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## OPINION

*In a welcome, but under-reported, development last week, Arab states from the [Persian] Gulf Cooperation Council reportedly "sought to reassure Iran of their neutrality" in the brewing conflict between Iran and Israel.*

*The stance was expressed by Arab ministers to their Iranian counterparts at a meeting last week in Doha. It was not a formal, public declaration, but rather a commitment expressed in the meetings directly. Initially, reports—particularly the main one from Reuters on which much of the other reporting was based—also said that the Persian Gulf states had explicitly stated that they would forbid the United States from using their airbases to attack Iran, although more recent and updated reports have mysteriously omitted this point. Still, neutrality does mean forbidding their airbases and territory to be used to launch an attack on Iran. It is important not to overstate the significance of this promise; it was expressed privately, though reported publicly, and it was verbal, not written. So it doesn't carry the full weight of a formal commitment.*

*Still, the promise is significant, particularly in light of the total inaction, beyond empty rhetoric, from the Arab leadership since the Israeli genocide in Gaza began. The ongoing exchange of threats, as opposed to an exchange of fire, between Israel and Iran, with the Israelis in ongoing discussions with the United States about it, implies that the Arab commitment has had some effect. American efforts to start ceasefire talks with Iran, while no more than political theater, also demonstrate the effect Arab efforts toward de-escalation have had.*

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As Israel expands its war to Lebanon and is threatening Iran as well, there are important signs that Arab states in the region are finally stepping in to prevent a broader regional war. Will the Biden administration listen?

# Arab states are coming together to prevent a regional war, will US listen?

## US left Arab states with no choice

Although the United States has enabled Israeli crimes for decades, there was usually some effort to draw a line when Israeli action posed too grave a threat to "regional stability" or American interests. Even Donald Trump acted, albeit in a horribly misguided and counter-productive way, when he wanted to stop the cabinet of Benjamin Netanyahu from formally annexing the West Bank during his presidency.

But Joe Biden has completely abandoned such efforts. There are many reasons for this, including Biden's deeply held and self-declared Zionism, his utter and inhuman disregard for Palestinian lives, and his general weakness as a leader.

Another factor, too rarely discussed in the media, but very significant, has been the absence of pressure from the Arab leadership. As the analyst Mouin Rabbani has often pointed out, Arab leaders, particularly the Saudis, have often, in the past, pushed American presidents to rein Israel in when Israeli actions were making matters too difficult for them, potentially straining US-Arab relations.

That hasn't happened with Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza. There have been public statements, but these are to be expected, and they have been limited to objections and condemnations, without any implied threat of consequences.

Without direct contact with the White House or some signal that there is a potential problem for American interests, there is no reason for an American president to worry, knowing that Saudi and other Arab leaders need to make such public statements in support of Palestinians under siege whether or not they are genuinely concerned about it.

The fact that these reassurances to Iran were made public is a much clearer signal to the White House that the Persian Gulf states do not want to see Israel and the United States start a regional war. More than that, they are also a signal that the relationship with the US is suffering a serious blow right now. Arab states have every interest in regional stability, regardless of their concerns about Iran, and this is a concern that Washington and Israel have severely underestimated.

The power of Arab states standing firm on these matters should not be taken lightly. When a US-allied Arab state takes a firm stand, it has a visible impact. Consider, for example, Egypt. In the midst of the Gaza genocide, Israel was pursuing a strategy of forcing the people of Gaza south, hoping that the buildup of people would force a substantial number to flee into the Sinai Peninsula and become Egypt's problem.

Egypt was worried they might not be able to stop Israel's plan, so they decided to construct what was basically a huge makeshift penitentiary in which to house Gaza refugees. But they were committed to stopping this Israeli scheme if they possibly could. At first, they tried to voice their strong objections through public statements and

by communicating directly to Israel and to Washington that this would not be tolerated. Ultimately, Egypt warned the US and Israel that if Israel persisted in pursuing this plan, it would endanger the Camp David Accords. Israel backed off. It's remarkable what a threat can do when you mean it.

The United Arab Emirates could do the same with the Abraham Accords. This deal, which was struck between Israel and the UAE, with Bahrain also signing on and, later, Morocco (Sudan also signed on, but the official signing is overwhelmingly opposed in the country and the civil war there has put the agreement on hold), is held up as a prime example of "peacemaking" between Israel and the Arab world. It is, of course, nothing of the kind. Instead, it is an agreement to normalize relations between an apartheid regime, Israel, and two of the Arab world's most brutal dictatorships, the

Times last week that represented the strongest statement by far from the Kingdom since October 7. He called a Palestinian state a prerequisite for peace and explicitly stated that self-defense was not motivating Israel's aggression. He even calling for real accountability for Israel.

"But merely recognizing Palestine is not enough. We must demand more accountability in line with International Court of Justice opinions. This includes the implementation of UN resolutions, the imposition of punitive measures against those that work to undermine Palestinian statehood and incentives for those who support it," he wrote.

As strong a statement as that is compared to most of what has come from Saudi Arabia over the past year, it is bolstered by the visit this week of Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Aragh-

But as Israel has expanded the war to Lebanon, and is obviously trying to bring Iran in as well, there are some stirrings of a limit to what the US will support. Attacks on Hezbollah are widely applauded in Washington, as the group is responsible for one of the largest attacks on American forces in history. That is not forgotten in DC. But the concerns about regional war are now coming to the fore in a new way.

If the US ever did object to Israel's behavior, Benjamin Netanyahu can thumb its nose at Biden in Gaza, and even to an extent in Lebanon, because these places are either under Israeli occupation or right on its borders. Even if offensive weapons stopped flowing tomorrow, Israel has enough firepower to continue those attacks for a while. In any case, the weapons will continue to flow, and Israel has no need of on-the-ground

American assistance to carry out those atrocities.

But Iran is a very different proposition. Israel can pull off targeted assassinations and some missile or drone attacks, but to really attack Iran, they need the United States. It was, therefore, significant that Biden made it clear that the US would not support a strike on Iranian nuclear sites, and, while not ruling it out, is "discouraging" Israel from hitting Iran's oil fields.

The fact that Israel has taken this long to strike Iran is likely an indication that they are trying to find a response that the US will support, meaning they are thinking about a big strike that will hurt Iran and are trying to find one that the United States will not only tolerate but will help with, at least with intelligence and logistics.

As was reported last month, some of Biden's closest advisers were salivating at the prospect of engaging Iran. Given that and the relish with which Biden and his team have greeted Israel's attacks on Hezbollah, despite the fact that they surely understood that this risked leading to a regional war, it is reasonable to believe that Persian Gulf Arab concerns played a significant role in deterring Washington from supporting a potentially destabilizing Israeli attack on Iran.

In the bigger picture, this reflects the bankruptcy of US policy in the region. Some of the [P]GCC states that declared their neutrality, such as Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar, routinely try to build bridges between themselves and Iran. But Saudi Arabia and the UAE have much stronger connections to the United States, and this heightens tensions that exist for a wide variety of other reasons between them and the Islamic Republic.

Saudi and Emirati resistance to a strike on Iran should be good news, and it is for anyone who genuinely wants to see peace in the Middle East. But the Biden administration's hawks are seeing their plans frustrated by the Saudi and Emirati effort to stave off a regional war. In the long term, healing the Arab-Iranian rift is absolutely essential for regional stability and peace. Yet it is also a key requirement for what any reasonable person should see as American foreign policy goals: investing less money, military, and diplomatic resources in the Middle East and regional stability.

Israel, of course, doesn't see it that way, even though improving Arab-Iranian relations only makes it more likely that Israelis can find a way to assimilate into the region, provided they end their occupation, genocide, and apartheid policies. That, of course, helps many Israelis, but is counter to the interests of the Israeli regime.

Sadly, American foreign policy continues to reflect the priorities of the Israeli government rather than the people of the entire region. There should be no higher foreign policy priority than changing this outlook for the next American administration, as unlikely as that may seem to be right now.

*The full article first appeared on Mondoweiss.*



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and US President Joe Biden during the Jeddah Security and Development Summit at a hotel in Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coastal city of Jeddah on July 16, 2022.  
SAUDI PRESS AGENCY via APA IMAGES

UAE and Bahrain. Morocco already had de facto relations with Israel, and the agreement just formalized and expanded it, with Morocco getting American recognition of its claim to Western Sahara as a bribe.

The UAE is the key party here, and they could have used the threat of withdrawing from the Abraham Accords to pressure Israel to curb its genocide in Gaza. Israel and the Biden administration place great value on the normalization with the UAE, so the UAE could have used it to convince Washington to pressure Israel, which could have combined with Israel's own concern about losing this valuable relationship. Biden has been desperate to expand the Accords, and has failed to do so. If they had been reversed under his watch, it would have been a huge blow to him. Maybe it would have worked, maybe it would not have. We'll never know because the UAE never even considered trying.

By the same token, Saudi Arabia could also have done a lot more to push the Biden administration. Their Foreign Minister, Faisal Bin Farhan al Saud, published an Op-Ed in the Financial

chi to Riyadh, a sign of the growing rapprochement between the two countries. While many tensions remain between Saudi Arabia and Iran, it is clear that the Saudis no longer trust the United States to maintain security in the region and are working with Iran to de-escalate the current tensions and address the long-term ones.

## A bankrupt US strategy

With Biden's and Netanyahu's genocide now a full year old, the horrific crime against the Palestinians and all of humanity that is being committed is clearly not a moral issue for Western or Arab leaders. Yet one would think perceived national interests might come into play at some point for Washington, as it now has for the Saudis and Emiratis.

It has been clear from the outset that any concerns the Biden administration might have over the genocide were far below the threshold for American action. The absolute lack of value that Palestinian lives have in the eyes of Biden, Antony Blinken, Lloyd Austin, Kamala Harris, Jake Sullivan and the rest of this administration is clear.