The Riyadh Summit's Diplomatic Dance and Middle Eastern Geopolitical Tensions

At the recent Riyadh Summit on 11 Nov 2023, a pivotal convention of Arab and Islamic nations, significant diplomatic rifts within the Middle East came to the forefront, particularly in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict. This high-profile meeting of the Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which includes 57 member countries, took a unanimous stance against Israel's actions, showcasing varied yet decisive regional perspectives led by countries such as Iran, Qatar, and the UAE.

A key highlight was Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi's historic visit to Saudi Arabia, where he advocated for stringent economic and political measures against Israel, including the proposal to label the Israeli army as a "terrorist organization." This move underscored Iran's staunch position and was a focal point of discussions. Despite Iran's aggressive stance, the summit's collective voice leaned towards a two-state solution, advocating for pre-1967 borders with Jerusalem as the capital. This position diverged notably from Iran's refusal to recognize Israel's existence, and Iranian proposals were conspicuously absent from the summit's final statement. This omission signifies a broader reluctance among Arab nations to endorse Iran's hardline approach completely.

In contrast, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's nod towards improving relations with Israel highlighted the region's varied diplomatic trajectories. This was further accentuated by Iran's continued support for Hamas, in sharp contrast to the more reconciliatory steps taken by nations like the UAE and Bahrain, signatories of the Abraham Accords. The summit collectively denounced Israeli claims of 'self-defense,' calling on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for a decisive resolution to halt Israel's actions in Gaza. However, the lack of consensus on more assertive measures mirrored the inherent complexities and diverging willingness within the Arab League and OIC to confront Israel head-on.

While the summit was a platform to deter further escalation, Iran's advocacy for extreme measures highlighted potential risks for increased regional tensions. Although the likelihood of regional conflict escalation remains relatively low, the potential impact of any such escalation cannot be understated.