

How the Gaza and the
Ukraine conflicts are
interlinked

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Nov 2023

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Abstract

How does the Hamas-Israel conflict fit into the context of great power politics? What alignment in the Middle East forms the attitudes of Muslim-majority countries in the region towards it? Is it interlinked in some way with the Russia-Ukraine war, and if so, how? Like most recent wars, the Gaza conflict does not stand on its own but is linked to geopolitical developments both in its own region and the rest of the world. This paper attempts to map their geopolitical connection between the Hamas-Israel conflict and how it might be related to the Russia-Ukraine war.

Introduction

Alongside the ongoing war in Ukraine, and after the Azeri invasion of Nagorno-Karabakh in September, in October 2023 a further conflict ignited, between Israel and Hamas. In our interconnected world, such conflicts seldom stand on their own, and this is especially true for the Gaza conflict. As we will be see, the conflict has a deep interconnectedness on both the regional and global level, It is, in a certain way, one theater of the same great power game, of which Ukraine is another. The geopolitical context of the Hamas-Israel conflict is formed by a level of alignment in the Middle East, where three major blocs of Muslim countries rival each other, led by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey respectively, whilst at an international level, the US and Russia are both involved.

Arab-Israeli conflicts have a long history of being closely related to great power politics. The Soviet Union supported the Arab coalitions against Israel in both the Yom Kippur War of 1973 and the Six Day War of 1967 and also supported Egypt against Israel during the Suez Crisis of 1956. During the 1969-1970 War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel, Soviet fighter jets directly clashed with those of Israel in July 1970.¹ Israel, on the other hand, was a close ally of the US and the Western Bloc throughout the Cold War. Things started to change for Jordan after

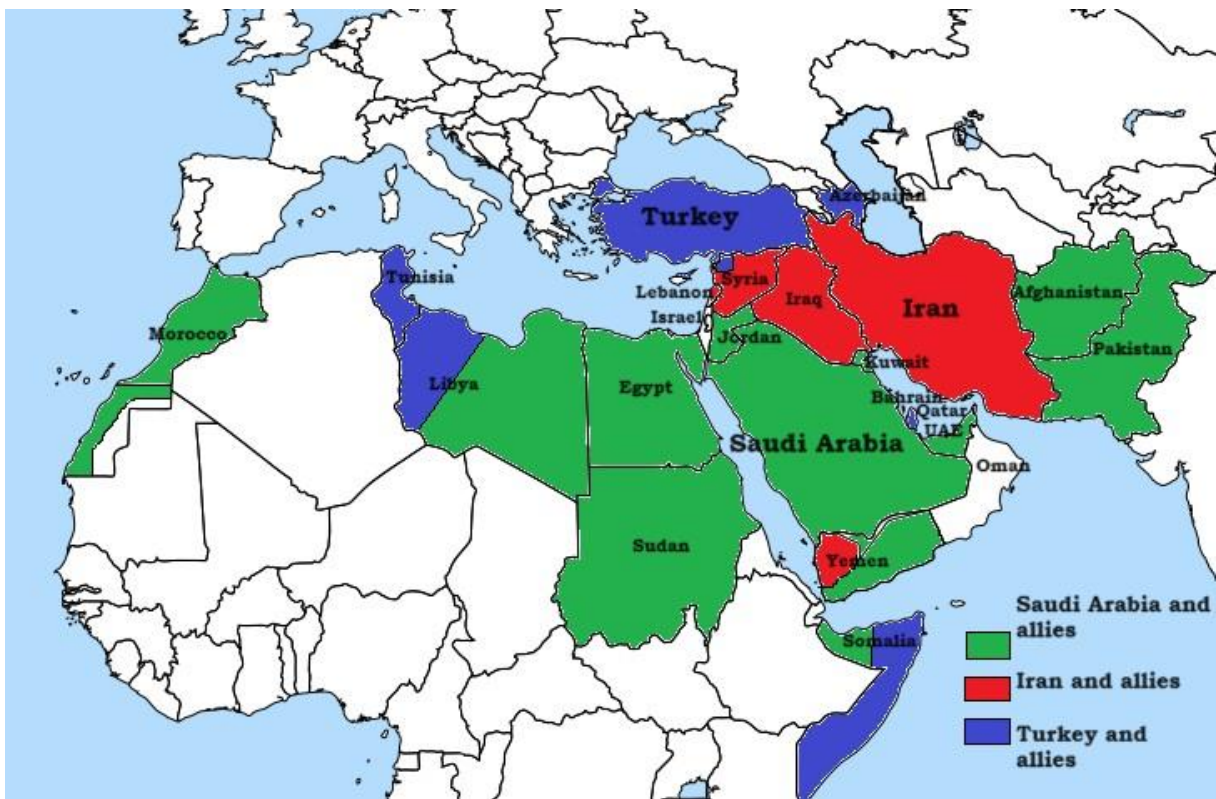
the Black September of 1970, and for Egypt after it concluded a peace treaty with Israel in 1979, after which both countries shifted closer to the US. Syria on the other hand, remained an ally of Moscow. Therefore, it can be argued that the Arab-Israeli conflict throughout the Cold War also played the role of a proxy conflict between the US and the Soviet Union. As we will see, the Hamas-Israel conflict is still closely interlinked with the NATO-Russia conflict.

Alignment in the Middle East today

The Western alignment of Israel is no secret. Israel had the status of a Major Non-NATO Ally of the US ever since the status was created in 1987, and then, the United States–Israel Strategic Partnership Act of 2014 established an even closer alliance. Things on the Muslim side were more complicated. Today, the geopolitical environment of the Middle East is formed by three major blocs: The Iran-led bloc, the Saudi Arabia-led bloc, with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates as its most important partners, and the Turkey-Qatar bloc.²³ Major changes in this grouping occurred in the past decades: The *de facto* Shia takeover in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, added it to the Iran bloc. The fall of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan in 2019, moved it out of the Turkey bloc into the Saudi bloc, and the turmoil in Egypt after the Arab Spring, initially added it to the Turkey bloc with the victory of the Muslim Brotherhood at the elections of 2012, but then moved it into the Saudi bloc after the military coup of 2013. Tunisia moved into the Turkey bloc after the Arab Spring, while Libya was split between the Turkey and Saudi blocs during its civil war, with the Tripoli government aligning itself with Turkey, while the Tobruk government aligned itself with Saudi Arabia. In Iraq and Syria, while their *de facto* governments align with Iran, Sunni insurgent groups in both countries tend to align themselves with Saudi Arabia or Turkey. In the Yemeni civil war, the government is pro-Saudi, while the Houthi rebels are pro-Iran. We find the groupings on the map below a visual depiction of this pattern. The map also adds Pakistan and Afghanistan to the Saudi bloc. Pakistan is often categorized as "the closest non-Arab Muslim ally" of Saudi Arabia,⁴ and often having tense relations with Iran since the Iranian revolution of 1979, while the Taliban in Afghanistan have close links to Pakistan to a degree that they can be viewed as a Pakistani satellite.. For the sake of analysis, we will call the three blocs Iran, the Saudi, and the Turkey bloc.

The three blocs are also linked to a greater or lesser degree to three currents within Islam: Iran is Shia, while the Saudi and Turkey blocs are Sunni. Within the latter, the Saudi bloc, due to the political dominance of Wahhabism, is linked to

the international Salafi movement. The Turkey-Qatar bloc, on the other hand, has close links with the international network of the Muslim Brotherhood.



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In terms of Great-Power politics, the Iran bloc generally follows an anti-Western hard line. Turkey is a member of NATO, if a somewhat reluctant member. Saudi Arabia and its allies have traditionally been close to the US. The attitude of the three blocs also greatly differ towards Israel. The members of the Iran bloc do not recognize Israel. Turkey on the other hand has maintained diplomatic relations with Israel from early on. The Saudi bloc while fiercely opposed to Israel during the Cold War, two prominent members of this bloc, Egypt and Jordan normalized relations with Israel through peace treaties in 1979 and 1994 respectively, while two other members of the bloc normalized relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords in 2020. Indeed, negotiations were ongoing between Israel and Saudi Arabia to join the Abraham Accords when the Hamas attack on Israel happened on the 7th October 2023.

The Gaza dimnesion

Hamas, originating from the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, has traditionally been seen as a part of the Turkey-Qatar bloc. However in recent years, probably due to the hard stance of the Iran bloc on Israel, it has shifted closer to Iran.

Therefore, the 2023 war between Israel and Hamas started in an environment, where the Saudi and the Iran bloc detested each other more than they hated Israel. Actually, by preventing the formation of a unified Muslim geopolitical bloc, this arrangement enabled the West and Israel to pursue a balancing policy in the Middle East, without having to confront a unified Islamic bloc. In this context, the October 7th attack had two important consequences:

First, the rationale for the Hamas attack may have been to undermine the Saudi bloc: Even before the Hamas attack of October 7th, it was clear, that if it managed to provoke an excessive Israeli response, then public opinion in Saudi bloc countries would not countenance links with Israel. Therefore, would pressure their governments to adopt at best a neutral stance. This is also a reason for Iran to support the Hamas action, as Iran would appear as the champion of the Palestinian cause in the region.

It would certainly be a major, game-changer if Iran can pick its conflicts, and picking a conflict with Israel would be a better option, than having to face a conflict with either Saudi Arabia or Turkey. Should the Saudi-Iranian feud escalate to an all-out war, the Iran-led bloc would face the entire Saudi-led bloc, which, with Egypt and the Gulf states contains most of the Arab world. At the same time, Sunni insurgent groups in Iraq and Syria, and even Pakistan and Taliban-led Afghanistan might also be drawn into such a conflict against of Iran. Therefore, such a conflict would be high risk. Should the proxy conflicts between Turkey and Iran in Syria as well as between Armenia and Azerbaijan turn into an all-out war between Iran and Turkey, though somewhat less risky, the situation would also be sub-optimum. In both cases, the gravest risk for Iran would be the Saudi bloc and the Turkish bloc joining forces against Iran.

By contrast, a conflict with Israel would be very different. An Israeli-Palestinian conflict puts immense pressure from the domestic public on the governments of both the Saudi and the Turkish blocs. This forces them to at least stay neutral in case of a conflict between Iran and Israel. And Israel on its own, is in certain ways a more convenient enemy than either the Saudi or the Turkish bloc would be, as it has no appeal to Sunni political forces in Iraq or Syria either.

On the other hand, the Saudi and Turkey bloc will also be unlikely to go further than neutrality. Should the Israel-Iran proxy conflict escalate, this could enable Iran to solidify its strategic positions in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, under the pretext of enhancing its capabilities against Israel. This would obviously go against the interests of both the Saudi bloc and the Turkey bloc, as it would weaken their positions in these countries. Therefore, while their domestic public

won't allow them to explicitly go against Iran, they wouldn't support it either, as by doing so, they would unnecessarily strengthen Iran.

Russia comes into the picture

We can identify three blocs of the Islamic world, out of which the Iran bloc actively supports Hamas, while the Saudi and Turkey blocs are stuck between their rivalry with Iran, and their dislike for recent events in Israel. How Russia comes into the picture, and what links the Gaza conflict with the Ukraine conflict, is that out of these three blocs, Russia is allied to the Iran bloc. Syria is the closest and oldest ally of Russia in the Middle East. Their alliance reaches back to the Cold War. Basically, Syria has been an ally of Moscow ever since. Russia maintains several military bases in Syria: a naval facility in Tartus since 1971; and an air base in Latakia since 2015.⁶ Syria voted against virtually every single UN resolution condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine. Russia also maintains close ties with Iran, having received Shahed drones from Iran for its war against Ukraine, and also supplying Iran with much of its weaponry, and the partnership of the two countries has grown ever closer since the start of the war in Ukraine.⁷ The Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th was a potential watershed event in this policy. Putin could have either decided to emphasize condemning the attack and distance himself from Iran or continue with a pro-Iranian policy. Putin's choice was to double down on its pro-Iranian stance. Putin not only compared the Israeli operation against Hamas to the Nazi siege of Leningrad⁸ but also hosted the representatives of Hamas and Iran in Moscow for a joint meeting.⁹ Moscow has already maintained relations with Hamas before the October 7. attack, and leaders of Hamas have visited Russia in March and September this year.¹⁰ Russia has also refused to designate Hamas a terrorist organization and maintained this position after the October 7. attack.¹¹ Russia is peculiar in that, despite being a Christian majority country, it actually maintains closer relations with the anti-Israeli Iran bloc than the Saudi bloc or the Turkey bloc, making it actually more anti-Israel than these blocs. And it serves Russia's geopolitical interests, if the Gaza conflict diverts resources and attention from the war in Ukraine.

The conflict, and Moscow's reaction to it, also highlights the paradox that Russia is trying to position itself simultaneously in two distinct international roles, that are increasingly incompatible. One of these roles is as the supporter of the European Right, the other is the champion of the Global South. Putin has a

history of trying to reach out to the European right, for instance inviting Marine Le Pen to Moscow in 2017, before the French presidential election,¹² inviting the co-party leader of the German AfD, Tino Chrupalla to Moscow in 2021,¹³ signing a co-operation agreement with Italy's Lega in 2017,¹⁴ and thus attempting to pose as the patron of the European Right.¹⁵ On the other hand, however, in recent months Putin has been increasingly positioning his country as the champion of the Global South. While, at first this didn't mean being apologetic to Jihadism per sé, Russian policy arguably crossed a line by doubling down on its pro-Iranian and to a certain extent, pro-Hamas policies since the Gaza conflict started and hosting the representatives of both Hamas and Iran in Moscow for a summit, and refusing to declare Hamas a terrorist organization. Therefore, while on the one hand, perhaps the single most vocal issue of the European Right is to pledge to defend the continent against Jihadism, Russia's stance on the Gaza conflict highlighted its increasingly ambivalent attitude towards Jihadism in order to position itself as the champion of the Global South. This doesn't seem to be a sustainable stance in the long run, especially as the Gaza war has ignited tensions around Jihadism in Western Europe itself.

China and the Gaza war

Last but not least, what of China? China has also condemned Israel's actions and has adopted a pro-Palestinian rhetoric. In practical terms, however, China's alignment ties it to a much less pro-Palestinian alliance system, than that of Russia. While Russia is primarily allied with the Iran bloc, China on the other hand has focused on building relations with countries that have traditionally been allies of the US in the region, and do not assist Hamas against Israel, mainly with the Saudi bloc.¹⁶¹⁷¹⁸ Even before the Belt and Road Initiative was launched, China's main Muslim ally had been Pakistan,¹⁹ a Sunni state with close relations with Saudi Arabia, and tense relations with Iran, ever since the Iranian revolution of 1979. Thus, China's ties in the region link it to countries that are in conflict with Iran.²⁰ China has even taken over the role as Saudi Arabia's number one trading partner.²¹ Therefore China can be expected to stand by the policies of Saudi Arabia regarding the conflict, and not going any further than that in the confrontation with Israel and the West. And as Saudi Arabia is unlikely to get actively involved in the conflict, China's stance will most likely also not go beyond neutrality.

Russia, on the other hand, is linked to Iran and Syria, which are actively involved in the conflict, therefore Russian military assistance to Iran and Syria makes it much more involved.

Regarding the question of escalation, this geopolitical context gives us some reasons for optimism. For a broader Arab-Israeli war to occur, we would need to see action along the Israel-Jordan, and Egypt-Israel borders, as they represent the longest continuous lines of contact. Both countries however, have signed peace treaties with Israel, and are part of the Saudi bloc, which in general has aspired to normalize relations with Israel, and in fact, has more hostile relations with Iran and its allies. Therefore, no intervention in the conflict from Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia is likely. The Iran bloc, actively supporting Hamas, only borders Israel along the relatively short Israel-Lebanon and Israel-Syria borders. However, not only are these two sections of the Israeli border relatively short, but also both Syria and Lebanon are in a post-civil war status, lacking strong unified militaries, that would be capable of launching a major conventional war with Israel. The Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iranian-affiliated paramilitaries in Syria such as the Quds Force, are capable of some military action, but not for an all-out invasion. As Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are all allied with Iran, Iran could theoretically move its conventional forces through their territory to the Israeli border. However, this would not only be a logistically difficult task, but would most likely trigger US intervention. Indeed, the supreme leader of Iran has expressed unwillingness to directly intervene in the conflict.²² Therefore, it seems, that while the Hamas-Israel conflict serves the interest of Iran by creating a rift between the West and the Saudi and Turkish blocks, escalating the conflict by direct intervention is not in Iran's interests. Thus an escalation of the conflict seems to be unlikely.

Conclusion

To summarize, the Gaza conflict is marked by the existence of three main rival blocs in the core of the Islamic World: The Iran bloc, the Saudi bloc, and the Turkey bloc. Out of these three blocks, Iran is the one, that is actively opposed to the West and Israel, and actively supports Hamas in the conflict.

As the Turkey bloc and the Saudi bloc have so far been more or less allied with the West, the October 7th attack by Hamas can also be described as an attempt to create a rift between the West and its Middle Eastern Muslim allies, to try to

detach the Turkey bloc and the Saudi bloc from their Western allies. This somewhat resembles the case, during the First Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein started firing Scud missiles at Israel. Several Arab states, namely Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE were part of the coalition against Iraq, while Israel stayed neutral. Had Israel retaliated against the Scud missile attacks by Iraq, it would have made it difficult for these Arab states to remain part of the coalition. Thus in 1991, Israel did not respond. In the case of the 2023 conflict, however, Hamas did everything to ensure, Israel would have to retaliate.

Russia comes into the picture, as it is actively allied with the Iran bloc, which is an active supporter of Hamas. It maintains bases in Syria and is engaged in arms trade with Iran. A Russian victory in Ukraine will most likely boost its support for Iran and Syria, while a Russian defeat in Ukraine, will result in Russian support for Iran and Syria drying up.

Besides these practical issues, is Russia's increasingly cynical political positioning: playing the role of the patron of the European Right, as well as the champion of the Global South. Going too far in the latter role, especially with an apologetic stance on Jihadism, will ultimately alienate the European Right. Russia's dealing with the Gaza conflict seems to be close to, if not already beyond that point. How much longer can Putin play these diametrically opposed roles, will be a major question over the next months.

Endnotes

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