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Signs of a storm

Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Syria takes the risk of further escalation to a new level. Can a regional conflagration still be averted?

Almost six months after the outbreak of war in Gaza, an end to the conflict seems more distant than ever. Developments in the region look increasingly ominous. Israel's attack on the Iranian embassy in Damascus – a breach of diplomatic conventions – takes the wider escalation to a new level and practically demands retaliation. Can a regional conflagration with all the unpredictable consequences it would entail still be averted?

Depending on your take, it's either a glass-half-full or a glass-half-empty situation. In the glass-half-full take, the US has used its position as the dominant power to ensure the live conflict between Israel and the radical Islamic Hamas organisation is confined to Gaza. Despite significant public pressure and a ratcheting-up of rhetoric, the Israeli-Arab peace agreements remain intact. There is closer dialogue between Washington and Tehran than there has been for years, with both sides asserting their wish to avoid a large-scale war in the region. Even Saudi Arabia, Iran's long-standing rival for hegemony in the Middle East, is doing whatever it can to apply pressure within the Bermuda triangle of Tehran, Tel Aviv and Washington and thus ensure Gaza doesn't tip the entire region over the edge. Qatar and Egypt are mediating between Israel and Hamas. No one wants a regional war, it would seem. And yet, the prospect looms ever larger.

The pessimistic view is of a slow-motion escalation that will inevitably see the conflict zone expanding. It regards American shuttle diplomacy as having achieved little. Hostilities along the demarcation line between Israel and Lebanon have long since turned into a de facto war. The number of Hezbollah fighters killed is now higher than it was during the Lebanon war of 2006. The Iranian-allied Houthi militia has effectively made the Red Sea a no-go area for Western commercial shipping, and the US-led military coalition has so far done little to change that situation. Tehran's strategy is to increase pressure on the US and Israel across the region for as long as hostilities rage in Gaza, while simultaneously

avoiding any major escalation. Playing with fire while preventing conflagration — this Iranian high-wire act seems to have now run its course.

Risks of regional conflagration

With the assassination of Mohammed Reza Zahedi, the highest-ranking Iranian commander to have been eliminated since the killing of Qasem Soleimani, Israel is now forcing Iran to show its hand. A breach of the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations, the attack on the Damascus embassy significantly raises tensions and challenges Tehran's credibility in the eyes of its own Islamic allies. Hardliners within Iran are also urging retribution. Reinstating what Tehran would call its deterrence capabilitywould, however, directly increase the risk of war in the Lebanese-Syrian-Israeli border region. For now, Hezbollah is keeping its powder dry, taking losses and practising strategic self-restraint despite repeated bombings. The question is: how long will this last?

Israel, on the other hand, while not actively seeking to provoke war, seems at least to be willing to risk its outbreak. Such a war, though, would be even more of a kamikaze mission with unpredictable consequences than that in Gaza. The Gaza conflict is already Israel's longest-lasting war. And yet, six months on, it still hasn't achieved its objective — i.e. the defeat of Hamas and the elimination of its military capabilities. Given the recent fighting around the al-Shifa hospital in Gaza City, it's doubtful whether this goal can even be attained via Israel's advertised Rafah offensive, which its closest allies have already condemned in advance. Evidently, Hamas is still able to operate in all areas of Gaza.

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In Lebanon, a similar disaster could be on the cards if Israel embarks upon a military escapade that's not underpinned by realistic political objectives. As US Defence Minister Lloyd Austin correctly remarked, military victories can turn into strategic defeats. In Israel's case, it's fair to ask whether that hasn't already happened. The manner in which it is prosecuting the war in Gaza, the images of utter destruction, the high number of civilian victims and the hard-to-refute accusation that two million people in Gaza are being deliberately starved – EU High Representative Josep Borrell has called it using 'starvation as a weapon of war' – means the country is on the verge of becoming an international pariah.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's declared aim was to push the Palestinian question to the foreign policy margins and normalise relations with the Arab world, even in the face of ongoing occupation and suppression, but the war in Gaza has completely scuppered that strategy. For the Global South in particular, this issue has become a focal point of postcolonial identity. In addition, the war has allowed various actors to accuse the West of double standards and hypocrisy.

At odds with reality

This also raises questions about the fundamental relationships between Israel and its closest Western allies, namely the United States and Germany. While the hegemonic powers in Israel seem, given global majority opinion, to be following the logic that having many enemies is a badge of honour, Washington and Berlin should, in fact, be concerned at how their almost total support of Israel is damaging their own standing in the world — and not just because rash moves such as the Damascus embassy bombing are dragging the US and its military ever deeper into a spiral of escalation, something they have no desire to see but which their supposed client state is pursuing with increasing vigour.

The German foreign minister may parade the oft-repeated two-state solution like a monstrance, but this is at odds with reality. There will be no two-state solution as long as the now dominant forces in Israel continue to have the upper hand. Since 7 October, opposition to such a solution has hardened even further — and every day the chances of its realisation are further and more fundamentally undermined. Perhaps even more delusional is the Biden administration's belief that a kind of mega-deal with the Saudi crown prince can help to break the Gordian knot. Why the latter, the de facto leader of the Islamic world, would now come down on Israel's side only Washington knows; just as only it can say why Israel, which seems indifferent to global majority opinion, should hand the Saudis of all people the clamoured-for two-state solution on a silver platter?

Ultimately, there's no getting around the fact that Washington and Berlin's almost unconditional support of Israel runs counter to both its own foreign policy interests and to their commitment to a rules-based world order. By inventing what it called a non-binding security council resolution, the US even made itself an international laughing stock. Is this a portent of a future "non-binding" rules-based world order? Either way, it certainly invites every autocrat around the globe to show further disdain for international organisations. The creation of air and sea corridors to supply aid to starving Palestinian civilians, meanwhile, is

essentially an admission of the West's failure.

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After all, Israel is not some out-of-control rogue state, but an allied democracy. For such a state to be repeatedly called to order by the International Criminal Court, where Israel is accused of genocide, should be beyond the pale. The British government's refusal to publish advice on international law from its own legal experts so as to avoid suspending military support for Israel illustrates just how far Western governments are having to go to get around their own rules.

Tel Aviv's biggest military backers and closest political allies, Washington and Berlin, are both failing to use the available tools in order to increase pressure on Israel. The rhetorical distancing that has been taking place in recent weeks can't hide the fact that, behind the scenes, military support continues unabated. This strategy risks directly contributing to the conflict's escalation and further isolating leading Western nations on the world stage. Moreover, the suffering in Gaza is now politicising an entire generation, especially in Muslim countries. The West is losing the battle for hearts and minds, particularly among progressively minded alliance partners, while Islamism, which had been on the wane, is being revitalised by the instagramisation of terrorist organisations such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis.

For an actor like Iran, so intent on destabilising the region, the unresolved Palestine question provides a first-class opportunity for cosying up to the Arab world. While domestically it subjects its own population to harassment, internationally it can present itself as an opponent of Israeli repression. Images of Gazan suffering also benefit Vladimir Putin, however — not just because they make his own crimes in Ukraine seem milder by comparison but also because the fatal damage being done to the rules-based world order in Gaza undermines the international justification for defending Ukraine. The West needs to ask itself whether it's prepared to risk its own reputation for the sake of an Israeli government that panders to extremist settlers. The governments in Washington and Berlin, otherwise so value-driven, are almost systematically misjudging the political nature of this Israeli government, which is waging war not just on the Hamas terrorist organisation but also and at least as importantly on Palestinian self-determination.

Its latest escalatory moves should act as a wake-up call, one that needs to be heeded before it's too late. That questions of war and peace should

depend on whether or not Iran now overreacts is an unacceptable state of affairs. The first step on the journey towards any fragile peace is the agreement of a ceasefire in Gaza, as demanded by the UN Security Council. This would not only enable aid to get through to a civilian population that's starving before the world's very eyes, but also allow a serious political process to get underway. It's not enough just to pay lip service. The power to steer such a course lies with Washington, but also with Brussels and Berlin. Those who refuse to use it are complicit in Gaza's suffering.



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