

Opinion **Instant Insight**

The risk of all-out Middle East war is rising sharply

Strikes in Beirut and Tehran could plunge Israel and Iran deeper into dangerous cycle of escalation

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Senior Hamas official Ismail Haniyeh flashes a victory sign at the Iranian parliament in Tehran on Tuesday just hours before his death © Abedin Taherkenareh/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

Andrew England 2 HOURS AGO

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has just taken a huge gamble. In a matter of hours, Israeli forces launched an air strike in Beirut targeting a senior commander of Hizbollah, the Lebanese militant movement, and have been accused by Hamas and Iran of assassinating the Palestinian group's political leader in an attack in Tehran.

Israel said it killed Fuad Shukr, a Hizbollah commander considered close to the group's leader, Hassan Nasrallah. But it has not commented on the strike that killed Ismail Haniyeh, the senior Hamas official. It typically neither denies nor confirms targeted assassinations in [Iran](#).

Netanyahu is no doubt betting the strikes will send a message of deterrence to his country's enemies, while rallying Israelis after months of political turmoil. But it is a high-stakes bet that risks triggering the all-out Middle East war the region has feared since Hamas's October 7 attack and Israel's subsequent offensive in Gaza.

[Israel](#) had been threatening retaliation since a rocket attack in the occupied Golan Heights on Saturday killed 12 youngsters on a football pitch, for which both it and the US blamed Hizbollah. But targeting one of Nasrallah's top aides in Hizbollah's Beirut heartland was at the top end of the scale of expected responses.

It is the first time Israel has launched a strike against Hizbollah in the Lebanese capital since October 7, and Shukr was the most senior leader of the group that Israel has killed in years. (Hizbollah has not confirmed his death).

The killing of Haniyeh, shortly after he joined foreign dignitaries attending the swearing-in of Iran's new president, then raised the stakes to a new level. The Tehran attack delivers a stinging, humiliating blow not just to Hamas, but also to the Islamic republic at a highly sensitive moment.

It also indicated that Israel — which has made no secret of its willingness to target Hamas leaders wherever they are — is prepared to double down even as the US and its allies desperately seek to de-escalate. The region, gripped by angst for months, is now on tenterhooks as it awaits the response of Hizbollah, its patron, Iran, and the so-called axis of resistance, a network of Iranian-backed militant groups. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was quick to threaten Israel with a pledge to “avenge [Haniyeh's] blood”.

Israel and Iran have pushed each other to the brink before, but so far they have been able to pull back, notably after they traded calibrated missile and drone strikes in April.

Iran has been clear that it does not want a direct conflict with Israel or the US. Its prime goal is the survival of the republic, which means keeping conflict from its shores and relying on the militants it backs to strike out instead. But its decision to launch the first direct assault on Israel from Iranian soil in April showed that it too is willing to raise the stakes if it feels provoked or under pressure.

Israel's myriad strikes since October 7 have done little to deter its foes. It has been trading blows with Hizbollah with increasing ferocity for months, although these have largely been confined to the Israel-Lebanon border region. It is hard to see how the assassination of Shukr does not elicit a more muscular response, plunging the adversaries deeper into their dangerous cycle of escalation.

There has long been the fear that a miscalculation or provocation would trigger the next phase of conflict — since October 7 Israel has come under fire from Iranian-backed groups on multiple fronts and launched strikes in Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The critical question is now whether increasingly blurred red lines have been, or are about to be, crossed.

Israel has made no secret of its determination to push Hizbollah fighters back from the border region, either through US-backed diplomacy or military means. Indeed,

Washington had to persuade Netanyahu's far-right government not to launch a pre-emptive strike against the Lebanese militant group in the early days of the Gaza war.

It is also fair to assume that both Israel and Hizbollah have been preparing for a full-blown war since 2006, when they fought a 34-day conflict. Back then, Hizbollah delivered Israel a bloody nose, and Israeli officials have made clear that they would go far harder and wider this time, not simply targeting militant strongholds.

That would be catastrophic for Lebanon, a nation mired in economic and political malaise and at risk of total collapse in the event of an Israeli invasion. But the consequences for Israel would also be high. Hizbollah, widely considered to be the world's most heavily armed non-state actor, is a far more formidable enemy than Hamas.

Iranian officials have said Tehran would support Hizbollah with all its means if a full-blown war erupts. That is unlikely to involve direct strikes, at least initially, but rather the mobilisation of the militants in the axis of resistance — from Houthi rebels in Yemen to Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. That would mean an intensification of missile and drone attacks on Israel, and risk overwhelming its air defences — a Houthi drone struck Tel Aviv last week, killing one person.

The US, which has pledged its “ironclad” commitment to Israel's defence, would also be in danger of being sucked deeper into conflict, with its forces in Iraq and Syria likely targets. International shipping — already under attack from the Houthis in the Red Sea — could face greater threats. Arab states worry about the potential spillover effects.

It is the nightmare scenario the regional powers have been warning of for the duration of Israel's war in Gaza. But so far US-led efforts to end that war have floundered, and been dealt a severe blow by the death of Haniyeh, the main Hamas interlocutor with mediators. Instead, the US — and the region — is grappling with day-to-day management of a crisis that is becoming ever more complex and deadly.

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