

Risks and opportunities in the Middle East: normalization plus dialogue

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No normalization with Israel without two states

Hamas' terrorist attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 was followed by Israel's war against Gaza with tens of thousands of deaths, Hezbollah's skirmishes in northern Israel and Israel's increasingly massive retaliatory strikes on Lebanon. Iran believed it had to retaliate against the killings of leaders of Iran's allies Hamas and Hezbollah on Iranian territory and in Lebanon in order not to lose its credibility. An asymmetrical war increasingly turned into a military conflict between states.

The attempts of some Arab states, with the mediation of the USA, to recognize Israel without the rights of the Palestinians with the so-called "Abraham Accords" of 2020 were exploited by Hamas for the terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 with 1200 dead. The Israeli army responded by destroying a large part of the Gaza Strip, wiping out well over two percent of the population. The USA, which has supported Israel with around 300 billion dollars, could no longer defend this fact with the "right to self-defense".

Nevertheless, the Joseph Biden administration took no action to stop the Israeli army. Weapons used for destruction continued to be supplied. Resolutions in the UN Security Council calling for a ceasefire were regularly blocked by the USA. The US Secretary of State's numerous trips to the region were unsuccessful. The USA did not exert any pressure on Israel. However, even before he took office, Donald Trump had persuaded the Israeli Prime Minister to agree to a temporary ceasefire in Gaza in January 2025. However, the Israeli armed forces reserved the right to re-enter the fighting if they felt that Hamas was not abiding by the agreements.

But only a two-state solution can prevent repeated uprisings against the occupation. However, if Palestine is denied the right to an independent state, the two-state solution will be further postponed. The status quo not only prevents self-determination for the Palestinians, but also jeopardizes the existence of a Jewish state. The more states that recognize a state of Palestine, the more likely a future Israeli government will agree to this reality as the best solution for Israel.

The "Abraham Accords" announced in 2020 are primarily seen as a normalization between Israel and some Arab states (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan). However, the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel also means that Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories is indirectly recognized. In addition, the agreements with the participation of the USA include an alliance against Iran, both economically and militarily.

Saudi Arabia did not join the "Abraham Accords" because it feared that instability could arise in its own country if the Palestinian issue was not resolved. Nevertheless, the country considered that it could receive certain benefits from the USA if it joined these "Abraham Accords". Saudi Arabia formulated certain conditions. It demanded security guarantees similar to NATO from the USA, US approval of a (civilian) nuclear program and the delivery of modern combat aircraft.

The terrorist attack by the Palestinian organization Hamas on 7 October 2023 halted the crucial negotiations that were to have taken place shortly afterwards. The Arab League then recalled its own principle of the 2002 Arab Peace Plan "Land for Peace", according to which recognition of Israel was possible, but within the 1967 border lines.

President Trump moved far away from this solution again in January 2025. He proposed resettling the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip to Jordan and Egypt. This ethnic cleansing would not only meet with fierce resistance from the Palestinian population, but would also be rejected by Jordan and Egypt.

Ultimately, the Gulf region and the Middle East must find their own peace solution. The “Abraham Accords” are not sufficient for this and are dividing the Arab world. If they are to be successful, they must be linked to a cooperative dialog forum of Islamic states, including representatives of a Palestinian state. These included Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the future Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen and Palestine. Representatives of the United Nations and members of the Security Council and the EU could take part.

This dialog forum can prevent the “Abraham Accords” from becoming a solo effort between a few Arab states and Israel. Its principles would be territorial integrity, sovereignty, non-violence, prohibition of intervention and indivisibility of security. They must also apply to a Palestinian state. This would also be in line with the Arab peace initiative of 2002, but it also implies that Iran must recognize Israel within the 1967 borders.

The fall of al-Assad of Syria, Donald Trump and the nuclear agreement

At the end of 2024, Bashir al-Assad of Syria was overthrown by rebel groups. In addition to the war in Gaza and Lebanon, another element of uncertain development was added to the Middle East. The new rulers who toppled the regime emerged from opposition organizations that Western states had labeled as terrorists, such as Al-Qaeda or Al-Nusra. However, they were seen as the lesser evil by the West and were also supported.

Iran was weakened by the end of Bashir al-Assad. Iran had supported Assad's regime because it saw Syria as a buffer for its own defense. After his departure, Iran changed its line of argument and quickly referred to the new rulers in Damascus as an “armed group” and no longer as terrorists, as before. Moreover, Iran would respect any government that complied with the wishes of the Syrian people. Nevertheless, Iran's geopolitical position in the region will be diminished. Iran's other non-state partners, Hezbollah in Lebanon, have also been severely weakened by Israeli military strikes. Iran also lost direct access to Lebanon via Syria and thus to Hezbollah. In addition, Iran can no longer rely on Syria's former ally Russia. Relations will be limited to a brotherhood in arms.

This new situation could also represent an opportunity for Iran. There is also a weariness in Iran to support fighting groups, such as the members of the “Axis of Resistance”, financially and militarily. There was also always the danger that these allies would drag Iran into a direct war with Israel. Conservative newspapers in Iran were quick to accuse the reformist president Masoud Pezeshkian of not supporting al-Assad enough. In fact, after the fall of al-Assad, the reformist government has more leeway to concentrate on internal reforms and use its resources for its own development, but Iran could again prioritize diplomacy over threats of retaliation and also seek a new nuclear agreement. For example, it could offer to freeze its existing nuclear program instead of threatening to expand it.

President Trump may return to a policy of “maximum pressure” towards Iran for the time being. In doing so, he will also be fulfilling the wishes of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. He will impose even more sanctions and try to stop Iran's trade with China by also threatening Chinese companies with sanctions if they do business with Iran. However, the history of sanctions shows that although they can affect the economy of the target country, they almost never lead to a change in political behavior.

President Trump could therefore also return to diplomacy with Iran, unlike in his first term in office. Trump may prefer to avoid entanglements in the Middle East. He is unlikely to seek a

military conflict with Iran and could consider negotiating a new nuclear deal, provided it bears his name and not Obama's.

Trump would be in trouble if Israel bombs Iran's nuclear facilities - a move that would likely require US support unless Israel resorts to its own nuclear weapons - a scenario that would be a nightmare for the United States. However, if Israel takes advantage of the situation to further weaken Iran and bombs its nuclear facilities, this would likely cause Iran to react, which in turn could force the US to intervene to come to Israel's aid.

