

Gidi Brandes

The External Politics of the Israel-Hamas War

How regional rivalries & alliances sustain the Gaza conflict—and paths to break the cycle

About the Article

Behind the unrelenting violence in Gaza lies a wider battle of regional powers entrenching the conflict's deadlock. Gidi Brandes examines how states like Iran, the US, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia shape the war's trajectory through competing interests and alliances. The article maps the complex web of regional politics and proposes strategies to realign incentives, arguing that only coordinated external action can break the cycle of violence.

About the Author

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The

The Israel-Hamas War, reignited by Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack and Israel's intense response, is a strategic deadlock rooted in a complex Middle Eastern network. This essay argues that the conflict's persistence stems from both sides' inability to pursue compromise due to political, ideological, and operational constraints, with external actors, like Iran and the United States, shaping its trajectory through their strategic choices. Neither Hamas, driven by resistance and regional support, nor Israel, prioritizing deterrence under Netanyahu's hardline coalition, sees de-escalation as viable without risking legitimacy or security (Hamida & Jin, 2021). The war's regional impact, from disrupting Saudi-Israeli normalization to amplifying Iran's proxy influence, highlights its significance in a multipolar Middle East (Saikal, 2024; Krieg, 2024). This essay proposes four strategies to realign these actors' incentives and foster a stable ceasefire. By examining the strategic incentives of Israel and Hamas, the essay frames their

deadlock as a self-reinforcing cycle where confrontation outweighs cooperation (Hamida & Jin, 2021). Hamas's attacks, like the October 7 assault killing 1,200 Israelis, sustain its resistance credentials, while Israel's airstrikes, claiming over thousands of Palestinian lives, reflect its security-driven stance (Byman, 2024). Bilateral ceasefire efforts, mediated by Qatar and Egypt, achieve temporary pauses but collapse due to external influences, such as Iran's support for Hamas and US backing for Israel (Saikal, 2024). By exploring the network of state actors (Iran, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, US, EU, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan), the essay reveals how their relationships sustain the conflict (Krieg, 2024).

1. Strategic Deadlock

The Israel-Hamas War's persistence reflects a strategic deadlock, where both Hamas and Israel view continued confrontation as more viable than compromise, locked in

a cycle of mutual escalation. This section analyses the bilateral dynamics sustaining this equilibrium, the domestic incentives reinforcing it, and the reasons internal ceasefire efforts falter, highlighting the growing influence of external state actors. Strategic analysis highlights the war's intractability, showing that neither side can unilaterally shift to cooperation without facing greater costs (Hamida & Jin, 2021). For Hamas, confrontation—exemplified by the October 7, 2023, attack killing 1,200 Israelis—bolsters its legitimacy as a resistance movement, outweighing the risks of Israeli retaliation (Byman, 2024). Israel, conversely, prioritizes security and deterrence, viewing concessions as a signal of weakness that could embolden Hamas or other adversaries (Valbjorn et al, 2024). This deadlock, driven by conflicting incentives, ensures mutual escalation: Hamas's rocket attacks and Israel's airstrikes, which

killed over ten thousands of Palestinians, reflect strategies where deviation (e.g., Hamas halting attacks, Israel offering concessions) undermines

each side's immediate goals (Byman, 2024). The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of violence, with neither actor able to break free unilaterally. Domestic pressures entrench this situation. For Hamas, prioritizing resistance over governance aligns with its ideological commitment and public support in Gaza and the West Bank, where it gains credibility over the weakened Palestinian Authority (Hokayem, 2023). The October 7 attack, despite devastating consequences, temporarily boosted Hamas's popularity by disrupting Israel's normalization with Arab states (Valbjorn et al., 2024). In Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu's coalition, reliant on far-right factions, faces public demand for robust security measures post-October 7, reinforcing hardline policies (Byman, 2024). Netanyahu's pre-2023 strategy of tolerating Hamas to undermine the Palestinian Authority further illustrates how domestic political survival shapes Israel's calculus, prioritizing short-term stability over long-term peace (Hokayem, 2023). These internal incentives—Hamas's resistance credentials and Israel's

**Proxy War:
Opposing powers support local
actors to pursue their goals without
direct confrontation.**

security-driven politics—lock both sides into confrontation. Bilateral ceasefire attempts, such as those following the 2008, 2012, and 2014 Gaza conflicts, consistently collapse due to mutual distrust and incompatible goals (Saikal, 2024). Hamas demands significant concessions, like lifting Gaza’s blockade, which Israel rejects to maintain control, while Israel’s insistence on demilitarization clashes with Hamas’s survival strategy (Hamida & Jin, 2021). Mediation efforts, often led by Qatar and Egypt, achieve short-lived results, like the 2023 humanitarian pause, due to conflicting external interests (Hokayem, 2023). For instance, Qatar’s financial support for Hamas and Iran’s military backing strengthen Hamas’s resolve, while U.S. military aid to Israel emboldens its hardline stance (Saikal, 2024). These external influences, reveal that the deadlock’s roots extend beyond Gaza, requiring a regional recalibration to unlock.

2. External Actor Dynamics

The Israel-Hamas War’s persis-

tence as a strategic deadlock is not solely a product of bilateral dynamics between Israel and Hamas but is profoundly shaped by a network of external state actors whose strategic interests, rivalries, and alignments sustain the conflict’s trajectory. This section maps key players—Iran, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—analysing how their positions and interactions reinforce the strategic deadlock outlined earlier. By examining the web of state actors, illustrated through simple diagrams, this analysis reveals the war as a regional conflict within a multipolar Middle East, where state-driven dynamics complicate ceasefire efforts and perpetuate confrontation. The conflict’s external actors form a complex web of influence, each with distinct roles. Iran bolsters Hamas through financial and military support, positioning it as a key component of the Axis of Resistance against Israel and US-aligned states (Celso, 2024). Qatar, leveraging its neutral broker status, mediates ceasefire talks while providing economic aid to Gaza, indirectly sustaining Hamas’s governance

(Valbjørn et al., 2024). Turkey adopts a pro-Palestinian stance, using rhetoric to enhance its regional influence, though economic constraints limit its direct involvement (Bardakçı, 2021). Egypt, controlling Gaza’s Rafah border, mediates alongside Qatar but prioritizes domestic stability amid economic crises (Ahn, 2025). The United States, Israel’s primary ally, provides military and diplomatic support, reinforcing Israel’s hardline posture (Valbjørn et al., 2024). The European Union, despite significant aid to Palestinians, struggles with internal divisions, rendering its peacebuilding efforts ineffective (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). Saudi Arabia navigates a delicate balance, pursuing normalization with Israel while facing public backlash over Gaza’s humanitarian crisis (Ahn, 2025). Jordan, with its large Palestinian population, supports a two-state solution but is constrained by internal unrest and its peace treaty with Israel (Samaan, 2012). These

The war’s intractability stems from external states’ strategic choices.

states, as actors in a regional web, collectively shape the conflict’s dynamics. Each actor’s strategic interests and interactions either perpetuate

or complicate the deadlock. Iran’s support for Hamas, including \$100 million annually and missile technology, strengthens the group’s military capacity, countering Israel and Saudi Arabia while escalating regional tensions (Celso, 2024). This aligns with Iran’s broader rivalry with the US and Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, which fears Iran’s growing influence (Ahn, 2025). Qatar’s dual role as mediator and Hamas funder enables temporary pauses, as seen in the 2023 humanitarian pause, but its support sustains Hamas’s operational resilience, frustrating Israel’s containment strategy (Valbjørn et al., 2024). Turkey’s vocal pro-Palestinian stance, driven by domestic support for the Muslim Brotherhood, enhances its soft power but strains ties with Israel and Gulf states like the UAE, which view such rhetoric as destabilizing (Bardakçı, 2021). Egypt and Jordan, both US allies with peace treaties with Israel, prioritize border security and economic stability, mediating to prevent Gaza’s collapse but avoiding direct confrontation with Israel due to domestic pressures (Samaan, 2012; Ahn, 2025). The US’s uncon-

ditional support for Israel, including military aid, emboldens Israel’s aggressive response but erodes its regional credibility, as Arab public opinion condemns perceived complicity (Valbjørn et al., 2024). The EU’s fragmented approach, hampered by member states’ divergent interests, limits its influence, with initiatives like the Middle East Quartet sidelined by US dominance (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). Saudi Arabia’s normalization efforts, part of the Abraham Accords framework, are stalled by public outrage over Gaza, forcing a cautious stance to balance domestic legitimacy with strategic ties to the US and Israel (Ahn, 2025). These rivalries (e.g., Iran vs. Saudi Arabia, US vs. Iran) and cooperative dynamics (e.g., Qatar-Egypt mediation) create a web of relationships where incentives align against compromise, sustaining the deadlock.

3. Breaking the System

The Israel-Hamas War is sustained by a complex web of external state actors whose support perpetuates conflict. Qatar and Egypt’s 2023 mediation attempts collapsed as states like Iran, the United States, and Saudi Arabia reinforced the status quo through their strategic alignments (Saikal, 2024). This section argues that disrupting this deadlock requires realigning the incentives of these external actors by strengthening or reconfiguring their support relationships. To do so, a qualitative analysis of diplomatic, economic, and military influence on Israel and Hamas was made. Together with four scenarios, this analysis illustrates pathways to de-escalate the conflict. Such changes show coordinated action can disrupt the deadlock.

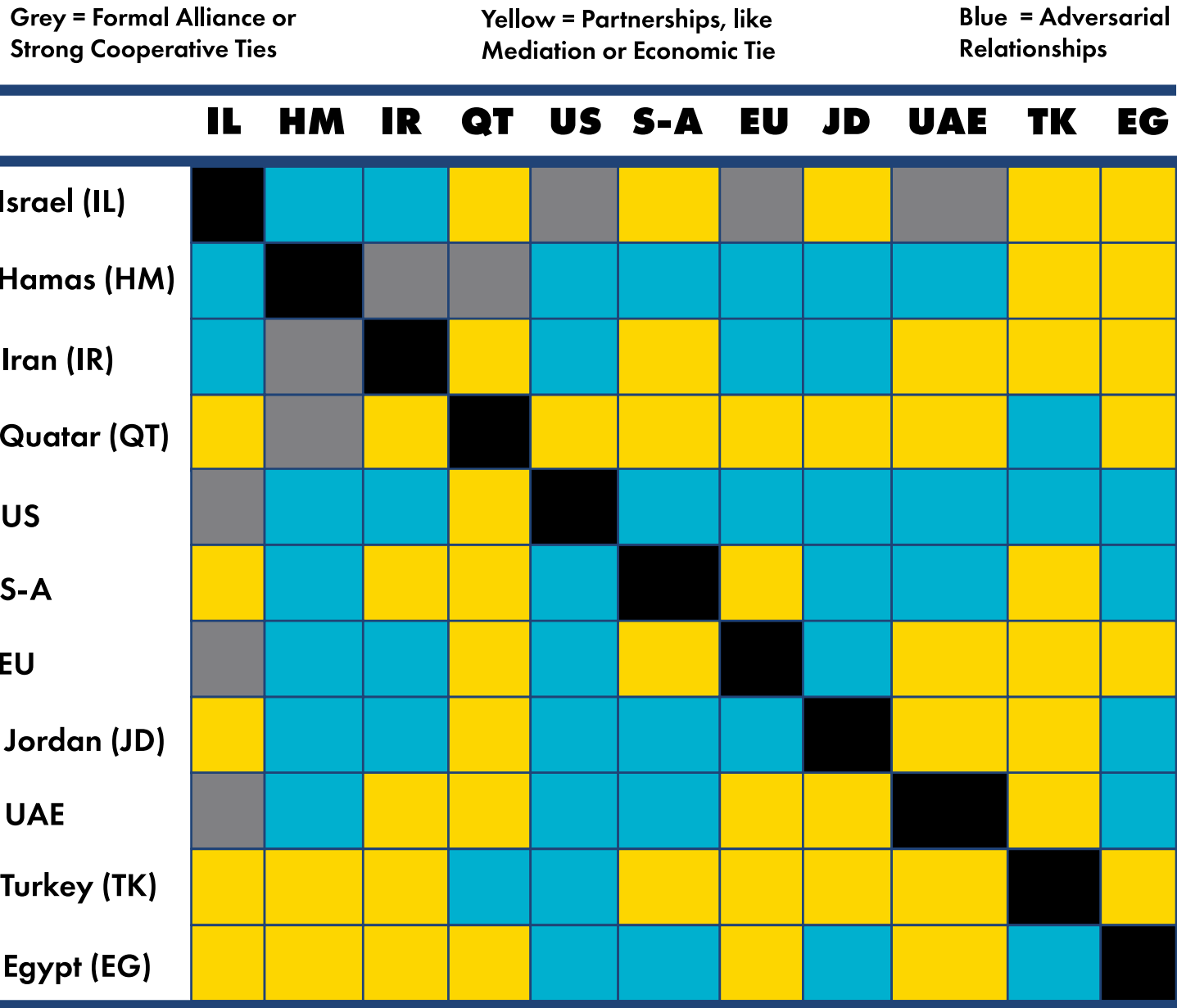


Figure 1: Table showing the Ties in the Middle East

Actor	Diplomatic Influence	Economic Influence	Military Influence
Iran	Backs Hamas via Axis of Resistance	Funds Hamas	Supplies Missiles
Qatar	Mediates Ceasefire Talks	Funds Gaza Aid	—
United States	Supports Israel Diplomacy	Limited Aid to Gaza	Military Aid to Israel
Saudi Arabia	Pursues Israel Normalization under condition of 2-state solution	Economic ties with Israel	—
EU	Fragmented Peace Efforts	Aid to Palestinians; Association Agreement with Israel	Individual member states trade arms with Israel
Jordan	Supports two-state solution	Limited trade with Israel; provides humanitarian aid to Gaza	—
UAE	Normalized ties with Israel (Abraham Accords)	Strong Economic ties with Israel	—
Turkey	Pro-Palestinian rhetoric, mediation attempts	Limited economic aid to Gaza	—
Egypt	Mediates ceasefire talks	Limited economic aid to Gaza; Trade with Israel	Border security operations; blockade of Rafah border

3.1. Shifting External Incentives

The war's intractability stems from external states' strategic choices. Iran's financial and logistical support for Hamas bolsters its resistance narrative, while the US's robust military aid to Israel entrenches its hardline policies, discouraging concessions (Saikal, 2024). Saudi Arabia's cautious normalization with Israel, driven by economic interests, and the EU's fragmented approach to the conflict further limit pressure for peace. Based on Table 1, we see that Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar, with zero adversarial ties in this web of state actors, are central players in mediation efforts for the ceasefire in Gaza. However, green ties also mean that states might have certain leverage over other states. For example, the leverage of the United States over Israel or Iran over Hamas. These relationships set the stage for exploring different scenarios by which we can recalibrate these ties through diplomacy, economic leverage, or sanctions, external actors can create conditions for a stable ceasefire, though broader coordination is essential for significant impact.

4.2. Scenarios for Recalibration

Scenario 1: US-Led Diplomatic Pressure

The U.S. strengthens support for Saudi Arabia and Egypt to empower the Palestinian Authority as a counterweight to Hamas, while reducing ties with Israel and withdrawing engagement with Hamas. This leverages the US's unique influence over Israel to push for a ceasefire and increased humanitarian aid, potentially stabilizing Gaza's governance (Byman, 2024). This may lead to a shift toward broader regional diplomacy. This could pressure Israel to moderate its policies and isolate Hamas, weakening its bargaining power. However, domestic political constraints in the US, particularly from pro-Israel constituencies, pose risks. Therefore, extensive US engagement with additional Arab states may be needed to significantly alter the region's structure.

Actor	Influence Shift	Outcome
Israel	US reduces diplomacy and military support	Pressured to moderate policies
Hamas	–	Isolated, weakened bargaining power
Saudi Arabia	US strengthens diplomatic and economic ties	Enhanced regional diplomatic role
Egypt	US strengthens diplomatic ties	Strengthened mediation influence
United States	Shifts focus to Saudi Arabia/Egypt ties	Gains leverage for ceasefire talks

Figure 2: Table showing scenario 1

Scenario 2: Gulf States’ Economic Leverage

Saudi Arabia establishes a strong tie with Israel to incentivize progress toward a two-state solution, while withdrawing support from Hamas. This aligns with Gulf public sentiment supporting Palestine and counters Iran’s regional influence, building on the Abraham Accords’ framework (Ahn, 2025). The strengthened Saudi-Israel tie could shift Israel’s calculus by tying economic benefits to

political concessions, while Hamas’s isolation reduces its leverage. Challenges include domestic Gulf resistance to normalization without tangible Palestinian gains and the need for broader Gulf coordination (e.g., with Qatar or even smaller Gulf states) to amplify pressure. These changes may require complementary state actions to disrupt the deadlock effectively.

Actor	Influence Shift	Outcome
Israel	Saudi Arabis establishes strong economic tie	Incentivized for two-state progress
Hamas	Saudi Arabia withdraws support	Isolated, reduced leverage
Saudi Arabia	Strengthens tie with Israel	Enhanced economic and diplomatic role
UAE	Coordinates with Saudi Arabia	Supports Gulf-led pressure
United States	Supports Abraham Accords Framework	Facilitates regional diplomacy

Figure 3: Table showing scenario 2

Scenario 3: Qatar-Turkey Mediation Axis

Qatar and Turkey enhance mediation by strengthening ties to Hamas, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, leveraging Qatar’s history of brokering humanitarian pauses, Turkey’s pro-Palestinian stance, and Jordan’s diplomatic efforts aiding border stability (Saikal, 2024; Bardakci, 2021; Samaan, 2012). Their initial ties (Table 1) reflect existing mediation roles, making it possible that changing or improving ties reinforce rather than transform their influen-

ce. Qatar and Turkey are positioned as a diplomatic hub, potentially coordinating ceasefire talks and stabilizing Gaza’s borders through Egypt’s cooperation. However, rivalry with Saudi Arabia and dependence on Hamas’s compliance limit impact, as the stability of these regional relationships indicates. Broader alignment with other mediators like Egypt is crucial to shift the deadlock significantly, despite the robust qualitative potential of this axis.

Actor	Influence Shift	Outcome
Israel	Qatar and Turkey strengthen mediation ties	Engaged in ceasefire talks
Hamas	Qatar and Turkey enhance mediation support	Engages, but potentially non-compliant
Qatar	Strengthens ties with Hamas, Israel, Egypt, Jordan	Strengthened mediation hub
Turkey	Enhances mediation with Hamas, Israel, Egypt, Jordan	Bolstered pro-Palestinian diplomacy
Egypt	Strengthens ties with Qatar and Turkey	Enhanced mediation and border stability

Figure 4: Table showing scenario 3

Scenario 4: EU Coordinated Sanctions

Lastly, if the EU withdraws support from Israel, maximizes its sanctions on Hamas and strengthens ties with Qatar and Egypt to bolster mediation, the situation could shift slightly, reflecting reduced conflict engagement and enhanced diplomatic leverage (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). This isolates Israel and Hamas, pressuring nego-

tiations through economic sanctions on settlement activities or Hamas’s funding networks. The EU’s normative power gains traction, but internal divisions and reliance on US alignment constrain effectiveness. While targeted sanctions can alter the dynamics, a more unified EU stance and additional state support are needed to maximize de-escalation.

Actor	Influence Shift	Outcome
Israel	EU withdraws support, imposes sanctions	Isolated, pressured to negotiate
Hamas	EU sanctions and targets funding	Isolated
EU	Strengthens ties with Qatar and Egypt	Enhanced normative and diplomatic role
Qatar	EU strengthens mediation supports	Strengthened mediation hub
Egypt	EU strengthens mediation support	Bolstered mediation influence

Figure 5: Table showing scenario 4

These scenarios demonstrate that realigning state support ties can challenge the Israel-Hamas deadlock, though the need for broader, coordinated efforts remains. By strate-

gically enhancing key relationships, external actors can pave the way for regional peacebuilding, leveraging their collective influence to foster a sustainable resolution.

Scenario	Key Actors	Influence	Outcome	Challenge
(1) US Diplomacy	Israel, Hamas, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, US	US reduces Israel/Hamas support, strengthens Saudi/Egypt ties	Israel pressured, Hamas isolated, Saudi/Egypt mediation enhanced	US domestic pro-Israel constraints
(2) Gulf Leverage	Israel, Hamas, Saudi Arabia, UAE, US	Saudi strengthens Israel tie, cuts Hamas support, UAE coordinates	Israel incentivized, Hamas isolated, Gulf role enhanced	Gulf public resistance to normalization
(3) Qatar Turkey Axis	Israel, Hamas, Qatar, Turkey, Egypt	Qatar/Turkey strengthen mediation with Israel/Hamas/Egypt/Jordan	Israel/Hamas engaged, Qatar/Turkey mediation hubs	Saudi rivalry, Hamas non-compliance
(4) EU Sanctions	Israel, Hamas, EU, Qatar, Egypt	EU sanctions Israel/Hamas, strengthens Qatar/Egypt mediation	Israel/Hamas isolated, Qatar/Egypt mediation bolstered	EU disunity, US alignment needed

4. Conclusion

The Israel-Hamas War persists as a complex regional conflict, sustained by misaligned incentives among external state actors. While temporary ceasefires offer relief, the deadlock’s roots demand a broader realignment to achieve lasting peace. By examining the web of state actors and their strategic interactions, this essay has highlighted how external support perpetuates confrontation.

Table 5 outlines four strategies each offering a pathway to disrupt the stalemate. In the US-led diplomacy scenario, the United States shifts support from Israel to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, empowering the Palestinian Authority as a counterweight to Hamas (Byman, 2024). This could pressure Israel to moderate its policies and isolate Hamas, weakening its bargaining power and fostering ceasefire

talks. However, domestic pro-Israel constituencies in the US may resist, necessitating broader engagement with Arab states to amplify diplomatic leverage. The Gulf leverage scenario sees Saudi Arabia strengthening economic ties with Israel, contingent on two-state solution progress, while withdrawing Hamas support (Ahn, 2025). Building on the Abraham Accords, this could incentivize Israel's concessions and reduce Hamas's regional clout, but Gulf public opposition to normalization without Palestinian gains poses a significant hurdle, requiring coordination with states like the UAE.

The Qatar-Turkey mediation axis leverages Qatar's history of brokering pauses and Turkey's pro-Palestinian stance to enhance ties with Hamas, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan (Saikal, 2024; Bardakçı, 2021). By positioning themselves as a diplomatic hub, they could coordinate ceasefire negotiations and stabilize Gaza's borders through Egypt's cooperation. Yet, rivalry with Saudi Arabia and Hamas's

potential non-compliance could limit impact, emphasizing the need for alignment with other mediators. The EU sanctions scenario involves withdrawing support from Israel and Hamas while bolstering Qatar and Egypt's mediation roles (Akgül-Açıkmeşe & Özel, 2024). Sanctions on Israeli settlements or Hamas's funding networks could isolate both parties, pressuring negotiations, but EU internal divisions and reliance on US alignment may weaken effectiveness, requiring a unified stance.

These scenarios demonstrate that breaking the deadlock depends on realigning external incentives through diplomacy, economic tools, and mediation. While each scenario offers promise, challenges like regional rivalries and domestic constraints demand careful navigation. Only through collective action, where states coordinate to shift their roles, can the cycle of violence end, offering Gaza not just a ceasefire but a path to stability in a multipolar Middle East.

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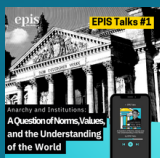
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