

World at Crossroads: From Scenarios to Action

These short summaries and discussions address highly complex global, regional, and translocal developments occurring up to March 2025, involving numerous actors, perspectives, and nuances. They do not offer comprehensive accounts or detailed analyses, and inevitably may overlook certain events, developments, or viewpoints. Instead, their purpose is to help stakeholders critically engage with the four RESPACE scenarios, stimulating reflection, strategic foresight, and deeper exploration of transformative possibilities for collaboration. Each RESPACE scenario outlines distinct, plausible future pathways but is explicitly not predictive. Users are encouraged to continuously adapt and update these Dialogue Inputs to reflect evolving contexts and emerging understandings.

Gaza War and Regional Turmoil in West Asia

April 2025

Summary & Context

The Gaza war (often called a genocide) escalated into a broader regional crisis, sparking a full-scale clash involving Israel, Hamas and Hezbollah. By late 2024, Israel had expanded military operations beyond Gaza to make severe strikes on Hezbollah in Lebanon. This expanded conflict prompted dire warnings based on humanitarian concerns and fears of an Iran–Israel confrontation. At the same time, Syria underwent seismic changes. A lightning rebel offensive led to the fall of the Assad government in December 2024, with President Assad fleeing to Russia for asylum. The collapse of the Assad regime has reshaped alliances as various factions vie for influence in post-Assad Syria.

Amid this turmoil, US policy took an unconventional turn under President Trump. In early 2025, Trump publicly floated a controversial plan to relocate the population of Gaza and rebuild Gaza as a Middle East Riviera. On his social media platform, he suggested moving Gazans to “a good, fresh, beautiful piece of land” elsewhere, eyeing locations such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Puntland and Somaliland as possible destinations. Regional leaders reacted with outrage. Palestinians decried the plan as ethnic

cleansing. Key Arab allies such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia unequivocally rejected any forced transfer of Gazans. Trump’s gambit strained the fragile ceasefire in Gaza, and while negotiations are stalled, attacks have resumed in Gaza and Beirut and Israel has issued a new forced displacement order for residents in several areas in northern Gaza. Though he claims credit for brokering a truce, Trump’s rhetoric has grown belligerent, threatening to resume full force military action. Under Trump, the rhetoric of his government has shifted almost daily, vacillating between pledges to stabilise Gaza and threats to remove all the residents of Gaza.

At the same time, Middle Eastern diplomacy has seen an unprecedented twist. Long-time rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran forged a cautious engagement, moving beyond their China-brokered détente of 2023. In late 2024, Riyadh and Tehran conducted joint naval exercises in the Sea of Oman, with some indications of future drills in the Red Sea. In mid-March 2025, Iran, Russia and China also conducted joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman. The new Saudi–Iranian cooperation, including joint military drills and backchannel talks, signals shifting regional alliances.

The two powers exchanged diplomatic visits, hinting at a broader front that could counterbalance US influence. This warming of ties – unimaginable only a few years prior – casts uncertainty on regional alignments. For example, Saudi Arabia put normalisation with Israel on hold, tying it to progress

on Palestinian statehood including Gaza, even as it built new bridges with Iran. All these developments underscore a West Asia in flux: regional turmoil driven by war, regime change in Syria, great-power rivalry and the search for alternative frameworks for peace and stability beyond traditional US leadership.

Scenario Parallels/Contrasts

These developments echo a Walls scenario of heightened militarism and zero-sum nationalism. The expanded Gaza war and Syrian implosion reflect a world where states resort to force and international norms crumble – much as Walls futures in which wars escalate and authoritarian leaders seize opportunities. Trump’s unilateral plan for Gaza also exemplifies Walls dynamics in bypassing multilateral diplomacy in favour of imposed solutions. In contrast, a Maze future prioritises collective peace efforts. Imagine the UN or regional bodies taking charge of the reconstruction of Gaza rather than a great-power ownership scheme. Elements of a Towers scenario – regional blocs stepping up – appear as Middle

Eastern powers assert regional agency. The Saudi–Iran rapprochement shows regional actors crafting their own security arrangements, independent of Western diktats. Civil society voices, a cornerstone of Bridges scenarios, are muted in this turmoil, though not absent. In post-Assad Syria, thousands of women have protested to demand rights from the new rulers, a courageous grassroots push that channels Bridges energy. Overall, however, West Asia is tilting toward a Walls-like state of fragmentation and conflict, with only small glimmers of Towers (regional cooperation) or Bridges (local activism) offering hope against the prevailing chaos.

Discussion Questions

- **For Activists and Civil Society:** With wars and crackdowns sweeping the region, how can peace activists and human rights defenders maintain their work? What strategies can local NGOs or networks use to protect civilians and advocate for ceasefires amid heavy militarisation? For example, secret humanitarian corridors, digital campaigns, diaspora advocacy. How can civic groups in West Asia cooperate across conflict lines (Israeli, Palestinian, Lebanese, Syrian activists together) to demand de-escalation and protection of human rights?
- **For Donors and Policymakers:** How should international agencies and donors respond to the humanitarian fallout in Gaza and Syria? Should they prioritise funding local relief and peacebuilding initiatives on the ground, even if governments are hostile? Or should they focus on high-level diplomacy to end the fighting? What policies can regional and global institutions (UN, Arab League, etc.) adopt both to address the refugee crises stemming from Gaza and Syria and to prevent forced population transfers? How can policymakers support the fledgling Saudi–Iran détente to reduce regional tensions rather than letting new proxy conflicts emerge?
- **For the Private Sector:** Given the instability, what role (if any) can businesses play in rebuilding war-torn communities and economies in Gaza or Syria? Can regional investors or companies be incentivised to invest in reconstruction and job creation in a way that promotes peace? For example, supporting joint Israeli-Palestinian industrial zones or rebuilding Syrian infrastructure with conflict-sensitive approaches. Conversely, how should companies manage the ethical risks? For instance, reconstruction contracts in Gaza that might entrench displacement if they proceed under Trump’s plan.

- **For Local Communities:** Facing violence and upheaval, how are local communities coping and organising? In Gaza, Syria and Lebanon, what community-led initiatives could help people survive and stay united (such as local ceasefire committees, makeshift schools or mutual aid for displaced families)? How can communities preserve social cohesion and resist hate narratives when external powers fuel sectarian divides? And how might they engage with new regional realities? For example, could Syrian communities leverage the Saudi–Iran rapprochement to press for peace in their areas?

Explore the **RESPACE** scenarios here.

