

Introduction

In the midst of the process of conflict and regional reconfiguration affecting the Middle East since October 2023, a thesis has emerged asserting that a new regional order dominated by Israel can only signify redirecting the region towards a more stable, peaceful, and sustainable political and social reality. However, Israel's ability to impose changes through brute military force, the collapse of the self-styled Axis of Resistance following the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, and the heavy blows dealt to Hamas and Hezbollah cannot be identified with a promise of a "new Middle East" from which conflict has been banished, the Palestinian question deactivated, and the dynamics of power balance definitively altered.

Donald Trump's return to the US presidency and the regional dynamics since the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 suggest an unfavourable, interventionist, and highly volatile scenario. However, the Republican president faces a Middle East that is markedly different from the one he encountered in his previous term. The main unknown is how Tehran will react to the collapse of its strategic alliance of the Axis of Resistance. The regime's own survival is more at stake than at any time since the rise of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, once Tehran's main Arab ally, opens the door to a political earthquake that will be felt across the region and beyond. While Syria and Lebanon are redressing their power balances outside Iranian influence, the Gulf Arab countries continue to make progress in their internal cohesion while restructuring their dynamics of disaffection with the West and rapprochement with the global South, accentuated by the Gaza war.

Middle East in 2024, a year of dynamited red lines

The 7 October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel unleashed an unprecedented war response against Gaza that lasted throughout 2024. The war has set off a shockwave of regional consequences, some of which will be revealed from this 2025 onwards while others are incubating for the longer term. The conflict has unbalanced regional power balances one by one and dynamited important red lines. Moreover, it has made it clear to the international community that the Palestinian problem remains and that the normalisation agreements between Israel and some Arab states, forged by Donald Trump's first

administration and further promoted by his successor, Joe Biden (Álvarez-Ossorio, 2024), have not marginalised the Palestinian issue or prevented a new clash of wars.

Gaza-Israel and the uncertainty of a ceasefire

On the eve of the inauguration ceremony of Trump's second presidency on 20 January 2025, mediation efforts succeeded in getting Hamas and Israel to agree to a ceasefire. Fifteen months of failed negotiation attempts with only a fragile and brief humanitarian standoff were behind us¹. It was precisely this *interregnum* between the outgoing and incoming administrations that made it easier to press the parties — particularly Israel, which had been the more reluctant — to reach an agreement. Donald Trump claimed credit for the achievement as a diplomatic victory at the very outset of his new term, but unquestionably his pressure on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was decisive, especially in contrast to the acquiescence of the outgoing President Joe Biden. The Democrat not only provided political backing to Netanyahu's pursuit of an unrelenting and ruthless war but also acted as his principal arms supplier. Under Biden, ceasefire negotiations had become a smokescreen, allowing Israel to continue its military campaign while the United States vetoed, on four occasions, a UN Security Council resolution imposing a ceasefire.

The major challenge soon became transforming the ceasefire into a permanent agreement and addressing the consequences of the war. Most apparent among these are the unprecedented levels of destruction and death caused by Israeli army bombings in the Gaza Strip. According to the official count, by early 2025, over 45,000 Gazans had died — two-thirds of them women and children — though the actual figure could be up to 40% higher, according to a study published in *The Lancet* (Jamaluddine et al., 2025). The number of injured and maimed exceeds 105,000; Gaza now holds the tragic record of having the highest number of child amputees in the world, according to the UN Refugee Agency² and almost the entire population (before the war, some 2.2 million people) has been forcibly displaced from their homes. Israel has prevented essential aid from entering the territory all this time, in violation of the Geneva Conventions, resulting in a

¹ A temporary truce in late November 2023 lasted just seven days, during which 105 hostages were released by Hamas and 240 Palestinian prisoners by Israel. Despite attempts to extend it, hostilities resumed on 1 December.

² See: UNRWA, Gaza Situation Update. 9 December 2024. Available at: <https://unrwa.es/actualidad/noticias/informe-actualizado-de-la-situacion-en-gaza-2>.

humanitarian catastrophe in which famine and disease have ravaged the Palestinian civilian population. In addition, Israeli attacks have caused the destruction of more than 90% of Gaza's vital infrastructure, hospitals and educational facilities and have destroyed entire towns.

Israel's actions have also been aimed at eroding UNRWA as an institution. For years Netanyahu has been attacking its central role in assisting the population with a view to dismantling it in order to end the issue of the right of return of refugees driven from their homes. Gaza has seen another episode of such harassment. The army attacked its schools and facilities, leaving more than 450 buildings destroyed, and accused the agency of "employing Hamas terrorists"³. Although Israel did not present conclusive evidence to back up its allegations, sixteen UN member states withdrew funding to the agency, while others imposed conditions for handing it over, effectively suspending some \$450 million. On 28 October 2024, Israel's parliament passed legislation to prohibit UNRWA from operating directly or indirectly in Israel and Palestine.

This is the context in which the ceasefire came into force on 19 January 2025, the first glimmer of hope in fifteen months. However, the difficulties in reaching the agreement were evident from the outset, as its acceptance on the Israeli side triggered a crisis of governance, while mistrust on the Palestinian side was evident. Moreover, just maintaining the ceasefire meant continuing to negotiate to consolidate it and bridge deep divergences between the visions and interests of Israel, and the Palestinians in a context different from that of 2024, with the Trump administration already in control of the process.

In any case, this plan did not go beyond a temporary solution to the conflict unleashed on 7-O. It did not address further negotiation of a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian problem, nor did it mention a two-state solution. It did not address the further negotiation of a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian problem, nor did it mention a two-state solution. The planned reconstruction phase in Gaza clashed from the outset with Israel's

³ The UN Secretary-General and UNRWA commissioned an independent report by a working group led by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, which investigated the allegations and published its findings on 20 April 2024. According to the document, the Israeli authorities "have provided no evidence to substantiate their claims that a significant number of UNRWA employees are members of terrorist organisations". The report concluded that in the absence of a political solution to the conflict, UNRWA remains "central" to ensuring vital assistance and essential social services, especially in health and education, to Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The working group made recommendations to strengthen the agency's governance and reform prevention strategies and oversight of its employees. The full 54-page report is available at https://www.un.org/unispal/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/unrwa_independent_review_on_neutrality.pdf.

plans for the north of the Palestinian Strip: according to information provided by the Israeli authorities themselves, the intention is that it will never be the same again. Although the Israeli army denied it was implementing what has been called the 'generals' plan', a proposal by former national security adviser Giora Eiland aimed at militarily depopulating the area, senior Israeli officials did admit that one of the aims of the offensive was to create a 'security zone' (Srivastava *et al.*, 2025) that would establish more distance between Israeli communities and the Palestinian population of Gaza.

The war has left Hamas severely decimated. Its military structure and political leadership have been severely decimated, especially after the death of Yahya Sinwar at the hands of Israeli soldiers on 17 October 2024. Sinwar was Israel's number one target, considered the mastermind of the 7-O attacks. Just a month and a half earlier, after the assassination of Ismael Haniyah, he had risen from leading Hamas in Gaza to become the head of the Islamist organisation's political bureau. It is clear, whatever happens, that Hamas will not return to rule the Strip. The biggest challenge after the end of the war will be the search for alternative political leadership, which will have to overcome the difficulty of a process of rebuilding the social fabric in Gaza and the West Bank, let alone what control Israel intends to exert. Failure to adequately address this phase could lead to a dangerous vacuum. With the Palestinian National Authority lacking internal credibility and being ignored at home and abroad as an institution, the Palestinian leadership is going through a moment of crisis unprecedented in its history.

Other war fronts: Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen

From the day after 7 October, Israel faced multiple war fronts and several red lines were crossed. Armed groups recruited by Iran for its so-called 'axis of resistance' soon allied with Hamas and escalated the conflict to the level of a multi-front war. On the Israel-Lebanon border, the Shiite militia Hezbollah launched a series of missile and drone attacks on Israeli territory, although these appeared to follow a strategy of limited intensity. They were met with extensive bombardment by the Israeli army.

Meanwhile, in the Red Sea, the Ansar Allah militia (the Houthi rebels) opened another front. Their attacks and boarding attempts against cargo ships bound for Israeli ports succeeded in jeopardising global maritime trade through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait - a

corridor that forms part of the main east-west route and carries a quarter of the world's seaborne trade. The Houthis posed a direct threat to Israel from day one by launching ballistic missiles at cities such as Eilat (2,000 kilometres away) and Yaffa. Although these attacks were easily intercepted by the Iron Dome system and by US and British maritime defence deployments in the Red Sea, they added a large and unexpected source of regional tension. 2024 ended with a wave of Israeli strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen and Netanyahu's threat of a full-scale offensive against their strongholds. On a smaller scale, but not without impact, pro-Iranian militias in Iraq attacked US military targets in that country. However, the conflict on this front was confined to low-intensity levels throughout 2024 and by early 2025 appeared to be defused.

This war has also been waged in the capitals of Syria and Iran, bringing to light for the first time the direct confrontation between Israel and the Islamic Republic, hitherto buried in a 'proxy war'. The Israeli attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1 April 2024 broke several previously respected red lines, raising the risk of a direct conflict between the two countries. The bombing killed General Mohamad Reza Zahedi, the former leader of the Quds Force in Syria and Lebanon, and at least six other senior Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders. This was the first red line dynamited between the two enemies.

Iran's response materialised on 13 April with the launch of hundreds of missiles and drones at Israel—the first direct attack in the history of the confrontation between the two nations. Another major red line was thus crossed. According to Iranian leadership, it was 'an exercise in maximum restraint', as the Iranian military warned of the attack beforehand and 99% of the drones and missiles failed to reach their targets—Israeli military bases and intelligence facilities involved in the bombardment of its diplomatic mission in Damascus—having been intercepted by allied defences (mostly over Jordanian airspace) before reaching Israeli territory. The Iranian response was indeed calculated, calibrated and limited, but it signalled a shift in strategic doctrine: Iran chose to respond openly, no longer hiding behind its 'forward defence' through proxies, while still avoiding full-scale war. It represented a departure from the strategy of 'strategic patience' through which, for decades, Iran had relied on allied militias to confront Israel and regional rivals indirectly. Instead, Iran now adopted what it termed a direct deterrence doctrine of 'multi-layered

defence' (Meneses, 2024b)—a response meant to establish a new deterrence framework in the region, though subsequent events reduced it to a mere attempt.

For months, there were fears of an Israeli counter-retaliation that would unleash a spiral of attacks and ultimately direct war. That came, but in the form of a different kind of strike on 31 July 2024: a "targeted attack" in the middle of Tehran to kill Hamas's top political leader, Ismael Haniyah. Israel had bagged a big game and was once again testing Iran's deterrence doctrine while humiliating its new authorities: Haniyah had attended the inauguration of the new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, the day before. After raising the rhetoric of revenge, Iran let the situation in its direct battlefield cool down between negotiations for a ceasefire in Gaza and intensified bombing in the Palestinian Strip and Lebanon. Its death throes had begun.

In September, the escalation of military activity on these two fronts led to the weakening of Hamas and Hezbollah's leaderships, with their top leaders—Yahya Sinwar and Hassan Nasrallah, respectively—killed in Israeli strikes within days of each other. This, in turn, further weakened Iran in a snowball effect that deepened following the fall of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad on 8 December 2024. With the Syrian dictator overthrown and a new Sunni-leaning regime closer to Turkey emerging, Iran not only lost its main regional ally but was effectively sidelined from the equation in the 'multi-front' war against Israel. The so-called 'axis of resistance' has been fractured.

That rift began to become visible in late September 2024 with the Israeli attacks that targeted thousands of *paggers* and *walkie-talkies* used by Hezbollah members. The devices were rigged with explosives before reaching Lebanon and were detonated simultaneously in two separate operations that injured thousands of people and killed at least 39. This breached the Shia militia's line of communication and further weakened its chain of command. This was followed by the assassination of the commander of the Redwan force, Hezbollah's elite unit, Ibrahim Akil.

Airstrikes against residential neighbourhoods in southern Beirut—where the 'Party of God' holds one of its strongholds—intensified, and on 27 September an air raid destroyed what Israel identified as Hezbollah's headquarters during a meeting of its leadership. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and several senior commanders were killed. With the Lebanese militia decapitated and in disarray, on 1 October Israel invaded southern Lebanon in its first ground incursion since the 2006 war. The risk of repeating the 1982

Israeli invasion of Lebanon (Parkinson, 2023) and the mobilisation of international diplomacy to prevent the northern front from spiralling out of control led to a preliminary agreement on a cessation of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah on 26 November. This fragile truce has since been subject to numerous violations by both sides.

The fighting in southern Lebanon has been the biggest challenge facing the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the peacekeeping mission that has patrolled the Blue Line since 1978 and was strengthened by Security Council Resolution 1701 after the 2006 war. Its troops have suffered several attacks by Israeli forces, which has fuelled a debate over its withdrawal or the reinforcement of the Blue Helmets' capabilities and rules of engagement (Meneses, 2024a). UNIFIL's role in southern Lebanon has proven to be key to controlling tensions on the border. From 2006 until 7-O, UNIFIL has maintained the *status quo*, despite the non-implementation of the terms of Resolution 1701 that envisaged the withdrawal of Hezbollah militia towards the Litani River line and the deployment of the Lebanese army.

Despite its failures, UNIFIL remains the best card the international community can play to stabilise the Lebanese-Israeli border. With more than 11,000 *blue* helmets from 46 countries, it is one of the longest-running and largest UN missions. It is also one of Spain's foreign policy and peacekeeping missions, as it has one of the largest contingents (some 650 Spanish military personnel participate in it) and, since 2022, Spanish General Aroldo Lázaro has been the commanding officer. The events of the past year and a half have shown that pacification in southern Lebanon and northern Israel requires the effective application of the UNIFIL mandate and Resolution 1701, which are more necessary than ever. In this sense, Spain can play an important role given the capital acquired from its experience in this UN mission.

The "new Middle East" once again

In observing and analysing events in the region over the past year, some analysts have discerned the imposition of an 'Israeli vision' (Yadlin and Golov, 2024), whereby Israel is using its power to reshape the Middle East. However, neither the dismantling of Hamas's military capabilities and the decapitation of Hezbollah's leadership—which have left Iran's regime isolated—nor the fall of dictator al-Assad suggest, as this theoretical framework

asserts, that the situation might lead to a political scenario that materialises Israel's 'successes' on the battlefield. Nothing guarantees that this could be the 'opportunity' to de-escalate the conflict and reach stable agreements that build a reality in line with the Israeli vision of a 'new Middle East', especially if it involves imposing an Israeli pax that prioritises the interests of the ultra-conservative government led by Benjamin Netanyahu over a just and lasting peace for the region.

Precedents for the use of "New Middle East".

Over the past decades, the concept of the 'new Middle East' has been evoked on numerous occasions when major regional changes have taken place. On each occasion, the concept has had different meanings depending on who was using it, the geopolitical context and the agenda it was intended to promote. In general, allusions to a 'new Middle East' have been made to signal transformative moments in the region's history, often associated with optimistic visions of peace, democracy and prosperity. This followed the signing of the Oslo Accords between Israelis and Palestinians in 1993, when Israeli leader Shimon Peres promoted the idea of a regional peace based on economic integration and shared prosperity. There was also talk of a 'new Middle East' after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq in 2003, and after the war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. In both cases, the term alluded to the triumph of a US-led agenda to reshape the region through democratisation and the weakening of authoritarian regimes and armed non-state actors.

The 'new Middle East' appeared again in 2011 in the wake of the anti-authoritarian uprisings, also known as the Arab Spring, implying that a new era characterised by a transition to democratic systems based on good governance and respect for human rights was dawning in several Arab countries. During the current decade, talk of a 'new Middle East' returned at the end of US President Donald Trump's first term in 2020, with the signing of the so-called Abraham Accords between Israel and four Arab countries (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan), believing that these normalisation agreements would bring regional stability through economic and technological cooperation, setting aside the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and reducing Iran's regional influence.

The balance sheet is not dazzling. Too many "new Middle Easterners" for the region to continue to suffer from so much armed conflict, geopolitical rivalry, human suffering, socio-economic hardship and lack of freedom and good governance. Neither did the Oslo Accords bring the long-awaited and much-needed peaceful coexistence among the peoples of the Middle East, nor did the war to change the regime in Iraq trigger a domino effect of new democracies. Nor did the Arab Spring succeed in replacing autocratic regimes with pluralistic and representative political systems. Nor have the Israeli-Arab normalisation deals promoted by both Donald Trump and Joe Biden successfully addressed the root causes of widespread regional instability. Although geopolitics is not governed by the same laws of physics, all too often the promoters of partisan projects to transform the Middle East according to their desires and interests forget that actions are accompanied by reactions. In the case of geopolitics, if the forces applied by some parties seek to produce exclusionary outcomes, other parties are likely to simultaneously exert force in the opposite direction.

The Middle East in 2025: unknowns amidst regional and global shocks

The year 2025 began in the Middle East with a sense of hope, something the people of the region have not been accustomed to for a long time. On the one hand, the exile of Syrian satrap Bashar al-Assad shortly before the turn of the year was greeted with massive displays of joy and jubilation among broad sectors of Syrian society, as well as the diaspora forced to flee their country by the war. Despite the enormous resources and the enormous difficulties in rebuilding the country, the sense of liberation and the hope for change for the better are real.

On the other hand, Lebanon began the year opening a new phase in its modern history with the election of a new president, General Joseph Aoun, with a broad consensus after two and a half years of paralysis and political deadlock. Almost immediately, the prestigious judge Nawaf Salam, who until then was the president of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague, was appointed prime minister. Both developments reflect a new dynamic of revival of Lebanese institutions as a result of new internal and regional power balances. The sense of hope was reinforced by the entry into force of the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas on the eve of Donald Trump's return to the US

presidency, after 470 days of ruthless human and physical destruction accompanied by near-total impunity.

The axis of resistance: decimated, but not defeated

The evolution of the Middle East in 2025 and beyond will be marked by interconnected dynamics that became more complex and unpredictable in the course of 2024. One of the most salient realities is that Iran faces a regional context in which its position has been significantly altered. This is due to the weakening of the so-called axis of resistance as a consequence of the heavy blows received from Israel, as well as the fall of the Assad regime in Syria. In a matter of a few months, the 'forward defence' strategy, by which Iran sought to project its influence and establish a network of allies and militant groups in the region to keep conflicts away from its borders and strengthen its geopolitical position, has been seriously compromised, taking with it much of Tehran's huge investment over the decades.

One of the big unknowns is the strategic choice that the Iranian regime will make in response to its new regional situation, and against the backdrop of an unfavourable international context with the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency. Four options can be envisaged for such a strategic choice: 1) attempt to rebuild a smaller 'axis of resistance', perhaps with a strengthened role for the Houthi militia in Yemen and related militias in Iraq; 2) engage directly in actions to destabilise other Middle Eastern and Gulf countries in order to divert attention and relieve some of the pressure it expects to receive from the US; 3) adopt a 'no-fly' approach to the Iranian regime, with a focus on the Iranian regime in response to its new regional situation and against the backdrop of an unfavourable international context with the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency. 3) adopting a more isolationist approach focused on strengthening the domestic front and its defensive capabilities, including the possible pursuit of non-conventional means of deterrence through the acceleration of its military nuclear programme; and 4) assuming a conciliatory attitude towards the new Trump Administration with a view to a compromise leading to a new 'nuclear deal' that would give guarantees of continuity to the regime in exchange for Iran abandoning its aspirations for regional hegemony.

None of these four options will be easy for Iran's leaders to accept, and all of them will come at an external or internal cost to the regime, especially as a change in the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran is felt to be approaching due to the advanced age of the current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei (86 years old). Whatever foreign policy Iran pursues and whatever methods it chooses to project its power, it is not an isolated country, as evidenced by the signing in January 2025 of a new Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between Russia and Iran that includes cooperation in multiple areas such as defence, security, economy, trade and energy. This is in addition to Iran joining the BRICS group in 2024, which has allowed it to alleviate some of its international isolation and diversify its diplomatic and economic relations.

In Lebanon, the Hezbollah militia also faces the dilemma of how to respond to the severe blows it received in 2024 from Israel, which eliminated its leadership, seriously undermined its military capacity and conducted spectacular intelligence operations against its members. Despite all this, Hezbollah has not been annihilated as a resistance movement and retains many of the ingredients necessary to rebuild itself, albeit on a smaller scale and with less support. If there is one thing that characterises groups such as Hizbollah, it is its ability to adapt and be resilient after suffering major setbacks, as it did in the 2006 war against Israel. As long as the Israeli army occupies territory in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah will be able to present itself to part of the Lebanese population as a legitimate resistance movement against the occupation. In addition, it remains to be seen how the new Hezbollah leadership will recalibrate its approaches to regional politics (especially after the disappearance of the arms supply route offered by the Assad regime) and Lebanese domestic politics (with the election of a new president and prime minister who are not part of any Hezbollah-friendly alliance).

Syria after al-Assad: daunting challenges and guarded hopes

The unexpected and rapid fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria in December 2024 is a momentous event that is changing the Middle East. The challenges facing Syria, after fourteen years of war devastation and more than half a century of ruthless dictatorship, are daunting. The immediate priorities are to maintain security conditions inside the country and lay the foundations for economic and social recovery. The interim authorities have done well to maintain the country's governmental structures from the outset, as well

as to integrate various militias into the new national army. They have also embarked on intense diplomatic activity abroad, showing a clear willingness to integrate constructively into the international system.

For the new Syria to become a stable country and rise from the ashes of war and dictatorship, the interim authorities need to exercise state control over the entire territory and improve the basic services provided by the state to citizens. They must also create the conditions for the gradual and orderly return of the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (about 60% of the total population), for the launch of an inclusive national dialogue leading to the adoption of a new constitution for all Syrians, as well as for the holding of pluralistic and inclusive elections within a reasonable timeframe.

An urgent challenge facing Syria is the recovery of its devastated economy. Syria's gross domestic product (GDP) contracted by more than 76% between 2011 and 2023 due to the impact of war, forced population displacement, the collapse of key productive sectors (such as agriculture and oil), the destruction of infrastructure and international sanctions. Bashar al-Asad fled the country leaving 90% of the population below the poverty line. Meanwhile, the Syrian pound has lost more than 99% of its value against the dollar since 2011. International cooperation is vital to help Syria emerge from this dire situation, create security conditions, rehabilitate state institutions, rebuild the country's infrastructure and help people and communities rebuild their lives.

The recovery and reconstruction of the Syrian economy will be decisive for the success or failure of the transitional phase that has opened up in the country. Social peace and economic opportunities for the population will depend on this. This in turn will condition the return of internally displaced persons (around 8 million) and the return of refugees (around 5 million) to their homes, or at least a significant part of them. The early arrival of technical and financial assistance from international donors is a priority. To this end, it is urgent that the international sanctions imposed against the Assad regime be lifted once it has collapsed. Maintaining them amounts to collective punishment of the Syrian people at a time when they most need to heal wounds and rebuild their country. The European Union (EU) has a crucial role to play in lifting sanctions and providing technical and financial assistance, both for humanitarian reasons and to enable the return of refugees. If it fails to do so, other neighbouring countries will crowd out the EU, which would lead it to further lose relevance in its Mediterranean neighbourhood.

Trump's return to a changed Middle East

Donald Trump's return to the US presidency will have a major impact on the Middle East. There is no certainty about what policies the unpredictable 47th US president will pursue and what consequences they will have. However, the record of his first presidency (2017-2021), his statements during the election campaign, the profile of his advisers and envoys to the region, as well as the first decisions made on the day he returned to office indicate that he will adopt an interventionist approach and shake up the regional scene to implement his *America first* agenda. However, the Middle East that Trump inherits from the Biden administration is very different from the one that Trump himself left behind in early 2021.

The past four years have seen tectonic shifts in the region and numerous red lines crossed: Iran and Israel have attacked each other from their own territories, Israel has dealt heavy military blows to Hamas and Hezbollah, and the Syrian Assad regime, once Iran's most important ally in the Arab world, has collapsed. But also the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar) are more united than in 2017 and have diversified their foreign relations, notably by strengthening ties with Asian powers (mainly China) and reacting lukewarmly to the Russia-Ukraine war. The Gulf Arab countries are also on better terms with neighbouring Iran than they were four years ago (Naar, 2025). On the other hand, Trump will find that the US's image among the vast majority of Middle Eastern populations has suffered a serious deterioration because of what is perceived as complicity in the war crimes and genocide that many understand Israel to have committed in Gaza.

All indications are that President Trump will maintain the very strong US support for the Israeli government's policies, as he has done in the past. This includes defending it against Israel and its leaders in the International Court of Justice (for possible genocide) and the International Criminal Court (for possible war crimes and crimes against humanity). However, Trump has shown that he can be unpredictable and disruptive. When it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it cannot be ruled out that he will present himself as a businessman looking to cut deals. While President Joe Biden had a strongly ideological approach (he himself declared himself a Zionist on multiple occasions), Trump can be expected to be transactional and to listen to other voices in the region to reach grand bargains, something Biden did not do. In a context of profound transformations in

Middle Eastern geopolitics, Trump's reappearance on the scene anticipates further shake-ups on the regional chessboard.

Donald Trump's first term culminated in the signing of the so-called Abraham Accords, under which the four aforementioned Arab countries normalised relations with the State of Israel in exchange for benefits in the diplomatic, economic, technological and military spheres. This represented a departure from the agreement among Arab countries that the establishment of full relations with Israel would only occur once the two-state solution was realised, as set out in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. The Abraham Accords were based on the premise that the Palestinian issue had ceased to be central to regional agendas and could be resolved on terms set by Israel once it had normalised relations with key Arab states. That sequence was disrupted on 7 October 2023 by the Hamas attack on Israel and the extension of the conflict to other parts of the Middle East, which had significant consequences for the international system.

Biden's foreign policy towards the Middle East revolved from the outset around a single issue: getting Saudi Arabia to join the so-called Abraham Accords. This failed to materialise during his tenure and many believe that the 7-O attacks were intended to derail normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Trump will certainly seek to claim credit for the success of closing that deal, if it comes to pass. However, Saudi Arabia's current crown prince and strongman, Mohammad bin Salman, will find it difficult to justify such a deal to Saudis, Arabs and Muslims if it is not accompanied by tangible progress towards self-determination for the Palestinian people. Saudi leaders have repeated that normalisation with Israel is out of the question as long as there is no clear horizon for the establishment of a Palestinian state. Moreover, Riyadh has shown interest in reaching a security pact with the US in exchange for normalising relations with Israel. These elements of a possible compromise could lead Trump to offer an updated version of his so-called 'deal of the century' to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on terms more favourable to the Saudis than those offered in his 2020 plan. The impact that the devastation in Gaza has had on public opinion and the danger of an open regional war could lead Trump to force Israeli leaders to make more concessions than they would like in order to close the coveted deal. Some believe that Trump wants to go down in posterity as the one who brought peace to the Middle East.

One of the great unknowns for 2025 is the policy the new US Administration will formulate towards Iran, both with regard to its nuclear programme and its regional influence and ambitions. There is ample reason to believe that a second Trump Administration would reinstate the policy of “maximum pressure” on Tehran, with harsher economic sanctions, efforts to isolate Iran internationally, and measures to weaken the regime from within by targeting its own population. Several Israeli leaders see the new US Administration as an opportunity to launch a large-scale military strike against Iran’s nuclear facilities. Benjamin Netanyahu has for years sought to draw the US into an open confrontation with Iran. The Biden Administration resisted such a course, considering the risks associated with such an attack too high — for Iran’s neighbours as well as for the global economy and international system. In Tel Aviv and Washington, there are those who hope this will change under Trump. To justify military intervention, they argue that the weakening of the axis of resistance during 2024 has left Iran more vulnerable and fragile, and that now is the time to strike and destroy its nuclear and defence infrastructure. For their part, Iranian leaders have challenged the US and Israel to test who is more fragile and vulnerable.

Should armed conflict break out against Iran, the consequences could be devastating for the Middle East and the entire international system. Despite the setbacks of the past year, Tehran retains a significant military capability and has demonstrated that, if necessary, it has no hesitation in attacking its enemies from its own territory, invoking its right to self-defence and responding to previous attacks on its interests and national security. This is what happened in April and October 2024, when Iran launched hundreds of drones, rockets and ballistic missiles against Israel and the Golan Heights. Rather than causing damage (the attacks were announced in advance), Tehran wanted to restore its deterrence capability vis-à-vis Israel.

Should the Iranian regime perceive an existential threat, it is likely to respond militarily against US and Western interests, including military installations in Arab Gulf states. It could also block the entry and exit of ships and oil tankers through the Strait of Hormuz, whose importance is critical to the global energy market. Were that to occur, the Arab countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council would face severe consequences, potentially derailing their ambitious economic and social development projects, such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030. The region still recalls how, in September 2019 during Trump’s first

term, several Saudi oil installations were attacked — presumably by Iran — and how the US was neither able to prevent it nor responded decisively.

It remains to be seen whether "Trump 2.0" will seek to strike a deal with Iran's supreme leader in what could be the *Trumpian* version of the "nuclear deal" (known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA) that President Barack Obama signed in 2015 and from which President Donald Trump withdrew in 2018. Iran's current president, Masoud Pezeshkian, has reiterated that his country is open to exploring the negotiating track with the governments of the US and the other five countries that originally signed the nuclear deal a decade ago. The alternative to such a path is that the current US president might be swayed by the more ideological and militaristic elements in his entourage, leading to armed conflict. Given such a high level of uncertainty and perceived dangers, it is also worth asking whether the Iranian regime will seek to build up its own nuclear deterrence capability and whether the stage that opens up in 2025 could lead to a nuclear race in the Gulf and the Middle East.

For their part, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries face changing realities within and beyond their borders. Despite their long-standing rapport with Trump and members of his family, some divergences may emerge in the new phase on key issues such as Israel and Iran. Differences may also arise over energy policies that could lead to friction. While the new administration is full of *hawks* on the Iranian *dossier* and staunch defenders of Israeli positions, Gulf Arab leaders have long called for Washington to take a more dialogue-oriented stance on Iran and a tougher stance on the Netanyahu government in Israel. Several Gulf Arab leaders have publicly condemned 'the continuing genocidal massacres committed by the Israeli occupying forces against the Palestinian people' in Gaza since October 2023, a sentiment shared by the vast majority of their populations.

With regard to Iran, its Arab neighbours have asked Washington to open diplomatic channels with Tehran in order to prevent a regional conflict of incalculable dimensions. This new disposition reflects the agreement reached in March 2023 between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran, under the auspices of the Government of the People's Republic of China, by which the two formerly hostile neighbours re-established diplomatic relations and high-level contacts. It is worth recalling that, as part of their policy of diversifying alliances, both Iran and the United Arab Emirates were admitted to the BRICS group (which brings together the world's leading emerging

economies) at the beginning of 2024, while Saudi Arabia has expressed interest in doing likewise in the future, though it has yet to take that step.

Israel and Palestine: from the rubble of Gaza to the West Bank

The war has not ceased in Gaza. Since its inception and under its shadow, Jewish settler violence against Palestinians and land confiscation have increased in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. During 2024, Israel approved the construction of new housing in settlements⁴ and annexed more Palestinian land while establishing new *outposts*⁵. This has meant creating further impediments to future Palestinian statehood just when international diplomacy was putting the two-state solution back on the table and when Palestinian voices were expressing initiatives to build a transformative entity of their own (Khalidi, 2024) in the face of the horror of war.

Settler violence and harassment against Palestinians in the West Bank has multiplied under the protection and collusion, in many cases, of the Israeli army and thus the Israeli government. According to the Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem, settler attacks on Palestinian civilians have so far forced them to leave twenty West Bank villages⁶. According to the UN humanitarian agency, 2024 brings record numbers of forced displacement of Palestinians, destruction of homes and widespread violence throughout the West Bank and East Jerusalem⁷. At the same time, Israeli forces have intensified arrests and restrictions on the Palestinian population in areas under their control, such as H2 in Hebron, where the installation of barriers has left residents without access to essential services and livelihoods. The army raided several Palestinian towns and shelled refugee camps such as those in Tulkarem and Jenin (where it launched a wide-ranging

⁴ All Jewish settlements in the West Bank are illegal under international law. Israel opposes this declaration.

⁵ The *outposts* are initially created by extremists without Israeli government authorisation and then *legalised*, the first embryo of a settlement. In June 2024, two new *outposts* were established in the Ramallah district and, in mid-2024, seven new *outposts* were established in the Bethlehem district, all in Area B (under Palestinian civilian control and Israeli military control as per the Oslo Accords), as documented by the UN, which noted that this has led to a substantial increase in settler aggression against neighbouring Palestinian communities. See: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-256-west-bank>

⁶ See: B'Tselem, Forcible transfer of isolated Palestinian communities and families in Area C under cover of Gaza fighting. Report updated 30 October 2024. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: https://www.btselem.org/settler_violence/20231019_forcible_transfer_of_isolated_communities_and_families_in_area_c_under_the_cover_of_gaza_fighting

⁷ It has counted 4250 displaced, 1750 houses demolished and more than 1400 violent attacks. See: OCHA: Humanitarian Situation Update #252 West Bank. December 2024. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/humanitarian-situation-update-252-west-bank>

offensive in December that intensified after the Gaza ceasefire). Since the Gaza conflict began, the West Bank has experienced another shadowy war whose death toll exceeded 800 by early 2025.

The climate of violence has become normalised in the Israeli political context in the aftermath of O7. The ultra-right and Jewish supremacist parties, which have been part of Netanyahu's coalition government since December 2022, are the main drivers of the war. The prime minister has relied on the support of extremist parties such as Jewish Power (led by Itamar Ben-Gvir) and the Religious Zionist Party (led by Bezalel Smotrich) to keep him in power, despite the massive demonstrations that demanded his resignation due to the huge security breach that occurred on 7-O. These parties do not recognise the two-state solution and enact the annexation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem to Israel. In Gaza they also proclaim to annex the Strip and revive the settlements that were dismantled in 2005 under Ariel Sharon.

Both Smotrich and Ben-Gvir have promoted anti-Palestinian hatred from their seats in power and have declared themselves in favour of promoting "a solution for them to emigrate from the territory" to other countries and for Israel to occupy Gaza permanently once the war is over⁸. Ben-Gvir has supported recent calls by Jewish settler leaders for Israel to also annex the West Bank to expand its territory, ideas that gained further traction for them after Trump's election victory⁹ and the repeal, once sworn in, of sanctions against radical settlers. Netanyahu already tried to annex all Jewish settlements in the West Bank in 2020, but Trump stopped him before he lost the election. With the Republican back in the White House and in front of the rubble of Gaza - which at his inauguration he called "a great place", "by the sea" and where "beautiful things can be done" - these plans to annex settlements, control more territory and "voluntarily" displace tens of thousands of Palestinians are once again taking shape.

⁸ Likud MP Danny Danon also declared himself in favour of provoking the 'voluntary emigration' of Palestinians from Gaza. See: *Middle East Monitor*, 18 January 2024. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240118-israel-national-security-minister-ben-gvir-calls-for-full-occupation-of-gaza-emigration-of-palestinians/>

⁹ Sharon, J. (2024). Two settlement leaders, Ben-Gvir call to annex West Bank after Trump victory [online]. *The Times of Israel*, 6 November. [Accessed: 2025]. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/two-settlement-leaders-ben-gvir-call-to-annex-west-bank-after-trump-victory/>

Internal dynamics in post-Netanyahu Israel

The war in Gaza and the regional conflict that Netanyahu has sustained since 7-O have had and will have consequences for Israel's domestic politics as well as its foreign relations. Disagreements between the various elements of the coalition government have been evident since it was formed, but the Gaza war has not dissipated these internal dissensions. The government's tensions with extremist parties revolve mainly around the Gaza ceasefire. The early 2025 agreement triggered these tensions and caused Ben-Gvir and two other ministers from his party to leave the executive. These resignations damaged the alliance that sustains Netanyahu, but did not immediately bring him down. At that point, the pragmatism of other leaders who threatened to resign but made their political calculations and decided to stay in the hope that the truce would not come to fruition won the day.

However, Netanyahu's time in office is running out. The main sources of dissent within his cabinet concern the new conscription laws for ultra-Orthodox men—who have until now been exempt from military service—and budgetary expenditure controls. For now, the ongoing war in Gaza and on other regional fronts, along with the as yet publicly undefined post-war plans, are holding the government together. Nevertheless, once the Prime Minister can no longer invoke the state of war to ensure his political survival, his career will collapse. He will then have to face the corruption cases pending against him in the Israeli judiciary, as well as be held accountable for his failure to protect Israeli citizens on 7 October.

Post-Netanyahu Israel is half an unknown quantity. Polls suggest that the trend towards the ultra-right in which Israeli society is immersed will continue in the upcoming elections. Part of the legacy of the current prime minister is his government's assault on the judiciary to demolish the last pillars that made Israeli society appear to live under the rule of law.

Israel will also have to repair its damaged international image. Its violations of international humanitarian law and the laws of war established by the Geneva Conventions led the International Criminal Court to issue arrest warrants for Benjamin Netanyahu and his defence minister, Yoav Gallant, for crimes against humanity and war crimes¹⁰. At the same time, Israel is being sued before the International Court of Justice

¹⁰ See: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/icc-arrest-warrant-netanyahu-21nov24/>

for breach of the obligations contained in the UN convention against the crime of genocide (Torrecuadrada, 2024). The case was brought by South Africa and was subsequently joined by Spain, Belgium and Ireland, among others (Amirah Fernández, 2024). It also sparked parallel lawsuits against arms sales to Israel by the UK and Germany on the grounds that they contribute to the genocide. Human rights organisations such as Amnesty International backed up these allegations by conducting their own research to conclude that "Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinian population of Gaza"¹¹. These accusations have brought down another red line - that of its narrative that its military operations are always in self-defence - and have caused Israel to lose some of its international political capital.

While countries such as the US and Germany have given Israel unconditional support, many others in Europe and the global south have questioned its behaviour and engaged in diplomatic confrontations. The Gaza war revitalised international diplomatic efforts towards a so-called two-state solution (Amirah Fernández, 2023), with Spain and Belgium leading initiatives that remain to be seen whether they will materialise, but are on the table. Both joined forces and recognised the Palestinian state in an attempt to generate *momentum* to stop the war and hold an international peace conference. However, it was not until the change of administration in the US that a minimal breakthrough in the form of a ceasefire was achieved. Circumstances in the Palestinian political arena augur a road not without obstacles, with the Palestinian Authority in a state of internal decay and internationally ignored, and a shattered Gaza Strip that will have to wait years to rebuild its social fabric.

Conclusion

The Middle East chessboard will continue its reconfiguration process in 2025 and will be even more agitated in the new Trump era. The US president faces a very different scenario in his second term than the one he left in 2021. At that time, the Abraham Accords had sown the illusion that the Palestinian issue was no longer central to regional agendas. 7-O dismantled this belief and put the Palestinian issue back on the table. All

¹¹ Amnesty International (2024). "It's as if we were subhuman beings". *Israel's genocide against the Palestinian population of Gaza*. 5 December. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2024/12/amnesty-international-concludes-israel-is-committing-genocide-against-palestinians-in-gaza/>

indications are that Trump will continue to apply unconditional US support for Israel, but his approach is likely to be transactional and he will listen to other voices, unlike Biden.

The red lines that have been broken since 7-O exacerbate this scenario of major upheavals. In Gaza, the consequences of an unfinished war are still simmering. In Syria, after the unexpected fall of Bashar al-Assad, the immediate priorities must be to maintain security and lay the foundations for the country's economic recovery. The lifting of sanctions is key and the EU has a crucial role to play here. In Lebanon, stabilisation of the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel depends very much on strengthening the UN peacekeeping mission (UNIFIL) and implementing Security Council resolution 1701 once and for all. Spain has a great opportunity to capitalise on its experience in UNIFIL to strengthen the mission.

The puzzle is completed by an Iran whose regional power has been eroded by the major blows dealt to its *proxies* in the axis of resistance. However, this alliance is weakened but not finished, and it remains to be seen how it fits into the new scenario. In this context, there is reason to predict that Trump will return to a policy of "maximum pressure" towards Tehran, especially with regard to its nuclear programme. The Iranian regime, at one of its greatest crossroads since 1979, may choose to revolt, isolate itself or adopt a more conciliatory attitude.

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*Haizam Amirah-Fernandez /
Rosa Meneses **

Associate Professor at the Instituto de Empresa, analyst and writer

Periodista y secretaria general de Reportero sin Fronteras