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Escalate to de-escalate and war for deterrence, the warped logic of the Middle East



The Middle East is teetering on the brink of **all-out war** but not for some tangible on the ground gains, territorial, strategic or otherwise, but mostly because of a fight for reputations and deterrence.

From the Hamas attack on 7 October last year, to the way Israel has responded by flattening Gaza and now taking on Hezbollah wholesale, to Iran's latest missile attack on Israel, political and reputational factors have far outweighed any concrete military and strategic objective.

Despite Israel's stated aim of altering the regional balance, any military and strategic victories are likely to be pyrrhic, with the same actors, such as Hamas and Hezbollah able to survive or reconstitute and a potential Israeli buffer zone in Lebanon both ineffective and a flashpoint for new conflict. And all this in the name of deterrence, credibility and reputation.

On my first visit to Hezbollah's stronghold in the south of Beirut, almost 25 years ago, guards took away my recording equipment for a security check. After waiting for some ten minutes for it to be returned, a horrifying thought struck me: I was at the time based in Amman and the week before had been on a reporting trip to Jerusalem, where my batteries ran out and I had replaced them... with ones with Hebrew lettering.

Knowing Hezbollah's reputation for tight security, I was wondering how my explanation would go down but then the recorder was returned and I was allowed to proceed without further comment.

Reputational blow

The episode came to mind when thousands of the group's pagers and walkie-talkies **exploded** recently. For Hezbollah, even before Israel assassinated its leader Hassan Nasrallah, this was a reputational blow on a par with the one Israel suffered on October 7th last year.

Reputations often take a long time to construct and can be ruined in a flash. Hezbollah's aura of near-invincibility, Iran's

regional projection of power and Israel's image as an intelligence and military superpower are on the line because of recent events.

Much of what Israel has been doing since October 7th last year, and the way in which it is going about it, seems calculated not just to claw back the credibility as a regional power that it lost that day, but to go beyond that and effect a more decisive shift.

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While Israel proclaims that it is engaged in a legitimate defence against non-state actors that have attacked it, its actions seem not geared towards an achievable strategic goal.

Rather, Israel seems interested in returning to 'managing' the conflict the way it has done for the past two decades or so, albeit on somewhat more favourable terms.

Thus, the current **fighting**, now both in Lebanon and in Gaza and possibly soon in Iran, can only bring temporary relief at best from the ever-escalating, and never de-escalating, cycle of violence that Israel and its opponents are engaged in.

Yet, this might fulfil the purpose of Israel's ascendent right-wing ideologues: it would afford them maximum freedom to further dispossess the Palestinians while engaging their opponents at will across the region.

Downward trajectory

In the eyes both of Israel's security hawks and the nationalist-religious far-right, who together dominate the government, the country had been on a downward trajectory since at least the withdrawal from South Lebanon in 2000, followed by the withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 and then the inconclusive conflict with Hezbollah in 2006.

The second Palestinian intifada that started in 2000 petered out but was replaced after 2006 with longer-range rocket attacks from Gaza to which Israel had no effective military response.

Meanwhile, Iran replaced Iraq as the main regional threat, which rapidly escalated because of Iran's involvement in the Syrian civil war from 2011.

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Israel's military, intelligence and technological capacities are not merely ways to safeguard the country's immediate security. They play a huge role in the long-term strategic web that determines alliances, including with the US.

Even Europe, although much more critical of Israel, often sees the value of maintaining a close working relationship with the country.

The regional thinking is similar: with Iran ascendant, seemingly able to expand its influence unchecked, and its proxies defying Israeli military might, Israel's added value as an ally for threatened Sunni Arab regimes was partly compromised.

Even so, the breakthrough **Abraham accords** with the Arab Gulf states and others were forged under these 'adverse' circumstances. This might reflect such things as Israel's emergence during these years as a high-tech hotspot, its burgeoning economy and its relative stability, despite the heavy price paid for this by Palestinians, both in Gaza and the West-Bank.

The conflict finds ways to re-impose itself

This deceptive and precarious balance was shattered by Hamas on October 7th. It dealt

Israel's reputation a much heavier blow than any of the previous piecemeal erosions.

In the minds of at least the far-right and the security hawks, if not a much wider segment of Israeli society, this had to be redressed decisively, both towards the country's own population, towards its enemies, its potential allies, i.e. Saudi Arabia, and indeed towards investors in its high-tech economy.



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With Moody's recently downgrading the country's credit rating, some might say that Israel's leadership has miscalculated on at least one of these fronts. It's disinterest in achieving a more long-term, stable and equitable arrangement with its opponents affects the prospects of even a short- to medium-term patch of stability.

The conflict continuously finds ways to re-impose itself and when one avenue is closed off, an even more violent and disruptive confrontation will inevitably burst to the surface, witness 7 October and its aftermath.

In the meantime, Hamas is still operational in Gaza and any illusion of turning Lebanon against Hezbollah is misguided. The Shia movement is not just an Iranian proxy, it is deeply embedded in Lebanese society and no other Lebanese faction has the wherewithal to resist it, nor has the Lebanese army the will or the capacity.

With its spectacular grandstanding intelligence coups against Hezbollah, Israel

might have regained some clout, but it has inexplicably also wasted those intelligence assets on a campaign that in all likelihood will not be decisive, as none can be.

The result in the coming years could even be less security on its northern border, in the rest of the country, and for its overseas interests, as it will take time to rebuild a network that is now inevitably partly compromised.

The current round of fighting is not over. Both Iran and Hezbollah might have a lot more cards up their sleeve and even Hamas cannot be counted out. They too have shown a willingness to mete out extreme violence. Even if Israel's deterrent reputation comes out enhanced, it's merely so until the next blow.