



IPS INSIGHTS

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

The Middle East's Many Wars: Is Peace Still Possible?

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Part I

The Middle East appears to be moving from one crisis to another without finding an exit from any of them. Gaza remains unresolved, the confrontation involving Iran and the United States has turned the Strait of Hormuz into a major security crisis, Yemen has suddenly become more dangerous, and Saudi Arabia is now finding itself directly exposed to attacks from the Houthis.

The danger is not simply that these conflicts may continue. It is that they are beginning to connect with one another. A missile or drone attack in Yemen can affect Saudi Arabia; instability in Saudi Arabia can affect global energy markets; disruption in the Strait of Hormuz can affect countries thousands of miles away; and the unresolved Gaza war continues to provide the wider conflict with its political and emotional fuel.

The question therefore is no longer merely whether individual conflicts can be brought to an end. It is whether the region can find a broader mechanism for de-escalation.

Saudi Arabia Comes Under Pressure

The most immediate new development is the intensification of Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia. Saudi authorities issued air-

raid alerts in Riyadh and other areas on September 18, while on September 19 Reuters reported explosions and a plume of smoke and flames near Riyadh's main airport. Saudi authorities had also reported the interception of a Houthi drone south of Mecca earlier in the week.²

The geographical dimension is particularly worrying. The Houthis have expanded their presence along Yemen's Red Sea coast and have threatened the maritime routes around Bab el-Mandeb. Reuters has reported that their recent advance has placed additional pressure on Saudi oil exports and international shipping.³

Saudi Arabia consequently faces a difficult strategic dilemma. Retaliation could become a prolonged military campaign in Yemen, while restraint could encourage further Houthi attacks. The history of Yemen suggests that neither option is simple.

There is another complication. The United States has apparently been reluctant to launch direct attacks against the Houthis on Saudi Arabia's behalf, although Washington has continued to provide intelligence and targeting assistance. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has also discussed the deteriorating situation with the commander of US Central Command.⁴

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² Reuters, "Flames, Smoke Seen near Riyadh Airport; Houthis Claim Attacks on Saudi Capital," Reuters, September 19, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-civil-defence-sends-all-clear-after-danger-warning-capital-riyadh-2026-09-19/>

³ Samia Nakhoul and Timour Azhari, "Houthi Blitz Leaves Saudi Arabia Exposed, Iran Emboldened," Reuters, September 16, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthi-blitz-leaves-saudi-arabia-exposed-iran-emboldened-2026-09-16/>

⁴ TOLONews, "Govt Reduces Fuel Tax to Six Percent," <https://tolonews.com/business/govt-reduces-fuel-tax-six-percent>.

This is significant because Saudi Arabia has traditionally relied heavily on the United States for its external security.

Hormuz: The Economic War

The Strait of Hormuz represents an entirely different dimension of the crisis. The strait is one of the world's most important energy chokepoints. Its disruption does not remain a Middle Eastern problem. It immediately becomes an international economic problem.

The International Maritime Organization reported on September 16 that it had verified 80 attacks on merchant vessels in and around the Strait of Hormuz since the conflict began on February 28, resulting in at least 22 seafarer deaths.⁵

The IMO has warned that thousands of seafarers remain exposed to danger, while hundreds of vessels have faced difficulty leaving the Persian Gulf.⁶

The longer the disruption continues, the greater the economic pressure on both the consuming and producing countries. Oil prices, insurance costs, shipping rates and supply chains are all affected. For Pakistan, which depends heavily on imported energy, this is particularly consequential.

Thus, the Middle Eastern crisis is no longer simply a contest between states and armed groups. It has become a threat to the international trading system.

Gaza Remains the Central Unresolved Conflict

Gaza remains the deepest and most politically charged conflict in the region. The

United Nations reported in early September that most of Gaza's 2.1 million population remained displaced and that airstrikes and hostilities were continuing to cause civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. Humanitarian agencies were also facing severe restrictions and funding shortages.⁷

UNRWA reported that, according to Gaza's Ministry of Health as reported by the Health Cluster, 73,035 Palestinians had been killed between October 7, 2023 and June 21, 2026, with more than 173,000 injured. The figure has undoubtedly moved since then, but a precise current figure should be treated cautiously because casualty reporting in an active war zone is inherently difficult to verify.⁸

The important point is that even periods described as ceasefires have not produced genuine stability. The UN human rights office reported that Palestinians continued to be killed in Israeli attacks after the announcement of a ceasefire.⁹

Gaza therefore remains the unresolved political centre of gravity of the wider Middle Eastern crisis.

Is Peace Possible?

There are reasons for pessimism, but also some grounds for cautious hope. The pessimistic argument is straightforward. There are too many actors, too many overlapping conflicts and too little trust. Iran and Israel remain locked in confrontation. Washington and Tehran have fundamental disagreements. Israel and the Palestinians remain far apart. Yemen has again become

⁵ International Maritime Organization, "Stop Attacking Merchant Ships and Seafarers: IMO Secretary-General to Member States," September 16, 2026, <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/pressbriefings/pages/stop-attacking-ships-and-seafarers-imo-secretary-general.aspx>

⁶ International Maritime Organization, "Middle East," International Maritime Organization, accessed September 21, 2026, <https://www.imo.org/en/mediacentre/hottopics/pages/middle-east-strait-of-hormuz.aspx>

⁷ United Nations, "Humanitarian Situation across the OPT 'Deeply Alarming': OCHA Briefs the UN Palestinian Rights Committee," United Nations, accessed September 21, 2026, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/humanitarian-situation-across-the-opt-deeply-alarming-ocha-briefs-the-un-palestinian-rights-committee/>

⁸ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), "UNRWA Situation Report #227 on the Humanitarian Crisis in the Gaza Strip and the Occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem," United Nations, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unrwa-situation-report-227-on-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-the-gaza-strip-and-the-occupied-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem/>

⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights: The Bloodshed in Gaza Must Stop," United Nations in Palestine, September 4, 2026, <https://palestine.un.org/en/322139-office-united-nations-high-commissioner-human-rights-bloodshed-gaza-must-stop>

a battlefield. Saudi Arabia is now directly exposed to Houthi attacks. And the international community has struggled to produce a durable political settlement.

Yet diplomacy has not disappeared.

The fact that the United States has reportedly maintained contacts with the Houthis through Oman is significant. Reuters reported that US officials met Houthi representatives in Muscat in September, with Oman facilitating the contact.¹⁰

Oman has historically played the role of quiet intermediary in difficult regional disputes. Such channels may not immediately produce peace, but they provide an avenue for preventing escalation.

Pakistan has also attempted to position itself as a diplomatic bridge rather than another military participant. Its Foreign Office has repeatedly stated that Islamabad is pursuing dialogue and diplomacy to promote regional peace and has been in contact with Saudi Arabia, Iran and other regional actors.¹¹

A comprehensive Middle Eastern peace may therefore be too ambitious in the immediate future. But limited agreements—ceasefires, maritime arrangements, prisoner exchanges, humanitarian access, de-confliction mechanisms and eventually political negotiations—remain possible.

Peace may have to come in stages rather than through one grand settlement.

The Makkah Agreement and Pakistan's Dilemma

This is where the situation becomes particularly important for Pakistan. On

August 7, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye signed the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement. The agreement states that an armed attack against one of the three states shall be regarded as an attack against all three. It is officially described as defensive in nature.¹²

At first sight, the language appears unequivocal. If Saudi Arabia is attacked, would Pakistan therefore be obliged to fight?

The reality is more complicated. The agreement is still being institutionalised. At their August 31 meeting in Istanbul, the three countries agreed to establish a permanent secretariat in Saudi Arabia, initially headed by a Pakistani secretary-general for three years. They also agreed to strengthen defence cooperation, collective deterrence and military capabilities.¹³

More importantly, Pakistan's Foreign Office has itself acknowledged that the operationalisation of the agreement remains at an early stage. On September 10, it said that the Makkah Agreement is an umbrella framework requiring subsequent mechanisms before it can be fully operationalised. It also pointed out that Pakistan already has bilateral defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia, including personnel deployed for training and logistical purposes.¹⁴ This distinction matters enormously.

An attack on Saudi Arabia could create a political expectation that Pakistan would stand with its treaty partner. But the precise military response—its scale, timing, forces involved and circumstances—would depend

¹⁰ Timour Azhari, Alexander Cornwell, Gram Slattery, and Humeysra Pamuk, "US Officials Met Iran-Backed Houthis in Oman over the Weekend, Sources Say," Reuters, September 16, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-officials-met-iran-backed-houthis-oman-over-weekend-sources-say-2026-09-16/>.

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Transcript of the Press Briefing by the Spokesperson on Wednesday, 12th August 2026," August 12, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/transcript-of-the-press-briefing-by-the-spokesperson-on-wednesday-12th-august-2026>.

¹² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Message to the Nation by the Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister on the Signing of the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement," August 10, 2026.

¹³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Strategic Political and Defence Committee of the Makkah Agreement for Joint Defence—Joint Statement," August 31, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/strategic-political-and-defence-committee-of-the-makkah-agreement-for-joint-defence-joint-statement>

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, "Transcript of the Press Briefing by the Spokesperson on Wednesday, 10th September 2026," September 10, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/transcript-of-the-press-briefing-by-the-spokesperson-on-wednesday-10th-september-2026>

on the mechanisms eventually established under the agreement and the nature of the attack.¹⁵

Indeed, on September 10 Pakistan specifically stated that no military response had been discussed under the Makkah pact in response to the Houthi attacks.

So far, therefore, Pakistan has not crossed the line from diplomatic support to direct military intervention.

Part II

Would Pakistan Come Under Pressure?

Almost certainly, if attacks on Saudi Arabia become sustained and severe.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have exceptionally close defence, economic and political relations. The Makkah Agreement has now given those relations a formal multilateral security framework involving Türkiye as well.

But Pakistan would face a difficult balancing act. First, Islamabad would have to distinguish between defending Saudi territory and becoming involved in Yemen's civil war. Second, Pakistan has its own security challenges and cannot afford an open-ended expeditionary commitment. Third, Pakistan maintains important relations with Iran and has repeatedly advocated dialogue rather than confrontation. Direct Pakistani military action against Iran-aligned forces could complicate that diplomatic role. Fourth, Pakistan has historical experience of the difficulties of intervening in Middle Eastern conflicts. Yemen in particular has proved a graveyard of military ambitions. Foreign powers have repeatedly discovered that military superiority does not necessarily translate into a political solution.

This makes the wording and implementation of the Makkah Agreement particularly important. Collective defence does not

necessarily mean collective participation in every military operation.

The Yemen Trap

Pakistan should be especially conscious of the distinction between defending Saudi Arabia and entering the Yemeni war.

If Saudi territory or critical Saudi infrastructure comes under attack, the political pressure on Pakistan would be substantial. But participating in offensive operations inside Yemen would represent a very different proposition.

The geography is unforgiving. Yemen's mountains, tribal structures, fragmented political landscape and history of resistance make it extremely difficult for outside powers to impose a durable settlement through force.

The current Houthi advance towards the Red Sea coast and Bab el-Mandeb only reinforces this point.¹⁶

Pakistan's best contribution may therefore be to help prevent the Saudi-Houthi confrontation from becoming another full-scale regional war.

A Window for Diplomacy?

Paradoxically, the multiplication of conflicts may eventually create incentives for diplomacy.

Saudi Arabia has an interest in securing its territory and energy infrastructure. Iran has an interest in avoiding a direct confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the wider Arab Gulf. The United States has an interest in restoring freedom of navigation through Hormuz. European and Asian economies need secure energy supplies. Türkiye has an interest in regional stability. Pakistan has an interest in preventing another war on its western periphery.

¹⁵ Asif Shahzad and Hritam Mukherjee, "Pakistan Says No Military Response Discussed under Mecca Pact over Houthi Attacks on Saudi Arabia," Reuters, September 10, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/pakistan-says-no-military-response-discussed-under-mecca-pact-over-houthi-2026-09-10/>

¹⁶ Samia Nakhoul and Timour Azhari, "Houthi Blitz Leaves Saudi Arabia Exposed, Iran Emboldened," Reuters, September 16, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/houthi-blitz-leaves-saudi-arabia-exposed-iran-emboldened-2026-09-16/>

These interests do not eliminate differences, but they create areas of possible convergence.

The immediate objective should therefore not necessarily be a grand Middle Eastern peace conference. A more realistic sequence would be: stop attacks on civilian infrastructure; restore maritime security; establish communication channels between adversaries; secure humanitarian access in Gaza; negotiate arrangements for Yemen; and gradually address the underlying political disputes.

The Middle East has seen enough wars to demonstrate that military victories rarely produce permanent peace.

The region now needs an exit strategy. For Pakistan, that means maintaining its commitment to Saudi Arabia while preserving diplomatic space with Iran and avoiding an open-ended military commitment in Yemen. The Makkah Agreement may require solidarity, but solidarity does not have to mean abandoning diplomacy.

Pakistan could ultimately find itself in a position where its greatest contribution to Saudi security is not the deployment of another brigade, but the use of its diplomatic relationships to help prevent the next war.

That would be entirely consistent with the stated purpose of the Makkah Agreement itself: collective security, deterrence and, ultimately, regional peace.

