



## ISSUE BRIEF: THE ESCALATION IN REGIONAL MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT SPARKED BY THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

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More than three months into the Israel-Hamas war, the prospect of a wider regional conflagration in the Middle East is growing. As Israel continues its military response in Gaza to the October 7 Hamas massacre, violence is surging on the Israel-Lebanon border, in the Red Sea, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and in the occupied West Bank. While there has been a significant risk of regional escalation since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, developments in recent weeks – including assassinations of a top Hamas official in Beirut and senior Hizballah commanders in southern Lebanon; increased Houthi attacks on global shipping in the Red Sea, followed by a US-led military response; and a spate of attacks in Iraq and Syria, including against US forces – have led experts to warn that the likelihood of a regional war is [increasing significantly](#). Such a war would further pit Israel against groups linked to and supported by Iran, with further impact on the US and countries in the Middle East that are already drawn into the conflict. The Biden Administration will need to combine [active, skillful diplomacy](#) with carefully calibrated [deterrence](#) and strategic, limited, and targeted military actions – while avoiding pressure from right-wing hawks to enter a catastrophic war with Tehran.

The following issue brief addresses five key theaters and developments to date, assessing the motivations and capabilities of the major actors and the likelihood and potential consequences of further escalation:

### 1. Israel's Northern Front with Hizballah in Lebanon:

- Hizballah, an Iran-backed Lebanese Shi'ite Muslim [political party](#) and US-designated [Foreign Terrorist Organization](#), has [fired](#) over 1,700 rockets from Lebanon into Israel since the start of the Israel-Hamas war in "[solidarity](#)" with Hamas. [Over 80,000](#) Israelis from more than 40 communities have been evacuated, 15 Israelis have been killed, and about 150 others have been injured. On the Lebanese side, approximately [74,500](#) people have been displaced and nearly 160 people have been killed in Israeli strikes.
- Likely due to its domestic position in Lebanon, where political chaos and deteriorating economic circumstances have [emboldened](#) anti-Hizballah forces and many Lebanese strongly [oppose](#) the spreading of war to southern Lebanon, Hizballah had refrained from major escalation in the initial months of this conflict.
- The assassination of senior Hamas leader Saleh Arouri – the [linchpin](#) of relations between Hamas, Iran, and Hizballah – in an [alleged](#) Israeli drone strike in Beirut on January 2, 2024 marked the first time a Hamas official was killed outside the occupied Palestinian territory. Hizballah [responded](#) with a warning that "this crime will never pass without response and punishment." It subsequently [launched](#) 62 rockets toward an Israeli air surveillance base on Mount Meron. Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah [warned](#) that "a war with us will be very costly." Israel later [killed](#) a senior Hizballah commander in south Lebanon.

- Unlike Hamas, Hizballah is a regional power with significant urban warfare [experience](#) in several conflicts across the Middle East. It is [believed](#) to have as many as 150,000 missiles aimed at Israel – including precise antitank missiles that have [targeted](#) Israeli homes and civilian infrastructure – and to have trained its [Radwan](#) special operation forces for a cross-border invasion of Israel.
- According to the State Department, Hizballah is [closely aligned](#) with Iran and typically follows religious guidance from Iran’s Supreme Leader, but also acts independently. Iran provides most of Hizballah’s funding, training, weapons, political support, and organizational aid. Given its tens of thousands of supporters and members worldwide and capacity to attack Israel and the US, it has been [referred to](#) as a “potential insurance policy...for the Iranian regime” if the latter “were imperiled in a substantial way” including through military action targeting Iran’s nuclear facilities.
- According to US intelligence [estimates](#), Israel would have difficulty winning a simultaneous war against Hamas and Hizballah. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has stated that Israel [prefers](#) a diplomatic resolution but could “[copy-paste](#)” its Gaza strategy to Lebanon, and Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly [told](#) US envoy Amos Hochstein there is a “[short window](#)” to avoid all-out war between the parties.
- Ahead of his visit to Beirut last week, Hochstein [shared](#) the US assessment that a full IDF transition to low-intensity operations in Gaza would assist in de-escalating the conflict with Hizballah. Hochstein visited Lebanon as part of important Biden Administration efforts to ease tensions along the border with Israel. This could lay the groundwork for talks on drawing the Israel-Lebanon land border, following Hochstein’s brokering of a [maritime border agreement](#) between the two countries in 2022.

## 2. Yemeni Houthis in the Red Sea:

- Protesting Israeli attacks on Gaza, the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen have been [attacking](#) what they [characterize](#) as “ships linked to Israel” in the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb strait, [disrupting](#) global shipping and causing economic damage, including an 85 percent reduction in shipping activity at the Israeli port of Eilat. The Houthis have also attacked ships without ties to Israel; the US government [claims](#) that most ships targeted by the Houthis are not connected to Israel.
- The US responded to the Houthi maritime attacks by [launching](#) Operation Prosperity Guardian, a multinational coalition with over 20 [members](#), and [warning](#) of “consequences for the Houthis’ actions.” When the Houthis continued their attacks, the US, UK, and other allies [carried out](#) military strikes against more than a dozen Houthi-controlled targets in Yemen, in a significant escalation of the conflict. The Houthis vowed to [retaliate](#), and subsequently, Houthi attacks and US strikes have [continued](#).
- Houthis, [trained](#) and armed by Iran, have [indicated](#) they are “comfortable with a direct confrontation with the Americans” and [intend](#) to continue their attacks until Israel stops its

“aggression against Gaza.” Given the strength of pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli sentiment in Yemen, the maritime attacks may be [geared](#) to improve the group’s standing at home, while signaling Houthi support for Hamas, Hizballah, and Iran.

- The Houthis and other warring parties in Yemen’s catastrophic civil war, which began in 2014 and [produced](#) one of the world’s largest humanitarian crises, were [close](#) to agreeing to a UN-brokered road map for peace. That has been scuttled by events in the Red Sea, and US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking has [warned](#) that two years of “joint progress” toward peace in Yemen are at stake. The Houthis’ ongoing maritime attacks give them [leverage](#) in negotiations with impacted nations and raise their international profile.

### 3. Iran-Linked Groups in Iraq and Syria:

- As regional tensions increase amid the Israel-Hamas war, Israel and Iran have been fighting a shadow war in Iraq and Syria. This includes an Israeli airstrike outside the Syrian capital, which [killed](#) a senior adviser in Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) who was reportedly responsible for coordinating the Iran-Syria military alliance. On January 16, the IRGC [retaliated](#) against Israel by striking what it claimed was a headquarters of the Mossad located near the US consulate in Erbil.
- Several US troops stationed in Iraq and Syria have been [injured](#), at least one critically, in more than 118 attacks by Iran-linked groups since October 7, [prompting](#) six retaliatory US airstrikes. On December 8, for the first time in over a year, the US Embassy in Baghdad was [attacked](#) by mortar rounds, causing minor damage.
- On December 25, the US [struck](#) three facilities inside Iraq used by Iranian proxy group Kataib Hizballah and killed several of the militants. This followed an attack by the group on the US air base in Erbil, which injured three US service members, one critically.
- On January 4, a rare US missile strike in Baghdad [killed](#) Mushtaq Jawad Kazim al-Jawari, the former deputy commander of Iranian proxy group Haraqat Hizballah al-Nujaba. The Pentagon [claimed](#) he was “actively involved in planning and carrying out attacks against American personnel.”

### 4. Iran:

- Aside from Iranian regional proxy activity including support for Hamas, Iran proper has not been a focal point of violence since October 7 – with the exception of a pair of [bombings](#) on January 3 near the Iranian city of Kerman that killed 94 and wounded 280 others. While ISIS has [claimed](#) responsibility and Iran has predictably [blamed](#) Israel and the US, it remains unclear whether this attack on a memorial for the former IRGC chief Qassim Suleimani was directly connected to the Israel-Hamas war.
- While Iran has provided significant material and financial support to Hamas, the US, Israel, and regional partners have found [no evidence](#) that Iran directed or was behind Hamas’

attack on October 7. Initial US intelligence reports even [indicated](#) that some Iranian leaders were caught by surprise. Though Iran has [supported](#) proxy attacks from Lebanon to the Red Sea in its attempt to open multiple fronts against Israel, it has thus far avoided direct confrontation with Israel or its allies.

- While right-wing hawks at home have called on the Biden Administration to [employ](#) “direct military force, applied against critical targets inside Iran” and [exact](#) “massive retaliation”, the Biden Administration has [aimed](#) to prevent a [disastrous war](#) with Iran through diplomacy and calculated deterrence.

## 5. West Bank:

- In addition to escalating violence with groups linked to Iran, an urgent situation in the West Bank threatens to open yet another front. Taking advantage of the war in Gaza, Israeli settlers in the West Bank – [aided](#) and [abetted](#) by Israeli forces – are [exploiting](#) an atmosphere of impunity following the Hamas massacre to forcibly displace Palestinians from their homes. This situation is compounded by economic devastation wrought by [revocation](#) of visas for West Bank Palestinians who worked in Israel. The average number of settler attacks has [skyrocketed](#) to an [unprecedented](#) rate of 7 per day – up from 3 per day earlier in 2023 (before Hamas’ attack). In the three months following October 7, over 1,200 Palestinians have been [displaced](#) due to settler violence and access restrictions.
- Pre-war dynamics, including the breaking down and absence of the security forces of the Palestinian Authority – deliberately marginalized by the Netanyahu government – [permitted](#) the rise of a new generation of militants. In the midst of the war in Gaza, support for Hamas in the West Bank has [spiked](#). The rate of attacks, including those directed by Hamas, against Israeli settlers has [grown](#) significantly.
- A record-high 300 Palestinians have been [killed](#) in the West Bank since October 7. Eight were killed by Israeli settlers and the remainder by Israeli forces during IDF operations in the areas ostensibly under PA control. [According](#) to the UN, this made 2023 the “the deadliest year [on record] for Palestinians in the West Bank.”
- See “[As Israel-Hamas War Rages, Urgent Situation in the West Bank Also Requires US Action](#)” for policy recommendations and further details and analysis.

*For additional analysis, see the J Street Policy Center [webinar](#) with experts [Mona Yacoubian](#) of the US Institute of Peace and [Dr. Gil Murciano](#) of Mitvim, recorded on January 16, 2024.*