

## How Israel's quest for a decisive victory can cost West Asia hefty

Maj Gen GG Dwivedi • October 12, 2024, 13:30:40 IST



*There are fears that Israel could attack Iran's oil installations and even nuclear sites, which would have serious ramifications for the region*



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. AP*

The current Gaza conflict started with Hamas unleashing barbaric attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. Acting swiftly, Israel declared a state of war and launched “Operation Iron Sword” with the dual aim of decimating Hamas and rescuing scores of people taken hostage. A year of fighting has been marked with intense destruction as a sequel to Israeli disproportionate response and Hamas-Hezbollah resilient resistance. It has taken a heavy toll of Palestinians, with over 42,000 dead and around 2 million displaced.

In the early days, it appeared that Iran-backed 'axis of resistance' militias had managed to gain an upper hand. However, the illusion was short lived as Israeli air-land operations in Gaza and Rafah inflicted heavy losses on Hamas, besides colossal damage to the infrastructure, with full support of the US and European allies. In the initial stages, fighting was largely centred around Gaza, but there were frequent skirmishes with the Hezbollah in South Lebanon and Palestinians on the West Bank.

In April 2024, Tehran launched a series of retaliatory airstrikes on Israel for the first time, in response to the latter's airstrike on Iran's consulate in Damascus. Israel retaliated days later, targeting Iran's military complex at Isfahan. Tehran chose to downplay the incident, exercising strategic restraint. Iran also became painfully aware that its arsenal of ballistic missiles and drones was no match to that of Israel, besides realisations about the limitations of Hamas and Hezbollah in taking on Israeli Defence Forces (IDF).

On July 31, 2024, Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh was assassinated in Tehran allegedly by an Israeli strike. The risk of regional escalation deterred Tehran from responding. A month later, Israel launched preemptive strikes against Hezbollah, destroying a large number of rocket launchers. To target Hezbollah leadership, Israel orchestrated pager and walkie-talkies explosions, killing at least 39 people.

There was dramatic escalation when Israel launched air and ground operations against Lebanon on September 27. The targeted airstrike at Hezbollah Headquarters in Beirut resulted in the killing of its top leader, Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah. This led to Iran launching a massive airstrike on Israel, wherein it fired over 200 missiles. While Israel claimed that most were intercepted, yet these proved to be effective. Israel has openly declared that it will respond at will. There are fears that Israel could attack Iran's oil installations and even nuclear sites, which would have serious ramifications.

As the war rolls into the second year, Israel has stepped up its attacks on Hezbollah, and the IDF is well poised to expand ground incursions into southern Lebanon. Israel's long term strategic objective has been to push Hezbollah north of the Litani River and create a buffer zone. Currently, around 60,000 Israelis have been displaced from Northern Israel. While the IDF is aiming for a total victory, Hezbollah has vowed to fight on; its biggest challenge is survival.

West Asian nations stand divided, adopting a reconciliatory or hardline approach towards Israel in pursuit of their national interests. The Arab states have deliberately stayed away from giving any indications of Shia-Sunni Islamic solidarity. In fact, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have chosen to abide by the geopolitical process that has been underway, beginning with the signing of Abraham Accords in 2020. There is general consensus for durable peace in the region by ensuring the sovereignty of Palestine through a two-state solution.

The US and West remain steadfast in extending resolute support to Israel to defend itself, despite Tel Aviv's defiance to the calls of exercising restraint. Both Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have stressed peace across the Middle East while treading a tightrope on the conflict, which could impact US presidential elections next month. Even amongst the EU Nations, there has been outcry for controlling escalation, going to the extent of imposing sanctions against Israel.

China and Russia are staunch supporters of Iran. While Putin is constrained to influence events in West Asia due to his involvement in Ukraine, in contrast, China has made deep inroads into the region. Beijing wields considerable influence, evident from the reproachment it has been able to bring about between Iran-Saudi Arabia and Hamas-Fatah. While critical of Israel, China has avoided direct involvement in pursuit of its strategic interests.

International opinion in favour of Palestine statehood has gained traction in the wake of Israel's heavy-handed approach. Mediation initiatives by various parties, including Egypt-UAE, have not yielded any results so far. The US ability to influence Israel appears to have diminished too. The UN has proved to be utterly toothless. India has deep stakes in the region's prosperity and maintains close ties with Iran, Israel, and Gulf countries. Delhi has lent support to the moderate voices to prevent a flare-up between Israel and Iran, as well as backed a two-state solution for enduring peace in West Asia.

Speaking at a meeting to mark the first anniversary of the horrific Hamas attack last year, Netanyahu said, "We will end the war when we complete all the goals we have set: overthrowing the evil rule of Hamas, returning all our abductees home, thwarting any future threat from Gaza, and returning all our residents safely to their homes". To achieve the above objectives, Netanyahu has pushed the boundaries in the Middle East well beyond the redlines. Apparently, it is not a war against Hamas or Hezbollah but against the 'Iranian Axis of Resistance'. This has well served Netanyahu's domestic agenda—strengthened his image and improved his approval rating dramatically.

Tamir Hayman, Director of the Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv, has accentuated a terrifying reality when he said, “Without seeking political-diplomatic solutions, it is a matter of endless war. After Gaza, we will go to Lebanon; after Lebanon, we go to the West Bank, and after the West Bank, we go to Iran”. Ironically, Israel’s quest for decisive victory without seeking a political solution could well push West Asia into a regional war, which would definitely have disastrous global consequences.

*The writer is a Bangladesh war veteran, currently Professor of Strategic and International Relations. Views expressed in the above piece are personal and solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect Firstpost’s views.*