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How did Saudi Arabia Respond to the Last Hamas-Israel Confrontation?

While the Russia-Ukraine war continues, the increased tension between Hamas and Israel and the emergence of a humanitarian crisis in the region drew the international public's attention to the Middle East, and the Palestine issue returned to the regional and international agenda. The conflict escalated with the unexpected attack of Hamas armed forces positioned in Gaza to Israeli civilians, and continued with Israel's response by laying siege to the more than two million Palestinians who live in Gaza Strip. Israel cut off the essential needs in Gaza, like water and electricity and bombarded the enclave with airstrikes including the civilian targets, like Al-Ahli Hospital. In this context, the positions of the regional powers that have a potential to maintain peace and security in the region are decisive. Saudi Arabia is one of the regional leading powers that share similar Arab-Muslim identity with Palestinians which is the party of the conflict directly.

Saudi officials criticized Israel's blockade called for a cease-fire. During his phone call with U.S. President Biden, Bin Salman emphasized the urgency of initiating discussions aimed at to stop military operations that have resulted in the loss of innocent lives. He stressed the importance of avoiding any form of civilian targeting, damage to infrastructure, or interference with vital interests that impact the daily lives of civilians and caused to forced displacement.[1] The statements called upon the international community to "fulfil its responsibilities and activate a credible peaceful process leading to a two-state solution that achieves security and peace in the region and protects civilians".[2]

From the other side, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman has an ambitious development agenda for Saudi Arabia called *Saudi Vision 2030* which contains reshaping economic structure that is almost fully depended on oil, supporting development of science and artificial intelligence

in the country, and building stronger and better governance and social environment[3] thanks to regional and international cooperation. It aims to shift Saudi Arabia to the center of global investment and tourism, and to fulfill the gaps in the field of defense. In this context, Saudi authorities expressed their willingness to normalize relations with Israel, upon certain benefits to be provided by the United States. These included the possibility of a mutual defense agreement between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, American backing for a Saudi civilian nuclear initiative, and increased sales of U.S. weaponry.[4] Parallel to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza, Saudi Arabia hosts Annual Investment Forum as a part of its development agenda enthusiastically with the ceremony of dancers and an operatic solo with an image of a white dove – symbol of peace – on the screen.[5]

As polarization and regionalization increased on a global scale, Saudi Arabia began to normalize its relations with its regional rivals, Iran and Israel. Probably, the shift of the USA focus from the Middle East to China and Ukraine paved the way to the alternative rapprochements and change of conjuncture in the region. Just when the normalization was about to begin with Israel, the escalation of this confrontation directly affected and slowed down the normalization of Saudi Arabia and Israel. The fact that the representative of Saudi Arabia made a telephone conversation with that of Iran as soon as the conflict flared up is an indication that it does not want to be left among the flares.

Additionally, the continuing violence between Hamas and Israel can lead to the challenges to Spice Route, which connects India to European Union via Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia and Israel. The aim of the project is to organize an alternative to China’s Belt and Road initiative and make a trade route in the region backed by United States, European Union and Saudi Arabia.[6] The escalated regional conflict resulted with the damage of Saudi Arabia-Israel relations establishes the challenge for the project.

As a result, Riyadh is not glad its interests and desires to be affected because of the any conflict in the region, including Palestine issue; however, it is obliged to demonstrate solidarity with Palestinians because of their common identity. As it is seen from the statement of the Saudi finance minister, Mohammed al-Jadaan, "Before the 7th of October, a lot of de-escalation had happened, which brought a lot of hope for the region, and we don't want the recent events to derail that",[7] a relative stability and 'de-escalation' is sufficient that will help Saudi Arabia to normalize its relations with regional and international partners, build developed economic and trade relations, and realize its development goals in a middle-term.

[1] Nabolsi, I. "Saudi crown prince tells Biden that military escalation in Gaza needs to stop", Anadolu Agency, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-tells-biden-that-military-escalation-in-gaza-needs-to-stop/3031664

[2] Khalil, S. "How did Arab states react to Hamas operation against Israel?", The New Arab, https://www.newarab.com/news/how-did-arab-states-react-hamas-attack-israel

[3] https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en/

[4] Kelly, K. et al. "Saudi Arabia Warns U.S.: Israeli Invasion of Gaza Could Be Catastrophic", The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/27/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-israel-us-invasion.html

[5] Nereim, V. et al. "As War Looms Over Mideast, Saudi Arabia Tries to Keep the Music Going", The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-israel-hamas-gaza-war.html

[6] Pasricha, A. “Israel-Hamas Conflict Reality Check for India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor”, Voice of America, https://www.voanews.com/a/israel-hamas-conflict-reality-check-for-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-/7323955.html

[7] Nereim, V. et al. “As War Looms Over Mideast, Saudi Arabia Tries to Keep the Music Going”, The New York Times, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-israel-hamas-gaza-war.html