

The Arabs are transparently displaying their crossover to multi-alignment in a US-led Middle Eastern war

by M. K. Bhadrakumar,* India



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(Picture ma)

Reuters reported on Friday quoting three sources in the Persian Gulf that the regional states are lobbying Washington to stop Israel from attacking Iran's oil sites as "part of their attempts to avoid being caught in the crossfire".

The exclusive Reuters report¹ singled out Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar as also refusing to let Israel fly over their airspace for any attack on Iran.

These moves come after a diplomatic push by Iran to persuade its Sunni Gulf neighbours to use their influence with Washington. Saudi Arabia has drawn the bottom line to the Biden Administration that it is determined to pursue the track of normalisation with Iran that began with the rapprochement brokered by China in March 2023. This affirmation, well into the Iranian-Saudi détente's second year, puts paid to any residual hope that Arab states may eventually join a 'coalition of the willing' against Iran.

The big picture here is that the Gulf states are positioning themselves to be among the key contributors to the ongoing power diffusion in their region – and globally. Tehran and Riyadh have found ways to responsibly share the neighbourhood. Suffice to say, the Arab world is already in the post-US and post-West era.

Now, this also signals Riyadh's unease about Israel continuing its war on Gaza and Saudi frustration with the US for refusing to pressure Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government into accepting a ceasefire.

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Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Crown Prince, (R) received Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, Riyadh, Oct. 9, 2024. (Picture ma)

Iran's Foreign Minister *Abbas Araqchi* was in Riyadh on Wednesday and was received by Crown Prince *Mohammed bin Salman*. The Saudi readout said² they discussed bilateral relations and regional developments as well as the "efforts exerted towards them". The meeting was attended by Saudi Defense Minister Prince *Khalid bin Salman*, Foreign Minister Prince *Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah* and Minister of State and National Security Advisor Dr. *Musaed bin Mohammed Al-Aiban*.

Araqchi also held talks with Prince Faisal. "Discussions focused on relations and explored ways to strengthen them across various fields", the Saudi report said. Only the previous day, Prince Khalid had spoken with his American counterpart Defence Secretary *Lloyd Austin*.

The *Saudi Press Agency* reported³ Tuesday that the two defence ministers "discussed the latest regional and international developments, efforts to de-escalate tensions in the region, and ways to ensure regional security and stability".

Clearly, the Saudis are on the ball, quite aware that they can assume a pivotal role in restoring calm and preventing the spillover of the conflict into the region. The ground beneath the Israel-Iran standoff is shifting in systemic terms.

The military implications are profound when the *Gulf States close their airspace to Israel*⁴ (and the US) for operations against Iran. The Israeli jets will now have to take a circuitous route via the Red Sea and circumvent Arabian Peninsula to

approach Iranian airspace, which of course will necessitate mid-air refuelling and all that it entails in such a sensitive operation that may have to be undertaken repeatedly. In a 'missile war', Iran may prevail.

How far the coordinated move by the Persian Gulf States to get the US to de-escalate the situation will work remains to be seen, as it depends largely on Netanyahu mellowing, of which there are no signs. Nonetheless, President *Joe Biden* did his part by calling Netanyahu on Wednesday. But the White House readout neatly sidestepped the main talking point between them.

It stands to reason, though, that the call from Biden did have some effect on Netanyahu. The *New York Times* reported⁵ that Israel's security cabinet convened on Thursday during which Netanyahu discussed with senior ministers "the overall plan for Israel's retaliation".

The results of the meeting were not released. And *Times* concluded its report by taking note that "analysts still say neither side appears interested in all-out war". Indeed, the Gulf states' anxiety has become a key talking point between the US officials and Israeli counterparts.

After the call from Biden, Netanyahu asked Defence Minister *Yoav Gallant* who was scheduled to visit Washington to stand down. Meanwhile, the US Central Command chief General *Michael Kurilla* came to Israel for "a situational assessment". Lloyd Austin followed through on Thursday with a call to with Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant but the *focus was on Lebanon*.⁶ No doubt, the Biden administration is pulling many strings in Tel Aviv.

Netanyahu is known to be a realist himself. The point is, Tehran is explicit that Tel Aviv *will pay a heavy price*⁷ for any further hostile action. The warning will be taken seriously as Israeli military and intelligence – indeed, Netanyahu himself – have just had a preview of Iran's deterrent capability.

Second, the price of oil has already begun going up and that is something Candidate *Kamala Harris* wouldn't want to see happening.

Third, as for nuclear facilities, Iran has dispersed them to all parts of the country and the critical infrastructure is buried deep in the bowels of mountains that are hard to reach.

To be sure, Iran's missile strike on October 1 carried also showed that it has superb intelligence to know what to target, where and when. In a tiny country like Israel, it is difficult to hide –

although Tehran may not stoop so low as to decapitate opponents.

Suffice to say, all things taken into account, a terrible beauty is born in the Middle East: How far will the US go to rescue Israel?

The beginning of an alignment of the Arab states, as evident this week, refusing to be part of any form of attack on Iran and the signs of 'Islamic solidarity' bridging sectarian divides – these are, quintessentially, to be seen as tipping points. This is the first thing.

Secondly, this isn't going to be a short, crisp war. Colonel *Doug Macgregor*, an astute US combat veteran in the Gulf War and former advisor to the Pentagon during the Trump administration and a noted military historian, aptly drew the analogy of the Thirty Years' War in Europe (1618–1648), which began as a battle among the Catholic and Protestant states that formed the Holy Roman Empire but evolved in time and became less about religion and turned into a political struggle, more about which group would ultimately govern Europe, and ultimately changing the geopolitical face of Europe.

To quote from a 2017 essay by *Pascal Daudin*, an ICRC veteran who was deployed in major conflict situations such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Central Asia, Caucasus, Saudi Arabia and the Balkans,

the Thirty Years' War turned into "a complex, protracted conflict between many different parties – known in modern parlance as State and non-State actors. In practice, it was a series of separate yet connected international and internal conflicts waged by regular and irregular military forces, partisan groups, private armies and conscripts." (*here*)⁸

True, a Middle Eastern War in the current setting already has combatants, bystanders and on-lookers who, as the conflict evolves into a latter-day Crusade, are bound to jump in – such as Turkey and Egypt.

It will most certainly exhaust Israel – and vanquish the US presence in the Middle East – although a protracted war may prompt an intellectual upheaval that would ultimately bring about the Enlightenment to the region, as the Thirty Years' War did to Europe.

Source: <https://www.indianpunchline.com/the-arabs-are-transparently-displaying-their-crossover-to-multi-alignment-in-a-us-led-middle-eastern-war/>, 12 October 2024

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/stop-israel-bombing-irans-oil-sites-gulf-states-urge-us-2024-10-10/>

² <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/5069462-saudi-crown-prince-iran-fm-discuss-regional-developments>

³ <https://english.aawsat.com/gulf/5069211-saudi-arabia-us-discuss-de-escalation-efforts-region>

⁴ <https://nournews.ir/en/news/193519/Saudi,-UAE,-Qatar-seal-air-space-to-Israel-for-anti-Iran-move>

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/10/world/middleeast/israel-iran-attack-response-security-cabinet-meeting.html>

⁶ <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3933727/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iiis-call-with-israeli-minister/>

⁷ <https://nournews.ir/en/news/193414/Araghchi-We-are-not-seeking-to-escalate-tensions,-but-we-will-respond-to-any-hostile-action>

⁸ <https://blogs.icrc.org/law-and-policy/2017/05/23/thirty-years-war-first-modern-war/>