

Gaza: tenuous ‘cease-fire,’ lingering uncertainty

It is extremely unlikely that 2026 will see the Palestinians achieve an independent and sovereign state free from Israeli occupation. However, a central question for the year ahead is whether Trump’s “peace initiative” will advance while the October 2025 cease-fire holds — albeit tenuous-ly, amid ongoing Israeli violations — or whether the truce will entirely collapse and give way to a resumption of Israel’s all-out genocidal military campaign against the enclave. Given Israel’s track record of undermin- ing cease-fires and diplomacy, as seen in Gaza in March 2025, there is ample rea- son to expect that military operations could resume if they receive Washing- ton’s approval. Since the Gaza cease-fire took effect on October 10, Israeli forces have reported- ly carried out more than 730 violations, including air and artillery strikes as well as direct shootings that have killed over 400 Palestinians. The Miami talks on December 19, which brought together representatives from the US, Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey, con- cluded with a joint statement urging all parties to uphold the cease-fire. Yet without consequences for future Israeli violations, there is little reason to expect restraint from Tel Aviv. The pressing question remains whether Israel will seek to gradually undermine the truce through a steady series of lim- ited operations or unilaterally shatter the truce and resume a full-scale mili- tary campaign as Israel did with the previous Gaza cease-fire on March 18. Dr. Juneau said he was “very pessimis- tic” about the overall situation in Gaza. “Israel shows no inclination to further withdraw, Hamas is unlikely to disarm, and other pillars of Trump’s peace plan, notably the international stabilisation force, are unlikely to come to fruition,” he told TNA.

Syria’s post-Assad challenge: relative stability amid fragility

As Syria enters its second year of the post-Assad era, the early months of 2026 will reveal the extent to which Ahmed al-Sharaa’s government can es- tablish stability under a unitary system. A range of challenges could undermine a successful transition, including Israe- li aggression, the further resurgence of Daesh — also known as the Islamic State (IS) — and heightened tensions between minority communities and the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-dominated authorities in Damascus. “The ability of [the new] Syrian govern- ment to reunite the country in a stable, centralised, succeeding rather than fail- ing state will be essential. If Israel gets its way and Syria remains chaotic and fragmented, it will almost certainly give rise to forces that are highly destabilis- ing,” observed Dr. Ibish. “However, thus far the track record of the new government, while modest, is more reassuring than not.” Syria’s prospects for stability in 2026 and beyond will hinge, in large part, on the support of Persian Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Turkey, and Europe- an countries. Since the fall of the former regime, rival- ries within the GCC and between Turkey and certain Arab states have not under- mined Syria, and in the year following Assad’s ouster, Persian Gulf capitals and Ankara have largely aligned in their ef- forts to prevent state collapse. Working in concert, they successfully lobbied the White House to lift US sanc- tions on Syria contrary to Israeli inter- ests. Nevertheless, next year, it will be crucial to monitor emerging dynamics as renewed competition among Persian Gulf states or between Turkey and Arab capitals could reshape these relation- ships. “The victory of Saudi Arabia over Israel in convincing the United States to embrace the new Syria was a remarkable triumph of Arab diplomacy. But the Trump administration had been seeking to draw the US forces from the country. The ISIS attack that killed Americans in Syria may reverse that trend, and in many ways, Donald Trump’s Syria poli-



cy is his most impressive foreign policy that would almost certainly not have been adopted by a Democrat,” Dr. Ibish told TNA. “So, I think he’s likely to keep US troops in Syria, and with a potential Turkish-Saudi entente to rebuild a centralised Syria that is stable and viable, its prospects are real- ly quite decent,” he added.

Emirati-Saudi rivalry: high stakes in Sudan, Yemen

Competition between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia for re- gional leadership is likely to intensify in 2026, with developments in Sudan and southern Yemen emerging as key arenas to watch. With global attention focused on Sudan following the Rapid Support Forces (RS- F)’s massacres in El-Fasher in late Octo- ber, Abu Dhabi faces increased scrutiny in the West for its backing of the para- military group. In contrast, Saudi Arabia has adopted a more supportive stance toward the Su- danese Armed Forces (SAF), placing the two Persian Gulf Arab monarchies at odds in a conflict that erupted in April 2023. Among the UAE’s motivations for arm- ing the RSF is a desire to assert an in- creasingly autonomous foreign policy in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, high- lighting Abu Dhabi’s pursuit of interests independent of Riyadh and other Arab capitals. Additional drivers include eco- nomic considerations and the ideologi- cal imperatives of the UAE’s anti-Muslim Brotherhood agenda. However, Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 agenda is inextricably linked to stabili- ty along the Red Sea, where significant tourism investments are already taking shape. The ongoing conflict in Sudan and the risk of further escalation, therefore, weigh heavily on Saudi decision-makers. In this context, officials in Riyadh regard a national military institution such as

the SAF as far preferable to a militia like the RSF, which they view as unpredict- able, institutionally weak, and lacking political legitimacy. Ultimately, Saudi policymakers seek a coherent govern- ing authority in Khartoum capable of maintaining order and securing Red Sea ports. These are responsibilities that Ri- yadh does not believe the RSF can fulfil. As Sudan’s war continues, escalating Saudi-Emirati competition in a frag- mented country could have outsized geopolitical repercussions, profoundly affecting relations between the two Per- sian Gulf powerhouses. Recent developments in southern and eastern Yemen, where the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) has seized nearly all territory outside Ansa- rullah (Houthi) control, are set to play a central role in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh’s competition for influence. After years of advocating for a unified Yemen, Saudi Arabia now views the STC’s recent advances as making a re- turn to a North-South division increas- ingly likely. Should this scenario unfold, northern Yemen could solidify under the Iran- backed Houthi proto-state with its cap- ital in Sanaa, while the south coalesces around a UAE-backed entity centred in Aden, effectively sidelining Riyadh. With its influence increasingly constrained and options limited, Saudi Arabia may ultimately have little choice but to acqui- esce to a UAE-backed STC government in the south. While the situation remains fluid and the STC’s ability to consolidate these gains is uncertain, 2026 is likely to see Yemen increasingly serve as a stage for intra-GCC rivalries, particularly between the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In any event, analysts caution that, given recent developments in Sudan and Yemen, 2026 is likely to pose significant challeng- es for the Emirati-Saudi relationship. “Currently, due to the escalating situa-

tion in Yemen and especially in Sudan, a massive deterioration in relations be- tween Saudi Arabia and the UAE is like- ly,” Wolfgang Puszta, a senior adviser at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, told TNA. When asked about the most likely crisis scenario that could unfold in the Middle East in 2026, he said a “significant wors- ening of the relations between Saudi Arabia and the UAE”. As Puszta noted, “The Trump adminis- tration will certainly try to prevent this as both are important allies, but means on hand are limited.”

What comes next

As 2026 begins, the Middle East faces a year defined less by certainty than by the precarious balance of competing am- bitions, unresolved conflicts, and fragile alliances. The tenuous Israel-Iran cease-fire, fears of Israel’s genocidal campaign restart- ing in Gaza at full speed, and the challenges confronting post-Assad Syria underscore how quickly regional dynamics can shift, with consequences reverberating all over and far beyond the region. At the same time, the intensifying rival- ry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Sudan and Yemen highlights how intra-GCC competition could reshape the region’s political and strategic land- scape, particularly along the Red Sea and in the Horn of Africa. Against this backdrop, external powers, including the United States, European actors, and Turkey, remain pivotal, yet their ability to stabilise outcomes is far from guaranteed. Ultimately, 2026 is poised to test the resilience of existing partnerships, the effectiveness of diplomacy, and the ca- pacity of regional actors to navigate a volatile environment without plunging into further conflict.

The article first appeared on The New Arab.



“

Yet, Dr. Ereli also stressed how the fundamental drivers of hostility between Tel Aviv and Tehran remain in play, which should leave observers nervous about the conflict resuming next year. “Even though the cease-fire ‘continues’ after six to seven months, the root causes of the Israel-Iran tension do not seem simple enough to be resolved by US military and political intervention,” he told TNA.

“

“The victory of Saudi Arabia over Israel in convincing the United States to embrace the new Syria was a remarkable triumph of Arab diplomacy. But the Trump administration had been seeking to draw the US forces from the country. The ISIS attack that killed Americans in Syria may reverse that trend, and in many ways, Donald Trump’s Syria policy is his most impressive foreign policy that would almost certainly not have been adopted by a Democrat,” Dr. Ibish told TNA.



Armed forces of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) flash the victory sign as they ride in the back of a lorry in the port city of Aden, Yemen, on November 30, 2025. ● SALEH AL-OBEIDI/AFP