

The conflict in the Middle East: Netanyahu's escape by running forward

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The regional armed conflict that began with the surprise attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023 has now been raging for ten months, with its scale continuing to grow. In addition to the Gaza Strip, where the retaliatory Israeli invasion is ongoing, the conflict has spread to the West Bank and, to varying degrees, to Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iran. Besides Israel and Hamas, the main actors include Iran and its allies (notably the Lebanese-based Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthi movement) on one side and the United States on the other. The Arab states, for their part, have stayed out of this conflict as they seek to minimise its impact on their own security and internal order.

Hamas's attack triggered the current phase of the conflict, and it was the axis of pro-Iranian forces that expanded it geographically, particularly by shelling Israeli territory in 'solidarity' with Hamas and the Palestinian people. However, Israel's actions now carry the greater risk of sparking a regional war, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appears uninterested in de-escalating the situation. Indeed, the necessary precondition for this – a ceasefire in Gaza – has been met with refusal by the Israeli leader, despite Hezbollah's announcement that it would halt its shelling if a ceasefire were declared.

The conflict's dynamics and state of play

Over the past few months, the Israeli government has taken numerous escalatory steps, both in vertical terms (the intensity of its attacks and the prominence of its targets) and horizontal terms (the geographical extent of its strikes). These include the bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus last April and the killing of Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas's political wing, in Tehran on 31 July. Both attacks can be seen as symbolic, though not strategic, successes for Israel, but also as a public challenge to Iran, fully aware of the risk that it could retaliate. Moreover, at least according to official reports, these steps were not coordinated with the US.

Israel has also dictated the dynamics of its exchange of fire with Hezbollah. According to the BBC, it accounted for around 83% of the nearly 7,500 strikes the two sides launched between October 2023 and June 2024. Israel has struck more frequently, deep into Lebanese territory, and has hit targets of greater importance; for example, on several occasions, it has launched missiles on Beirut, killing high-ranking members of Hezbollah and other organisations.

Meanwhile, its invasion of Gaza, which has so far killed at least 40,000 Palestinian civilians and combatants, wounded more than 90,000, and left more than 10,000 missing, has

dragged on for ten months without any clearly defined and realistic political objectives.

According to a CNN report from 5 August, even though Palestine has suffered enormous human and material losses, only three of Hamas's 24 battalions have been completely destroyed, 13 have been severely weakened, while eight have retained their combat readiness. The militant group is also capable of at least partially restoring its lost capabilities. This suggests that Netanyahu's stated goal of "completely destroying Hamas" is still far from being achieved. Additionally, 115 Israeli hostages (dead or alive) are still being held in Gaza.

In Israel, there is increasing criticism that the Prime Minister is actively obstructing efforts to secure the release of the hostages. Indeed, this would require a ceasefire, something Netanyahu appears unwilling to consider. Such views have been expressed both by his political opponents who have taken part in mass street protests, and, according to media reports, by senior figures in the security establishment, including the Chief of General Staff and the heads of the secret services.

The objectives and consequences of Netanyahu's policy

The policy of escalating the regional conflict and delaying a ceasefire in Gaza that Netanyahu has pursued probably stems from a complex calculation. Under his leadership, Israel is not seeking a full-scale regional war; indeed, it is neither militarily nor politically prepared for such a conflict. However, the drawn-out armed conflict – especially the spectacular successes such as the elimination of prominent members of Hamas and Hezbollah – pushes the moment of domestic political reckoning further away, while giving Netanyahu hope that he can regain some of the popular support he lost after 7 October. This, in turn, is essential for his political survival, particularly in light of the ongoing criminal trials against him and his responsibility for failing to prepare the country for the Hamas attack.

In addition, the conflict's escalation and, above all, Iran's direct involvement in it have forced the United States to become militarily engaged. For several decades, Netanyahu and the Israeli right wing have sought to convince Washington that it is necessary to strike Iran and overthrow the ayatollahs' regime by force. Even if a large-scale US attack against Iran seems extremely unlikely at present, the very fact of the ongoing redeployment of significant US military assets to the Middle East has improved Israel's position. Meanwhile, the current situation in the US (Joe Biden's weakened presidency and the ongoing election campaign, where candidates must present themselves as reliable allies of the Jewish state) has created fertile ground for influencing Washington's policy in the direction desired by the Israeli prime minister.

Furthermore, any direct Iranian attack on Israel (such as that on 14 April, which was carried out in response to the bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus) would distract the Western public from the situation in Gaza and compel Western countries to commit to Israel's defence while having limited ability to influence its policy. Consequently, Israel has retained its freedom of manoeuvre regarding offensive operations (for example, it is now signalling that it could launch a 'pre-emptive strike' in anticipation of Iranian retaliation for the assassination of Haniyeh) while being confident that it will not have to bear the full burden of its defence alone.

Finally, the state of 'perpetual war' without clearly defined political objectives or parameters for achieving them, offers political advantages for the Israeli leader. In such a situation, the definition of 'victory' becomes arbitrary and dependent on immediate political urgency.

Netanyahu's policy of constantly 'escaping by running forward' and managing multiple crises simultaneously has yielded short-term political benefits for him, but it has also exacerbated internal social polarisation and increased external threats. Additionally, it has produced negative consequences for US allies in other parts of the world, as recurring escalations of the conflict in the Middle East have prompted the US to redirect its military assets from other areas, such as the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe.