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## The Middle East and its immediate future



The criminal war being waged by Israel in Gaza may be coming to an end as the Israeli military advances to capture Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip. This point on the border with Egypt is providing relative security for the more than 1.4 million Palestinian civilians forcibly displaced within the territory. The seven-month war, which has killed some 35,000 Palestinians and devastated Gaza's cities, has led to an increase of tensions in the Middle East and brought Israel and the US to the brink of a military conflict with Iran and its regional allies.

### **The Rafah offensive and the world's reaction**

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is facing trial for his past crimes, has vowed that he will continue with the ground offensive on Rafah and destroy completely innocent Palestinian civilians. Numerous warnings from the Arab nations, the US and many other countries around the world to refrain from taking this step have failed to sway Netanyahu,

who has nothing to lose in the present situation. The Israeli army has completed its preparations for an attack on Rafah in an area in northern Gaza, not far from where Israeli tanks and troops have gathered ahead of a long-anticipated assault on the enclave's southernmost city. It is quite obvious that there will be a large-scale and bloody attack on Palestinian civilians who have nowhere to run.

On May 7, The Times of Israel reported that IDF armored units had entered Rafah early in the morning, and the IDF claimed to have launched massive strikes on targets in the eastern part of the city and destroyed a number of residences and buildings. According to the Al Mayadeen television channel, Israeli troops and heavy military equipment entered the Rafah border crossing area from Palestinian territory. The operation of the border crossing was completely halted, and the passage of vehicles carrying passengers and humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip was stopped, which, according to Western journalists present there, will cause severe famine and epidemics of various diseases. As Al Jazeera television channel notes, there are reports of numerous persons killed and wounded following the bombing of a residential building in the township of al-Tanur, east of Rafah, and five dead in the west of the city. At least 20 casualties were later reported.

Hamas has described the Israeli forces' control of the Rafah crossing from the Gaza Strip as an attempt to prevent talks on a ceasefire and the exchange of hostages for Palestinian prisoners. It has called on the international community to put pressure on Israel to "prevent the lives of hundreds of thousands of displaced people in Rafah and throughout the Palestinian enclave from being put at risk."

UN Secretary-General António Guterres has expressed grave concern over the military operation in Rafah and called on the Israeli government to stop escalating the Middle East conflict and engage constructively in ceasefire negotiations in the Gaza Strip. The French Foreign Ministry has stated that France disagrees with Israel's decision to launch offensives in Rafah and reminds it that forcibly displacing civilians is a war crime. In a post on the social media platform X, EU diplomatic chief Josep Borrell has insisted that the evacuation of civilians from Rafah is unacceptable, and that Israel must abandon the ground military operation. According to China's Foreign Ministry, Chinese President Xi Jinping and French President Emmanuel Macron have issued a joint statement against the attack by Israeli troops on Rafah. Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanani has also condemned the launch of the military operation in Rafah and said the decision is aimed at frustrating the international community's efforts to bring peace to the Palestinian enclave.

**What the future holds for Palestine**

As Israel's brutal assault on Gaza and Rafah continues, attention has shifted to post-war security and political arrangements and the need to consider the future of the blockaded, destroyed and impoverished, but still densely populated Gaza Strip. Despite the urgent need for a plan for the post-war governance of the territory, which has been under Hamas' control for nearly two decades, Netanyahu continues to refuse to outline a strategy for the future. He insists that destroying Hamas' political and military power comes first. Netanyahu and his fellow hawks in the Israeli government want to eliminate any possibility that Hamas could grow again after the war and regain control of Gaza.

Other than that, Israel has no concrete roadmap for the future or exit strategy from Gaza. As yet, there has been no clarity on restoring the control of the Palestinian Authority over the Strip, other than a number of fanciful suggestions including proposals to empower local tribal leaders. Despite its limited successes in using sophisticated tactics against the numerically superior Israeli army, Hamas also lacks the vision and strategy to win the war or even survive the outcome. Nevertheless, some long-term plans for post-war governance have been circulated, either in a bid to maintain the momentum of the Gaza operation and its political objectives, or simply to test the waters.

One proposal reportedly being discussed in regional capitals is to disarm Hamas and transform it into a political party that would later join the political institutions of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority. Senior  [Hamas official Khalil al-Hayya](#)  has said the group is ready to agree to a five-year truce with Israel and lay down its arms if an independent Palestinian state is established on the pre-1967 borders. Other options for deradicalizing Gaza after the war, mentioned in unconfirmed media reports, indicate that Israel may be willing to allow Hamas military leaders in Gaza to go into exile, just as PLO leaders and cadres were allowed to depart by ship from Beirut in 1982. Speculation has emerged that Turkey could become a new meeting place for Hamas leaders from Gaza, after a number of the group's exiled leaders recently visited Istanbul for talks with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

With the future of Gaza still uncertain, regardless of the victory or defeat of either Israel or Hamas, there is growing concern about the impact of the conflict on the Middle East countries whose responses are determining its course. Even if the current war ends soon, there will be no end to the broader Palestinian-Israeli conflict and no sustainable peace in the Middle East, which has been hit hard by the war. So, in that sense, planning for the "day after" the war involves more than simply managing Gaza once the guns have stopped firing – fact that is sometimes overlooked, with discussions focusing on how to end the war in Gaza.

The conflict in Gaza has shaken up the Middle East, and the region appears to have changed forever. When seen from the air, the region appears to be on autopilot, steeped in amnesia but nevertheless inspired by a new geopolitical vision. This geopolitical vision is not hidden, as Israeli and Western politicians and some Middle East experts try to pretend. It is clearly working both at the regional and national level to restructure and manage the region's political economy. However, while some politicians, both globally and in the region, have voiced their support for a return to a two-state solution, this idea is now dead and buried because of Israel's genocidal policies in Gaza, which have blocked any clear path to a peaceful future. A credible solution to the Palestinian problem, including the establishment of a sovereign and independent Palestinian state, has been consistently rejected by Israel. As a result, the only thing left is continuing frustration, anger and violence in the occupied territories.

From a broader pan-Arab perspective, popular fears remain strong, and the specter of a Palestinian exodus and a new Nakba, or catastrophe, would be likely to generate additional anger throughout the Arab world. The memory of the defeat of Arab armies in the 1948 war with Israel, which undermined the nationalist positions of the Arab regimes of the time and sparked a series of military coups in Syria, Egypt and Iraq, as well as unrest in other parts of the region, still carries an important lesson as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict continues to shape public opinion in the Arab world. Contrary to various erroneous stereotypes about Arab public opinion, in reality there was considerable apprehension and sometimes strong resentment in the Arab world concerning perceived complacency in the face of Israel's actions in Gaza.

Indeed, the Gaza war has refocused Arabs' attention on what, for them, is Israel's humiliating policy of subjugating Palestinians or leaving their cause unresolved, and this is posing a serious threat to regional stability. The central question for the region, already riven by conflict, is how effective the normalization agreements signed by several Arab countries with Israel back in 2020 will be, with the public mood increasingly angry and Israel remaining arrogant and showing utter contempt for Palestinians' aspirations and rights. The desire for peaceful coexistence that might have been expected after the conclusion of the so-called "Abraham Accords" with Israel has given way to a growing realization that a comprehensive peace settlement is necessary to achieve security and strategic goals.

Similarly, the period following the end of the Gaza war is likely to be followed by an uneasy interregnum, with growing rivalries between the regional powers and a newly unstable and polarized Middle East. The powerful forces unleashed by the conflict are already in the

process of changing the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, with four Arab countries having entered into a regional alliance with Iran. The conflict in Gaza has brought the region to the brink of a larger war, with the US and Iran already involved. When Iran sent more than 300 missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles into Israel on April 13, Jordan, an Arab state, helped Israel repel the attack. As long as Israel and Iran remain embroiled in war, the operational logic of this conflict will create a tendency towards further escalation. There are growing fears that some Arab states will side with Israel if its conflict with Iran continues to intensify.

Moreover, the conflict is expected to intensify divisions within the Arab world, where instability and inequality have led to political and socio-economic crises that limit states' national resources and their ability to rebuild. With a new economic boom under way, a new form of financial firepower is expected to take root in the region as super-rich countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE pursue a diplomacy based on advanced strategies, including the cementing of their position at the forefront of Middle East politics. To get a sense of what might happen the day after the Gaza war, it is important not focus solely on the immediate aftermath, but rather to consider its broader impact on a region that is already undergoing radical change.

After the Nakba, both centripetal and centrifugal forces acted to create the current instability in the Middle East. This time, the inevitable remaking of the region may be no less chaotic and every bit as painful. That raises the question of how, given these difficult conditions, the interests of the peoples living here will be taken into account. As developments in everyday life have already demonstrated, in order to fulfil these aspirations, at least to some extent, the Middle East will need to join the other regions in the world on the path towards a multipolar world.

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