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On the brink of a major regional war

Hamas' violent attack has taken Israel by surprise. And it has raised concerns about the potential for an unprecedented escalation in the Middle East

Just when no one expected it anymore, Hamas catapulted the Israeli-Palestinian conflict back into the centre of world attention in the most brutal way possible. While the logic of confrontation was beginning to prevail globally, the notoriously unstable Middle East, of all places, recently developed into an oasis of major diplomatic offensives. But all that is over now. In the end, the great fraternisation, the rapprochements and normalisations everywhere, turned out to be just a 'calm before the storm'. Beyond the honeymoon enjoyed by the rulers, hardly anything has been resolved in the Middle East. There is a certain irony in the fact that the Middle East conflict, this primal conflict in the region that has been so marginalised in recent times, has destroyed the superficial harmony.

The fog of the unfolding events has not yet completely lifted. But one thing already seems clear: on 7 October, Israel experienced a disaster that can be compared to Pearl Harbor or 9/11, not only in its strategic but also psychological consequences. Even without using the now hackneyed term '*Zeitenwende*', it is clear that nothing will ever be the same again.

A large-scale attack with far-reaching implications

Almost 50 years to the day after the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War, Israel was once again hit hard by a surprise attack. But this time, instead of the Egyptian and Syrian armies, it was the radical Islamist Hamas, the de facto ruler of the sealed-off Gaza Strip and classified as a terrorist organisation in many parts of the world, that invaded southern Israel. It was a surprise attack of unprecedented nature. At times, militant fighters controlled entire villages and towns in the south of the country — a nightmare scenario that no one in Israel would have thought possible beyond Netflix series and horror films. The Jewish state has so far suffered over 1,200 deaths and an unknown but probably low three-digit

number of kidnapped and abducted persons. These include military and security forces, but the vast majority are civilians, with many women and children among them. The terrorist organisation has acted with inhumane brutality, which, at least in the eyes of the Western public, is likely to further erode the already dwindling sympathy for the cause of the oppressed Palestinians, who are scarred by the ongoing Israeli occupation.

It is a disaster, especially for the usually well-informed Israeli secret service, which did not foresee a major offensive of this kind that had been planned for months. Not only were they completely in the dark with regard to the plans, but they obviously did not think anything like this was politically possible. The belief that Hamas would adhere to certain rules of the game within the framework of controlled hostilities and shy away from a full-scale war was probably too strong. The fact that it did not do so could also mean that Israel no longer feels bound by anything. As a result, both parties are entering new territory in the nature of the dispute — and it is precisely this that exponentially increases the risk of a major escalation, a war possibly beyond Gaza.

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This spree of violence is a particular defeat for Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's on-and-off long-term prime minister, who now has to play warlord in the midst of his country's biggest domestic political dispute. As much as this at least temporarily fills in the deep social rifts, as the country unites in the face of external danger, it is still a failure for the 'Netanyahu' vision of being able to manage the conflict. His promise was to reduce the 'Palestinian issue' to a barely perceptible background noise in the minds of most Israelis. The solution to the conflict was no longer the unpopular two-state solution, to which his right-wing nationalist government had even stopped paying lip service. Rather, it was to be the perpetuation of the status quo of occupation and oppression of the Palestinians, which both the Israeli and the world's leading human rights organisations describe with the term so disliked in Germany, 'apartheid'.

In Netanyahu's logic, the marginalisation of the 'Palestine question' was to go hand in hand internationally with a normalisation of relations with the Arab rulers and potentates, which began with the Abraham Accords and was supposed to culminate in the major deal with Saudi Arabia that

has just been negotiated. This has now become a distant prospect, not only because the Palestinians clearly do not want to be 'managed', but also because the presumably ugly images that the announced ground offensive will produce in Gaza in the coming days are likely to severely limit the manoeuvrability of even the all-powerful Saudi Crown Prince. Unlike their rulers, solidarity with Palestine remains alive among the Arab peoples. Only two per cent of young Saudis support normalisation with Israel.

What comes next?

So what options does Israel have? The illusion of a managed conflict has been shattered, but given the composition of the predominantly ultra-right government and the hegemonic political conditions in the country, this in no way means a return to a negotiated solution. On the contrary, the prime minister's first announcements show that Israel, too, is relying on a revision of the rules of the game. The aim of the ground offensive is to destroy Hamas as a relevant political-military organisation. The coexistence that de facto has been in place since 2007 is thus to come to an end. This could also mean a reinstatement of direct occupation in the Gaza Strip. Both are associated with considerable risks. The international outrage, which is almost unanimous (especially in the West) can, however, be used to take a much more robust approach. The terrorist organisation's brutal slaughter of civilians reminds observers of the inhumanity of the Islamic State.

Advancing with hundreds of thousands of soldiers and the most modern military equipment into an extremely densely populated urban area held by a highly motivated organisation that knows every stick and stone there, and for its part is fighting to the death, could turn out to be a military disaster, despite the conventional superiority of the Israeli armed forces. The Gaza Strip is smaller than historic East Berlin, but with two and a half million people – almost half of whom are minors – it has twice the population. Netanyahu's call for them to flee is cynical in view of the fact that there are no options for escape, and Israel is unlikely to grant any escape corridors into its own territory to a population that is deeply hostile to it. A humanitarian catastrophe is inevitable.

The Palestinians are at an impasse and are in danger of being marginalised once and for all, in view of the impending normalisation

The rules of the game are also being redefined for Israel. Netanyahu's radical right-wing coalition partners have long dreamed of a Greater Israel without Arabs. Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich wants to 'encourage' the Palestinians to leave the occupied territories — ultimately a demographic-ethnic change in

with Arab superpower Saudi Arabia.

conditions that has so far been brought about by gentle pressure. A political window may now be opening to pursue this with greater vigour. Defence Minister Yoav Gallant announced a total blockade of the Gaza Strip ('no electricity, no water, no food, no petrol') and spoke of the fight against 'human animals'.

A mass panic among the population trapped in Gaza could lead to an exodus to Egypt, provided that the Nile state itself opens its highly fortified border to the Sinai — which seems unlikely at present. Both Cairo and the refugees should bear in mind that it will no longer be an option to return to a Gaza Strip that is under direct Israeli occupation. Such a solution may seem extreme, but less than two weeks ago, Azerbaijani leader Ilham Aliyev proved in Nagorno-Karabakh that such a thing can still be achieved in the 21st century.

Hamas' calculation, however, is different. One cannot assume that the organisation will be surprised by the coming ground offensive. It may be counting on being able to inflict heavy losses on Israel in urban warfare, at least until support arrives from elsewhere. The situation in the West Bank is more explosive than it has been in years, given the anguish of the Palestinian Authority, the coming struggle for the succession of Mahmoud Abbas and the increasing escalation of violence by settlers supported by the Israeli government. At the same time, there is no prospect of improvement politically. The Palestinians are at an impasse and are in danger of being marginalised once and for all, in view of the impending normalisation with Arab superpower Saudi Arabia. Violence appears to be the last viable option. From Hamas' perspective, the longer the fight in Gaza lasts, the greater the hope that order will completely collapse in the West Bank as well, possibly leading to a complete uprising of the Palestinian people, as was the case in the riots of 2021, even in Israel proper.

A possible involvement of Hezbollah?

But the situation is also highly explosive regionally. In the worst-case scenario, Israel faces a war on several fronts. There is currently much speculation about how much Iran, as the dominant power in the 'Axis of Resistance' that also includes Hamas, was privy to the planning. The need for secrecy, in order to maintain the element of surprise, argues against such close coordination. Hamas has always acted independently, and despite the current support from Tehran, there have been and are many ups and downs in relations between the Islamic Republic and the Palestinian terrorist organisation.

Wouldn't coordinated planning – analogous to the Yom Kippur War – have made a simultaneous strike by Hezbollah on the northern front likely? Hezbollah, however, is highly armed but, in the view of many observers, not yet ready for the big war when taking into account the wounds caused by its operations in Syria. However, the possible entry into the war by the Lebanese militia is currently the very central element that would turn a territorially limited Gaza conflict into a regional conflagration.

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The Shiite 'Party of God' is not yet ready to unduly escalate on Israel's northern border. The Israelis, of course, are preparing for a two-front war and are rapidly moving troops and equipment to the Galilee. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah may not yet have made a final decision. However, once the ground offensive in Gaza begins, the pressure to provide Islamist solidarity to the 'brethren' in Palestine will increase exponentially.

Should the de facto destruction of Hamas as a military-political factor actually become apparent, this could once again influence the calculations in southern Beirut. This would be tantamount to a significant deterioration in the overall strategic situation and would then make further waiting for the 'desired final battle' with Israel appear disadvantageous. Hezbollah, however, is militarily of a completely different calibre than Hamas. The organisation has over ten times as many rockets at its disposal, many of them state-of-the-art, than it had in its last military encounter with Israel in 2006, which ended in a draw. This is an extremely threatening scenario, not least in view of the fact that, at times, the much-vaunted Iron Dome seemed to have reached its absolute limit in the face of Hamas' rockets.

Moreover, if Israel decides to use ground troops against the enemy in the north, as it has now announced in the case of Hamas, there is a risk that the war will ultimately expand to include Iran. The Islamic Republic would most likely not stand by and see its most valuable asset wiped out. An invasion of Lebanon (itself a political powder keg with almost two million refugees already) and an expansion of the conflict to Syria (the country in which numerous Iranian and pro-Iranian militias operate), which could then open a third front across the Golan, would bring the situation ever closer to the horror scenario of a Middle Eastern conflagration with global repercussions.

How should the West react?

The West should do everything in its power to limit the conflict territorially. This means exerting a moderating influence on Israel so that it does not overreact in a state of psychological shock. The purpose would not only be to avert the impending humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, where a population of millions would get caught between the fronts with no possibility of escape; it would also be to prevent Israel itself from overestimating its own strength, which in a multi-front war threatens the simultaneous outbreak of civil war-like conditions in the West Bank and in Israel proper. This will not be easy in view of factions within the politically dominant, openly right-wing radical forces in Israel, which may be seeking exactly the opposite of de-escalation.

The current escalation is also a reminder that there is no way around a political solution to the Middle East conflict.

Egypt and Qatar need to be involved in order to influence the rampaging Hamas in some way, not only with regard to the release of hostages, but also to possibly offer them exile in the face of its death throes. Above all, the American side should make it clear to the Islamic Republic of Iran that the West is not interested in the outbreak of a major regional war. At the same time, however, the necessary deterrence in the form of war support for Israel must be increased, as has already occurred with the deployment of a US aircraft carrier battle group, in order to make it clear to the Iranian regime what costs it would have to bear. Whether the wiser forces and not the risk-taking gamblers will prevail in Tehran is, of course, another matter. At the very least, however, there should be no miscalculation on Israel's northern border, which could lead to a war that nobody really wants.

A conflagration in the Middle East would be devastating for global stability. Above all, it would be a gift to Russia, which would be given breathing space in Ukraine thanks to distracting the West. While Moscow is not to be expected to explicitly side with an Iran-Hamas alliance, the chaos that would break out would suit the Kremlin.

Ultimately, the current escalation is also a reminder that there is no way around a political solution to the Middle East conflict. It was a fool's errand to believe that sustainable stability in the region could be achieved by ignoring the Palestinian issue. This is precisely the sort of political

hopelessness that provides fertile ground for extremists. This situation should give pause to those who will soon be negotiating the major normalisation between Saudi Arabia and Israel.



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