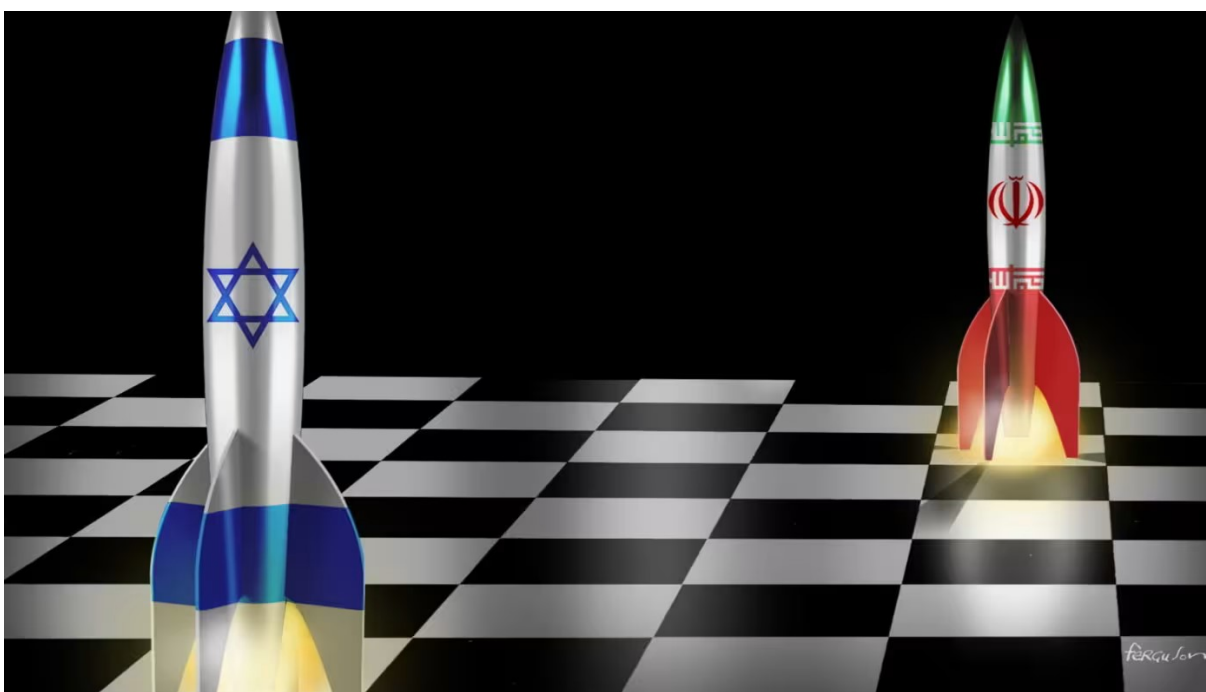


Opinion **Middle East conflict**

Israel dreams of a new order in the Middle East

But escalating the conflict further is more likely to lead to regional chaos

GIDEON RACHMAN



© James Ferguson

Gideon Rachman YESTERDAY

The killing of Hassan Nasrallah came just a few days before the first anniversary of Hamas's October 7 attacks on Israel. With its decapitation of Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Israeli government hopes that it has finally seized the initiative in the battle with its regional enemies.

The US is urging Israel not to escalate the conflict further. But Israel is likely to see the current moment as too good an opportunity to miss. Many now want to press home the advantage, in the hope of striking a decisive blow against not just Hizbollah but Iran — and the “axis of resistance” that it leads, which includes Hamas, Hizbollah, militias in Iraq and Syria and the Houthis in Yemen.

In the aftermath of Nasrallah's killing, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, [talked](#) about an opportunity for “changing the balance of power in the region for years”. If Israel can gravely damage the “axis of resistance”, its achievement would be quietly welcomed in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates — which also fear Iran and have fought a war against the Houthis.

Unlike the Israeli government, the Saudis continue to insist that establishing a Palestinian state is critical to achieving lasting peace in the Middle East. The Saudi government also has good reason to fear the escalation of regional hostilities that could threaten their ambitious development plans

could threaten their ambitious development plans.

For Israel, changing the balance of power also involves reversing the national narrative of defeat and confusion that set in after October 7. The Hamas attack was a humiliation for Israel's intelligence services. The country's reputation for always being one step ahead of its enemies was a key part of its deterrence strategy. That reputation was lost in a single day last year, when Israel was comprehensively outwitted by Hamas.

The subsequent war in Gaza has failed to restore Israel's pride or its security. Despite an operation that has caused massive civilian deaths, Israel has been unable to free all its hostages. It is also losing the battle for international public opinion, and has been [accused](#) of genocide in hearings at the International Court of Justice.

The series of attacks on Hizbollah — starting with [the exploding pagers](#), which killed or maimed so many of the organisation's footsoldiers — has restored the reputation of Israeli intelligence and the morale of the Israeli public. The fact that Hizbollah is detested by many Lebanese citizens and some in the wider Arab world, also complicates the normal condemnation of Israel.

The destruction wrought on Hizbollah potentially puts Iran's government in the most dangerous international situation it has faced for decades. The presence of a powerful Iran-backed militant force with a huge arsenal of rockets — right on Israel's northern border — was always regarded as key to Iran's deterrent power against Israel. The theory was that the Israelis would avoid a direct attack on Iran — partly for fear that Tehran would unleash Hizbollah.

Now, with its proxy and ally reeling, Iran is faced with a dilemma. It has not come directly to the aid of Hamas. If it also stands to one side as Hizbollah is pummelled, its allies will feel betrayed and Israel may be emboldened to take even more radical actions — perhaps including the direct attacks on Iran's nuclear facilities that it has been threatening for decades.

On the other hand, if Iran gets directly involved in a war with Israel, the regime's survival would be at risk — particularly since the US might well get drawn into the conflict. The Americans have sworn off further wars in the Middle East, at least in theory. But they are also firmly committed to the defence of Israel and have demonstrated that they are capable of bringing about regime change in the Middle East. The bloody, chaotic aftermath of the US-led war in Iraq remains a recent and painful memory in Washington. But the fact that Iran is known to be very close to having the capacity to build a nuclear weapon will increase the temptation for Israel

to strike now.

Some excited supporters of Israel are [comparing](#) the current moment to the Six Day War of 1967 — a sudden and unexpected Israeli victory that changed the balance of power in the Middle East.

But while there are clearly opportunities for Israel in the current situation, there are also massive risks. Hizbollah is reeling but it may still be able to deploy what remains of its arsenal of missiles and hit Israel's major cities repeatedly. If Israel follows through on its threats of a ground invasion of Lebanon, it could find itself in a quagmire-like conflict that runs for years — at a time when its forces are already at war in Gaza.

Over the long run, the death and destruction in Lebanon caused by Israeli air strikes is likely to create a new generation of Hizbollah soldiers. Some 60 per cent of Hamas fighters are [thought](#) to be orphans from previous conflicts.

Hizbollah and Hamas are both grievously damaged. But Israel has yet to answer how Gaza will be governed after the war is over. Lebanon's weak caretaker government may well be incapable of moving into any vacuum left by Hizbollah, in which case Israel could have a failed state on its borders.

Netanyahu may dream of bringing about a new regional order in the Middle East. But regional chaos — with all the dangers that it brings — seems a more likely outcome.

gideon.rachman@ft.com

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2024. All rights reserved.
