

# On the Brink? The Potential for a Broader Conflict in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

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**An Israeli general and two former U.S. officials discuss the prospects of an imminent Iranian attack and what can be done to deter it.**

**O**n August 12, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Amir Eshel, David Satterfield, and Dana Stroul. Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Eshel, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, formerly served as director-general of the Israeli Defense Ministry and commander of the Israeli Air Force. Ambassador Satterfield is director of the Baker Institute for Public Policy and former U.S. special envoy for Middle East humanitarian issues. Stroul, the director of research and Kassen Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, recently served as deputy assistant secretary for the Middle East at the Pentagon. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

## Amir Eshel

**F**ollowing the assassinations of senior Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, Israel has been readying itself for an attack from Iran and Lebanon. Although the Israeli people are deeply concerned about this possibility, they are not panicking. The region appears to be on the brink of full-scale escalation even though none of the major players—including Iran, Israel, and Hezbollah—want it. The question now is whether Tehran and its Lebanese proxy will be able to respond in a way that satisfies them without crossing the threshold of war.

Conflict with Iran is not new for Israelis. After Tehran intervened in Syria many years ago and subsequently announced its intent to attack Israel, Jerusalem assessed that direct threats and conflicts would be more frequent and began preparing accordingly. For its part, Iran understands that deterrence is a key component of Israel's retaliation strategy and is proceeding with caution. The regime previously pledged to defeat Israel by 2030, so it is unlikely to accelerate that timeline. Tehran is also making progress on its nuclear program and forming friendships with Russia and China. As such, it might be satisfied with a small-scale, low-volume retaliatory attack in the near future, for which Israel is offensively and defensively ready.

For now, there is no need for Israel to take preemptive action against Iran unless one of the players escalates to full-scale war. Israel will certainly react to any Iranian and Hezbollah attacks with strikes of its own, in a manner reflecting the outcome of their attacks.

There is also consensus in Israel that Hezbollah's continued presence on the northern frontier is unacceptable. Many have discussed the notion that a ceasefire in Gaza would lead to a ceasefire with Hezbollah, but this would not be enough to make evacuated Israeli citizens comfortable about moving back to their homes in the north. That sense of security will only come if the group is fully removed from the border. Israel should certainly put significant diplomatic and political effort into achieving a ceasefire on both fronts, but it must also be prepared to do what is necessary in the north. This includes the possibility of declaring sovereignty along the border—a move that could lead to full-scale war but may be justified if Hezbollah violates future ceasefire agreements.

Regarding a Gaza ceasefire, it is important to understand that Hamas commander Yahya al-Sinwar has not yet reached the point of desperation. Israel may control the Philadelphia Corridor between Egypt and Gaza, but Hamas still has access to some of its weapons supply lines. New ceasefire terms have been put on the table, but there is not a lot of room for the two sides to meet.

## David Satterfield

**I**ran and Hezbollah do not want regional escalation that results in a significant Israeli response or, even worse, a U.S. response. Yet there is significant risk of a miscalculation or mistake that could lead to broader conflict. The only actors who want to widen the war are Hamas and Yemen's Houthi movement. Resolving the crisis requires guarantees not only from Hamas, but also from Hezbollah in the north, where 80,000 Israelis are waiting to return to their homes.

The key to parrying Iran's previous attack against Israel back in April was the willingness of Arab and European partners to play a role in the U.S.-led defensive operation. That same willingness is evident today. Most recently, Jordan declared that it would respond to any violation of its airspace by any country's weaponry—a comment directed at Tehran. U.S. officials continue to mobilize an international coalition of "the willing and able" to ensure that Iran does not precipitate wider conflict.

Meanwhile, the United States is taking preventive action by sending an aircraft carrier group, a guided-missile submarine, and additional fighter jets to the region. It took similar steps after the October 7 attack, turning its forces around and sending Iran a warning: "Don't." Still, the Biden administration's focus is on diplomatic engagement so that the president is not forced to order military strikes.

Although a ceasefire is crucial, Sinwar still believes he is winning. In asymmetrical warfare, the nonstate party simply has to survive to "win." Sinwar believes he will survive this war and that Hamas will remain the actual or de facto ruler of Gaza, with the upper hand in shaping the territory's future.

Although every resource can and should be expended to see if a ceasefire is possible, the phases and guarantees required by such a deal are incredibly complicated, and expectations should be tempered accordingly. Yet even if a deal is not reached during this week's round of negotiations, the United States is unlikely to walk away from the process.

## Dana Stroul

**U**.S. diplomacy and military measures since October 7 provide an important framework for understanding Washington's approach to the latest escalation. Specifically, efforts to prevent a full-scale regional conflict have progressed in three phases during the Gaza war.

From October 7 to April 13, Washington's priorities were supporting Israel's right to defend itself and preventing regional war. It pursued these goals by providing security assistance to Israel, initiating a rapid military buildup, and ensuring consistent, specific messaging to allies and adversaries, among other steps. It also addressed spillover crises elsewhere in the region with unique capabilities. In Iraq and Syria, it directly

targeted Iran-backed militias who were attacking U.S. forces. In Yemen, it worked offensively and defensively with separate multinational coalitions to counter Houthi attacks in the Red Sea and diminish the group's military capabilities. And in Lebanon, it supercharged its diplomacy to define the contours of a de-escalation roadmap with Hezbollah once a ceasefire is achieved in Gaza.

Yet Iran's April 13 attack opened a new phase in the crisis and represented a watershed moment for the Middle East. Rather than employing its decades-old strategy of relying on proxy groups to project power, Tehran directly launched a complex missile and drone attack on Israel in response to the killing of senior Iranian military figures in Damascus. Equally groundbreaking was the U.S.-led defensive coalition, in which Israel and various Arab and European partners deflected the majority of Iran's attack. These events fundamentally changed the strategic environment in the region and the manner in which all parties think about offensive and defensive uses of force.

Hezbollah's July 27 rocket attack on Majdal Shams is a sobering example of the risks that come with this new environment. The biggest threat today is not a decisive step toward regional war, but rather the potential for a mistake or miscalculation that sends the parties into an escalatory cycle. After the Majdal Shams attack killed twelve children, Israel targeted Fuad Shukur in Beirut and is believed to have carried out the operation that killed Ismail Haniyeh in downtown Tehran. These killings were seen as both a significant escalation and a public embarrassment for the leaders of Iran and Hezbollah. At the moment, all of the players presumably want to avoid a broader war, but it remains to be seen if the desire to avenge public humiliation outweighs the pragmatic need for de-escalation.

In the current phase, the United States has accelerated a new round of military deployments to the region, signaling a readiness to use force in defense of Israel even as it continues to push for a diplomatic means of preventing regional war. In the past, adversaries have taken note of unexpected and dynamic projections of U.S. military power. The fact that U.S. officials are openly talking about the deployment of a guided-missile submarine is a strong message intended for senior leaders in Tehran. Yet Washington has yet to indicate whether it is willing to engage Iran directly or preemptively.

*This summary was prepared by Sarah Boches. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Florence and Robert Kaufman Family.* ❖

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