibrate regional balances, as its engagement is driven more by global strategic calculations than by a commitment to comprehensive regional restructuring.⁽³⁶⁾

E- The Sino-Russian Presence Qualified by a Risk-averse Approach

The conflict has underscored China's hesitancy to assume a more prominent role on the global stage, despite its willingness to challenge US hegemony and propose initiatives for global security and peace. In the Middle East specifically, the Gaza war has highlighted the clear limitations of China's role, emphasizing its economic focus and reliance on Washington

to act as the primary provider of regional security.

Nonetheless, the region is no longer entirely under US dominance as in the past. The conflict has demonstrated that the world has progressed beyond the stage of unipolarity, even if it has yet to achieve full multipolarity. This suggests that the conflict will not be resolved solely by the regional powers involved but will also be determined significantly by international actors. This dynamic may prolong the conflict, particularly if China and Russia choose to intensify their involvement, seeking to counterbalance Washington's influence by bolstering the Iranian axis against the Western-Israeli alliance.

The delay in reaching a ceasefire by the Biden-Harris administration in Gaza undeniably provided China with a significant public relations advantage in the Arab world. According to the 2023-24 Arab Barometer poll conducted in five countries, China's popularity has risen markedly, while the United States' image has faced a notable decline. During this period, China further strengthened its regional influence as Egypt, the UAE and Iran joined the BRICS alliance under its leadership, solidifying its position as a champion of emerging economies. Additionally, China's economic ties with Arab countries have flourished, with trade reaching \$120 billion with Saudi Arabia alone in 2023.⁽³⁷⁾

Russia appears to be leveraging the ongoing crisis to its advantage, particularly through its defense cooperation with Iran, signaling an interest in prolonging the conflict to add complexities for Washington and divert its focus from Ukraine.

Similarly, China likely views US involvement in this crisis as an opportunity to advance its regional ambitions, such as asserting control over Taiwan, while bolstering its efforts to reassess its global standing. As such, the conflict represents a significant juncture in shaping the global power structure, influencing alliances and redefining the roles of active regional powers in the evolving international order.⁽³⁸⁾

Similarly, influential regional powers with significant political and diplomatic clout have expressed reservations about Washington's approach and its attempts to impose polarization in the region. These states remain committed to preserving their partnerships with China and maintaining strong ties with Russia, refusing to jeopardize their interests with these nations merely to satisfy Washington's strategic goals. Instead, they are pursuing a strategy of diversifying their relationships and partnerships, driven by a firm belief in the ongoing international transformations in the global power structure and the necessity of a multipolar world that upholds rules and standards.

But, the strategic earthquake that struck Syria may indicate that Russia and China's bet on avoiding involvement in the conflict and making more efforts to impose a cost on the United States' unilateral approach in the region and its absolute support for Israel is wrong, as Russia and China's allies in the region are being weakened and even some of the regime's supporters, such as Iran and Syria, are being undermined, with what this means in terms of eroding the influence of the two countries in the region and even inflicting significant losses

on them, both strategically and geopolitically, and giving the United States regional superiority that may attract regional powers to it and push them to reduce their bets on China and Russia.

F- Geoeconomic and Geotechnological Equilibriums

The Middle East conflict exemplifies how global competition influences the economy and trade. Among its underlying causes is the struggle between international and regional powers to shape a new economic reality. A notable dimension of this competition is the rivalry between the United States and China over controlling trade routes connecting East and West. This rivalry has drawn in regional powers, splitting their allegiances between China's BRI and the US-backed IMEC, fueling ongoing geopolitical tensions.

These dynamics have become increasingly evident as complications in navigating the Bab al-Mandab and Hormuz Straits disrupt trade, directly harm certain economies and slow commerce between East and West. Adding to this is the heightened cost of transporting goods via the Cape of Good Hope, which could impact all Middle Eastern countries. The threat of targeting vital infrastructure, such as oil facilities, amplifies the conflict's potential international repercussions, including soaring energy prices and destabilization of major global economies, notably China and the United States. This underscores the significant leverage Iran's allies wield, particularly if the conflict escalates into broader, more aggressive confrontations.⁽³⁹⁾

The region's economic significance has directly contributed

to the heightened military presence around key maritime passages, taking the form of military bases, stationed forces and ongoing military operations. With these forces stationed near critical shipping lanes like the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the region is undergoing an unparalleled militarization. This escalation raises concerns that extend beyond the immediate Israel-Iran conflict. The US military presence presents a challenge to China's global initiatives, particularly the BRI, by disrupting its trade routes to the West and impacting its global supply chains. This strategic tension may explain China's decision not to engage directly in military operations in the Red Sea, opting instead for agreements with the Houthis to ensure the safe passage of its ships.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Meanwhile, Russia has reportedly provided technical assistance to the Houthis to target US and Western vessels.⁽⁴¹⁾ These developments highlight how global powers are maneuvering within the region's volatile security environment to advance their strategic and geoeconomic interests at the expense of their rivals.

The competition in AI has become a key front in the broader geotechnological rivalry between the United States and China in the Middle East. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have ambitious goals to carve out a significant role in the global AI landscape. While the United States is widely regarded as a leader in this field, this does not necessarily mean that collaboration with the United States will come at the expense of ties with China. The geopolitical competition and growing distrust in Washington have cast a shadow over regional re-

lations. Despite this, the technological relationship between China and these countries remains strong. As a result, Saudi Arabia is unlikely to fall into a binary choice between the United States and China, and its ties with both powers in the AI field are expected to remain robust.⁽⁴²⁾

Conclusion

The new Middle East envisioned by the United States and Israel hinges on a decisive Israeli victory over Palestinian resistance factions and the regional Iranian axis, along with the establishment of an Arab understanding of Israel's dominance and an abandonment of the Palestinian cause. Achieving this, however, seems challenging. Despite unprecedented US support for Israel, there are US red lines regarding the complete elimination of the Palestinian cause. A significant segment of the US population still rejects the extreme right-wing ideologies in Israel. However, with Trump's return to the White House, there is potential for Israel to receive additional time and support to advance its agenda, especially considering that many of Trump's administration picks are strong ideological supporters of Israel and critics of Iran. This administration's adoption of an unrealistic policy could, however, exacerbate regional instability, potentially expanding the conflict and undermining both US influence in the region and its global standing.

The Palestinian issue will undoubtedly remain a central concern, with major Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Ignoring this issue would undermine Saudi Arabia's position

and soft power within the Arab and Islamic world, hence, making it unlikely for the kingdom to join the Abraham Accords. As such, the new Middle East project cannot succeed without Saudi Arabia, which has solidified itself as a key regional leader and an essential player in driving the required change. More importantly, Saudi Arabia is pursuing a path that contrasts with the Israeli vision, which has partial support from the United States, by prioritizing the Palestinian cause. This was evident in Saudi Arabia's attempt to launch an international alliance to recognize a Palestinian state, essentially positioning this initiative as a counter to Israeli hegemony and seeking to build a regional and international consensus that balances the interests of the region and protects it from extremist ideological projects, whether emanating from Israel or Iran.

On the other hand, Egypt and Jordan, two crucial players in this conflict, are resolutely opposed to Israel's plans. Despite having diplomatic relations and peace agreements with Israel, both countries are deeply concerned about Israel's expansionist ambitions and the potential for the Palestinian crisis to spill over into their borders. They are likely to serve as significant obstacles to any transitional process in the region, viewing such initiatives as threats to their interests, security and sovereignty. This stance was clearly demonstrated by their rejection of the "Deal of the Century," as well as their firm refusal to accept the displacement of Palestinians to their lands, even in the face of intense and unprecedented pressures.

A new Middle East also demands a direct confrontation and large-scale war with Iran, aimed at halting its nuclear ambitions and preventing the progress it has made in this field, which could soon transform it into a formidable deterrent force capable of altering the regional balance of power. Alternatively, efforts could be made to overthrow the establishment. However, the United States has not yet supported Israel's push for military action to bring about this change, primarily due to the high cost it would incur for Washington and its reluctance to engage in military conflicts on multiple fronts. Meanwhile, the Gulf states that have restored their relations with Iran are reluctant to allow the region to be split into competing and conflicting axes. They continue to emphasize their desire to diversify relations, open up to all global powers, and position themselves as vital conduits for the flow of interests.

Although Iran has lost its tools and ability to influence, Russia's influence has declined and China has not undertaken meaningful engagement, the resistance factions' ability to survive still exists.

In contrast, the resistance factions' ability to survive and secure support from regional powers like Iran or international powers such as China or Russia strengthens the regional reality that has existed since the Arab Spring revolutions. This period saw the rise of non-state groups in several Arab countries, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen as well as the Palestinian resistance factions. These factions may find in the current war of extermination an opportunity for re-

newal, recruiting more members and garnering support from the broader Arab and Islamic world. This could contribute to maintaining regional chaos, with shifts in the balance of deterrence among these parties, influenced by the dynamics of the conflict and their respective calculations of gain and loss. However, it is likely that no party will achieve a complete victory. In one of its forms, the conflict may serve as a model for the proliferation of global power beyond traditional state actors, blurring the lines between state and non-state entities. Although the United States has a strong presence in the Middle East, aiming to reshape the region's strategic balances, the Middle East has historically been exceptional in resisting full submission to US goals for change. This resistance was evident even during periods of clear US superiority, as seen in events ranging from the invasion of Iraq to the Arab Spring. The situation today is different, with more influential international powers challenging Washington's dominance and seeking to drain its resources in prolonged conflicts. Meanwhile, Washington may struggle to engage in geopolitical competition on three global fronts simultaneously. Furthermore, some regional powers are increasingly adopting independent policies and approaches that are not always in line with US dictates. Moreover, developments in Syria will be decisive for the future of the region as a whole.

Confrontation will become the defining feature of the region due to the ongoing conflicts of interest and the inability of any party to fully surrender or resolve the situation. As a result, countries will likely increase their military expenditures, fac-

ing the prospect of a new and major arms race — both conventional and potentially nuclear — in order to maintain a balanced military and strategic position. The Gulf states, whether they lean toward one side of the conflict or choose to remain neutral, will play a pivotal role in shaping the regional balance of power and in determining security priorities. The decisions made by these states, particularly Saudi Arabia's independent approach focused on diversifying partnerships rather than succumbing to polarization, will be crucial in preventing the region from falling into a regional cold war or seeing a power imbalance power tipping in favor of any one party.

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