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Executive Summary Report

On Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacked Israel with approximately 3,000 terrorist militants leaving roughly 1,200 Israelis dead and around 240 kidnapped in Gaza. Israel is now at war with Hamas until Hamas' military capability is destroyed, Hamas is no longer the governing authority in Gaza, and all hostages taken by Hamas are rescued or released.

In previous conflicts involving Israel and Hamas, Arab nations have rallied together to condemn Israel and, in some cases the United States, for its support to Israel. The current war is different in that the Arab World has not responded with a unified condemnation of Israel declaring war with Hamas following the atrocities committed by Hamas on Oct. 7.

There is agreement on some very basic areas related to the crisis. For example, few nations blame Israel for responding to the Hamas attacks of Oct. 7. Every nation, including the United States, has condemned the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the loss of innocent Palestinian lives primarily in Gaza, but also within the West Bank, since the conflict began. The acts by Hamas on Oct. 7 have certainly sidelined any discussion of resuming negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA). Despite the signatories of the Arab Peace Initiative and the U.S. President's aspirations for a two-state solution, Israeli/Palestinian violence will continue. There is international consensus to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza as an outcome of the war. But there is currently no unifying idea to resolve the current war between Israel and Hamas other than a call by some member states in the United Nations Security Council for an immediate cease fire – this was vetoed by the United States on Dec. 9

Key Points:

- The current response of Arab nations to the Israel-Hamas War has been uneven and below the coherence and intensity levels seen in previous conflicts between Hamas and Israel. This could change, but for the foreseeable future a powerful Arab response is unlikely.
- Sunni Arab nations are far more threatened by Iran than they were during past conflicts. Further, they fear terrorism and see Hamas as a terrorist organization.
- The Palestinians are not a cohesive political force right now and do not garner the same advocacy or leverage globally that they did in decades past.
- The signatories of the Abraham Accords are benefiting economically from normalized relations with Israel. Six nations have normalization agreements with Israel: Egypt and the Kingdom of Jordan's agreements are decades old, while the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan normalized relations as recently as 2020.
- An exemplar is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which considers itself the leader of the Arab and Muslim world. While Palestinian statehood is not a strategic concern for Saudi monarchy, the plight of the Palestinian people is in Saudi citizens' minds. That said, in the long-term Saudi Arabia hopes to benefit from a future economic relationship with Israel.
- The Houthis in Yemen recently stepped-up attacks on U.S. Navy and commercial ships in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The United States and United Kingdom are conducting retaliatory strikes on Houthi facilities in Yemen to degrade its abilities to continue these attacks. This ongoing lethal exchange is not a major escalation in the Israel-Hamas war but is certainly problematic to commercial traffic and global commerce. The Red Sea normally supports approximately 15 percent of all maritime shipping.



GEOIntelligence@bancroft4vets.com

Reasons for Key Sunni Nation's Muted response to the War:

Sunni Arab nations today are far more threatened by Iran than they were during past conflicts. There is a common concern by Israel and Sunni Arab states of an ever strengthening and aggressive Iran. These Arab nations are willing to work with Israel and the United States to contain Iran and are reluctant to sever that cooperation over the current Israel-Hamas war in the immediate term or in support of the Israeli/Palestinian Peace Process in the longer term.

Arab nations fear Islamist Terror Organizations such as Hamas, which many Sunni Arabs consider a terrorist organization. Sunni Arab nations clearly remember the dangers of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ), Al Qaeda (AQ), and the Islamic State (ISIS). They recall that EIJ gave birth to AQ, which in turn gave birth to ISIS. Hamas was born out of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The terrorist attack of Oct. 7 by Hamas was horrifically brutal and the atrocities unprecedented by Hamas. Most Middle East Arab nations would like to see Hamas eliminated as a military capability in Gaza and the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority is threatened by, and arguably fearful of, Hamas. This is why PA President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh have been very muted in their criticism of Hamas. They both fear the threat Hamas presents to PA stability as a political organization, the threat it poses to PA governance of the West Bank, and the future security and governance of Gaza if Israel falls short of its stated objectives of eliminating Hamas.

The other concerning outcome of allowing Hamas to survive is the current war bolsters Hamas' standing with Iran and other Iranian proxies, and Islamist terrorists in general. Allowing Hamas to survive will enable Hamas' influence to spread into other nations, particularly nations that have normalized relations with Israel. The Sunni Arab nations cannot allow this to happen.

The Palestinians are not a cohesive political force right now and do not garner the same advocacy or leverage globally that they did in decades past. This lack of global leverage reduces the pressure on the international community, including Arab nations, to act in support of the Palestinian cause. The PA is at its weakest point since its founding. The PA is not respected by the Palestinians in the West Bank or by Sunni Arab nations in the region. Israel has been content (until now) to have the political leadership in Gaza and the West Bank split. For Israel, this meant there was a less powerful voice on the world stage asking for a two-state solution. Neither the Palestinians or Israelis view the current Palestinian or Israeli leadership as viable or able to engage in strategic dialogue.

The Sunni Arab nations are taking a long view of their economies. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is probably the best example. Saudi Arabia is actively seeking to diversify its economy, which has historically been solely dependent on oil. Saudi sees a stable Middle East as a critical element to reforming its economy. Over the past several years, Saudi leaders have sought to detangle themselves from conflicts in Yemen and Qatar and it is hesitant to become involved in a conflict with Israel.

The signatories of the Abraham Accords are benefiting economically from the normalized relationship with Israel. Six nations have normalization agreements with Israel: Egypt and the Kingdom of Jordan have longstanding agreements, while the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan have recently normalized relations. It is reasonable that all these countries obtained the concurrence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia before normalizing relations with Israel.

Positive diplomatic, economic, and security relations with the United States are very useful to the Sunni Arab governments. Egypt has benefitted with security assistance for decades. U.S. assistance to Egypt has played a central role in Egypt's economic and military development and in furthering the U.S.-Egypt strategic partnership and regional stability. Beginning in 1978, the United States has provided Egypt with over \$50 billion in military and \$30 billion in economic assistance.

Since 1951, the United States has provided more than \$20 billion economic and security assistance to Jordan. Morocco gained the U.S. acceptance of its annexation of Western Sahara. Sudan was removed from the list of nations that sponsor terrorism, and the UAE was promised the opportunity to purchase F-35 advanced fighter aircraft from the United States. Saudi Arabia is seeking a nuclear agreement with the United States and is unlikely to jeopardize the prospects of that deal over the Israel-Hamas War.

It is worth noting what the two-state solution means to the Sunni Arab nations. The first is peace between the Palestinians and the state of Israel. This is elusive for sure - particularly when Gaza is governed by Hamas leaders that openly deny Israel's right to exist and they call for the elimination of the Jewish people. The second is a stable Palestinian population that does not spread to other countries in the region. Since the war began, none of the 22 nations in the Arab League have offered to take Palestinian refugees. In the minds of the Sunni Arab governments, if the Palestinians are not at peace with Israel, they will conduct destabilizing activities whenever tensions rise, and they will do this wherever they reside.

Select Sunni Arab National Responses:

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: considers itself the leader of the Arab and Muslim world. And, while Palestinian statehood is not a strategic concern for Saudi monarchy, the plight of the Palestinian people is at the forefront in Saudi citizens' minds. This quandary shapes the government's response.

Saudi Arabia issued a statement in support of Palestinians that neither approved of nor condemned Hamas' actions. The media is reporting that Saudi prefers not to participate in a stabilization force or in funding the reconstruction of Gaza, though this could change.

The Kingdom intends to diversify its economy by 2030 avoiding the "Natural Resource Trap" (e.g., oil) that potentially plagues many oil-only national economies around the world. The amount of multi-Ministry transformation efforts will only intensify over the coming decades as the older royalty dies. This modernization could tangentially help bring the Palestinians around and away from terrorist political bodies taking control and dominating their future. The Crown Prince understands that a stable Middle East is in its national interest and seeks to pursue these reforms. The country has the largest economy in the Middle East, yet Israel has the most diversified economy and a powerful high-tech sector. Saudi hopes to benefit from a future economic relationship with Israel. Normalizing relations with Israel is not possible right now, but analysts suggest that negotiations to that end are paused, not severed.

Egypt: prior to normalizing relations with Israel in 1980, Egypt was at war with Israel since 1947. Egypt has served as an advocate for Peace and has been an interlocutor during multiple Hamas/Israeli conflicts since 2007. Not surprisingly, Egypt has been hard on the Israeli government for the decades-long problem with the Palestinians that, in Egypt's mind, Israel refuses to solve. Egypt has not outwardly condemned Hamas for the Oct. 7 attacks. Egypt does not support Hamas, but Egypt is also intimidated by Hamas and remains concerned over the outcome of the current war. It sees Hamas as an extension of the Muslim Brotherhood and an extremist organization. Most likely, Egypt is muted in its condemnation of Hamas for domestic reasons. Egypt continues to enable the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza, but it has not allowed Palestinian refugees into Egypt. As has been

the case over many, many Israeli-Palestinian crises, Egypt does not want to inherit the Palestinian problem. It fears a temporary arrangement to allow Palestinians from Gaza into the Sinai region to escape the conflict, could become permanent dislocation.

Kingdom of Jordan: reactions have been very similar to Egypt's. Jordan has approximately 3 million Palestinians within its population and Jordan sits adjacent to the West Bank. Jordan's concerns are containing the conflict in Gaza, preventing its expansion into the West Bank, and maintaining internal stability with its restive Palestinian population. Jordan, like Egypt, does not support Hamas, but Hamas as a terrorist organization has growing popularity with the Jordanian Palestinian population. For these reasons, Jordan has not condemned Hamas. Similar to Egypt, Israeli-Palestinian problems invariably become Jordan's problem too. Like most nations, Jordan's biggest irritation with Israel is the growing humanitarian disaster in Gaza, but also the exponential increase of violence in the West Bank; both will factor in the stability of the Jordanian Palestinian population.

United Arab Emirates (UAE): also has a balanced and pragmatic approach to the war. It issued a strong statement condemning Hamas. It is equally concerned, however, with Palestinian civilian casualties and the risk of escalation. The UAE is benefitting from its economic ties to Israel and it would like to expand its security cooperation with Israel as well. The previous U.S. administration promised the UAE it would be allowed to purchase F-35s. The current administration has paused, but not halted, the normalization process and UAE does not want to jeopardize the opportunity to restart the F-35 acquisition process. Like everyone else, the UAE must balance these competing issues.

Bahrain: like UAE, has a very useful economic relationship with Israel and it will work hard to not damage that. It also is the host to the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Given Bahrain is a mostly Shia Arab nation, having this U.S. headquarters in country provides an important hedge against Iranian aggression. Bahrain will not jeopardize this relationship. The concern for the monarch is that the Palestinian civilian casualties are a domestic political issue that it cannot ignore. Its response has been largely rhetorical issuing statements expressing concern over the civilian casualties, but more importantly, Bahrain clearly condemned Hamas.

Syria: response to the war is twofold. First, is rhetorical condemnation, which is inconsequential. The second is Syria continues to allow Iranian facilitation of its proxy forces in Syria. The facilitation has gone on for years. What is new is Israel's increased strikes in Syria to curb Iran's activities.

Qatar: has a complicated role in the Israel-Hamas war. Qatar has supported Hamas ideologically and financially for over a decade. Qatar provided Hamas more than \$1.3 billion since 2012. Israel has historically allowed this financial assistance to continue so that Israel does not have to financially support Gaza humanitarian and economic assistance. Qatar hosts Hamas political leadership, and Hamas benefits greatly from Qatar-based (and government funded) Al Jazeera. Hamas leaders residing in Qatar have been able to move about the region and Europe freely because they reside outside of Gaza. This freedom of movement for the political senior leaders has enabled strategic planning, fundraising, and provided a base of support for their policy objectives.

Qatar also hosts U.S. forces in country and has been helpful to the U.S. diplomatic efforts and hostage negotiations throughout the crisis. Qatar was instrumental in the cease-fire negotiation and recent hostage/prisoner exchange and will continue to play a constructive role until Hamas is eliminated. Qatar does not maintain diplomatic relations with Israel and, consistent with the international narrative, has been critical of the humanitarian disaster growing in Gaza.

Finally – Turkey and Iran:

Turkey: is not a Sunni Arab nation, but it has influence in the Middle East and with this conflict. Turkey sees itself as a leader in the Muslim World and seeks to display its self-proclaimed leadership role. Turkey has fostered tensions with Israel in the past for domestic political reasons and to garner popularity in the Middle East. Turkey has been highly critical of Israel and has not condemned Hamas. In fact, Turkey considers Hamas an organization fighting for liberation and not a terrorist organization.

Iran: is obviously not a Sunni Arab nation, but its reaction to the war is worth noting. Iran has supported Hamas for years with money, arms, and training, but it has stated openly, at various levels, that it does not intend to intervene in the war militarily. There are likely two major reasons for this approach. First, Iran has domestic stability challenges of its own, both economic and political. A major war will be unpopular, and Iran is not well-postured domestically to handle that shock. Second, Iran does not want to fight the United States directly. But Iran has been undeterred from engaging the United States with actions below the level of armed conflict. Iran, either directly or through encouragement, increased attacks on U.S. forces by its proxies using Syrian and Iraqi Shia militias. However, Iran is currently deterred from an all-out, full-scale war with the United States. The U.S. rapid movement of forces to the Middle East likely contributed to this deterrence.

Iran, like many others, is walking a tightrope. It must balance the considerations above with the optic that looks weak. The Houthis in Yemen, Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Shia militias in Iraq and Syria are taking notice that Iran is not robustly standing by Hamas in its time of need. There is potential that this concern will reduce Iran's influence over these groups.

That said, the Houthis, armed and trained by Iran, yet only tangentially under Iranian control, launched several missiles and drones against Israel in the past few months, with successful interceptions by Israeli defenses, and in several cases, by U.S. Navy ships operating in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. More recently, Houthis stepped up attacks on U.S. Navy and commercial shipping, causing significant disruption to maritime commerce in this strategically important Global Commons. The United States and United Kingdom are conducting strikes on Houthi facilities in Yemen to degrade their abilities to attack ships in the Red Sea. This ongoing challenge is not a major escalation in the Israel-Hamas war, but is problematic to commercial traffic, as the Red Sea normally enjoys about 15 percent of all sea-borne shipping, with even higher percentages in trade between Asia and Europe, especially oil.

Conclusion:

The current response of Arab nations to the Israel-Hamas War has been uneven and well below the coherence and intensity levels we've seen in previous conflicts between Hamas and Israel. Nations must balance support for the Palestinian people, which matters greatly on the "Arab Street," with economic growth, containing the war, containing Islamist terror organizations (like Hamas), and containing Iran. This could change, but for the foreseeable future a united and powerful Arab response is unlikely.

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