



Israel's Conundrum and America's War in the Middle East

Description

Ioannis Tirkides

The Middle East is currently embroiled in a complex and potentially explosive situation that could spiral out of control. Iran's retaliatory strike against Israel on October 1 marked a turning point on the escalation ladder. The attacks came with little forewarning and, more importantly, they penetrated Israel's air defences. The implications are profound, and the calculus of the war has now changed. It is no longer just a war between Israel and the Palestinians and their militant branches, or a war with Hezbollah. It has become a broader clash involving the strategic interests of the United States, foreshadowing a volatile and potentially protracted confrontation that may draw in other great powers. In this article, we discuss the various and complex aspects of the conflict in the Middle East and conclude that the world is on a dangerous path to peak escalation and wider war unless steps are taken to prevent further escalation and stabilize the region, something local actors cannot do on their own.

The changing calculus of war

War is a risky business, and countries decide to go to war based on their perceived national and security imperatives. But crises and miscalculations can escalate tensions and lead to war even when it is not the most rational choice. The current circumstance of war in the Middle East is a combination of conflicting national imperatives and greatpower competition, as we will discuss.

The calculus of this war is changing. What the attacks on Israel have shown is the significant advanced military capabilities that Iran has, particularly in missile technology, against which Israel's air defences, and by extension, the West's, are relatively ineffective. And so, this marks a shift in the military balance in the region. If Iran has the ability to launch precise, high-impact strikes from a distance, the stakes for Israeli and American interests are much higher than originally thought.

We are now at a critical moment on the escalation ladder, awaiting Israel's response, which is likely to include massive U.S. support. Iran will then retaliate, leading to another Israeli response in a never-ending sequence of all-out war. But an attack on Iran with the support of the United States can potentially bring in the Russians and possibly the Chinese. And so, the conflict can potentially transform from local to regional and possibly global.

Israel's conundrum

The concept of Greater Israel can vary according to historical, religious, and political contexts, but it roughly describes a region that, in biblical interpretation, includes modern Israel, Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and even areas beyond.

In a very real sense, then, the pursuit of a Greater Israel presents a scenario in which ethnic cleansing becomes a potential strategy. This is Israel's conundrum. A Greater Israel with the Palestinians in it, as numerous as they are compared to the Jewish population, will be an apartheid state. And if it is to be a Jewish state, it will be without them. The absence of the compromises that a two-state solution would entail suggests a grim future of perpetual instability and violence in the region.

A difficult predicament in Lebanon

Israel also faces a difficult predicament in Lebanon. A decapitation strategy, such as killing the Hezbollah high command and its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, may be a temporary success, but it is not a long-term strategy. The underlying political and social dynamics that sustain Hezbollah have not changed. Removing a leader does not necessarily change

the organization's ideology or diminish its popular support, and it can ultimately backfire. Historical examples abound where assassinated leaders are in most cases replaced by more radical successors, leading to more instability, not less.

A ground invasion of Lebanon will be a very risky endeavour, even with the full backing of the United States. Hezbollah remains a competent fighting force, as demonstrated by its recent attacks on Israel. It is much larger than Hamas, with more and more battle-hardened fighters, and Lebanon is more difficult terrain than Gaza. So, ground incursions greatly increase the risk of casualties. A ground invasion of Lebanon didn't work very well the last time, in 2006, and there's no guarantee that a rematch this time would be any different.

The Iranian Knot

Surely the most dangerous part of the conflict is with Iran, and here we are on the verge of a major escalation. Israel's goals in this conflict are perhaps best expressed by Naftali Bennet, a former prime minister of Israel, when he posted a call to action on his X account the morning after the Iranian missile attack. Emphasizing that Israel faced a "historic opportunity" to decisively change the strategic balance in the Middle East, Mr. Bennett urged Israel to act immediately "... to destroy Iran's nuclear program, its central energy facilities, and to cripple this terrorist regime." He framed this moment as the greatest opportunity Israel has had in 50 years to reshape the region by dealing a critical blow to Iran's capabilities.

Defeating and damaging an enemy, in this case Iran, and bringing about regime change sounds like a familiar American strategy in the Middle East and elsewhere, but one that hasn't worked very well in most cases. The result in most cases is instability, prolonged conflict, and humanitarian disasters.

The tail and the dog

The United States is usually portrayed as being driven by Israeli priorities in the Middle East, not its own. Israel is arguably "the tail that wags the dog," as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt argue in their 2007 book, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*. By lobbying Congress and influencing public opinion, they make it politically difficult for the U.S. to oppose Israeli policies, even against its own strategic national interests. In the current situation, the US fully supports Israel in its military operations in Gaza and now in Lebanon, and apparently against Iran as well.

In contrast, others such as Noam Chomsky argue that U.S. support for Israel serves the broader strategic interests of the United States in the Middle East and is driven by geopolitical imperatives such as maintaining regional stability and access to oil.

The geopolitical and geoeconomic importance of the Middle East is undeniable, especially in the context of the rivalry between the United States on the one hand and Russia and China on the other. The region holds over 50% of the world's proven oil reserves and a significant portion of its natural gas reserves. Strategically located at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Middle East offers access to critical global maritime trade routes, including the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea. These chokepoints are vital to global shipping, trade, and military operations, which is why the United States maintains a large presence in the region with 12 major military bases and many other smaller installations.

Without denying the power of the Jewish lobby, we find it unconvincing that the United States would enter a prolonged Middle East war solely because of it. The relationship between Israel and the United States is certainly more complicated than that of a proxy, but not much happens without the approval of the United States. For example, the recent Israeli attacks in Lebanon that resulted in the death of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah wouldn't be possible without American input. It was American intelligence that guided the Israelis, and it was American bombs, all 86 of them, freshly arrived, that were used in the attack. An Israeli attack on Iran will not happen without the massive support of the United States.

Conclusion

Whatever Israel's objectives in the conflict may be, tenable or not, the United States offers its unwavering support, not only because of the power of the lobby, but also because a strong Israel in the region also serves American interests. At the center of this conflict is now a great power competition between the United States, on the one hand, and Russia and China, on the other, for control and influence in the region. The attacks and counter-attacks between Israel and Iran are putting the world on a dangerous path to a peak escalation and a wider war that will involve the great powers in one way or another, with potentially catastrophic consequences. To avoid this outcome, it is necessary to prevent any further escalation and work to stabilize the region in a timely but consistent manner by addressing the underlying issues, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There is only one country that can do this, and that is the United States.

**Ioannis Tirkides is the Economics Research Manager at Bank of Cyprus and President of the Cyprus Economic Society. Views expressed are personal.*