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The Middle East in 2024: A test of progressive principles and values

The Middle East in 2024 stands as a critical test for progressive principles, such as human rights, international solidarity and peacebuilding. The region's escalating crises, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have highlighted the inconsistency of the West's responses to global conflicts, challenging its credibility and moral leadership. The contrasting reactions to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza have fuelled mistrust, especially in the Global South, where nations like India, Brazil, Nigeria or South Africa are increasingly questioning the West's commitment to existing international law and norms, respect, and equality of states. The humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and broader regional instability, exacerbated by Iran's influence and tensions with Hezbollah, underscore the need for a comprehensive, multilateral approach to peace. For Progressives, these crises offer both a profound challenge and an opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to justice, equality and the protection of human dignity. Addressing the Middle East's challenges requires global cooperation, a consistent application of international law and a vision for peace grounded in respect for all peoples.

The world is navigating a geopolitical landscape marked by deepening complexities and interwoven crises. 2024 saw the return of Donald Trump to the US presidency, heralding a renewed era of unilateralism and unpredictability. His approach, characterised by brinkmanship and a transactional view of international relations, has heightened tensions on multiple fronts, including the already precarious US-China relationship, where competition over trade, technology and security continues to intensify. Against this backdrop, the brutal war in Ukraine entered its third year, serving as a stark reminder of the fragility of European security.

Meanwhile, the Middle East has become a focal point of instability, marked by escalating tensions, devastating conflicts and a profound humanitarian crisis. These developments challenge the resilience of progressive principles, such as respect for human rights, international solidarity and the pursuit of sustainable peace. Perhaps most critically, they

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raise questions about the West's consistency in upholding a rules-based international order. The stark contrast between the decisive and united response to the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the more fragmented and ambiguous approach to the Middle East has fuelled debates about how these principles are applied in practice. This inconsistency threatens to undermine the credibility of these values at a global level.

The situation demands urgent reflection on three interconnected dimensions. Firstly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – reignited by Hamas' horrific terrorist attack in October 2023, which claimed the lives of 1,300 Israelis, and Israel's subsequent military campaign – has led to an unprecedented humanitarian disaster in Gaza. The violence has also highlighted the absence of any meaningful political process capable of delivering a just and lasting peace. Secondly, the broader regional implications of the conflict, including the risk of escalation with Hezbollah and Iran, threaten to destabilise the region further and derail fragile efforts for normalisation between Israel and Arab states, such as those fostered under the Abraham Accords. Finally, the crisis has global ramifications, particularly for the dynamics between the West and the Global South and the future of multilateralism. Perceptions of double standards in the West's responses to Ukraine and Gaza have deepened mistrust and strained international cooperation. These tensions risk eroding the credibility of multilateral institutions and further complicating efforts to address pressing global challenges, such as climate change, inequality and global security.

For Progressives, who have long championed dialogue, cooperation and partnership based on mutual respect, the unfolding events in the Middle East present a profound test that can have long-term implications for the future of progressive policy in the region itself. However, there are potential repercussions for relations with countries and societies in other parts of the world – Africa, Latin America or Asia – where many observe how we live up to our normative positions, especially when it comes to adhering to key principles of international law, but also to principles of equality, solidarity and true partnership. They compel us to critically assess how our principles can be effectively upheld amidst overlapping crises and whether they can guide us toward meaningful and inclusive solutions that uphold human dignity, strengthen multilateralism and address the root causes of instability.

A grim outlook for Israeli-Palestinian peace

The unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza stands out as one of the most profound tragedies of our time, with civilian casualties reaching unprecedented levels and essential infrastructure devastated. Tens of thousands of lives have been lost, and millions are displaced, enduring conditions that are increasingly untenable. The sheer scale of suffering underscores the urgent need for immediate humanitarian aid and a long-term strategy to address the root causes of this protracted conflict. At the same time, the deepening instability in the broader region, marked by clashes with Hezbollah in the north and rising tensions with Iran, exacerbates the situation, making the risk of instability and resulting

humanitarian consequences in other areas of the Middle East also relevant, including the reignited conflict in Syria, or instability in Lebanon.

Apart from the humanitarian crisis, one of the most significant takeaways from this year is the continued erosion of prospects for a long-term resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The extreme-right Israeli government, under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, has pursued a military campaign aimed at eliminating Hamas's operational capabilities. While this objective is framed as necessary for ensuring Israel's security, it has also intensified international scrutiny and criticism. And put a large question mark above the long-term prospects of Israeli-Palestinian relations and the settlement of the almost eight-decades-long conflict. Even if Israel succeeds in eliminating or significantly weakening Hamas, the future of Gaza remains deeply uncertain. The hardline Israeli leadership, under Netanyahu, lacks a clear plan for achieving lasting peace, focusing instead on short-term goals, such as securing a cessation of violence and providing humanitarian aid. While these priorities are understandable given the immediate context, they fail to address the root causes of the conflict or lay the groundwork for a negotiated settlement, leaving fundamental questions about the region's future unresolved.

Compounding this is the growing polarisation within Israeli society itself. Many Israelis, including a number of high-profile figures, have criticised Netanyahu's approach and conduct, particularly his failure to bring all hostages home and his lack of a coherent vision for peace. Simultaneously, the influence of extremist settler movements and far-right elements within the government has intensified, perpetuating a divisive and dehumanising narrative about Palestinians. This approach not only undermines internal cohesion but also exacerbates tensions in the region, even with some potential partners of Israel, making the prospect of meaningful dialogue even more distant. On the Palestinian side, the enduring presence of militant groups, coupled with the political divisions between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, continues to hinder any credible push toward a two-state solution too.

The situation is further complicated by accusations of double standards from both sides. Israelis often point to the international community's inconsistent criticism, arguing that, while their military actions are scrutinised, groups like Hamas and Hezbollah face inadequate condemnation for their roles in perpetuating violence and instability. On the other side, Palestinians perceive double standards in the strong global support for Ukraine's resistance against occupation, compared to what they view as limited solidarity with their struggle against decades of Israeli occupation. This parallel sense of unfair treatment fuels distrust, deepens divisions and makes constructive international engagement even more challenging.

As Progressives, we must stand firm in rejecting violence as a means of addressing injustice, whether it is inflicted on Palestinians or Israelis. To move forward, both sides require courageous leadership that prioritises the protection of human lives, respects international norms and commits to addressing the root causes of this protracted conflict. Without such leadership, peace will remain elusive, and the cycle of violence will continue to deepen.

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Regional interconnections:
The broader Middle East context

The Israel-Hamas conflict underscores the deeply interconnected nature of violence in the Middle East, where local disputes often reverberate across borders, exacerbating broader instability. The region's conflicts are shaped by intricate alliances, sectarian divisions, and the competing interests of regional and global powers. Iran's role in financing and arming militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah has intensified hostilities, not only in Gaza and Lebanon but across the region, heightening Sunni-Shia tensions and destabilising countries such as Syria and Iraq. This dynamic has revealed the need for a more focused assessment of Iran's destabilising influence, which has perhaps been underestimated in Western policy frameworks in the past.

The situation in Syria offers a striking example of these interconnected dynamics. In just two weeks, the long-standing conflict between Assad's regime and Sunni rebel groups reached an unexpected climax. With remarkable speed, the rebels overran the country, the Syrian army collapsed and Bashar Assad fled after 24 years in power. While internal factors largely explain the rapid downfall of the Assad regime, which had long relied on Russian and Iranian support, both militarily and economically, the dire social and economic conditions played a key role in eroding public support for the regime. The army's unwillingness to fight further exacerbated the situation.

Externally, broader geopolitical shifts have also contributed to the regime's collapse. Russia, overstretched by its involvement in Ukraine, could no longer provide the necessary support to its Syrian ally. Iran, meanwhile, has redirected its focus to other hotspots, particularly Lebanon, Gaza and its escalating confrontation with Israel. Additionally, Hezbollah's position in Syria has weakened due to its engagement in the Israeli conflict.

These changes created new opportunities for rebel offensives, underscoring Syria's fragile state. The fall of Assad's regime highlights the ongoing instability in Syria, which remains a flashpoint for broader regional tensions, with frequent clashes, a persistent humanitarian crisis and a fractured political landscape. The crucial question now is whether the change in power in Damascus will lead to greater stability in the region, or whether it will contribute to the ongoing pattern of violence and instability throughout the Middle East. This situation underscores how the outcomes of conflicts in one area, such as Gaza, can ripple through the region, reshaping power dynamics and security in profound ways.

Moreover, the normalisation of relations between Israel and several Arab states – a process made possible by the Abraham Accords – faces new challenges in light of these crises. The outcomes of these normalisation efforts will be pivotal for the future of the Middle East, determining whether diplomatic ties can weather the escalating violence or if the region will fall back into entrenched hostility. Strengthening these relationships could provide a pathway for broader regional cooperation, fostering stability and mutual economic benefits. However, the fragility of these agreements has become evident, with some countries expressing hesitations and criticisms amid rising violence and civilian casualties.

As Progressives, it is crucial to recognise these complexities and advocate for policies that address both immediate humanitarian needs and the deeper structural issues fuelling conflict. This means prioritising a comprehensive approach that includes holding all actors accountable, addressing Iran's destabilising activities and supporting initiatives that promote inclusive peace agreements. Focusing on long-term stability and the equitable resolution of grievances – across national, religious and ethnic lines – is essential to break the cyclical nature of violence and forge a more secure and just Middle East.

Global implications: The Middle East in a changing world order

The escalating crises in the Middle East have profound implications for global geopolitics, particularly in relation to the West's interactions with countries in the Global South — or, more accurately, the so-called 'global majority'. Nations such as India, Brazil, South Africa, Indonesia, Nigeria and other regional powers, which collectively represent the majority of the world's population, are increasingly demanding greater influence on the global stage and greater respect from the West. How the West handles the Middle East crisis will significantly shape perceptions in these parts of the world. For the United States and the European Union, the situation underscores the challenge of maintaining credibility and moral leadership on the global stage. The EU has attempted to balance its approach by emphasising diplomacy and humanitarian assistance, yet this strategy has faced scepticism, particularly in the Global South, where many perceive Western actions as inconsistent and self-serving. This scepticism is amplified by the region's deepening humanitarian crises and the West's struggle to offer cohesive, effective responses and prevent the escalation of violence at the same time.

A glaring example of these perceived double standards and inconsistencies lies in the contrasting responses to different global conflicts. While the West has united in its strong condemnation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine and provided unwavering support for Ukrainian sovereignty, its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict appears more ambivalent and flawed, with divisions between European member states. The plight of Palestinians, enduring decades of occupation, is seen by many as receiving insufficient attention or inconsistent advocacy from Western powers. This perception not only undermines Western influence in the Global South but also complicates the ability to build coalitions on other critical global issues, such as climate change, sustainable development, international security or responses to major geopolitical tensions in other parts of the world.

Furthermore, these perceptions of inconsistency strain relationships with key nations and blocs in Africa, Asia and Latin America. For countries in the Global South, Western rhetoric about universal human rights and international law often rings hollow when it is perceived as selectively applied. A stark example lies in the ambivalent response to the decision by the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate alleged crimes committed

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by representatives of the Israeli government and Hamas leadership. While many EU member states, as strong supporters of the ICC, applauded the Court's decision to prosecute Vladimir Putin for war crimes in Ukraine, the coherence of this stance has been questioned in other contexts. For instance, France recently declared that, while respecting its obligations under the Rome Statute, it would not act on ICC decisions against Israeli officials, revealing significant discrepancies in the application of international justice.

Such dynamics risk alienating potential allies in the Global South, especially when these issues are raised by the emerging powers representing the global majority like with South Africa in the case of the ICC, where many view these inconsistencies as evidence of double standards, further weakening trust in the multilateral institutions necessary for addressing global challenges. These tensions are compounded by growing frustration over perceived Western prioritisation of its geopolitical interests at the expense of broader, impartial commitments to international law. The erosion of the ICC's perceived neutrality could undermine its legitimacy and the broader credibility of the rules-based international order.

To restore trust and credibility, the West must address these perceptions head on by committing to an equitable and consistent application of its principles, regardless of geopolitical considerations. This entails supporting the ICC and other multilateral institutions in a manner that transcends national or political interests, reinforcing their independence and impartiality. It also requires fostering dialogue with the Global South to rebuild partnerships based on mutual respect and a shared commitment to upholding international norms, ensuring these principles are not just espoused but applied universally.

Conclusions:
Opportunities for progressive leadership

Progressive leaders have a unique role in addressing these challenges. They must take the lead in reaffirming a steadfast commitment to universal human rights and international norms, regardless of the geopolitical context. This means advocating for justice and peace in the Middle East with the same vigour as in Ukraine, and recognising the importance of engaging with the Global South on an equal footing. By doing so, Progressives can help rebuild the trust necessary to strengthen global partnerships and tackle the complex crises of our time.

Amid the grim realities, there are opportunities for Progressives to lead with values-driven approaches to the Middle East's crises. Firstly, Progressives must advocate for a reinvigorated multilateral effort to address the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza and to lay the groundwork for a sustainable peace process. This includes championing initiatives that emphasise human rights, reconstruction and inclusive governance in Palestinian territories. At the same time, we must remain attuned to the legitimate security concerns of Israeli society, recognising that lasting peace is unattainable without ensuring safety for all communities.

Equally crucial, and not exclusive to the Middle East but having repercussions for progressive global policy, is the need to confront and reject any kind of hate speech and dehumanising rhetoric, wherever it arises and whoever is using it. Silence is not an option when elements of the Israeli government undermine Palestinian rights or deny the very existence of the Palestinian nation. Conversely, we must also unequivocally condemn antisemitism and any rhetoric that questions the legitimacy or existence of the state of Israel. Both are antithetical to the principles of justice and coexistence that should guide our vision for the region.

Secondly, Progressives should work to bridge the growing divide between the West and the Global South. This involves acknowledging legitimate grievances about Western double standards and promoting a more equitable and inclusive global order. By leveraging soft power, fostering dialogue and investing in development, Progressives can build partnerships that advance both stability and justice in the region.

Lastly, Progressives must challenge the notion that resilience and security are inherently competitive. Instead, they should champion cooperative frameworks that prioritise shared prosperity and mutual respect. This approach aligns with the broader progressive vision of a world where security is achieved not through domination but through collaboration and the rule of law.

The Middle East in 2024 serves as a stark reminder of the challenges facing progressive principles in a world marked by conflict and division. Yet, it also offers an opportunity to reaffirm those principles by addressing the region's crises with compassion and solidarity, but also with realism and pragmatism. It is also the opportunity to demonstrate our unwavering commitment to peace. For Progressives, the path forward lies in embracing multilateralism, fostering inclusivity and demonstrating that our values are not just ideals but actionable solutions to the world's most pressing problems.