

Opinion **The FT View**

Israel's spiralling offensive

The west must restrain Netanyahu, or it will be haunted by his widening campaign

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



Palestinians flee Jabalia, northern Gaza. Israel's offensive grinds on, deepening the catastrophe for Palestinians and prolonging the agony for the families of hostages © Mahmoud Issa/Reuters

The editorial board YESTERDAY

The killing of Yahya Sinwar should mark a turning point in Israel's more than year-long campaign to debilitate Hamas and secure the release of its hostages held in Gaza. Ever since the militant group's horrific October 7 attack, killing the ruthless architect of the assault and decapitating Hamas's leadership has been a prime Israeli objective. Israel has now taken out most of Hamas's top commanders in Gaza, its political leader Ismail Haniyeh and severely degraded the group.

It was a moment for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to take his military wins, [reach a deal](#) to end the Gaza war and save the hostages. Instead, Israel's offensive grinds on, deepening the catastrophe for Palestinians trapped in the enclave and prolonging the agony for the families of hostages.

The scenes in northern Gaza over the past week have been horrific. Scores have been killed in the days since Sinwar's death — the toll from [Israel's onslaught](#) is nearing 43,000 people, according to Palestinian officials. Thousands have been forced from their homes. Even the US took the unprecedented step of warning Israel it would suspend arms sales if it did not do more to ease the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe. Israel has also intensified its assault on Hizbollah, wreaking havoc in Lebanon as its bombs flatten buildings — including non-military targets — while its forces push on with an invasion in the south.

Netanyahu is also preparing his retaliation for Iran's missile attack on Israel three weeks ago. The region will then [wait anxiously](#) for the next round of escalation. Hizbollah, meanwhile, weakened by the killing of its leader Hassan Nasrallah, continues to fire missiles into the Jewish state.

Israel, it seems, is locked in endless wars on multiple fronts. The suspicion is that Netanyahu has bet that with the Biden administration focused on the US election, he has a window to strike hard against Israel's foes and ignore international pressure for a ceasefire in Gaza or with Hizbollah. He is likely to be calculating that a victory for Donald Trump, who during his first term gifted Netanyahu a number of pro-Israeli policies, would give him even greater licence to strike against Israel's foes and the Palestinians.

Yet the Biden administration seems to be dancing to Netanyahu's tune: despite calling for a ceasefire in Lebanon one minute, it supports Israel's goal of degrading Hizbollah the next. None of this serves the stability of the Middle East — or Israel's long-term security interests. Hamas and Hizbollah can be decapitated and devastated but will not disappear. Many Hamas fighters are believed to be orphans of previous conflicts as cycles of violence breed new generations of militants. When one leader is killed, another takes over. When a group's military capacity is debilitated, it reverts to guerrilla tactics.

Military history — including Israel's past experiences in Lebanon — is littered with the follies of mission creep; of technically superior occupying armies becoming bogged down by insurgencies, often with radical forces filling the void when they depart.

US President Joe Biden must end the year-long cycle of death and destruction. The threat of a full-blown Middle East war grows by the day. It is in the west's — and the region's — interest to pressure Netanyahu to take the diplomatic off-ramps that are available. An all-out regional conflict risks drawing American forces into conflict with Iran and its proxies. It would put the Gulf's oil infrastructure at risk, threaten more disruption to shipping through vital trade routes and fuel more extremism.

Biden has the tools to rein in Netanyahu. He must halt the offensive arms sales to Israel that enable its relentless bombing of Gaza and Lebanon. He can do so without breaking Washington's commitment to Israel's defence, including providing air-defence systems. But Biden's message should be clear: the bombing must stop and the day after must begin. If not, the devastation and suffering in the

must stop and the day after must begin. If not, the devastation and suffering in the Middle East will come back to haunt the west.

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