

# Could a Cold War-era pact stop the next Middle East war?

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## Contents

1. Reading Passage
2. Explanation
3. Key Terms Glossary
4. Reading Comprehension Quiz (10 questions)
5. Answer Key with Explanations

*Note: the original article is provided as a separate file (attached to the email or downloadable from the website).*

## 1. Reading Passage

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In the wake of the US-Israeli war with Iran, Saudi Arabia is quietly floating an idea that would have seemed unthinkable a decade ago: a non-aggression pact binding Middle Eastern states and the Islamic Republic itself. According to diplomats cited by the Financial Times, Riyadh is studying the 1970s Helsinki Process — the Cold War agreement signed in 1975 by the United States, European countries, and the Soviet bloc — as a potential template. The Helsinki deal did not end the Cold War, but it created channels for security cooperation and economic engagement between enemies who otherwise had no reason to talk.

Why now? Gulf states are nervous. They fear being left with a wounded but still dangerous Iran on their doorstep once the current conflict winds down and the large US military presence in the region scales back. A weaker Iran is not necessarily a safer Iran; it may be a more hawkish one. Already, Tehran has retaliated against the war by firing barrages of missiles and drones at Gulf targets and effectively closing the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow waterway through which a significant share of the world's oil flows.

There is also a second pressure point: Israel. Many Arab and Muslim states have grown increasingly uneasy about Israeli military conduct following Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, pointing to continued strikes against Hizbollah in Lebanon, against Hamas in Gaza, and against parts of southern Syria. That unease shapes the diplomatic geometry of any new pact. An Arab diplomat quoted in the FT report put it bluntly: 'It all depends on who is in it.' In the current climate, getting Iran and Israel into the same agreement is essentially impossible. But excluding Israel could be counterproductive, the diplomat warned, because — after Iran — Israel is now seen by many in the region as the biggest source of conflict. The Saudis are pushing the idea anyway, the diplomat added, because 'Iran is not going anywhere.'

The pact would not be a peace treaty. It would be something more modest and more realistic: a set of guardrails between rivals who do not trust each other but cannot afford another open war. European governments and Brussels-based institutions have reportedly welcomed the concept, urging Gulf countries to back it as a way to let the region manage its own affairs rather than rely indefinitely on outside powers.

But here's the catch: the Arab world is not united on Iran. There are real divisions between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over conflicting visions for regional security and economic competition. The UAE has taken the most hawkish Gulf stance toward Tehran throughout the war and has criticized Arab institutions for what it sees as a soft response to Iranian aggression. That split matters. A Helsinki-style framework only works if the major players actually want the same kind of order — and right now, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi do not entirely agree on what that order should look like.

Still, the proposal is striking. It signals that the Gulf's most powerful Arab monarchy is thinking past the current war toward a different kind of regional architecture — one built less on American protection and more on managed coexistence with the neighbor it has spent decades treating as its primary threat.

## 2. Explanation

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*Saudi Arabia – Iran's longtime rival – is quietly floating a non-aggression pact with Tehran, borrowing the playbook that helped NATO and the Soviets avoid blowing up the planet.*

### What's Going On?

According to a Financial Times report by Andrew England and Henry Foy, Saudi Arabia has discussed the idea of a non-aggression pact between Middle East states and Iran. The talks are happening as the region tries to figure out what comes next after the recent US-Israeli war with the Islamic Republic.

Riyadh is looking at the 1970s Helsinki Process – the Cold War deal that cooled tensions between the Soviet bloc and the West – as a potential template. Diplomats say Gulf states are nervous about being left with a wounded, more hawkish Iran on their doorstep once the fighting stops and US forces scale back.

### How To Think About It

The pact isn't about friendship – it's about installing guardrails between two neighbors who don't trust each other but can't afford another war. Think of it less like a peace treaty and more like:

- A nuclear-armed apartment building where tenants who hate each other agree on fire exits, smoke alarms, and a hallway hotline – because if one unit burns, they all choke on the smoke.
- Two rival high schools that schedule their football games with refs, metal detectors, and bus routes pre-cleared by the principals – not because the rivalry ends, but because nobody wants the brawl that ended last year's game.

### Key Things To Know

- The original Helsinki Accords were signed in 1975 by the US, European countries, and the Soviet bloc to address security and boost economic cooperation between rivals.
- Iran has retaliated against the US-Israeli war by firing missiles and drones at Gulf states and effectively closing the Strait of Hormuz – the world's most important oil chokepoint.
- Arab and Muslim states are also increasingly uneasy about Israel's military conduct since Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack, including ongoing strikes on Hizbollah, Hamas in Gaza, and parts of southern Syria.
- An Arab diplomat told the FT that any pact 'all depends on who is in it' – getting Iran and Israel into the same room right now is basically impossible.
- The UAE and Saudi Arabia don't fully agree: the UAE has taken a more hawkish line toward Iran and has criticized Arab institutions for being too soft in response.

### Why It Matters

Roughly 20% of the world's oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz – when it closes, gasoline prices everywhere (including at your local pump) spike. Beyond that, the Middle East is where US foreign policy, college study-abroad programs, oil markets, and global migration patterns all collide. A region that builds its own security architecture, rather than depending on US troops, would reshape

everything from defense budgets to which countries your generation does business with.

### **The Bigger Picture**

If this works, it would mark a historic pivot: the Gulf moving from US-protectorate logic toward something self-managed, echoing how Europe slowly built the OSCE out of Helsinki. If it fails, the most likely path is a fractured region where the UAE-Saudi split widens, Iran rebuilds quietly, and Israel remains outside any framework. Watch for whether European governments push harder for it, whether Iran signals openness, and whether the Abraham Accords (the US-backed Israel-Gulf normalization deals) get folded in or pushed aside.

### 3. Key Terms Glossary

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#### **Non-aggression pact**

A formal agreement between states pledging not to attack each other. It doesn't make them allies – it just rules out war as a tool.

#### **Helsinki Accords (Helsinki Process)**

A 1975 agreement signed by the US, the Soviet Union, and European countries that lowered Cold War tensions through security cooperation, economic ties, and human-rights commitments.

#### **Strait of Hormuz**

A narrow waterway between Iran and Oman through which roughly a fifth of global oil shipments pass. Closing it spikes world energy prices.

#### **Proxies / proxy forces**

Armed groups (like Hizbollah in Lebanon or the Houthis in Yemen) that fight on behalf of a larger sponsor state – letting that sponsor wage war without officially being at war.

#### **Hawkish**

Favoring aggressive, militarized foreign policy. The opposite – preferring diplomacy and restraint – is called 'dovish.'

#### **Gulf states**

The Arab monarchies along the Persian Gulf, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman – most of them oil-rich and US-aligned.

#### **Back-channel talks**

Secret, unofficial negotiations between governments, often used when public talks would be politically risky for one or both sides.

## 4. Reading Comprehension Quiz

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Circle the best answer for each question.

**Q1.** The passage most directly argues that Saudi Arabia's proposed pact is best understood as:

- A) A peace treaty designed to end the rivalry between Iran and Israel
- B) A risk-management framework borrowed from Cold War diplomacy
- C) A military alliance uniting Gulf states against Iranian expansion
- D) A trade agreement intended to reopen the Strait of Hormuz quickly

**Q2.** According to the passage, Gulf states are worried about which outcome of the US-Israeli war with Iran?

- A) That Iran will quickly rebuild a stronger conventional military
- B) That Israel will demand to join any new regional security pact
- C) That a weakened but hostile Iran will remain on their doorstep
- D) That the US will permanently expand its military bases in the Gulf

**Q3.** As used in the passage, the word 'hawkish' most nearly means:

- A) Watchful and observant
- B) Aggressively confrontational
- C) Secretive and evasive
- D) Diplomatically flexible

**Q4.** As used in the passage, 'float' (as in 'Saudis float a pact') most nearly means:

- A) Officially ratify
- B) Tentatively propose
- C) Publicly reject
- D) Quietly finance

**Q5.** Which inference about Israel can most reasonably be drawn from the passage?

- A) Israel is leading the diplomatic effort behind the pact
- B) Most Arab and Muslim states currently view Israel as a major source of regional conflict
- C) Israel has formally rejected joining any Helsinki-style framework
- D) Israel and Iran are already in back-channel talks about the pact

**Q6.** The passage suggests that disagreement between Saudi Arabia and the UAE stems primarily from:

- A) Differing visions for regional security and how to handle Iran
- B) A dispute over oil production quotas within OPEC
- C) Competition over hosting US military bases in the Gulf
- D) Religious differences between their ruling families

**Q7.** The author's tone in describing the proposed pact is best characterized as:

- A) Openly enthusiastic and optimistic
- B) Measured and cautiously analytical
- C) Dismissive and skeptical
- D) Alarmed and urgent

**Q8.** The author's primary purpose in the passage is to:

- A) Argue that the pact will inevitably succeed
- B) Explain a diplomatic initiative and the conditions shaping it
- C) Criticize Saudi Arabia's foreign policy choices
- D) Predict the immediate collapse of negotiations

**Q9.** Based on the passage, what can be inferred about Iran's likely response to the proposed pact?

- A) Iran would reject any framework that excludes Israel
- B) Iran would likely welcome a pact that provides security guarantees
- C) Iran has demanded the pact be modeled on the Abraham Accords
- D) Iran would only accept terms negotiated by Russia

**Q10.** Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A) The reference to Iran's missile and drone attacks on Gulf states
- B) The Arab diplomat's statement that Iran 'is not going anywhere and this is why the Saudis are pushing it'
- C) The description of Gulf states' fears about US forces drawing down
- D) The mention of UAE criticism of Arab institutions

**My Score:** \_\_\_\_\_ / 10

## 5. Answer Key with Explanations

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**Q1.** The passage most directly argues that Saudi Arabia's proposed pact is best understood as:

**Answer: B**

The passage repeatedly frames the pact as a Helsinki-style mechanism – built not on trust but on guardrails between rivals. A is wrong (Trap A: wrong direction – the passage explicitly says Israel likely wouldn't be in it). SAT Tip: When a question asks for the 'central idea,' pick the answer that captures the passage's framing throughout, not a detail mentioned only once.

**Q2.** According to the passage, Gulf states are worried about which outcome of the US-Israeli war with Iran?

**Answer: C**

The passage states Gulf states fear being left with a 'wounded, more hawkish' Iran nearby as US forces draw down. D is the main distractor (Trap A: opposite direction – the passage says US presence is being scaled back, not expanded). SAT Tip: Watch for answer choices that flip a detail's direction – scaling back vs. expanding is a classic trap.

**Q3.** As used in the passage, the word 'hawkish' most nearly means:

**Answer: B**

In context, a 'hawkish Iran' or a 'hawkish UAE' refers to aggressive, militarily forward postures. A is the trap (Trap B: 'hawkish' literally evokes hawks watching prey, but that's not its political meaning here). SAT Tip: On vocab-in-context, substitute each option into the original sentence – only the right answer keeps the sentence's meaning intact.

**Q4.** As used in the passage, 'float' (as in 'Saudis float a pact') most nearly means:

**Answer: B**

To 'float' an idea means to test it out informally – exactly what the diplomats describe. D is tempting (Trap B: 'float' is used in finance to mean issuing shares, but that meaning doesn't fit a diplomatic context). SAT Tip: Many vocab questions use words that have multiple meanings; always anchor to the specific sentence, not the word's most common meaning.

**Q5.** Which inference about Israel can most reasonably be drawn from the passage?

**Answer: B**

The Arab diplomat explicitly says that 'after Iran,' Israel is seen as the biggest source of conflict – and many Arab states are uneasy about its conduct since October 7, 2023. C is the main trap (Trap C: it may be true in real life, but the passage never says Israel formally rejected anything). SAT Tip: On inference questions, eliminate answers that require facts the passage doesn't actually state, even if they sound plausible.

**Q6.** The passage suggests that disagreement between Saudi Arabia and the UAE stems primarily from:

**Answer: A**

The passage explicitly cites 'conflicting visions for the security and economic competition' between the two, with the UAE described as more hawkish. B is the trap (Trap C: oil quotas are a real source of UAE-Saudi friction, but the passage doesn't mention them). SAT Tip: Stick to what the passage actually says – your outside knowledge may be true but irrelevant to the question.

**Q7.** The author's tone in describing the proposed pact is best characterized as:

**Answer: B**

*The author lays out both the diplomatic logic and the obstacles (Israel's exclusion, UAE disagreement) without cheerleading or condemning. A is the main distractor (Trap A: while the pact is described as constructive, the author also flags real obstacles, so 'enthusiastic' overstates). SAT Tip: Look at how the author treats counterarguments – even-handed treatment usually signals a measured or analytical tone.*

**Q8.** The author's primary purpose in the passage is to:

**Answer: B**

*The passage informs readers about the proposal and the regional dynamics – war aftermath, Iran's retaliation, Arab unease with Israel – that make it possible. A is wrong (Trap A: the passage makes no such prediction). SAT Tip: Purpose questions reward the answer that fits the passage's overall function – usually 'explain,' 'analyze,' or 'describe,' rather than 'argue' or 'predict.'*

**Q9.** Based on the passage, what can be inferred about Iran's likely response to the proposed pact?

**Answer: B**

*The passage states the Arab diplomat believes Iran would welcome such a pact, and notes Iran has long sought assurances against attack so it can manage its own affairs. A is the main trap (Trap A: wrong direction – the diplomat suggests Iran is fine without Israel included). SAT Tip: For inference questions, choose the answer the passage most directly supports, not the one that sounds geopolitically sophisticated.*

**Q10.** Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

**Answer: B**

*This quote signals that the Saudis see Iran as a permanent player who would engage with such a framework – the strongest direct evidence for Iran's likely receptiveness. A is the trap (Trap B: it uses passage vocabulary but supports the opposite point – Iran's aggression, not its willingness to negotiate). SAT Tip: On evidence-pairing questions, first lock in your previous answer, then find the option that most directly states the same idea – don't get distracted by quotes that merely sound important.*