



## The US and Europe Must be More Balanced to Diffuse Middle Eastern Tensions

### *GRC Commentary & Analysis*

October 2023

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*Destruction in Gaza, October 2023*

Source: [CNN](#)

Just one month ago, there was hope for peace in Palestine through the Saudi-US-Israel talks. In his recent interview with Fox News, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman [reiterated](#) that "there is an approach by President Biden's administration to get to that point. For us, the Palestinian issue is very important. We need to solve that part, and we have good negotiations [continuing] until now. We got to see where we go. We hope that it will reach a place, that it will ease the life of the Palestinians, and get Israel as a player in the Middle East." The



Crown Prince [explained](#) that “every day we get closer” to reaching an agreement, which he called “the biggest historical deal since the Cold War” and that “it seems it’s for the first time a real one, serious. We’re gonna see how it goes.”

While the likelihood of such an agreement seems impossible at this stage, there is nevertheless the need to acknowledge the agency of the wider Arab world, particularly the GCC states, to insist on defusing the latest eruption of conflict and to ensure that it does not spiral even further out of control. As Western leaders are streaming to express solidarity with Israel, the Middle East faces the potential of a wider regional conflict that, unless managed effectively, threatens to broaden the scope of the calamity beyond what has been seen so far. This danger alone demands broader and more comprehensive diplomatic efforts by the West than adhering to merely an Israel-only focused approach. It is, therefore, essential that on their upcoming visits to the region, President Biden, the EU leadership, and individual European leaders engage with not only Tel Aviv, but also Riyadh, Cairo, Abu Dhabi, Amman, and Doha.

The GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia, are deeply committed to the de-escalation trends witnessed in the region in recent years, such as the rapprochement with Iraq, Türkiye, and Iran, pushing for Syria to rejoin the Arab League, and negotiating with Yemen, as well continue to make their ties to the United States and Europe the cornerstone of their foreign policy.

Despite significant initial skepticism among GCC member states regarding US policy in the region, US ties with the GCC states have seen positive developments over the past few months. The Jeddah Security and Development Summit can be seen as an example of a positive shift in US-GCC relations, with [President Biden](#) stating that the US would “remain an active, engaged partner in the Middle East” and “will not walk away and leave a vacuum to be filled by China, Russia, or Iran.” The US has also welcomed initiatives by the Gulf countries regarding playing a more decisive mediating role, such as in the Sudan and Ukraine crises.

In addition, the Arab states have already proposed a viable solution to the conflict between Palestine and Israel, known as the Arab Peace Initiative since 2002. The initiative needs to finally be given the proper consideration as a starting point for the path forward. On October 11, the



foreign ministers of the Arab League held an “extraordinary meeting’ in Cairo to discuss the Israeli aggression on the Gaza Strip. The meeting [highlighted](#) “the importance of resuming the peace process and starting serious negotiations between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel.” Saudi Arabia also [called](#) for an urgent meeting of the executive committee of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Jeddah on October 18 “to address the escalating military situation in Gaza and its environs as well as the deteriorating conditions that endanger the lives of civilians and the overall security and stability of the region.”

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken’s visit to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries were essential steps toward helping contain the violence in Gaza. During this meeting HRH Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman reaffirmed, the Crown Prince [reaffirming](#) “the need to find ways to stop the military operations that have claimed the lives of innocent people, stressing the Kingdom’s endeavor to increase communication, calm the situation, stop the current escalation, and ask for respect for international humanitarian law.” Blinken [called](#) the meeting “very productive” underscoring the central role that the Kingdom plays in regional matters. The same goes for his visit to the UAE and Qatar.

President Biden has, in the meantime, urged Israel against occupying Gaza, [calling it](#) a “big mistake” and reiterated the US call for a two-state solution, [saying](#) “there needs to be a Palestinian authority. There needs to be a path to a Palestinian state.” This statement marked a change for Biden and his administration, which previously offered Israel’s military operations broad support ahead of a ground invasion that human rights organizations claim will cause large-scale civilian casualties. However, the word “ceasefire” was not uttered once.

The White House’s statement on President Biden’s trip to Israel comes with the [announcement](#) that the US and Israel “have agreed to develop a plan that will enable humanitarian aid from donor nations and multilateral organizations to reach civilians in Gaza.” The White House also stated that President Biden will travel to Jordan to meet with King Abdullah II, President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi of Egypt, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. To give such statements greater substance, President Biden should even consider combining his trip to Israel with a wider



tour to include the Gulf countries. There is an absolute need to activate as many diplomatic channels as possible and to present a unified position across the board.

The same goes for the European Union. Initial statements by EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen that provided EU unqualified support to Israel and carte blanche in Israel's response abdicated any balanced role that the EU could play in resolving the crisis. EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell was more balanced, [stating](#), "Some of the actions [by Israel] — and the United Nations has already said it — cutting water, cutting electricity, cutting food to a mass of civilian people, is against international law." Irish President Michael Higgins has in the meantime, referred to von der Leyen's comments as "thoughtless and even reckless."

The GCC-EU Ministerial Meeting held in Muscat on October 9 and 10, 2023, underlined the common [position](#) between the two sides, calling "for restraint, for the release of hostages and for access to food, water, and medicines in accordance with international humanitarian law, and stressed that an urgent political solution to the crisis is needed to prevent this violence from recurring flare-ups again and again." This momentum now needs to be accelerated forward and further activated.

As Israel continues to [respond](#) with heavy airstrikes and contemplates a total siege of Gaza, the US together with Europe must engage with all allies to defuse the situation and prevent any further escalation. This can best be done if there is effective and wide-ranging engagement with the Arab world, including with the GCC states. This is also essential to bringing much-needed balance back to the discussion table.

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