Total escalation

Israel's attack on Nasrallah has dealt a heavy blow to Hezbollah and its allies. Lebanon now faces the threat of another major war

'There are decades where nothing happens, and there are weeks where decades happen.' Although it's unlikely that Lenin ever uttered this *bon mot*, generally attributed to him, it's hard to imagine anything that better encapsulates what has been happening in the Middle East over the past week and a half. Israel's literal decapitation of Hezbollah in the person of its leader Hassan Nasrallah has catapulted the region into its third Lebanon war after 1982 and 2006. The US containment strategy has thus failed. Although it's unclear whether this is the prelude to an even more uncontainable regional conflagration, it is clear that Israel has completely changed the dynamics of regional confrontation in recent weeks.

The Economist rightly talks of an echo of 1967. Once again, Israel has been able to deliver a knockout blow to its enemies through ruthless and daredevil acts. The Lebanese Hezbollah were Israel's most dangerous security policy challenge. It was the key element of Iran's forward defence strategy. In just a few days, Israel has eliminated almost the entire political and military leadership of the organisation, and through its far-reaching intelligence and military penetration of the enemy, sown paranoia among its supporters and fighters. The conflict, which has now escalated into war, represents a humiliation for Hezbollah, also because it renders null and void the party's central pledge to be the protective power of the already badly beset Cedar Republic against the Zionist arch-enemy.

The Six-Day War comparison is also apt because, until very recently, observers had assumed that there was a balance of terror on Israel's northern front. This proved to be a fantasy. The supposedly so powerful Shiite militia collapsed like a *soufflé*, just like another proud Arab leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, before it. Like Nasser, Nasrallah had the ear of the Arab world right to the end. The martial rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the abject military failure.

Costly hesitation

The up to 200 000 missiles and projectiles that the organisation has at its disposal, alongside its 40 000 or so men in arms, should drive the cost of the war for Israel prohibitively high. There is little trace of that. Hezbollah has systematically undermined its own deterrence, having largely failed to respond to continuing Israeli aggressions. It may have been the fear of total escalation that withheld Nasrallah's hand. The strategy since 8 October, when hostilities began on the northern front, was to turn the heat up, but not to let the situation ignite.

Total escalation is now upon us. The Shiite leader paid for his hesitation – disguised as a stratagem – with his life. It is not clear what remains of a once extensive arsenal. Are what are reputed to be 10 000 precision guided missiles with 500 kilo warheads still operational? Or have the Israeli air force's pre-emptive strikes already largely eliminated them? And who could give the order to launch them, now that the chain of command has been disrupted and hundreds of commanders have been killed? Although Israel's civil population could be severely affected and thousands of casualties may be assumed, it's highly unlikely that such an operation could turn the tide.

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The total rout of Hezbollah also changes the regional dimension of the conflict. Until not so long ago, the Iran-led 'axis of resistance' could flex its muscles. Along with its disparate network of autonomous members, Tehran imagined it was on the strategic path to victory. The Houthis in Yemen had closed the Red Sea to commercial maritime traffic; in Gaza, Hamas had long put up bitter resistance to Israeli superiority; and in Israel's north, Hezbollah had effectively been able to establish a buffer zone in the land of its enemy. Nasrallah's death and Hamas' evident agony now reveal the limits of military effectiveness. Is it possible that the axis had become intoxicated by all the talk about a coordinated united front against the Israeli enemy? It has had little to offer against a highly armed, technologically far superior Israel, whose conduct of the war has furthermore been utterly ruthless.

Generally speaking, over the past few days, Israel has restored what it lost on 7 October: the myth of its own invincibility and its status as the

absolutely superior technological-military-intelligence superpower in every respect against which its opponents seem nothing more than upstarts, doomed to be picked off one by one. Iran, in particular, now faces an extremely unpleasant dilemma. The Islamic Republic fears a big regional war like the devil fears holy water. Such a conflict would put the regime's very survival at stake. There is great paranoia in Iran that Israel has penetrated Tehran as deeply as Hezbollah. Tehran cannot stand by and watch Hezbollah, its longest-standing, most loyal and actually militarily most capable ally, being destroyed.

Not only for strategic reasons but because the Shiite militia was actually the centrepiece of Iran's forward defence strategy. Its missiles aimed at Israel were the survival insurance of Iran's nuclear programme. They were supposed to prevent the Zionist or US arch-enemy from attacking Iran itself. Hezbollah's weakening now endangers Iran's own security. At the same time, it reinforces the military logic behind the nuclear programme — a dynamic that, in turn, may have a strong exacerbatory effect on the conflict.

An ideological dilemma

But the almost irresolvable dilemma that Iran faces is not only strategic. The axis is primarily an ideological project. Permitting the demise of its most important ally, an organisation that has often acted as Tehran's military and diplomatic intermediary with other militias, would amount to a loss of face that would endanger the network's very existence. The loss of Nasrallah is most painful in this respect. His significance for the axis cannot be underestimated. The Shiite leader was an almost mythic figure. Thousands of people in Lebanon physically collapsed when Hezbollah officially announced his death. A single wail could be heard over the rooftops of Dahiye, the suburb in the south of Beirut. Similar scenes have been reported from Iraq, the second Arab Shiite stronghold. Awe and adoration, but also terror and hatred were the emotions evoked by the man whose name means 'victory of God', who led Hezbollah with an iron hand for over three decades.

The far less charismatic Iranian revolutionary leader Ali Khamenei, as risk-averse as he is, will probably try to wriggle out of the irresolvable dilemma via a kind of middle way. Tehran's preference is likely to be to force an initially triumphant Israel into a war of attrition in Lebanon. Indeed, Israel is currently trying to seize control of the airport and the border with Syria. This indicates that a more protracted operation is envisaged. The risk of a conflagration thus cannot be ruled out, even though all the great and regional powers have no interest in that at all.

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This development is catastrophic for Lebanon. There have been over a thousand deaths in only a week of war. That still doesn't include the possibly hundreds of victims of the strike on Hezbollah's alleged headquarters in a busy part of the city. The bomb blast was so powerful that people's bodies were literally pulverised. According to the government, the massive Israeli bombardment, in particular in areas with a large proportion of Shiites in the south and east of the country, has already given rise to a million internally displaced persons. In Beirut, the refugees are sleeping under the open sky. Also affected are the over one million Syrian refugees who have had to flee for their lives a second time.

The great fear is that the Israeli military machine will do the same to Lebanon as it has done to Gaza. The post-apocalyptic landscape there is warning enough. IDF animation films that purportedly show cruise missiles hidden in private houses are intended to give Israel justification for smashing any civilian infrastructure it wants into smithereens. Calls for evacuation are being made not just for individual villages and city neighbourhoods but for whole regions of the country. The aim is quite clearly the collective punishment of the entire Shiite population. A number of Israeli politicians have been issuing calls to bomb Lebanon 'back to the Stone Age' for months.

It is highly questionable whether this brute force strategy will succeed over the medium term. Besides the many civilian victims, it can only stir up hatred and violence, and indeed for decades to come. In Israel, military power goes hand in hand with political hybris. And others are left to pay the price. A country that has reproached large parts of the world for failing to value the civilian victims of 7 October sufficiently has shown astonishing contempt for civilian victims on the other side. And let it not be forgotten that war was not inevitable. Israel was not compelled to pursue this course. Nasrallah's call for an end to military hostilities involved a ceasefire in Gaza, where the stricken Hamas scarcely poses a military threat any more. This demand from the since assassinated Hezbollah leader has been echoed by the UN General Assembly, the Security Council, the German government and, at least rhetorically, the United States. The humanitarian apocalypse in Gaza is not enough to offer the Palestinian people, who are crying out for it, the prospect of survival. Now the next war is getting out of hand.

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Now that a ground offensive has followed, no end to the war is in sight. It wouldn't be the first time that Israel has become enmired in Lebanon. But unlike Gaza, Lebanon is no enclave. Its hinterland stretches all the way to Iran. Although Hezbollah is without a head in every sense, the organisation is sufficiently embedded and ideologically robust to return to the fight. Especially when it's going on in its own country. A physical front with the arch-enemy is likely to turn Lebanon into a Mecca for global jihadists. It scarcely bears imagining what would remain of the country after such a confrontation.

Last but not least, this war is also an American failure. The global power's goal was to avoid escalation beyond Gaza. For months now, President Biden and his Secretary of State have been trying to bring about a ceasefire. It is breathtaking to witness how the Israeli prime minister time and again has humiliated the ageing president before the eyes of the world. No one should be under any illusion. It is American weapons, American munitions and American diplomatic backing that have enabled Israel to take the war to Lebanon. But politically, the balance of power is reversed.



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