**[Raising the stakes](https://www.dawn.com/news/1851738/raising-the-stakes)**

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ISRAEL’S criminal actions have again pushed the Middle East to the edge of the precipice, unleashing fears of a wider conflict. Ten months of Israel’s brutal war on Gaza have already claimed 40,000 Palestinian lives, displaced two million people, and brought untold suffering to Gazans.

Its assassination in quick succession of top Hamas leader [Ismail Haniyeh](https://www.dawn.com/news/1849144/hamas-chief-ismail-haniyeh-assassinated-in-iran) in Iran, and senior Hezbollah commander [Fuad Shukr](https://www.dawn.com/news/1849297/body-of-top-hezbollah-fighter-found-in-beirut-as-fears-of-wider-war-grow) in Lebanon, further raised the stakes in a dangerous escalation of regional tensions. The audacious targeted killing of Haniyeh, a former prime minister of Palestine, who was in Tehran to attend the inauguration of the [newly elected](https://www.dawn.com/news/1844187) Iranian president sent shockwaves throughout the Middle East. This came a day after an Israeli strike assassinated Shukr in Beirut.

Just a week earlier, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu undertook a [high-profile trip to Washington](https://v), where he received enthusiastic bipartisan support. He met President Joe Biden, former president Donald Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris, all of whom [reiterated](https://www.dawn.com/news/1848136#:~:text=Harris%20ensures%20Israel%E2%80%99s%20right%20to%20%E2%80%98defend%20itself%E2%80%99) their unflinching commitment to Israel’s security. He received rapturous applause during his address to the joint session of Congress.

This emboldened Netanyahu to up his deadly game and order the two assassinations on his return, even if they were planned before. He also took advantage of a lame-duck Biden administration, which urged a ceasefire but did little to pressure Israel. Instead, the deployment of additional US warships and [fighter aircraft](https://www.dawn.com/news/amp/1851025) to the Middle East on the heels of the killings indicated the ‘cover’ Washington sought to provide Israel and ‘legitimise’ rather than censure Israel’s brazen violations of international law. Ostensibly aimed at mitigating the risk of a broader conflict, it only exacerbated tensions in the Middle East.

These developments have driven the region to the brink of a wider conflagration, with Iran under mounting pressure to retaliate for Haniyeh’s assassination and violation of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Its leaders have vowed to avenge the killing, with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warning of a harsh, punishing response. Iran’s newly elected President Masoud Pezeshkian has made it clear that Tehran does not wish to broaden the war and contribute to a bigger crisis, but Israel “will definitely receive a response for its crimes and insolence”. Meanwhile, Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, declared that its conflict with Israel had entered a new phase and warned of a major retaliation in response to the assassination.

Tehran, however, is faced with a dilemma as it mulls an appropriate response to Israel. It knows further escalation and a widening of the war is exactly what Netanyahu wants, having tried — unsuccessfully — for years to goad Washington into joining Israel in an attack on Iran. It also has to consider that any significant military reprisal would rule out the possibility of détente with the West that Pezeshkian had pledged to pursue to secure sanctions relief.

But it cannot let Tel Aviv’s criminal action go unanswered and has to do more than just save face to re-establish deterrence. Its carefully calculated, limited military response to Israel’s bombing of the Iranian consulate in Damascus in April did not deter the Israelis from carrying out the Hamas leader’s assassination on Iranian soil.

For now, Iran’s focus is on diplomatic efforts to build a consensus at the regional and global level against Israel’s aggressive actions. Attempts by some Arab countries at Washington’s behest to dissuade Tehran to hold off a military response have not gone anywhere. Concerned about an “imminent” Iranian attack on Israel, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington was urging all parties to refrain from escalation and “take steps to ease tensions”. Although the US called for a ceasefire, the Biden administration had nothing to say about the fact that the Israelis killed the man who was negotiating with them for a ceasefire and hostage and detainees release deal.

This dealt a heavy blow to the talks brokered by the US, Qatar and Egypt. It again exposed Netanyahu’s lack of interest in a peace deal and intent to prolong the war. Washington’s own actions and failure to rein in Netanyahu contributed to the increasingly explosive situation. The head of US Central Command, Gen Michael Kurilla, arrived in Israel in the wake of the assassinations to discuss “joint preparations in the region, as part of the response to threats in the Middle East” — a reference to ‘threats’ from Iran and its regional allies dubbed as the ‘axis of resistance’.

Israel’s escalation has pushed the Middle East to the brink of a wider war.

In fact, the US has continued to back and arm the Israeli government throughout the 10 months of its genocidal war that has wreaked so much death and destruction in Gaza. As the war enters the eleventh month, the situation across the Strip has become even more dire and desperate. Relentless Israeli air strikes [continue to target schools](https://www.dawn.com/news/1851374/israel-airstrike-on-gaza-school-kills-more-than-100-govt-media-office), refugee camps and residential buildings, laying waste to much of Gaza. There is no safe shelter for [displaced Palestinians](https://www.dawn.com/news/1851668/gazans-flee-from-death-to-death-as-khan-yunis-hit). A humanitarian disaster continues to unfold. In the West Bank, casualties are rising as violent Israeli crackdowns intensify. Israel has also stepped up air strikes across southern Lebanon and assassinated a Hamas official in Sidon.

Jordan’s foreign minister has warned that “Israel is pushing the entire region into the abyss of a regional war by continuing its aggression on Gaza, violating international law and attacking the sovereignty of states”. But the question is, what is the international community, especially Arab states, doing to stop this?

An extraordinary [OIC ministerial meeting](https://www.dawn.com/news/1850839) last week issued a statement holding “Israel, the illegal occupying power, fully responsible for this heinous attack” (on Haniyeh), which it described as “a serious infringement” of Iran’s sovereignty. But that was it. In fact, the conduct of Arab states has been more than disappointing, to put it mildly, and has hardly matched the expectation of Muslims across the world.

Nevertheless, if Israel believes military aggression and its assassination strategy will weaken the Palestinian armed resistance and annihilate Hamas, it is utterly mistaken. History has shown time and again that no amount of violent repression and brutal force can diminish an occupied people’s will to resist. Nor can liberation movements be destroyed by killing its leaders.

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