

Summary

Tensions in the Middle East region have reached a highpoint.

- **Iran's** future actions remain uncertain, but they are likely to involve regional allies rather than direct confrontation.
- **Lebanon** is now facing an Israeli ground offensive. This comes after days of increasingly escalating hostilities, with the unprecedented attack on central Beirut being another notable event.
- In **Yemen** Israel launched air raids on Houthi targets in Ras Isa and Hodeidah, retaliating for a missile attack on Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport. Israel's increased military actions against Iran-backed militants raise concerns about regional stability.
- In **Iraq**, the Iran-backed Islamic Resistance of Iraq claimed responsibility for missile strikes on Haifa and central areas of Israel, following a drone attack on Eilat earlier in the week.
- In **Syria**, large numbers of people fleeing from Lebanon are seeking refuge. While thus far Syria has remained quiet in this conflict, Syria remains a target for Israeli airstrikes.

Recent events and developments

The past couple of days have been marked by further escalation in the region. On October 1, Israeli forces have entered into Lebanon after announcing a "limited" ground operation against Hezbollah. Israeli air strikes reported on Sunday, September 29 and continuing onto Monday, September 30 have reached central Beirut. This is the first time an attack was carried out within the city's limits since hostilities have escalated. For years, municipal Beirut was seen as a "safe haven" from the bombardments. Israel's action has therefore been interpreted as "crossing a red line". Earlier, on September 27, Israeli aircrafts bombed what has been described as "Hezbollah's central headquarters" in Beirut's southern suburbs, killing the secretary general of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah. The next day, Hezbollah confirmed Nasrallah's death. The tensions increasingly seem to be heading in the direction of an all-out war between Israel and Iran-backed proxy-groups. Iran's direct involvement remains unlikely, despite repeated provocations, as the consequences of the United States joining the conflict would be too dire for Iran.

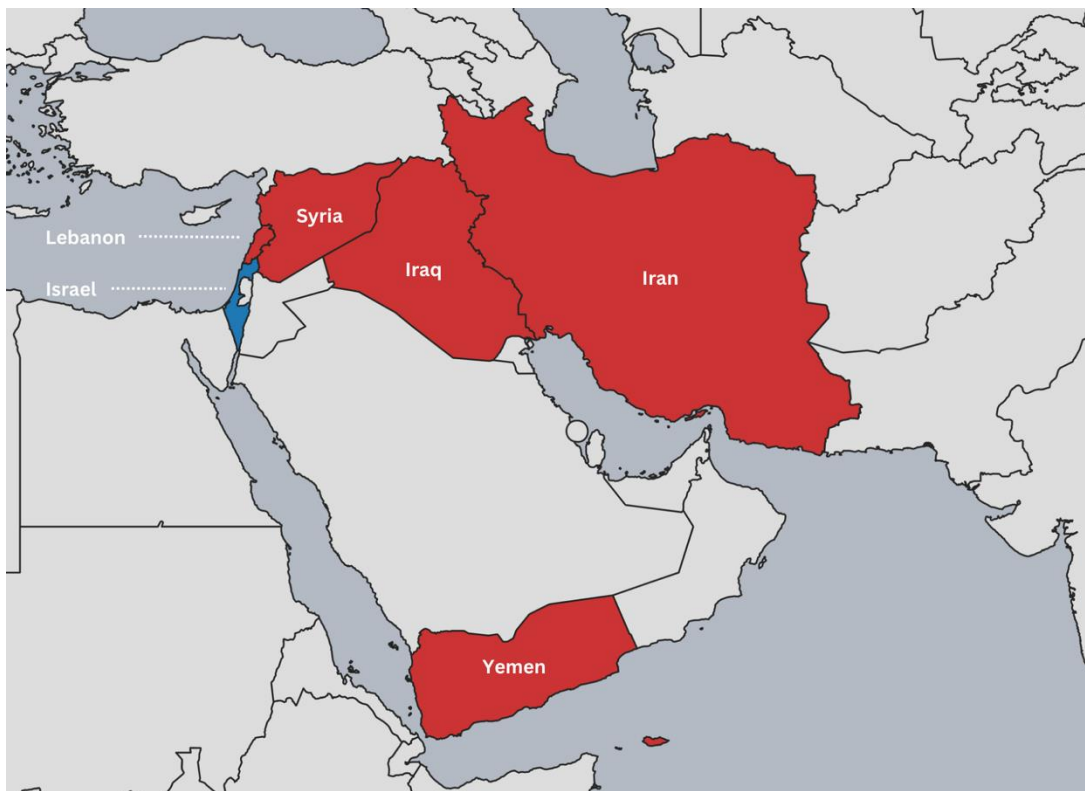


Figure 1: Map illustrating Iran's Axis of Resistance and Israel (self-made)

Iran

Following Nasrallah's assassination, Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei was quick to condemn Israel and urge Muslims worldwide to show their support for Lebanon and Hezbollah. Khamenei refrained from explicitly calling for revenge or clearly stating what steps Iran would take next, instead simply declaring that Israel would regret its actions. On the other hand, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has issued a warning to Iran, Hezbollah's main supporter, boasting the Israeli military's capacity to reach any target in the region. According to media sources close to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) a senior IRGC general, Abbas Nilforushan, was also a victim of the attack that killed Nasrallah. On September 30, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson has declared that Iran will issue an appropriate response if its national security is threatened.

Iran's future response to the recent escalations is a matter of high concern. Israel has crossed multiple red lines in regards to Iran, starting with the bombing of Iran's embassy in Damascus last April, followed by the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran in July, and now culminating in Nasrallah's elimination. Nonetheless, these actions have been regarded as a provocation. Iran's president, Masoud Pezeshkian, alluded to this recently, commenting that Iran would not fall into the "trap" of a regional war. However, Israel's incursion into Lebanon has put this into question, stirring fears of an Iranian attack against Israel.

The consequences of Iran waging an all-out war against Israel would be extensive, as Iran's direct engagement in the conflict would almost certainly warrant a response from the United States. The military capabilities of Iran and its allies would not be able to overpower those of Israel and the United States. This being said, while the risk of Iran waging an all-out war on Israel is minimal, it is probable that the Islamic Republic will use its regional allies (the so-called "Axis of Resistance") to retaliate in a coordinated way, while ensuring this remains within confines that do not invite U.S. intervention. Namely, Hezbollah's ability to escalate the conflict and the deployment of precision-guided missiles is limited by Iranian restrictions.

Lebanon

The situation in Lebanon has been deteriorating at a rapid pace, with the Israeli ground offensive in Lebanon marking a new low in this conflict. Tanks and heavy shelling have been observed at the border. Hezbollah seems to have foreseen a ground offensive, as their deputy leader Naim Qassem, in his first public address since Nasrallah's assassination, has stated the following: "We will face any possibility and we are ready if the Israelis decide to enter by land and the resistance forces are ready for a ground engagement". Analysts and geopolitical observers have been of the opinion that a ground offensive would mark the start of a much-feared "all-out war". In an attempt to prevent this, Lebanon's caretaker PM Mikati has stated that the Lebanese Government is ready to deploy its army in the south and fully implement the UNSC Resolution 1701 of 2006 that aimed to end Hezbollah's armed presence south of the Litani River as part of an agreement to stop war with Israel. Resolution 1701 ended the monthlong Israel-Hezbollah war in 2006 and called for a full Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon, with only the Lebanese army and UN peacekeepers maintaining a presence there. Israel has previously stated that it will only accept a ceasefire in Lebanon when Hezbollah is pushed away from the border to the north of the Litani River and disarmed. It is unclear whether this initiative will be successful and what the implications for Lebanon's internal situation will be. The ground offensive will drive more civilians out of their houses, traveling to northern Lebanon or to Syria.

Hezbollah has potentially already struck back at Israel by conducting their largest missile attack at Tel Aviv since the war has started. In this attack they reportedly targeted the Mossad headquarters.

In light of the deteriorating situation, several airlines including Flydubai, Emirates Airlines, Iran Air, Air Algerie, Air France and Turkish Airlines have suspended flights to Beirut.

Yemen

On September 29, the Israeli military has launched a series of air raids on Houthi targets in Yemen. Power plants and sea port facilities in Ras Isa and Hodeidah were targeted. At least four people were killed and power outages were caused. The attack came in retaliation after the Houthis allegedly fired a ballistic missile at the Ben Gurion International Airport near Tel Aviv the day before. A spokesperson on behalf of the Houthis stated that the strike would not deter the group from perpetrating further attacks on Israel. In fact, earlier this month, the Houthis issued a statement on Telegram warning that Israel should expect more attacks ahead of the anniversary of the October 7 events which triggered the ongoing conflict in Gaza. The strikes targeting the Houthis indicate that Israel is ramping up its attacks on multiple fronts against Iran-backed militant, which further raises concerns for the stability of the region.

In light of the ground offensive initiated by Israel, it becomes increasingly likely that the Houthis will perpetuate their attacks. As evidence, on October 1, the group has targeted Israeli army bases in Tel Aviv and Eilat with drones.

Iraq

On the night of Sunday, September 29, the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, another Iran-backed group, claimed it has allegedly executed a series of coordinated attacks using al-Arqaab missiles in Haifa, the port of Haifa, and central areas within the occupied Palestinian territories.

On September 25, the Islamic Resistance of Iraq has launched a drone attack on southern port city of Eilat. Israeli officials have stated they are monitoring the "threat from Iraq" and "would do whatever was necessary to address the matter".

Earlier on Wednesday, September 25, the Iraqi group stated that it had also aimed drones at Israel's Jordan Valley. The Israeli military reported that a drone fell in the desert early Wednesday, causing no injuries or damage, after sirens had sounded in Israel, near the border of Jordan.

These latest strikes from the Iran-backed group in Iraq highlight the expansive role of Iran in Israel's current conflicts, and how quickly any escalation could draw in more regional players.

The Iranian-backed militias in Iraq are allegedly seeking to strike at Israel to help take the pressure off Hezbollah. This will now be of even greater importance as Hezbollah is facing off Israeli troops moving into southern Lebanon. As such, similarly to the Houthis in Yemen, Iran-backed militias located in Iraq are likely to increase their attacks on Israeli targets, as well as on U.S. military bases and other strategic objects based in Iraq. On October 1, a military base hosting US forces near Baghdad International Airport was targeted in an attack.

Syria

Syria has been under pressure as over 100,000 people have crossed the border from Lebanon fleeing Israel's bombardment. The possibility of a ground offensive could be launched would displace an even higher number of people.

On top of this, on the night of Sunday, September 29 the Israeli military carried out a strike near Damascus. Commanders from Lebanon's Hezbollah as well as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards allegedly frequented the villa that was targeted. Israel has said it will not allow Iran to gain a foothold on its border with Syria, where dozens of foreign-backed militias operate.

On September 28, another suspected Israeli airstrike targeted the vicinities of Al-Qusair in Homs Governorate and Assal al-Ward in Rif-Dimashq Governorate. Machinery and facilities near the Syrian-Lebanese border were targeted and destroyed.

Despite speculations of Iranian-backed forces opening a new front against Israel in Syria, this front has remained mysteriously calm for the past year, despite the involvement of other Iranian allies in the conflict and Israel's strikes and operations inside Syria. Syria is the only member of the Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance" to have so far stayed out of the conflict.

It is likely that Iran is only tolerating this situation and would prefer to have Syria directly involved, but Russian influence and interests are potentially influencing the dynamics.

Advice from Forth Global

- For a thorough analysis of the potential impact on your operations in the implicated countries, please contact us.
- Strongly reconsider travelling to Iran, Lebanon and Israel and be well prepared for travelling to Iraq and the wider Middle East.
- Do not travel to active areas of military operation, such as southern Lebanon.
- If travel is absolutely necessary, ensure that all employees receive a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment and assess the situation closely to the travel date.
- Ensure contingency plans, such as hibernation, relocation and evacuation are reviewed and updated when needed.
- Ensure that shelter, transportation, and means of communication are provided and that you have multiple options may one of them fail.
- Due to the high pressure on local healthcare facilities, it is recommended to bring a first aid kit while travelling.

Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

+31 (0) 35 543 04 37
ra@forthglobal.com

We provide a wide range of services to prepare your organization and employees for situations like these. More information on our website: www.forthglobal.com