



**Beirut Security
Debates**

THE GAZA WAR AND THE REGIONAL TURMOIL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

FEBRUARY 2024



CONFERENCE REPORT

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) MENA Peace and Security Project held the second edition of the Beirut Security Debates (BSD) on February 2, 2024, at IFI. Initiated in 2023 as a forum to discuss regional geopolitical developments and impacts on a global scale, this year, local, regional, and international scholars, as well as specialists and policymakers, gathered to discuss under the conference theme *“The Gaza War and the Regional Turmoil in the Middle East.”*

This year’s conference comprised four sessions to break down the ongoing developments and challenges in the region that pose diverse threats to the regional and international order, namely *“The Middle East After October 7”*, *“The Middle East as a Playground for the Next Cold War: Multipolar Interests”*, *“Saudi Arabia Between Rapprochement with Iran and Normalization with Israel”*, and *“The Lebanese-Israeli Border and the Developments in Gaza: Humanitarian Crises and the Question of Human Security.”*

The events that continue to unfold in Gaza put into question the state of the art of the international order and liberal values that are more and more perceived as hypocritical impositions by the so-called West. The post-Cold War has increasingly faced challenges due to protracted wars, conflicts, and inhumane treatments of migration flows in recent years. It is experiencing further fragmentation aggravated by the shortcomings of international law and humanitarian protection mechanisms as they stand today.

Held in Beirut amidst troubling times in the region and specifically in Southern Lebanon, the discussion approached the issue from security, geopolitical, economic, as well as humanitarian perspectives and angles.

This report reflects the assessments and opinions that emerged during the BSD conference.

THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER OCTOBER 7

Since the beginning of the Gaza War, all talks held to reach a lasting ceasefire have failed, letting the war advance at a devastating rate, and threatening the stability of the entire region. The negotiations held in Paris on January 28, 2024, with the United States, Israel, Qatar, and Egypt built on the idea of a temporary cessation of combat, like the November deal that had led to a six-day pause, allowing for the exchange of Israeli hostages against Palestinian prisoners, fell short of addressing the remaining gaps in implementing a ceasefire.

As outlined in the following paragraph, there were gaps both from the Israeli and Hamas sides. From the Israeli side, there is a clear understanding that negotiations for a ceasefire cannot take place without the release of the Israeli hostages taken on October 7. From the perspective of Hamas, while the entry of more humanitarian aid into Gaza is necessary, conditioning it to a short-term ceasefire is considered insufficient, and they will try to hold ground for a total end of the conflict. Hamas admitted that they perpetrated the attacks to change the paradigm in Palestine. Returning to the previous status quo without tabling on the underlying causes of the conflict is considered unacceptable.

While the ongoing ceasefire talks highlight the Israeli need for security guarantees, they also reveal the absence of considerations for the security of the Palestinian people. One plausible solution that would allow for the security of both Israeli and Palestinian people and avoid a direct Israeli reoccupation of Gaza would be to implement a regional arrangement involving Arab states. Although it seems the United States is pushing for this option, many reservations remain about the willingness of Arab states to be involved in such a security apparatus.

In the longer term, it seems we are reverting to the 2002 Arab Peace initiative which relied on the “Land for Peace” principle, meaning offering peace between Arab states and Israel in exchange for a Palestinian state on the pre-1967 borders. Nonetheless, the October 7 attacks have led to new challenges. The Israeli society is no longer split between a camp supporting peace and one against it, as during the Oslo Accords of 1993. Today, public opinion is more radicalized, and the division operates between supporters of Benjamin Netanyahu’s policy and those against it. Under these circumstances, there is no reliable partner on the Israeli side to broker a peace deal.

The Palestinian front we are dealing with has also considerably evolved. The popularity of the Palestinian Authority and the Fatah reached an all-time low while Hamas emerged as the most powerful Palestinian actor. While Hamas seems pragmatic and most likely will avoid being at the forefront of the formation of a Palestinian state, it remains unclear which actor would lead the Palestinian voice in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Moreover, after seven decades of failed peace processes, an increasing number of Palestinians are supporting armed struggle as a legitimate way of Palestinian self-defense in accordance with international law.



Meanwhile, the position of the international community in a future peace process is also problematic: the United States has lost what was left of its credibility in the Middle East, most recently by writing a blank check to Israel; the European Union (EU) is armed-strong with its own internal divisions and disagreeing national perspectives on the situation, undermining its capacity to broker an end to the conflict. There is an evident lack of political will on the Western front to act upon the UN Security Council resolutions 242 (1967), 338 (1973), 1397 (2002) they have adopted calling for a two-state solution. The quick decision of the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, and the Netherlands to defund UNRWA¹ on alleged Israeli accusations of 12 UNRWA staff involved during the October 7 operation², undermines the ICJ ruling asking for an immediate increase of humanitarian aid in Gaza, lays bare the one-sided approach that is displaying a more and more hypocritical approach to the region and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Ultimately, the Arab states do neither agree on a collective vision for normalization relations with Israel, nor regarding the potential outcome of the conflict. Since the beginning of the war, despite immense public pressure from their population in support of the Palestinians, the governments in the region have capitalized on diverging national interests when dealing with Israel. Neighboring countries such as Jordan and Egypt have no interest in population displacements into their territories. Both countries hold peace treaties with Israel, though facing popular opposition in their populations. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand,

¹ UNRWA stands for United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

² "What is UNRWA and why are some countries suspending its funding?" *Reuters*, January 31, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/what-is-unrwa-un-palestinian-refugee-agency-2024-01-29/>, last accessed 19/3/2024.

which had started negotiations on normalization with Israel before October 7 (US-facilitated as part of the Abraham Accords) claims to now condition such an agreement with guarantees for a Palestinian state. However, it is unlikely that the recent protests will derail Saudi's economic ambitions that pushed for the rapprochement with Israel in the first place.

Most importantly, considerations on any peace process between Israel and Palestine surface the prominence of the issue of the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. The intensification of settler expansion and violence since the Oslo Accords resulted in the intensifying settling of Israeli settlers in the West Bank from 250,000 in 1993 to 700,000 in September 2023.³ With the addition of the heavily militarized bypass roads that surround the settlements, a continuous territory that could be the ground for a Palestinian state disappears more and more.

Meanwhile, the war in Gaza further sparks fears of a regional escalation, especially in Lebanon. While Israel and Hezbollah might have expanded the conflict by gradually using more advanced weapons (e.g. Iranian Falaq-1 missile by Hezbollah), the conflict is still contained and has not yet turned into a major war. It seems that Hezbollah and Iran do not want to engage in a regional war, as it bears the risk of pushing the United States and the United Kingdom to militarily re-intervene in the region which could lead to the destruction of assets Iran built over the last decades. Iran, to push its regional agenda and contain the US influence, has avoided a major direct clash with its rivals and instead engaged its local allies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon to pressure the United States and Israel.

Until now, the response from Hezbollah has been measured in the form of deterrence rather than pushing towards escalation. Remarkably, the death toll among Hezbollah fighters as well as civilians in Lebanon (223 Hezbollah fighters, 39 Palestinian or other resistance fighters, 25 civilians, and three journalists⁴⁵) is high considering that there is no official war between Lebanon and Israel. And yet, the response has remained mainly measured, even after the Israeli drone strike in the Lebanese capital Beirut that killed high-ranking Hamas official Saleh al-Aouri. It remains to be understood if Israel sees this low-intensity and non-escalatory development as a chance to push forward strategic interests in Southern Lebanon, e.g. elimination of Hezbollah's presence south of the Litani river as well as assets and infrastructure of the group (as well as civilians⁴⁶). The rationale Israel is emphasizing has been the need to prevent another October 7-like attack on its Northern border. Therefore, by this logic, it is only a question of time of an escalation into war.

³ "Who are Israeli settlers, and why do they live on Palestinian lands?" *Al Jazeera*, November 6, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/6/who-are-israeli-settlers-and-why-do-they-live-on-palestinian-lands>, last accessed 19/3/2024.

⁴ "Death Toll in Lebanon," *L'Orient Today*, March 15, 2024. <https://www.instagram.com/lorienttoday/p/C4igd77NDd2/>, last accessed 20/3/2024.

⁵ UNSCOL, Statement by the Humanitarian Coordinator in Lebanon, "*Escalation of Hostilities in South Lebanon: Growing Toll on Civilians Deepens their Struggles*," *Relief Web*, January 26, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/escalation-hostilities-south-lebanon-growing-toll-civilians-deepens-their-struggles-statement-humanitarian-coordinator-lebanon-mr-imran-riza-enar>, last accessed 19/3/2024.

The future of Palestine remains uncertain. A ceasefire will most likely be brokered eventually, however leaving behind a shattered conscious and generational trauma, further pushing any form of solution to regional conflicts into an unknown future. There is a need to emphasize working on a renewed peace initiative. The two-state solution is on the table again after having lost momentum over the last years and despite posing significant challenges for realization, especially since October 7. The Palestinian Authority, which was conceived as the backbone of the two-state solution, is heavily compromised and unlikely to hold up as such after the end of the Gaza War. Last, but not least, as the United States enters a year of presidential elections, which are likely to bring about a second Trump administration, the issue of a Palestinian state will not be the priority.

If the Gaza War continues as it has for the last months, the level of destruction will make it inhabitable. Ultimately, this also implies there is no way back to the pre-existing fragile status quo, for neither side. Any talks for peace and ceasefire need to include the question of settlements, return as well as territorial governance of Palestinian lands. Despite the ICJ ruling, which *de facto* recognized the Palestinians as a “national, racial and ethnic group”, juridically giving legitimacy to a Palestinian state, there are fears that this will remain lip service. Western countries that traditionally present themselves as defenders of democratic values have continuously called for humanitarian pauses, a series of truces, but not an immediate and permanent ceasefire. Nonetheless, the longer the war goes on, the greater the risk of a spillover into the West Bank, which would make the possibility of re-engaging in a meaningful peace process more difficult.

WORKSHOP 2

THE MIDDLE EAST AS A PLAYGROUND FOR THE NEW COLD WAR: MULTIPOLAR INTERESTS

The events in the Middle East are developing in the broader context of a deepening fragmentation of the international order, increasingly shifting from a unipolar world to a multipolar one. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in February 2022, China and Russia are directly challenging the dominance of the United States globally and regionally, while regional actors like Türkiye and Iran are trying to take upon a more prominent role in the Middle East.

Türkiye is an important player in the region. In the Middle East, especially the Gulf countries expect Türkiye to become increasingly involved in regional affairs. Türkiye is in a tricky position, as it has refueled relations with Israel while its population like in other countries in the region is fervently pro-Palestinian. Although it was very critical of the Abraham Accords, it renewed its ties with Israel in 2022 as well as with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Türkiye even supported the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, viewing it as a means to diffuse tensions in the region, even though it meant sweeping the Palestinian struggle under the rug. Recep Tayyip Erdogan is advancing on a fine line regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, having met both with Hamas leader Ismael Haniyeh in July 2023 and Benjamin Netanyahu in September 2023.

After October 7, Türkiye acknowledged there could not be sustainable stability for the region without a comprehensive approach to the Palestinian issue. As the conflict escalated regionally and pressure emanated at the domestic level, Türkiye intensified its rhetoric. President Erdogan condemned Israel at the harshest level and framed Hamas as a “liberation organization”.⁶ However, Türkiye is unlikely to adopt more ambitious measures. For instance, applying sanctions on Israel might be considered a possible option, but it would considerably limit the trade of private companies between Israel and Türkiye.



Furthermore, as Türkiye is a member of NATO, the influence of the United States on its relations with Israel limits its capacity for action.

Amidst the ongoing reset of Turkish foreign policy, the country has been supporting the agency of the GCC countries in the conflict. Erdogan was a guest at the 44th session of the GC Supreme Council held in December 2023 and attended the exceptional joint Arab-Islamic meeting held in Riyadh in November 2023. In rupture with previous trends, there is no leadership competition for the Palestinian cause,

⁶ Tuvan Gumrukcu and Huseyin Hayatsever, “Turkey's Erdogan says Hamas is not terrorist organisation, cancels trip to Israel,” *Reuters*, October 23, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/turkeys-erdogan-says-hamas-is-not-terrorist-organisation-2023-10-25/>, last accessed 20/3/2024.

possibly due to the normalization between Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, but also between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

It is also worth noting that Türkiye's relations with Iran have improved, although competition for influence remains between the two in Syria, Iraq, and the South Caucasus. Relying on a fruitful compartmentalization of foreign affairs from their areas of confrontation, Türkiye has, for instance, refrained from criticizing the Iranian attacks on Iraq, Syria, and Pakistan in January 2024.

However, the position of Türkiye in the war in Gaza must be understood in a broader context than the one in the Middle East. Being also involved in the South Caucasus and the North African side of the Mediterranean, the country might not prioritize the Palestinian file despite its involvement in the region.

Meanwhile, the GCC countries find themselves in an uncomfortable position as some normalized their ties with Israel, and others have not. Qatar has taken up the role of mediator between Hamas and other international actors, Saudi Arabia is limiting itself to diplomatic actions, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is focusing on the humanitarian aspect of the conflict. Bahrain and Oman are politically less visible, although the pro-Palestinian popular response in these countries was significant, especially considering the generally low demonstration culture in the Gulf.

Gulf countries understood that amidst the transformation of the international order, they could and should diversify their international partners. By deepening their relations with Russia and China, they indicate to their traditional Western partners, especially the United States, that they do not solely depend on American policy.

Russia is another player in the region. Even before the war in Ukraine, Russia had started keeping its distance from the region. In Syria, for instance, it had refrained from heavily deploying its military, limiting its action to the use of airfare. The Russian military projection in the region is, for the moment, restricted by the limited capacity of its Black Sea fleet to navigate in the Eastern Mediterranean, as it withstood substantial losses in Ukraine.⁷ Regarding the Gaza War, the events have benefitted Russia by taking away the attention from the war in Ukraine without it needing to be involved in any way. However, the statements from Moscow since October 7 have tilted in favor of the Palestinians, marked notably by the visit of a Hamas delegation to Moscow after the attack.⁸ This apparently one-sided position may be explained by the complex stance of Russia towards Iran since the war in Ukraine. Isolated, Russia is becoming increasingly reliant on Iran, especially for the supply of drones.

The Biden administration has been primarily looking at strengthening its relations with Saudi Arabia, picking up on the normalization deals brokered under Trump. Since 2022, the priority of the US

⁷ Gonzalo Vázquez, "Russia's Bloodied Navy Remains a Threat," *Center for European Policy Analysis*, October 11, 2023, <https://cepa.org/article/russias-bloodied-navy-remains-a-threat/>, last accessed 20/3/2024.

⁸ "Hamas delegation visits Moscow, discusses release of hostages in Gaza - agencies," *Reuters*, October 26, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/hamas-delegation-is-visiting-moscow-russian-foreign-ministry-2023-10-26/>, last accessed 20/3/2024.

administration's actions has been to ensure support from regional powers amidst the Ukraine war and mitigate the consequences of it on oil prices by pressuring Saudi Arabia to lower the prices and increase production.

October 7 pushed the United States to move away from a solely diplomatic position to take an active and primary role in the regional conflict by further increasing its arms supplies to Israel and emphasizing its strong allyship towards Israel by continuing to oppose a ceasefire in Gaza.

Further, the US resumed strikes in Yemen against the Houthis, developing an international coalition to protect trade routes in the Red Sea, involving notably the United Kingdom and Bahrain. However, this new policy shift is taking place during the electoral year for the presidency (set for November 2024), meaning that the current Biden administration will not have the time to implement it fully. Furthermore, the glooming perspective of a return to a Trump administration in 2025 makes it difficult to imagine the United States would intervene should there be, for instance, an Israeli reoccupation of Gaza.

Overall, the American policy inconsistencies in the Middle East will eventually reinforce the ongoing change in the regional security architecture, further opening the door to other actors such as China who managed to bolster the normalization deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia. On its side, if China still does not have a Middle East strategy, the American role in the ongoing crisis will dictate its position. As an economic rival to the US, China can offer alternative benefits to the region and generally to the Global South. It pushes the most influential regional actors, like Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, to play a pick-and-choose game between the American and Chinese offers.

The reshuffling of the power balance in the region could be understood in terms of a “new Cold War” waged between global and regional players. The circumstances in which the October 7 events are developing are shifting and uncertain. The rapprochements in the region backed by the United States took place without addressing the underlying societal and post-colonial issues, particularly the Palestinian struggle. These rapprochements are symptomatic of the generalized fragmentation of the international system, which in the Middle East prevented the rise of a shared regional vision. The war in Gaza shattered what remained of the international order and its values, as well as the expectations it had shaped. To some, post-October 7 will be as influential, if not more, than 9/11 in inducing a paradigm shift. On a positive note, the Middle East could seize this fragmentation as an invitation to take ownership of its issues and concerns. It is an opportunity for regional stakeholders to develop and facilitate a new order.

WORKSHOP 3

SAUDI ARABIA BETWEEN RAPPROCHEMENT WITH IRAN AND NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL

Efforts to normalize relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia underscore a shift in the landscape of global diplomacy and strategic alliances in the MENA region. They have also served as an opportunity for strategic moves by actors such as China and the EU.

China's initiative to broker a normalization deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran aims at asserting its influence and projecting power through a global initiative with a minimum capital cost. However, the lack of progress in addressing conflicts such as the Yemeni one reveals the challenges in transforming diplomatic initiatives into palpable solutions. Furthermore, the absence of a clear Chinese stance and policy on protecting the maritime borders from the Iran-backed Houthis complicates efforts to alleviate tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. On the other hand, the EU aims to achieve independence from traditional allies, particularly the United States, while addressing regional issues.

Iran's motive to pursue diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia aims to alleviate tensions and enhance regional stability. Its security concerns stem from the perceived threat posed by the international US-led coalition, the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel and Gulf nations, and the potential normalization of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. In addition to geopolitical considerations reflecting Iran's response to the evolving global order and its expanding influence in the region, it also has economic considerations. Economic pressures such as the impact of Western-imposed sanctions on Iran's economy and the overall costs of a confrontational approach constitute the key drivers behind Iran's engagement in these diplomatic efforts with Saudi Arabia.

The political dynamics within Iran have had a substantial impact on the normalization process with regional powers. The internal struggle between the reformist and conservative factions had hindered any significant progress toward normalization under the presidential term of Rouhani. This internal rivalry has resulted in a dominance of battlefield priorities over diplomacy, overshadowing efforts to pursue diplomatic solutions to regional conflicts. Consequently, Iran's ability to engage constructively with its neighbors and the broader international community had been compromised.

From the Iranian view, the fact that the GCC countries maintained a neutral stance following the beginning of the Ukraine war by maintaining good relations with Russia and China while trying to find ways to align with the Western calculations sent a positive signal. Iran saw this as an opportunity to review its foreign policy toward its Gulf neighbors and score a "diplomatic victory."⁹ It especially meant that Saudi Arabia was no longer willing to be solely dependent on the United States, thus resulting in a rapprochement with Iran.

The perception of normalization processes among Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, has been shaped by a complex interplay of geopolitical and strategic considerations. The withdrawal of ambassadors and diplomatic tensions in recent years have underscored the volatile nature of regional dynamics. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain followed the lead of Saudi Arabia when the country cut its diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016. The signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020 by the UAE and Bahrain reinforced this position.

⁹ Abdolrasool Divsallar and Hesham Alghannam, "The Strategic Calculus behind the Saudi-Iranian Agreement," *The Cairo Review*, April 9, 2023, <https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/the-strategic-calculus-behind-the-saudi-iranian-agreement/>, last accessed 20/3/2024.

However, in 2022, when the Houthis attacked oil facilities in KSA and UAE, triggering the perception that the Obama and Trump administrations had not done enough to support the security of the GCC countries. Within this context, the sense of US unreliability has prompted some Gulf states to pursue reconciliation with Iran as a means of diversifying their security partners and mitigating security risks. The UAE will likely follow the policy of Saudi Arabia and initiate a rapprochement with Iran. Qatar always remained close to Iran, and this was one of the main reasons for the GCC boycott of Qatar 2017-2021. Oman and Kuwait also had not closed the door to Iran. This overall shift reflects a pragmatic approach aimed at safeguarding national interests in an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape.



However, Bahrain's decision to support the coalition against the Houthis reflects a combination of security concerns and strategic calculations that differs from the rest of the GCC countries. The perceived threat posed by Iran to regional stability has prompted Bahrain to align itself with the US in securing the maritime trade routes in the Red Sea. Additionally, Bahrain's desire to strengthen ties with the US for security reasons underscores the intricate web of alliances and rivalries shaping regional dynamics. It also confirms that the Abraham Accords are well-established and will continue to shape the strategic partnerships in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, the ongoing war in Gaza has posed challenges to regional diplomacy and raised questions about the future trajectory of relations between Iran and Israel. While some Gulf states have expressed

solidarity with Palestine, others have adopted a more cautious approach, seeking to avoid escalation and maintain a delicate balance between competing interests.

Now, Saudi Arabia finds itself in the middle of a rapprochement with Iran and a possible normalization with Israel. Nevertheless, the Saudi stance on normalization with Israel remains conditioned on a two-state solution, highlighting the complexities of regional politics and the need for nuanced diplomatic engagement. Positive signals coming from Tehran and Riyadh show that both are willing to continue on the path of rapprochement. This was clearly reflected in tensions in the Red Sea, where Saudi Arabia did not publicly support the United States-led coalition. The fact that Iran did not close the Strait of Hormuz could also be understood as the willingness of Iran to spare Saudi Arabia and their new relations from its campaign to pressure the United States and its allies.

WORKSHOP 4

THE LEBANESE-ISRAEL BORDER AND THE DEVELOPMENTS IN GAZA: HUMANITARIAN CRISES AND THE QUESTION OF HUMAN SECURITY

While the Gaza War is raging on more and more inhumane and unimaginable terms, the developments on the southern border of Lebanon remain uncertain. As the exchanges of fire across the Blue Line gradually intensify, the risk of miscalculations possibly leading to an escalation increases.

In the last seven months, talks to calm and diffuse the situation have focused on the withdrawal of Hezbollah fighters from the South of the Litani River as according to the UNSC resolution 1701 which states that no paramilitary forces should be active South of the Litani River.¹⁰ The primary interest of Israel in this matter is the return of its population to the North. Without a retreat of Hezbollah and other paramilitary forces, the threat of a broader Israeli military intervention persists. Furthermore, Israel needs to be able to demonstrate some wins as it has not been able to reach any goals set for Gaza as of now.

Both through the United National Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and the UN Special Coordinator for Lebanon (UNSCOL), the UN is attempting to hold back the extent of the conflict. UNIFIL is actively working towards de-escalating the situation at the border by communicating with both Israel and Hezbollah. However, UNIFIL has not activated the tripartite forum since the beginning of the conflict.¹¹ On its side, UNSCOL tries to push for the implementation of UNSCR 1701, as it presents the necessary elements to bring calm between Israel and Hezbollah and constitutes a basis on which a peace-building process could be developed.

¹⁰ The UNSC resolution 1701 adopted in 2006 called for the cessation of hostilities between Israel and Lebanon, the deployment of Lebanese Armed Forces to Southern Lebanon, parallel withdrawal of Israeli forces behind the Blue Line, strengthening the UN force (UNIFIL) to facilitate the entry of Lebanese Armed Forces in the region and the establishment of a demilitarised zone between the Blue Line and the Litani River.

¹¹ The tripartite forum refers to the indirect talks between the representatives of Lebanese Armed Forces and Israeli Defence Army chaired by UNIFIL representatives that usually takes place at the UN position near the border.



Accordingly, it has been suggested that negotiations for an agreement on the demarcation of the border could take place between the two countries. This is viewed by many as a logical outcome of the maritime border agreement concluded in October 2022, under the leadership of the American diplomat Amos Hoschtein. Demarcating the border would be a long process that might not address the urgency of the situation. Many contentious points remain along the Blue Line, especially regarding Ras Naqoura (or B1), Ghajar, Kfarchouba, and the Shebaa farms, which would require extensive negotiations.

Furthermore, on the domestic side, the Lebanese political actors have not stepped up to the situation. Despite the implications of October 7 on Lebanon, the political focus has remained to revolve around the internal debate on the presidential file. The preservation of Lebanon and especially the South from an escalation scenario by Hezbollah is today considered a bargaining chip for the accession of Hezbollah-backed candidate Sleiman Frangieh to the presidency. In the meantime, Hezbollah is concerned that the cross-border clashes may expand, and losing additional fighters without a strong response to Israeli attacks may undermine its prestige and social base. However, the party is also aware that entering a full-scale war with Israel would further alienate its supporters and make the country's civil infrastructure vulnerable to Israeli attacks. Therefore, the domestic political strategy of Hezbollah is pushing it to exert restraint towards Israel.

However, the consequences for the Lebanese communities of the South are already significant. In the villages around the border, the population has lost the little resilience they had left. More than 86,000

people have been displaced while the most vulnerable stayed, unable to afford to move away.¹² Many Syrian refugees are part of the displaced population, which in some hosting communities has increased tensions to the level of the implementation of curfews and restrictions on movement. The psychological repercussions of this unstable situation should not be neglected, especially for children. After multiple long-lasting school disruptions since 2019, many children find their education again interrupted.

The conflict at the border also caused harm to the environment and agriculture of the South. Arable lands have been severely damaged, reducing the production capacity and cutting communities from their livelihoods. Ultimately, this limitation on agricultural production will also have consequences for the rest of the country. To compensate for the shortages of labor prompted by the displacements, wages in farms were raised to encourage workers to stay or come work in the affected areas. Therefore, many people continue to work in combat areas without proper protection.

Furthermore, Human Rights Watch documented several Israeli attacks that amount to war crimes. Two separate targeted strikes killed three journalists covering the events in the South of Lebanon. In another strike against a civilian vehicle, three children and their grandmother were killed. Human Rights Watch also underlined the indiscriminate and unlawful use of white phosphorus in Gaza and Lebanon. The use of this illegal substance in warfare may cause long-term injuries and have a lasting impact on the environment, affecting arable land. This could potentially render affected areas uninhabitable or weaken the farming capacities, further deteriorating the socio-economic situation of the residents.

The political stalemate that has been particularly grave since October 2022 prevents the Lebanese state from presenting any functional plan to assist the affected communities. Although it might be tempting to draw a comparison with the 2006 war, the ongoing conflict is taking place in a very different context. The Lebanese state is considerably weakened and regionally isolated in the Arab world, while the conflict has already lasted longer than that of 2006. These factors prompt us to differentiate the two conflicts.

For the moment, as illustrated by the restraint of Hezbollah's General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah in his public appearances, the party continues to hold back and avoid retaliation, showing its disinterest in a more expansive conflict. As seen previously, Iran is not prompt to an escalation of the situation in Lebanon and is not pushing its proxy to widen the conflict. Nonetheless, while Israel has also avoided opening a second front while being involved in Gaza, it might be tempted to do so after the conclusion of a ceasefire. The October 7 attacks exacerbated the Israeli need for security guarantees. Israel might see the conflict at the border as an opportunity to get rid of Hezbollah, which it regards as an intolerable threat at its border.

Meanwhile, talks are emerging regarding the day after for Gaza and the regional stabilization. However, the large-scale and systematic destruction of Gaza is rendering it more and more unlivable. Additionally, the defunding of UNRWA raises concerns as to the conditions in Gaza on the day after. While Türkiye, Qatar, and Iran might invest in a future reconstruction of Gaza, it is doubtful Western countries will

¹² "Mobility Snapshot, round 22," *International Organisation for Migration*, January 22, 2024, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/mobility-snapshot-round-22-01-02-2024?close=true>, last accessed 20/3/2024.

substantially contribute to it. Furthermore, it is evident that without a political solution to the Palestinian struggle, no sustainable reconstruction will be possible as Israel would prevent the rebuilding of the infrastructure. The perspective of developing an adequate peace process allowing for the security of the Palestinian and Israeli people remains difficult to conceive in the present circumstances. Nonetheless, reverting to a status quo after the war in Gaza will inevitably prevent the establishment of lasting stability in Lebanon and the region.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The events in Gaza are putting the international order in limbo. While there is an evident change in the paradigm that supported this order, the extent of this shift remains undefined.

To the region, this moment is comparable to the turning point of 1967 for the Arab countries. There is a deepening disenchantment due to the failure of the Arab Springs democratic moment.

This uncertainty also applies to the Western part of the world. Between Ukraine and Gaza, the West has shown us that double standards prevailed on the rule-based international order, raising concerns about what frameworks and values will characterize this emerging new international order.

Finally, it is crucial to remember that no forces can be silenced and oppressed forever. The longer their struggle is suppressed, the more violently it will resurge.

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) – Foundation for social democracy!

The [Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung](#) is the oldest political foundation in Germany with a rich tradition in social democracy dating back to its foundation in 1925. The foundation owes its formation and its mission to the political legacy of its namesake Friedrich Ebert, the first democratically elected German President.

The work of our political foundation focuses on the core ideas and values of social democracy – freedom, justice, and solidarity. This connects us to social democracy and free trade unions. As a non-profit institution, we organise our work autonomously and independently.

The Regional Peace and Security Project in the MENA is based in Beirut and works with partners across Western Asia and North Africa towards a viable regional security architecture for more stability and inclusive and democratic societies.

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs

Inaugurated in 2006, the [Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs \(IFI\)](#) at the American University of Beirut is an independent, research-based, policy-oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab world. The Institute aims at bridging the gap between academia and policymaking by conducting high quality research on the complex issues and challenges faced by Lebanese and Arab societies within shifting international and global contexts, by generating evidence-based policy recommendations and solutions for Lebanon and the Arab world, and by creating an intellectual space for an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, scholars, civil society actors, media, and policymakers.



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