

Executive Summary

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Post October 7: A new security architecture for the Middle East?

Online panel discussion in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence

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Executive Summary

This analysis is based on the insights gathered from an online panel discussion held on March 13th, 2024, organized by the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) in cooperation with the Ministry of Defence (bmlv). The panelists analysed the complex geopolitical implications of the ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel. They assessed the stability of the regional order, the role of regional actors such as Iran and its proxies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, but also of Turkey and Egypt and the repercussions of the conflict on global security, foreign policy developments and geopolitical alliances.

Key takeaways

- **Israel** has gradually lost the support of the international public and faces growing global isolation because of Gaza's devastation. Most Israelis do not see any images of destruction from Gaza, and many do not care either - Palestinians are continuously dehumanized in public discourse. Gideon Levy maintains that most Israelis are in a state of denial and mainly seek revenge. The majority of Israeli society supports the war against Hamas and prioritises the eradication of Hamas over hostage release, although it may be impossible or counterproductive.
- **The two-state solution** is unrealistic as long as 700,000 Israeli settlers keep living in occupied territories. The settlements prevent an independent Palestinian state. Advocacy for a two-state solution solidifies Israel's "temporary occupation" and its authority over Palestinian territories and it consolidates the de facto one-state apartheid regime.
- **Regional security:** There is currently no expectation for an escalation of the conflict and regional destabilization. None of the regional actors has an interest in large-scale destabilization. Three important regional players such as Iran, Turkey and Egypt are struggling with economic problems. This certainly limits their options and activities in the region. They can neither bring about a systemic change on the regional level nor can they effectively impact the current system.
- **Iran's proxies** (among which Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis) should be seen as franchises that receive resources from Iran, but their strategies and actions are independent. Iran deflects accountability for conflicts through its proxies, and the Israeli reaction to the October 7th attack allows Iran to portray Israel as the greater evil. The Iranian regime prioritizes domestic stability.

Iran has no interest in a war. The strategy is rather to annoy Israel and weaken the US' influence in the region. Even if Iran achieved nuclear-power status, it would likely not declare it and adopt Israel's strategy of ambiguity.

- **Egypt** avoids direct involvement in the conflict. Gaza continues to be considered a natural zone of influence for Egypt and an area of great importance for Egypt's security. Cairo's priority is to avoid any refugee camps on the Sinai, which is an already unstable area. The al-Sisi regime established in the past a functioning cooperation with Hamas which allowed control over the border and prevented the influx of Salafi Jihadists from Gaza and their joining with ISIS groups in the Sinai. Egypt fears the uncertainty that would stem from Hamas' defeat, with other regional actors possibly trying to gain influence in Gaza. Similar to Iran, and Egypt, Turkey is also struggling with high inflation and a weak economy.
- **Turkish** foreign policy is driven by two important factors; domestic politics - the Gaza issue has become part of domestic policy debates - and economy. Turkish economy is under stress. This supports ambiguous and pragmatic policies. On the one hand, President Erdogan calls Hamas freedom fighters and Israel a terrorist state, on the other hand, Turkey has not reduced trade with Israel. Economic and political needs are also pushing Turkey to establish a pragmatic relationship with rival regional actors such as Egypt, and with Gulf countries.
- **China** remains passive as its economic interests in the region are not significantly damaged, however, the conflict will make Chinese infrastructure investment unsustainable over time.
- **The US** struggles to gather resources, rally allies, and control conflict narratives. This may also have an impact on other regions and may even reinforce China's confrontational policy towards Taiwan.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Diese Analyse basiert auf den Erkenntnissen einer Online-Podiumsdiskussion vom 13. März 2024, die vom Österreichischen Institut für Internationale Politik (oiip) organisiert und in Kooperation mit dem Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung (bmlv) stattgefunden hat. Die Diskussionsteilnehmer:innen analysierten die komplexen geopolitischen Auswirkungen des anhaltenden Konflikts zwischen der Hamas und Israel. Sie bewerteten die Stabilität der regionalen Ordnung, die Rolle regionaler Akteure wie jene des Iran und seiner Stellvertreter (die Hisbollah-Miliz im Libanon oder die Houthi-Rebellen im Jemen), aber auch jene der Türkei und Ägyptens sowie die Auswirkungen des Konflikts auf die globale Sicherheit, außenpolitischen Entwicklungen und geopolitischen Allianzen.

Takeaways Deutsch:

- **Israel** hat zunehmend die Unterstützung der internationalen Öffentlichkeit verloren und ist aufgrund der Verwüstung des Gazastreifens zunehmend isoliert. In den israelischen Medien sind kaum Bilder der Zerstörung aus Gaza zu sehen - und viele stehen dem Schicksal der Palästinenser:innen indifferent gegenüber– dies ist eine Folge der kontinuierlichen "Entmenschlichung" von Palästinenser:innen im öffentlichen Diskurs. Gideon Levy behauptet, dass sich die meisten Israelis in einem Zustand der Verleugnung befinden und hauptsächlich auf Rache aus sind. Die Mehrheit der israelischen Gesellschaft unterstützt den Krieg gegen die Hamas und gibt der Ausrottung der Hamas Vorrang vor der Freilassung von Geiseln, auch wenn dies unmöglich oder kontraproduktiv sein könnte.
- **Die Zwei-Staaten-Lösung** ist unrealistisch, solange 700.000 israelische Siedler weiterhin in besetzten Gebieten leben. Die Siedlungen stehen einem unabhängigen palästinensischen Staat entgegen. Das Eintreten für eine Zwei-Staaten-Lösung verfestigt Israels „vorübergehende Besatzung“ und verstärkt seine Autorität über die palästinensischen Gebiete, und es konsolidiert ein Ein-Staaten-Apartheidregime.
- **Regionale Sicherheit:** Trotz allarmierender Entwicklungen sind eine totale Eskalation des Konflikts und eine weitergehende regionale Destabilisierung derzeit nicht zu erwarten. Keiner der regionalen Akteure hat ein Interesse an einer umfassenden Destabilisierung. Die drei wichtigsten regionalen Akteure Iran, Türkei und Ägypten haben mit wirtschaftlichen Problemen

zu kämpfen. Dies schränkt ihre Kapazitäten und Möglichkeiten in der Region ein. Sie können weder einen systemischen Wandel auf regionaler Ebene herbeiführen, noch können sie das bestehende System wirklich beeinflussen.

- **Irans Stellvertreter** (darunter die Hamas, Hisbollah und die Houthis) können als Franchise-Unternehmen gesehen werden. Sie werden vom Iran versorgt und erhalten, ihre Strategien und die einzelnen Aktionen sind jedoch weitgehend unabhängig und nicht immer mit dem Iran akkordiert. Der Iran lenkt die Verantwortung für Konflikte durch seine Stellvertreter ab. Israels Gaza Feldzug in Reaktion auf den Angriff vom 7. Oktober ermöglicht es dem Iran, Israel als das größere Übel darzustellen. Das iranische Regime priorisiert die innere Stabilität. Iran hat kein Interesse an einem Krieg. Die Strategie besteht eher darin, Israel zu verärgern und den Einfluss der USA in der Region zu schwächen. Selbst wenn der Iran den Status einer Atommacht erreichen würde, würde er dies vermutlich nicht bekanntmachen, sondern Teheran würde eher Israels Strategie der Ambiguität übernehmen.
- **Ägypten** vermeidet eine direkte Beteiligung am Konflikt. Gaza gilt weiterhin für Ägypten als eine natürliche Einflusszone und ein Gebiet von großer Wichtigkeit für Ägyptens Sicherheit. Kairos Priorität besteht darin, vor allem Flüchtlingslager auf dem Sinai zu vermeiden, da die Lage ohnehin schon instabil ist. Das al-Sisi-Regime baute in der Vergangenheit eine funktionierende Zusammenarbeit mit der Hamas auf. Dies ermöglichte die Kontrolle über die Grenze und verhinderte den Zustrom salafistischer Dschihadisten aus Gaza bzw. deren Anschluss an ISIS-Gruppen auf dem Sinai. Ägypten ist angesichts der Unsicherheit, die eine Niederlage der Hamas bedeuten würde, besorgt. Insbesondere fürchtet man sich vor noch radikaleren Gruppen bzw. davor, dass andere regionale Akteure Einfluss in Gaza gewinnen könnten. Ähnlich wie der Iran und Ägypten kämpft auch die Türkei mit hoher Inflation und einer schwachen Wirtschaft.
- **Die türkische Außenpolitik** wird von zwei wichtigen Faktoren bestimmt; Innenpolitik – die Gaza-Frage ist Teil innenpolitischer Debatten geworden – und Wirtschaft. Die türkische Wirtschaft steht unter Stress. Dies unterstützt unklare und pragmatische Politiken. Einerseits bezeichnet Präsident Erdogan die Freiheitskämpfer der Hamas und Israel als Terrorstaat, andererseits hat die Türkei den Handel mit Israel nicht eingeschränkt. Wirtschaftliche und politische Bedürfnisse drängen die Türkei auch dazu, pragmatische Beziehungen zu rivalisierenden regionalen Akteuren wie Ägypten und den Golfstaaten auszubauen.

- **China** bleibt passiv, da seine wirtschaftlichen Interessen in der Region nicht wesentlich geschädigt werden. Allerdings kann der Konflikt dazu führen, dass chinesische Infrastrukturinvestitionen mit der Zeit nicht mehr nachhaltig sind.
- **Den USA** fällt es schwer, Ressourcen aufzubringen, Verbündete zu sammeln und Konfliktnarrative zu kontrollieren. Dies kann auch auf andere Regionen Einfluss haben und wird vielleicht sogar Chinas konfrontative Politik gegenüber Taiwan bestärken.

Regional context and dynamics

Israel: From Support to Isolation

In the direct aftermath of the October 7th attack, Israel received widespread international solidarity, with state representatives and politicians conveying their condolences and prayers from all over the world. This solidarity materialized primarily in diplomatic support for the country's right to defend itself, and thus undertake a military operation in Gaza. Noteworthy, Western support for Israel was also visible in the votes of the UN Security Council's (UNSC) and UN General Assembly's (UNGA) resolutions calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. The United States (US) vetoed all three resolutions proposed within the UNSC, considering them too lenient towards Hamas. The October 27th, UNGA's resolution signalled Israel's growing international isolation, with 121 votes in favour, forty-four abstained and only fourteen against (United Nations, 2023a). Another resolution on the same matter was passed by the UNGA on December 12th, this time with 153 votes in favour, ten against and twenty-three abstentions (United Nations, 2023b). The Israeli military's invasion of Gaza and the large number of civilian casualties have led to harsh criticism before all in the Arab world, but also increasingly in the West. South Africa accused Israel of genocide and filed a suit at the International Court of Justice. Growing criticism transpires from the adoption of the latest UNSC resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire on March 25th. This resolution was passed with fourteen votes in favour and only one abstention, that of the US. The US abandonment of its veto policy towards ceasefire resolutions strongly showcases Israel's growing isolation. In response, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu cancelled a visit to Washington by two of its ministries, further severing the relationship between the two historic allies (Borger & Tondo, 2024).

According to Gideon Levy, many Israelis perceive criticism as inherently biased and antisemitic. This belief has always been present but has been exacerbated by the war; in the past, it has allowed Israel to ignore condemnation for its repeated violations of international law. Levy added that, seeing itself as the only democracy in the Middle East, Israel believes the world needs it much more than it needs the rest of the world. This feeling of self-sufficiency is paradoxical, particularly in light of the country's heightened dependency on the US following October 7th. Levy further emphasised how Israel's reliance on the US implies that the latter would have been able to stop Israel in a matter of days if it had truly been its priority, a remark also explicitly made by EU High Representative Josep Borrell (Gray, 2024 and Jones, 2024).

Detached Realities

Israeli journalist Gideon Levy claims that the country finds itself in a post-traumatic state, characterized by denial and perceived moral superiority, which serves to justify the extreme actions it has undertaken. In the aftermath of October 7th, Israeli moderate and lefties parties have been side-lined, contributing to the creation of a unified Israeli society that widely supports the continuation of the war and prioritises the goal of destroying Hamas over the return of the hostages. Following October 7th, Israelis show dismissal for Palestinians' suffering and the violation of their human rights, as priority is given to Israelis' own affliction. The complete absence of internal opposition to the war indicates a society in denial and should concern primarily Israelis themselves, Levy added, before explaining that Israelis' detachment from reality owes greatly to the complete lack of exposure to the images and realities of Gaza. Indeed, whilst the world has been witnessing the destruction and suffering of Palestinians, Israelis have been shielded from it: private media, though independent and free to do otherwise, focused solely on Israeli hostages and casualties, providing no coverage whatsoever for the plight of civilians in the Gaza Strip. This one-sided portrayal of reality has shaped Israeli discourse and contributes to the dehumanisation of Palestinians, fostering among Israelis a sense of entitlement to defeat Hamas whatever the cost might be, with even the release of hostages being considered secondary. For this reason, negotiations for the release of hostages seem to have reached a standstill, with both parties blaming each other as neither feels the urge to reach an agreement. Levy further noted that, although Hamas' military capability is suffering losses, its political influence has increased, an aspect which is particularly observable in the West Bank where people have expressed strong

support and refer to Hamas as the leader of Palestinian resistance. The same cannot be said about Gaza, where civilians pay a very high price for the attacks of October 7th.

In Gideon Levy's view, Israeli claims about the achievement of a total victory over Hamas are mostly hollow slogans serving the Israeli Prime Minister's interests to continue the war, as even the assassination of Hamas' entire leadership could not improve Israel's security. October 7th has been referred to as "Israel's 9/11," an analogy that is apt, also considering the consequences these events have had, the Iraq War and the War in Gaza. History reveals that efforts to crush movements and replace them with friendly parties have often led to worse outcomes. Levy also reminded that Israel has experienced how counterproductive these attempts may be after assassinating former Hezbollah's leader Abbas al-Musawi along with countless other political and military commanders.

Levy also defined the two-state solution as a dead body. In his opinion, Israel never genuinely pursued the creation of two equal states with equal rights; rather, it has used the two-state solution as a pretext to prolong the occupation and expand Israeli settlements. For instance, the notion of Palestinian demilitarisation should be considered: as a sovereign state, Palestine would have the right to possess its own weapons and to exercise the monopoly on the use of force within its borders, just like Israel and any other country. Moreover, the presence of 700.000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem highlights the unfeasibility of the two-state solution. The West Bank is full of Israeli settlements. While the checkpoints are a reality of the everyday lives of Palestinians, Israeli Jews are not affected. Settlers wield considerable political power in Israel, and without their relocation, it is physically impossible to create a viable Palestinian state.

Although the one-state solution may not seem acceptable to either party, it has been in place for 56 years, with Palestinian territories de facto ruled by Israel. Advocating for a two-state solution perpetuates the current apartheid situation, which can only be ended by granting equal rights to all people living under the same government. The ambiguity of the everlasting "temporary occupation" favours Israel, prolonging its occupation and the current apartheid state.

Iran: did it pull the trigger? Proxies, (non-)escalation and nuclear capabilities

Speculations on Iran's involvement in the conflict started arising right after the October 7th attack due to the country's ties to Hamas, as well as Hezbollah and the Houthis, who promptly showed their support for the fight against Israel. Fear of escalation and of Iran becoming actively involved in the conflict arose, however, it seems to be unfounded.

According to Anoush Ehteshami, Iran provides its proxies, among which are the three aforementioned groups, with resources but it does not necessarily control the strategies and actions they undertake. The relationship between Iran and its proxies can be compared with a franchise model. Ehteshami also emphasized that ties differ across the groups, with Hezbollah as the group that has the closest ideological and financial ties with Iran. Iran, a non-Arab country, has been accused of being an occupier of Arab land just as much as Israel, given that its proxies operate in the Arab world. Thus, Teheran must handle these relationships cautiously. The groups' autonomy allows Iran to incite unrest but then observe the conflicts from a distance without becoming directly involved or having to take responsibility. Indeed, the country carefully avoided conflict escalation after October 7th. It has only rhetorically supported Hezbollah in its confrontations with the IDF, and it has neither backed nor stopped the Houthis from firing missiles towards ships in the Red Sea. This demonstrates Iran's interest in limiting the confrontation, and not bringing it closer to its own borders. Consequently, Iran has not been able to stop the flow of US weapons and support for Israel and to prevent Israel's attacks on Hezbollah and on its targets in Syria. The greatest loss for Iran would, however, be the demise of Hamas.

Anoush Ehteshami underscored that these proxies, also referred to as the "resistance front," oppose American influence in the Middle East, but although US presence and importance have declined, its complete elimination does not seem viable. On the contrary, Iran's provocations seem to reinforce US presence in the region. A situation that is unlikely to change as long as the US will remain Israel's security guarantor.

Therefore, the effectiveness of Iran's strategy is questionable, especially as it can neither move away from its proxies nor pursue a strategy beyond them and change its regional standing. Teheran only benefits from its relationships with China and Russia. For Russia, the war in Gaza is valuable as it diverts

the attention of Western actors from the war in Ukraine. Ehteshami maintains that Iran has achieved little to no foreign policy gains. Iran's strategy can only work insofar as Arab and international opinion is mobilised against Israel. The more casualties Israel's war in Gaza causes, the more Iran can portray Israel as a great evil that must be fought.

Anoush Ehteshami declined claims that Iran may have facilitated the war in order to destabilize Israeli-Saudi relations. He stated that Teheran would not gain from such a move given its current economic and political weakness and considering that this would spoil the rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, which was brokered by China and Iraq in 2023.

Iran's nuclear program

Ehteshami further commented on the statement that Iran is allegedly only weeks away from developing a nuclear weapon, saying that this has been claimed since the 1990s. He added that the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, which had been painstakingly negotiated by multiple parties in 2015, removed all constraints on Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program. Not even the assassination of Iranian scientists and military personnel involved in the project has weakened Iran's determination to develop and master the entire nuclear cycle, with the intention to create the ultimate weapon of deterrence. However, Professor Ehteshami argued that the deterrence argument holds little credibility in a region as unstable and prone to escalations as the Middle East, where nuclear weapons are unlikely to be an actual deterrent. Ehteshami stated that while it is debatable whether obtaining a nuclear arsenal would change or improve Iran's regional standing, it would undoubtedly affect Israel and Pakistan. For Iran itself, the acquisition of nuclear weapons would likely increase the strain on the already suffering Iranian society due to the probable imposition of further sanctions. Thus, it may be in Iran's best interest to not become a declared nuclear-weapon state and adopt Israel's strategy to let the world assume its possession of nuclear weapons without officially confirming it. In conclusion, Ehteshami said that Iran believes that owning nuclear weapons would not entail any other consequences beyond those that it is suffering from already. However, such an assumption could ultimately prove very dangerous.

Domestic constraints

In view of a potential succession of Supreme leader Khamenei, elites appear to prioritize the preservation of the status quo, remaining highly ideological and seemingly removed from the country's reality. At the same time, growing dissatisfaction with the regime was underscored by the recent parliamentary elections, which saw an extremely low turnout, and by a notable increase in anti-regime sentiment. Sanctions imposed on Iran have severe impacts on Iranian society, and the population blames the regime and its provocations against the US for the country's isolation. The regime's awareness of its domestic unpopularity limits its foreign policy options, particularly regarding possibilities for military mobilization, leaving Teheran reliant on its proxies. And whilst Iranians are troubled by the destruction of Gaza and the loss of Palestinian lives, they show little concern over the potential destruction of Hamas or Hezbollah by Israel.

Are Arab countries complicit?

Regimes in neighbouring countries appear to support the Palestinian cause at least on the rhetorical level. This is primarily to appease domestic public opinion. Most of them also view the conflict as an opportunity to weaken Hamas, which is seen as an Iranian proxy in the Arab world. According to journalist Gideon Levy, the hypocrisy of most of the Arab regimes is blatant, and in his view, Saudi Arabia would re-normalise relations with Israel soon after the war if allowed to do so, despite Gaza's destruction. Speakers overall agreed that although the rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia has been disrupted, and in the short term Arab Arab-Israeli relations may be strained, they will eventually resume, first informally and then formally.

Egypt - putting border and regime security first

Georges Fahmi highlighted that the Egyptian regime balances between avoiding direct involvement in the conflict and keeping public opinion satisfied. Considering its role as a mediator in past conflicts, under al-Sisi, Egypt has kept a relatively low international profile, despite its geographical proximity to Gaza and its historical influence on the Gaza Strip. In Fahmi's view, the regime is particularly concerned with three aspects of the conflict, namely the potential creation of refugee camps in the Sinai, the

uncertainty that will follow Hamas' defeat and the lack of control of Salafi Jihadists, and the potential struggle among regional powers who may try to replace Egyptian's influence in Gaza.

The establishment of refugee camps could turn the Sinai into "a state within a state" exacerbating the instability of the already troubled area, in what would also be seen as compliance with Israel's attempts to push Palestinians out of Gaza and into Egypt. Thus, Egypt won't completely open its borders and limits its assistance to the provision of humanitarian aid to Gaza and medical assistance to Palestinians in Egyptian hospitals.

Although the Egyptian military elite has had a very hostile position towards Hamas, this gradually changed since 2013, when al-Sisi took on power. In time, the regime developed a functioning cooperation with Hamas. Hamas helps Egypt to effectively control the borders and prevent radical Islamists from crossing the border and joining ISIS groups in the Sinai. In other words, Hamas helped maintain border security and keep more radical Islamist groups under control. The cooperation also led to high-level visits from Hamas leaders to Cairo. Today, Egypt is worried that the defeat of Hamas will create a vacuum which might then be filled by different extremist groups, and it is concerned that once Hamas is defeated or weakened other regional powers with more economic resources might get a foot in the door in Gaza which has been traditionally perceived as Egypt's sphere of influence.

Despite its weaker economic position, Egypt's prominence in Gaza remains steadfast, as it primarily depends on cultural and diplomatic ties, and it allowed Egypt to contribute to mediation efforts alongside Qatar.

Egypt's dire economic situation was exacerbated by the losses incurred due to the reduction in traffic in the Suez Canal following Houthis attacks in the Red Sea, further limiting the country's room for foreign policy manoeuvres. Remarkably, Georges Fahmi highlighted how, contrary to popular belief, Egypt's involvement in the crisis improved its economic situation, as it gave it greater access to International Monetary Fund's (IMF) loans. Indeed, Egypt had been able to secure an additional 5 billion US dollars to its previous 3 billion USD loan, for a total of 8 billion USD (Lewis, 2024).

Turkey: a loud, but economically weak actor

Ankara's position towards the conflict changed over time. Initially, Ankara saw the conflict as a disruption of its initiative to overcome its isolation in the region and normalise relations with other regional powers. As part of the normalization strategy, Turkey improved relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and most recently with Egypt. The economy has been a driver behind the rapprochement with regional rivals. Turkey is going through a severe economic crisis marked by high inflation and the continuous devaluation of the Turkish Lira. Turkey is in dire need of economic cooperation and access to markets.

Exports to Saudi Arabia significantly increased after the normalisation of relations in 2021/2022. Turkey has also become an increasingly important exporter of military industry products to the region. In addition, Turkey also established offshore production in the Gulf. However, despite a rise in trade, Derya Göçer stressed that the West remains Turkey's main trading partner and that the US in particular retains its position as one of the most significant Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) contributors in Turkey. Derya Göçer remarked that the government also sought normalisation with Israel. However, although it was already hard to communicate, it now is - at least for some time - unthinkable.

In the beginning of the conflict the government tried to position Turkey as a mediator between Israel and Hamas. After all, Turkey demonstrated its potential role as a middle power in the Ukraine war, when Turkey facilitated the so-called grain deal (Black Sea Grain Initiative). However, this failed in the case of the Gaza War. Once, instead of Turkey, Qatar brokered a deal between Hamas and Israel over the release of hostages, President Erdogan and other politicians of the ruling party escalated their rhetoric against Israel. Escalatory rhetoric culminated in President Erdogan's provocative claim that Hamas are freedom fighters and not a terrorist organisation. Certainly, the local elections on March 31, 2024, played a huge role. Göçer asserted that Erdogan became increasingly pressured by smaller Islamist parties. Particularly, the ruling AKParty's more conservative and Islamist constituencies expected a clearer and harsher stance against Israel and more support for Palestinians. Erdogan tried to use the Gaza war for his campaign. He and the candidate for Istanbul often referred in public speeches to the sufferings of Palestinians. However, while the rhetoric was escalated, this did not necessarily reflect in trade relations with Israel. The government did not impose any restrictions on trading, much to the anger of conservative and Islamist circles.

Derya Göçer noted that Iran and Turkey share a resemblance in terms of foreign policy gains; overall, neither country has experienced significant economic growth or seen an upgrade of its factories thanks to the relationships with China and Russia. She further noted that individuals holding eminent positions in the state may have benefitted from the deals, but such gains did not extend to the wider population, making a distinction between the regime and the general public necessary.

Extra-regional actors

The US has not proved to be the security provider it proclaimed, particularly to the Gulf countries. This inadequacy was already apparent when the Houthis bombed Saudi Arabia in 2019. Saudi Arabia has therefore begun purchasing Chinese drones, diversifying its options, and increasing Chinese influence in the region. However, although US leverage is declining in the region and Washington does not seem to be interested in serving as the regional provider of security, its replacement seems unlikely in the foreseeable future.

China currently remains passive towards the conflict despite substantial investments in the Suez Canal and port infrastructures in Egypt and the Mediterranean. However, Houthi rebels have not yet targeted Chinese ships. Western media have accused China of being a free rider. However, Göçer underlined that under the current situation, Chinese infrastructure investments are not sustainable in the long term. China is encountering other limits in the region, particularly with regard to its relations with Turkey and Iran. Indeed, Turkish Islamist's sensitivity is raising tensions over Xinjiang, and China's leverage over Iran is limited as Iranians are dissatisfied with the lack of economic improvement that the strategic partnership should have provided.

The war in Gaza has also affected the US position towards Ukraine. Aid in support of Ukraine has been thinned and priority has shifted towards Israel. Most importantly, Ehteshami noted that the conflict in Gaza has challenged the US' rhetoric and discourses, and its ability to shape them, exposing growing hardship for the US to criticize the Russian occupation or its indiscriminate use of weaponry against civilians, without condemning Israel's conduct. It has become increasingly difficult for the US to manage these narratives, exhibiting the limits of its crisis management capabilities. As a result of the

US struggles to contain crises and mobilise its allies and resources, China's approach to Taiwan risks becoming increasingly aggressive.

How will the region look like a year from now?

George Fahmi warned that the consequences of the war in Gaza should be anticipated and that they may include heightened levels of radicalization and unconventional warfare, leading to increased violence and attacks.

The unsustainability of the current situation causes Professor Ehteshami to believe that the conflict is likely to come to an end within the next year. However, the cessation of hostilities will not necessarily signify the resolution of conflicts in the region. Poverty, demographic challenges, and inequalities will persist as the ongoing conflict diverts attention from issues critical to individual well-being and societal development. Ehteshami added that, if these issues remain unaddressed, they will fuel further crises in the future.

The rise of non-state actors and proxies, a trend evident before the current conflict, is also foreseen by Derya Göçer. This will further complicate regional dynamics. She also underscored how the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars demonstrate a persistent state of conflict that obstructs growth and development. These ongoing low-level conflicts in the region are triggered by Iran and prolonged by its reluctance to escalate them out of fear of taking them to its own borders. However, this not only affects Yemen and Syria but also neighbouring countries like Turkey and Iraq.

Moreover, the panellists mentioned the environmental ramifications of this destructive behaviour, that have yet to be addressed on an international level. Efforts to diversify the energy sources and develop the sector are in fact hampered by this persistent instability.

Gideon Levy called for multilateral institutions to support regional leaders through concerted diplomatic efforts to normalize relations and address these conflicts. Indeed, in his opinion cooperation beyond the region's borders is necessary to effectively reduce low-level conflicts and

prevent radicalization. Levy claimed that the burden of resolving these issues cannot rest solely on the Middle East and its governments but requires collective action and support from the international community. Overall, he highlighted the need for greater efforts to break the vicious cycle of violence, and the normalization and routinisation of wars.

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