

We're Already in a Regional War. Only a Gaza Ceasefire Can End It. The Assassinations of Shukr and Haniyeh

As long as Palestinians were the primary casualties, Israel's allies indulged its military hubris. Now they fear the bitter fruits of their mistake.

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Global Research, August 07, 2024

[+972 Magazine](#) 6 August 2024

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Law and Justice](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

The back-to-back [assassinations](#) of Hezbollah commander Fuad Shukr in Beirut and Hamas political chief [Ismail Haniyeh](#) in Tehran were acts of either strategic folly or willful pyromania. While Israel has claimed responsibility for the former and remained cryptic about the latter, there is little doubt that it orchestrated both — and even some of its allies believe that, this time, the Israelis went too far.

Israeli politicians were quick to latch onto a pretext for a high-level strike on Hezbollah — a [rocket attack](#) from Lebanon that killed 12 Syrian Druze children and youth in the occupied Golan Heights, for which Hezbollah denied involvement — despite local residents vehemently protesting their calls for retribution. Shukr and Haniyeh were certainly key members of their respective groups, but Israel knows very well that both organizations have internal mechanisms and contingency plans to replace them; after all, these are hardly the first assassinations that the two resistance movements have experienced.

Crucially, as Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah and Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [declared](#), the killing of two senior figures in foreign capitals, executed in the space of a few hours, was an unambiguous message that broke the so-called "red lines" established between the fighting parties over the past 10 months. Now, the world is holding its breath for a retaliation to an unnecessary power play, inching us closer to a conflagration unlike any we've seen in decades.

The volatile effects of Israel's [military hubris](#) have been clear from the very first days of "Operation Iron Swords," the brutal campaign launched on the Gaza Strip after Hamas' deadly [October 7 assault](#). But international politics has always put more stock in the killing of symbolic leaders than of civilians.

Indeed, although October 7 thrust the entire Middle East into a violent vortex, we have repeatedly been told that the threshold of a "regional war" has not yet been crossed. The battling actors, experts insist, are still playing a risky but calibrated game to re-establish mutual "deterrence," permitting certain levels of violence that can still be read as avoiding all-out havoc.

In many ways, however, this is a discursive trick that downplays the harrowing truth on the ground: we have already been in the throes of that regional war for months. The evidence is

in the bodies and debris piling up [in Gaza](#) and [southern Lebanon](#), and in the activation of the Western-led alliance and the Axis of Resistance across multiple fronts — from [U.S. warships](#) in the Mediterranean to [Houthi militias](#) in the Red Sea, from [Israeli airstrikes](#) in Lebanon to a [missile barrage](#) from Iran.

This confrontation can become infinitely worse. Yet the very reason that international actors have belatedly jolted into action this past week is the same reason the war is being pushed into its most hazardous phase yet: that certain lives, and certain interests, matter more than others.

Arrogance and Ambitions

For Western governments, the main danger posed by the assassinations of Shukr and Haniyeh is not the untold number of Arabs or Iranians who might be killed in an escalation of hostilities. If anything, the past 10 months have shown that as long as Palestinians were the primary casualties, an elongated war was a [tolerable](#), if regrettable, state of affairs. As a result, Western capitals, chief among them Washington, declined to pull out all the stops to curb the fighting, instead buying time for Israel to try to advance its declared aims in Gaza and Lebanon — even as it was clear that the Israelis would fail.

Now, however, Western governments are panicking. They not only fear what an escalated war might do to the global order, including stoking security chaos and disrupting economic supply chains. It is also the very real prospect that such a war could incur a massive Israeli death toll — and with it, the unprecedented weakening of the Israeli state.

This withering process arguably began at the start of 2023, during the country's [internal battles](#) over the far right's judicial overhaul, but it has been rapidly expedited by October 7 and the Gaza operation. The full damage of Israel's current military attrition and loss of global standing have yet to sink in, but a serious attack by Hezbollah or Iran will likely worsen that decline.

Image: Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, left, and Knesset Foreign Affairs and Security Committee Chairman Yuli Edelstein attend a briefing at Gallant's office in Tel Aviv, January 30, 2024. (Photo credit: Ariel Hermoni/Defense Ministry)



Even if some in Israel admit that the military may have overreached, national ego could compel them to respond again; Defense Minister Yoav Gallant is already [directing](#) the army to prepare for a “quick transition to offense.” The constant desire to settle scores and claim some kind of victory may trounce any rationale for putting the guns down.

One might have expected Israel's own leaders to recognize that worsening spiral, with the

country's economy [tanking](#), its army [growing weary](#), and its northern and southern populations displaced. But these leaders are [too blinded](#) by ideological ambitions, nationalist arrogance, and fear for their own political survival to consider any path other than militarism and bombast.

It is not just Benjamin Netanyahu, whose own security cabinet [admits](#) that the prime minister is directly [sabotaging](#) a hostage deal with Hamas. From Gallant to IDF Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi, much of the political and military brass has a [vested interest](#) in some form of a prolonged conflict. All of them were in charge on the day that Israel suffered its worst security failure in decades, and all of them are fighting to restore their reputations if not their careers; an endless emergency, they believe, can help to stretch their days in office.

Meanwhile, the far-right ministers in government, led by Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben Gvir, are embracing the crisis in order to pursue their messianic goals. Their constituents on the ground, chiefly settlers in the West Bank, are matching [legislative advances](#) for formal annexation with [army-backed pogroms](#) against Palestinian communities, consolidating their vision of Greater Israel while promoting plans to [resettle Gaza](#) as well.

More Foresight Than the White House

It is precisely these officials that President Joe Biden and other Western leaders have gifted with [near-total impunity](#), despite every indication of their ulterior motives, their blatant war crimes, and even growing resentment from the Israeli public itself. For 10 months, the world's most powerful governments have played dumb and helpless, pretending they had [little leverage](#) over a state that is hustling for more weapons, funds, and diplomatic backing for its onslaught. And Biden, even as he is [reportedly realizing](#) how much he is being "lied to" by Netanyahu, has still kept America's taps open, ensuring that the reins of power remain in the hands of the fools and pyromaniacs.

Now, Washington — and for that matter, the Arab signatories to the [Abraham Accords](#) — are reaping the bitter fruits of one of their biggest mistakes: embracing the idea that bypassing the Palestinians would pave the way to regional peace. Hamas' October 7 attack shattered that [misguided belief](#), but the Biden administration has not absorbed the lesson.

In fact, the United States has preferred to [launch airstrikes](#) in Yemen and Iraq, [threaten](#) the world's top courts, and indulge Netanyahu in Washington with [standing ovations](#), rather than force Israel into a ceasefire in Gaza. The fact that millions of protesters worldwide took to [city streets](#) and [campuses](#) to demand a stop to the war from its very first days, and the Biden administration [didn't](#), shows how much more foresight regular citizens have compared to the decision-makers sitting in the White House.

But catastrophe is not inevitable. In the diplomatic void left by the United States, others have stepped up in recent months to try and stem the fallout. Qatar is still mediating negotiations between Hamas and Israel, despite the latter regularly insulting and undermining its hosts' efforts, and now assassinating one of the other side's [chief negotiators](#).



[Source](#)

China, which traditionally stayed clear of deep involvement in the conflict, facilitated the latest efforts at Palestinian reconciliation, when 14 factions, including Fatah and Hamas, signed a [declaration of unity](#) in Beijing last month. The new Labour-led British government has reversed its predecessor's [cuts to UNRWA](#), withdrawn its [objections](#) to the International Criminal Court's applications for arrest warrants, and is reportedly close to halting certain [arms sales](#) to Israel.

Importantly, the International Court of Justice, which has recognized the plausibility of an unfolding [genocide](#) in Gaza, has unequivocally deemed Israel's occupation illegal, and demanded [firm actions](#) to bring about its end. And ICC Prosecutor Karim Khan is waiting for the greenlight to order Netanyahu and Gallant to [stand trial](#) at The Hague, along with Hamas' Gaza chief Yahya Sinwar (who, if reports of commander [Mohammed Deif's](#) killing are true, is now the only surviving Hamas suspect).

All of these are miniscule measures compared to Washington's massive leverage, or the more serious economic and political pressures that other governments still hold. But they are indicators of where international policy is finally heading. The United States needn't find itself woefully catching up to these shifts, but getting ahead means accepting the truth that its most valued ally in the region — and U.S. power itself — has been a source of more devastation than peace.

Exercising Outsized Power

The Palestinians, for their part, are outnumbered, outgunned, and outmatched by regional and global forces beyond their control, suffering a genocidal campaign more destructive than the 1948 Nakba. Israel's [killing fields](#) have ripped apart every Palestinian family in

Gaza, turned much of the Strip into [valleys of rubble](#), and condemned 2 million besieged people, half of them children, to a lifetime of physical and psychosocial [trauma](#).

Hamas is [surviving](#) through its armed resistance and political organs, but it has taken heavy military blows, lost much international legitimacy after the October 7 [massacres](#), and is scrambling for control and [support](#) in Gaza itself. The Fatah-led Palestinian Authority has once again demonstrated its [total incapacity](#) to aid its people, glued to its role as the occupation's police force while rapidly slipping into political and financial bankruptcy.

Yet Palestinians have also proven that they carry outsized power in the face of these colossal barriers — and they must exercise it accordingly. While the foremost priority is to ensure the survival of Palestinians in Gaza from missiles, [starvation](#), and disease, it is also vital to assert their political agency at a time when external actors — from the Israeli army to Arab and Western states — are drawing up plans to dictate their fate.



As such, the Beijing unity declaration is a crucial, albeit imperfect, initiative to mobilize around. Although President Mahmoud Abbas and his loyalists are likely to try and thwart reconciliation efforts, many members of Fatah and Hamas are recognizing the urgent need to cooperate in order to restore their legitimacy and preserve Palestinian ownership of their affairs. Palestinian civil society will need to exert pressure on the elites to translate their statements into tangible actions, while insisting on opening avenues for popular and democratic participation.

Efforts to establish a Gaza [reconstruction council](#), led by Palestinians and aided by financial and technical support from abroad, should be elevated to ensure the Strip does not become a playground for foreign interference, neither from the West nor the East. A plan will also need to be drawn up for a national security apparatus that integrates Fatah security forces, Hamas' police, and other armed groups to have the capacity and credibility to restore order and safety among the population.

Questions of statehood and peace negotiations should not be the priority or precondition of this national program: survival, rehabilitation, and reorganization must take precedence. And international actors must respect that.

But all of this will mean little if Palestinians remain captive to the geopolitical dynamics that have thwarted their cause for a [century](#), and brought the region to the verge of calamity. As much as Western powers may skirt around the problem, a ceasefire in Gaza remains the keystone to regional de-escalation, and Palestinian liberation the blueprint for regional hope.

Palestine is hardly the first epicenter of the Middle East's regional battles, but it may be the

final crack that shatters any semblance of the international order that failed to prevent such a war. What comes next will be defined by what happens in Gaza — and Palestinians must seize the tools to sculpt it.

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