The External Politics of the Israel-Hamas War

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Regional Stakes, Local Deadlock: The External Politics of the Israel-Hamas War

The Israel-Hamas War, reignited by Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack and Israel's intense response, is a strategic deadlock rooted in a complex Middle Eastern network. This essay argues that the conflict's persistence stems from both sides' inability to pursue compromise due to political, ideological, and operational constraints, with external actors, like Iran and the United States, shaping its trajectory through their strategic choices. Neither Hamas, driven by resistance and regional support, nor Israel, prioritizing

deterrence under Netanyahu's hardline coalition, sees de-escalation as viable without risking legitimacy or security (Hamida & Jin, 2021). The war's regional impact, from disrupting Saudi-Israeli normalization to amplifying Iran's proxy influence, highlights its significance in a multipolar Middle East (Saikal, 2024; Krieg, 2024). This essay proposes four strategies to realign these actors' incentives and foster a stable ceasefire.

By examining the strategic incentives of Israel and Hamas, the essay frames their deadlock as a self-reinforcing cycle where confrontation outweighs cooperation (Hamida & Jin, 2021). Hamas's attacks, like the October 7 assault killing 1,200 Israelis, sustain its resistance credentials, while Israel's airstrikes, claiming over thousands of Palestinian lives, reflect its security-driven stance (Byman, 2024). Bilateral ceasefire efforts, mediated by Qatar and Egypt, achieve temporary pauses but collapse due to external influences, such as Iran's support for Hamas and US backing for Israel (Saikal, 2024). By exploring the network of state actors (Iran, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, US, EU, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan), the essay reveals how their relationships sustain the conflict (Krieg, 2024).

1. Strategic Deadlock

The Israel-Hamas War's persistence reflects a strategic deadlock, where both Hamas and Israel view continued confrontation as more viable than compromise, locked in a cycle of mutual escalation. This section analyses the bilateral dynamics sustaining this equilibrium, the domestic incentives reinforcing it, and the reasons internal ceasefire efforts falter, highlighting the growing influence of external state actors.

Strategic analysis highlights the war's intractability, showing that neither side can unilaterally shift to cooperation without facing greater costs (Hamida & Jin, 2021). For Hamas, confrontation—exemplified by the October 7, 2023, attack killing 1,200 Israelis—bolsters its legitimacy as a resistance movement, outweighing the risks of Israeli retaliation (Byman, 2024). Israel, conversely, prioritizes security and deterrence, viewing concessions as a signal of weakness that could embolden Hamas or other adversaries (Valbjorn et al, 2024). This deadlock, driven by conflicting incentives, ensures mutual escalation: Hamas's rocket attacks and Israel's airstrikes, which killed over ten thousands of Palestinians, reflect strategies where deviation (e.g., Hamas halting attacks, Israel offering concessions) undermines each side's immediate goals (Byman, 2024). The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of violence, with neither actor able to break free unilaterally.

Domestic pressures entrench this situation. For Hamas, prioritizing resistance over governance aligns with its ideological commitment and public support in Gaza and the West Bank, where it gains credibility over the weakened Palestinian Authority (Hokayem, 2023). The October 7 attack, despite devastating consequences, temporarily boosted Hamas's popularity by disrupting Israel's normalization with Arab states (Valbjorn et al., 2024). In Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu's coalition, reliant on far-right factions, faces public demand for robust security measures post-October 7,

reinforcing hardline policies (Byman, 2024). Netanyahu's pre-2023 strategy of tolerating Hamas to undermine the Palestinian Authority further illustrates how domestic political survival shapes Israel's calculus, prioritizing short-term stability over long-term peace (Hokayem, 2023). These internal incentives—Hamas's resistance credentials and Israel's security-driven politics—lock both sides into confrontation.

Bilateral ceasefire attempts, such as those following the 2008, 2012, and 2014 Gaza conflicts, consistently collapse due to mutual distrust and incompatible goals (Saikal, 2024). Hamas demands significant concessions, like lifting Gaza's blockade, which Israel rejects to maintain control, while Israel's insistence on demilitarization clashes with Hamas's survival strategy (Hamida & Jin, 2021). Mediation efforts, often led by Qatar and Egypt, achieve short-lived results, like the 2023 humanitarian pause, due to conflicting external interests (Hokayem, 2023). For instance, Qatar's financial support for Hamas and Iran's military backing strengthen Hamas's resolve, while U.S. military aid to Israel emboldens its hardline stance (Saikal, 2024). These external influences, reveal that the deadlock's roots extend beyond Gaza, requiring a regional recalibration to unlock.

2. External Actor Dynamics

The Israel-Hamas War's persistence as a strategic deadlock is not solely a product of bilateral dynamics between Israel and Hamas but is profoundly shaped by a network of external state actors whose strategic interests, rivalries, and alignments sustain the conflict's trajectory. This section maps key players—Iran, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—analysing how their positions and interactions reinforce the strategic deadlock outlined earlier. By examining the web of state actors, illustrated through simple diagrams, this analysis reveals the war as a regional conflict within a multipolar Middle East, where state-driven dynamics complicate ceasefire efforts and perpetuate confrontation.

The conflict's external actors form a complex web of influence, each with distinct roles. Iran bolsters Hamas through financial and military support, positioning it as a key component of the Axis of Resistance against Israel and US-aligned states (Celso, 2024). Qatar, leveraging its neutral broker status, mediates ceasefire talks while providing economic aid to Gaza, indirectly sustaining Hamas's governance (Valbjørn et al., 2024). Turkey adopts a pro-Palestinian stance, using rhetoric to enhance its regional influence, though economic constraints limit its direct involvement (Bardakçı, 2021). Egypt, controlling Gaza's Rafah border, mediates alongside Qatar but prioritizes domestic stability amid economic crises (Ahn, 2025). The United States, Israel's primary ally, provides military and diplomatic support, reinforcing Israel's hardline posture (Valbjørn et al., 2024). The European Union, despite significant aid to Palestinians, struggles with internal divisions, rendering its peacebuilding efforts ineffective (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). Saudi Arabia navigates a delicate balance, pursuing normalization with Israel while facing public backlash over Gaza's humanitarian crisis

(Ahn, 2025). Jordan, with its large Palestinian population, supports a two-state solution but is constrained by internal unrest and its peace treaty with Israel (Samaan, 2012). These states, as actors in a regional web, collectively shape the conflict's dynamics.

Each actor's strategic interests and interactions either perpetuate or complicate the deadlock. Iran's support for Hamas, including $100 million annually and missile technology, strengthens the group's military capacity, countering Israel and Saudi Arabia while escalating regional tensions (Celso, 2024). This aligns with Iran's broader rivalry with the US and Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, which fears Iran's growing influence (Ahn, 2025). Qatar's dual role as mediator and Hamas funder enables temporary pauses, as seen in the 2023 humanitarian pause, but its support sustains Hamas's operational resilience, frustrating Israel's containment strategy (Valbjørn et al., 2024). Turkey's vocal pro-Palestinian stance, driven by domestic support for the Muslim Brotherhood, enhances its soft power but strains ties with Israel and Gulf states like the UAE, which view such rhetoric as destabilizing (Bardakçı, 2021). Egypt and Jordan, both US allies with peace treaties with Israel, prioritize border security and economic stability, mediating to prevent Gaza's collapse but avoiding direct confrontation with Israel due to domestic pressures (Samaan, 2012; Ahn, 2025). The US's unconditional support for Israel, including military aid, emboldens Israel's aggressive response but erodes its regional credibility, as Arab public opinion condemns perceived complicity (Valbjørn et al., 2024). The EU's fragmented approach, hampered by member states' divergent interests, limits its influence, with initiatives like the Middle East Quartet sidelined by US dominance (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). Saudi Arabia's normalization efforts, part of the Abraham Accords framework, are stalled by public outrage over Gaza, forcing a cautious stance to balance domestic legitimacy with strategic ties to the US and Israel (Ahn, 2025). These rivalries (e.g., Iran vs. Saudi Arabia, US vs. Iran) and cooperative dynamics (e.g., Qatar-Egypt mediation) create a web of relationships where incentives align against compromise, sustaining the deadlock.

3. Breaking the System

The Israel-Hamas War is sustained by a complex web of external state actors whose support perpetuates conflict. Qatar and Egypt's 2023 mediation attempts collapsed as states like Iran, the United States, and Saudi Arabia reinforced the status quo through their strategic alignments (Saikal, 2024). This section argues that disrupting this deadlock requires realigning the incentives of these external actors by strengthening or reconfiguring their support relationships. To do so, a qualitative analysis of diplomatic, economic, and military influence on Israel and Hamas was made. Together with four scenarios, this analysis illustrates pathways to de-escalate the conflict. Such changes show coordinated action can disrupt the deadlock.

Scenarios for Recalibration Scenario 1: US-Led Diplomatic PressureThe U.S. strengthens support for Saudi Arabia and Egypt to empower

the Palestinian Authority as a counterweight to Hamas, while reducing ties with Israel and withdrawing engagement with Hamas. This leverages the US's unique influence over Israel to push for a ceasefire and increased humanitarian aid, potentially stabilizing Gaza's governance (Byman, 2024). This may lead to a shift toward broader regional diplomacy. This could pressure Israel to moderate its policies and isolate Hamas, weakening its bargaining power. However, domestic political constraints in the US, particularly from pro-Israel constituencies, pose risks. Therefore, extensive US engagement with additional Arab states may be needed to significantly alter the region's structure.

Scenario 2: Gulf States' Economic LeverageSaudi Arabia establishes a strong tie with Israel to incentivize progress toward a two-state solution, while withdrawing support from Hamas. This aligns with Gulf public sentiment supporting Palestine and counters Iran's regional influence, building on the Abraham Accords' framework (Ahn, 2025). The strengthened Saudi-Israel tie could shift Israel's calculus by tying economic benefits to political concessions, while Hamas's isolation reduces its leverage. Challenges include domestic Gulf resistance to normalization without tangible Palestinian gains and the need for broader Gulf coordination (e.g., with Qatar or even smaller Gulf states) to amplify pressure. These changes may require complementary state actions to disrupt the deadlock effectively.

Scenario 3: Qatar-Turkey Mediation AxisQatar and Turkey enhance mediation by strengthening ties to Hamas, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, leveraging Qatar's history of brokering humanitarian pauses, Turkey's pro-Palestinian stance, and Jordan's diplomatic efforts aiding border stability (Saikal, 2024; Bardakci, 2021; Samaan, 2012). Their initial ties (Table 1) reflect existing mediation roles, making it possible that changing or improving ties reinforce rather than transform their influence. Qatar and Turkey are positioned as a diplomatic hub, potentially coordinating ceasefire talks and stabilizing Gaza's borders through Egypt's cooperation. However, rivalry with Saudi Arabia and dependence on Hamas's compliance limit impact, as the stability of these regional relationships indicates. Broader alignment with other mediators like Egypt is crucial to shift the deadlock significantly, despite the robust qualitative potential of this axis.

Scenario 4: EU Coordinated SanctionsLastly, if the EU withdraws support from Israel, maximizes its sanctions on Hamas and strengthens ties with Qatar and Egypt to bolster mediation, the situation could shift slightly, reflecting reduced conflict engagement and enhanced diplomatic leverage (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). This isolates Israel and Hamas, pressuring negotiations through economic sanctions on settlement activities or Hamas's funding networks. The EU's normative power gains traction, but internal divisions and reliance on US alignment constrain effectiveness. While targeted sanctions can alter the dynamics, a more unified EU stance and additional state support are needed to maximize de-escalation.

These scenarios demonstrate that realigning state support ties can challenge the Israel-Hamas deadlock, though the need for broader, coordinated efforts remains. By strategically enhancing key relationships, external actors can pave the way for regional peacebuilding, leveraging their collective influence to foster a sustainable resolution.

Conclusion

The Israel-Hamas War persists as a complex regional conflict, sustained by misaligned incentives among external state actors. While temporary ceasefires offer relief, the deadlock's roots demand a broader realignment to achieve lasting peace. By examining the web of state actors and their strategic interactions, this essay has highlighted how external support perpetuates confrontation. Table 5 outlines four strategies each offering a pathway to disrupt the stalemate.

In the US-led diplomacy scenario, the United States shifts support from Israel to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, empowering the Palestinian Authority as a counterweight to Hamas (Byman, 2024). This could pressure Israel to moderate its policies and isolate Hamas, weakening its bargaining power and fostering ceasefire talks. However, domestic pro-Israel constituencies in the US may resist, necessitating broader engagement with Arab states to amplify diplomatic leverage. The Gulf leverage scenario sees Saudi Arabia strengthening economic ties with Israel, contingent on two-state solution progress, while withdrawing Hamas support (Ahn, 2025). Building on the Abraham Accords, this could incentivize Israel's concessions and reduce Hamas's regional clout, but Gulf public opposition to normalization without Palestinian gains poses a significant hurdle, requiring coordination with states like the UAE.

The Qatar-Turkey mediation axis leverages Qatar's history of brokering pauses and Turkey's pro-Palestinian stance to enhance ties with Hamas, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan (Saikal, 2024; Bardakçı, 2021). By positioning themselves as a diplomatic hub, they could coordinate ceasefire negotiations and stabilize Gaza's borders through Egypt's cooperation. Yet, rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Hamas's potential non-compliance could limit impact, emphasizing the need for alignment with other mediators. The EU sanctions scenario involves withdrawing support from Israel and Hamas while bolstering Qatar and Egypt's mediation roles (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). Sanctions on Israeli settlements or Hamas's funding networks could isolate both parties, pressuring negotiations, but EU internal divisions and reliance on US alignment may weaken effectiveness, requiring a unified stance.

These scenarios demonstrate that breaking the deadlock depends on realigning external incentives through diplomacy, economic tools, and mediation. While each scenario offers promise, challenges like regional rivalries and domestic constraints demand careful navigation. Only through collective action, where states coordinate to shift their roles, can the cycle

of violence end, offering Gaza not just a ceasefire but a path to stability in a multipolar Middle East.

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