

## The year that shattered the Middle East

Kill or be killed is the region's new logic. Deterrence and diplomacy would be better

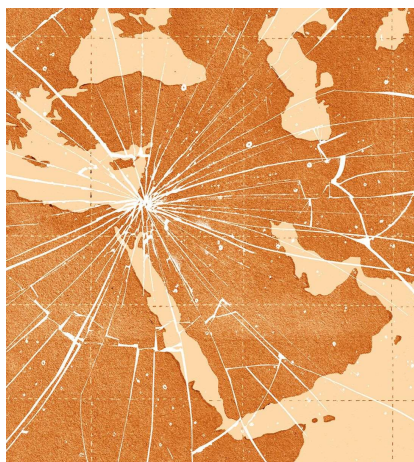


image: Carl Godfrey

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Ever since Hamas's slaughter of Israelis on October 7th 2023, violence has been spreading. One year on, the Middle East is an inch away from an all-out war between Israel and Iran. Israel's skilful decapitation of Hizbullah, a Lebanese militia backed by Iran, prompted the Islamic Republic to rain missiles on Israel on October 1st. Israel may retaliate, perhaps striking Iran's industrial, military or nuclear facilities, hoping to end once and for all the threat it poses to the Jewish state.

Iran is certainly a menace, and use of force against it by Israel or America would be both lawful and, if carefully calibrated, wise. But the idea that a single decisive attack on Iran could transform the Middle East is a fantasy. As our special section explains, containing the Iranian regime requires sustained deterrence and diplomacy. In the long run, Israel's security also depends on ending its oppression of the Palestinians.

Iran's [latest direct attack](#) on Israel consisted of 180 ballistic missiles. Unlike an earlier strike in April, this time Iran gave little warning. But as before, most of the projectiles were intercepted. The salvo was a response to the humiliation of its proxy, Hizbullah, which until two weeks ago was the most feared militia in the region. No one should shed tears for a terrorist outfit that has helped turn Lebanon into a failed state. For the past year Hizbullah has bombarded Israel, forcing the evacuation of civilians in its northern belt. Israel's counter-attack, unlike its invasion of Gaza, was long-planned. It has made devastating use of intelligence, technology and air power, killing the militia's leaders, including its chief, Hassan Nasrallah, maiming its fighters with exploding pagars and destroying perhaps half of its 120,000 or more missiles and rockets.

This humbling of Hizbullah has triggered a crisis of credibility for its sponsor. For three decades Iran has tried to intimidate Israel, Arab states and the West with a twin-track approach of threatening to race for a nuclear bomb and organising an "axis of resistance", a network of militias including Hamas, Hizbullah and the Houthis in Yemen. Now that axis is reeling: Israel [has battered Hamas's military wing](#) in Gaza and outwitted Hizbullah. Suddenly Iran's regime looks too weak to help its cronies—and, perhaps, to defend itself. Even its ballistic missiles are no match for Israel's air defences.

For Israel the danger now is hubris. There could be mission creep in Lebanon, with limited infantry incursions morphing into a full invasion, a mistake Israel made in 1982 and again in 2006. Its impending retaliation against Iran poses even greater risks. One option would be to destroy Iran's oil-export hubs, crippling the regime's finances and rattling energy markets. Another would be to strike its nuclear facilities. Some in Israel see a window of opportunity. For now, Iran's ability to hit back via Hizbullah is blunted, but in the next couple

of years it has a strong new incentive to build its first nuclear weapon, to re-establish deterrence. The hard right of Israel's ruling coalition, including Binyamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, dream that a single, devastating strike on Iran now could end all major threats to Israel's security for the foreseeable future.

This view is seductive but dangerous. It is true that Iran's behaviour has grown worse since Donald Trump's administration abandoned the deal to freeze its nuclear programme. In the past year Iran has accelerated uranium enrichment, armed the Houthis, executed hundreds of dissidents at home and supplied vast numbers of drones to help Russia kill Ukrainians. Its newish president, Masoud Pezeshkian, is supposedly a reformer but really a captive of conservatives. Yet for all that, Iran is unpredictable. Its clerical-military regime is unpopular at home and faces economic decay and a succession crisis when the 85-year-old supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, dies. A one-off attack on its nuclear sites might destabilise the regime. But it could fail to destroy those facilities, which are deep underground, and embolden hardliners who might dash even faster for a bomb, perhaps aided by Russia.

A more effective way to deter Iran might look like this. Israel, backed by America, should make credible threats to conduct repeated military strikes on its nuclear programme for years to come to prevent it from obtaining a bomb. America and its allies should enforce tougher sanctions on its oil exports, if it seeks to re-arm its proxy militias. In addition, there must be incentives to help Iran's reformers. Diplomats should make clear that, if Iran stops its quest for nuclear weapons and arming its proxies and Russia, it will get sanctions relief. Though President Joe Biden has signalled he does not support a hasty attack on Iran's nuclear sites, Mr Netanyahu may hope that a future President Trump will back a more hawkish approach. What Israel needs, however, is long-term bipartisan support from America, tempered with counsels of restraint.

American support and Israeli restraint will also be crucial in tackling Israel's other big security problem: the Palestinians. Mr Netanyahu and his hardliners want Israelis and the world to look only at Iran, downplaying the threats in Gaza, where Hamas is all but crushed, and in the West Bank.

### **The narrow path to peace**

Yet on the day of Iran's strike more Israelis died from a gun and knife attack in Tel Aviv than from missiles, and the biggest loss of Israeli life in a year of war has been from Hamas's home-grown killers. Never-ending repression, after the deaths of more than 40,000 Gazans in the past year, will [breed a new generation of militants](#). In Israel, the settler movement and its [toxic politics](#) imperil the open values that undergird the country's high-tech economy. Any rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, which could help contain Iran, depends on treating Palestinians better. An eternal occupation, by contrast, guarantees more human-rights abuses that would corrode Israeli society and strain, perhaps even break, the alliance with America.

As war escalates in the Middle East, Israel's government believes it has the advantage. Perhaps it does. But the challenge is to translate military prowess into lasting strategic gains and ultimately peace. Without that, blood will keep flowing for years to come. ■