

Opinion **The FT View**

## Israel's reckless pager attack on Hizbollah

Benjamin Netanyahu is raising the risks of an all-out Middle East war

**THE EDITORIAL BOARD**



An ambulance arrives at the American University of Beirut Medical Center on Tuesday after numerous electronic devices exploded, injuring thousands of people © Wael Hamzeh/EPA/Shutterstock

#### The editorial board YESTERDAY

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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu appears to have made provocation his new strategy. As thousands of Hizbollah members went about their daily business on Tuesday, the pagers they were carrying [exploded](#). Panic spread as at least 12 people, including two children, were killed, and almost 3,000 others were wounded. Hizbollah blamed Israel for Tuesday's assault and vowed to retaliate. More explosions rippled across Lebanon on Wednesday as a batch of Hizbollah's [walkie-talkies](#) was targeted. Israel has not commented on these attacks, but its defence minister said on Wednesday it was "at the start of a new phase in the war".

The attacks dealt a [humiliating blow](#) to the Iran-backed militia, targeting the heart of its communications network. They underlined Israel's intelligence prowess and its ability to strike its enemy anywhere, seemingly at will. But they have once more put the Middle East on edge, increasing the risk of a full-blown regional war.

Netanyahu increasingly seems bent on either goading [Hizbollah](#) into an all-out war or prompting a reaction that Israel would use to justify a land offensive into Lebanon. If not, he is gambling dangerously with the notion that Israel can keep escalating and expect the Lebanese paramilitary force to show restraint or to back down. Whichever is the case, the attacks were reckless acts that stoke the flames of conflict.

Israel and Hizbollah have been locked in a deadly war of attrition since the Iranian-backed movement launched rockets at the Jewish state a day after Hamas's horrific October 7 attack. So far, it has largely been contained to the Israeli-Lebanese border region. Hizbollah has said it does not want a full-blown conflict, yet continues to fire on Israel, ostensibly in support of Hamas.

Some 60,000 Israelis have been forced from their homes in the country's north because of constant Hizbollah fire. More than 40 have been killed. In Lebanon, Israeli strikes have killed almost 600 people, mostly Hizbollah fighters, and displaced about 100,000.

Hours before the pager attack, Israel expanded the objectives of its almost year-long [campaign against Hamas](#) in Gaza to include [securing the northern front](#) to enable displaced Israelis to return. That increased fears that it might escalate its conflict with Hizbollah, amid speculation Netanyahu may consider a ground offensive into Lebanon. That would be a grave mistake.

There is no chance of the displaced returning any time in the near future if the conflict continues or intensifies. Hizbollah, one of the world's most heavily armed non-state actors, is a far more formidable foe than Hamas. Israel's past interventions in Lebanon have a chequered history, and an all-out war in the current climate would risk drawing in Iran and other militants it backs.

In the latter stages of his career, Netanyahu has displayed a propensity to gamble with Israel's security interests — from the years he spent dividing and ruling the Palestinians, while thwarting any progress towards a Palestinian state, to his fateful underestimation of the threat Hamas posed.

There is a diplomatic off-ramp to the Hizbollah conflict — a US-proposed deal that would lead to Hizbollah pulling back from the border, a resolution to territorial disputes and Israel halting overflights of Lebanon. But that is dependent on Israel and Hamas agreeing to a deal to secure the release of hostages and a ceasefire in Gaza. Yet Netanyahu is loath to accept it, wary of alienating far-right allies who are vital to his political survival. US silence over the attack — and its failure to step up the pressure on Israel to agree a ceasefire — only emboldens him.

Reaching deals with arch enemies is always a bitter pill to swallow — even more so for Israelis after the horrors of October 7. But a situation of permanent conflict would be ruinous for Israel and the region. The worry is that it increasingly looks like the path Netanyahu is choosing.

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