

The situation in the Middle East has once more become extremely volatile, ahead of the first anniversary of attack on **Israel** carried out by Hamas 7 October 2023

## Background Information

As tensions have been running high over the last few weeks, the situation in **Lebanon** eventually became **seriously unstable** in just a few days following a year-long undeclared war between Hezbollah and the Israeli army in the south of the country, on a front opened by Hezbollah 8 October 2023 "in support" of Hamas, which Israel planned to "destroy" in the Gaza Strip. Israel started its **offensive against Hezbollah** with two major attacks on the Shiite militia's telecommunications network (remote explosions of beepers and walkie-talkies), in which 42 people were killed, including 12 civilians and 3,500 others were injured 17 and 18 September. The offensive continued with a widespread **aerial bombing** campaign from 23 September aimed at weakening the capabilities of Hezbollah, whose general staff was decimated in massive strikes on its underground HQ in Dahiyeh (a southern suburb of Beirut), killing its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah, 27 September. In total, the aerial bombardments that mainly targeted the south, the Beqaa Valley and Baalbek-Hermel, but also Sidon and several towns in the Chouf and Mount Lebanon regions, in addition to Shiite villages in the districts of Byblos, Keserwan and Metn, left **1,750 people dead and several thousand others injured** and missing, civilians for the most part, but have also displaced more than a million people. 30 September, the Israeli army said it was starting "**limited ground operations**" in Southern Lebanon.

In **Israel**, the repercussions of 7 October revealed **deep divisions** between the security apparatus and the sixth Netanyahu government, in place since November 2022. This was followed by a highly criticised handling of the war against Hamas in Gaza, both nationally and internationally. Despite an unprecedented use of force by the IDF in the Palestinian enclave (two thirds of buildings destroyed or damaged and more than 41,000 people killed according to the UN), Israel's war objectives, namely the return of the hostages and the destruction of Hamas, have not been achieved. It was against this very backdrop that, at the beginning of September 2024, **popular pressure** in Israel once again increased in solidarity with the hostages on the occasion of a historic general strike. On the brink of implosion, the sixth Netanyahu government found a convenient scapegoat in Defence Minister Yoav Gallant to justify **the military ineffectiveness of the Israeli forces in Gaza**. He was set to be "sacked" but ultimately stayed on amid the Israeli offensive against Hezbollah in Lebanon, justified by an alleged attempted attack foiled by Shin Bet and publicly revealed a few hours before the beepers exploded.

## Analysis & Outlook

The acceleration of the events in Lebanon has considerably changed the regional landscape. The government and the Israeli security forces have demonstrated joint operational achievements, which are in sharp contrast to the results of the strategy adopted in Gaza. After a year of solidification of the pro-Iranian "axis of resistance", which led to an increase in the popularity of the Houthi in Yemen and the Shiite militias in Iraq, the spearhead of this "axis", namely Hezbollah, saw its general staff decimated in the space of a few days.

Besides the humanitarian and political consequences of these sudden events in Lebanon, **the affront hit the Iranian regime particularly hard**. With this in mind, 1 October Iran decided to fire around 180 missiles at Israeli territory in order to honour its pledge to respond to the targeted assassinations of leaders of the "axis of resistance" (in particular Hassan Nasrallah and Ismail Haniyeh) by Israel. The attack was on a bigger

scale than the one of a similar nature launched 13 April 2024. However, as in April, Iran warned the US in advance of its intention to attack Israel so that the **American "umbrella"** active in the Gulf and in Jordan would be fully operational to counter the missiles sent and avoid major damage, as Iran was not seeking to initiate a regional war that would threaten the stability of its regime and the continuity of its nuclear programme.

Forced to respond to Israel's attack in an attempt to save its strategic leverage in the axis of resistance, the Iranian regime was nevertheless quick to warn Israel against disproportionate reprisals after the attack, highlighting **the need to preserve the infrastructure dedicated to the nuclear programme**. Although they are mainly underground, by eliminating Hassan Nasrallah Israel has proved its ability to strike at the heart of the axis of resistance through the use of new American anti-bunker bombs coupled with human intelligence from the highest spheres of Iranian power and Hezbollah.

Therefore, it is evident that in the short-term Israel will make the most of this advantage to respond forcefully to the Iranian attack on its territory. For more than a decade, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has been relentless in his opposition to Iran's nuclear programme, advocating military action. However, the US continues to rule out this option, which it considers to inevitably be a regional casus belli. The **current negotiations underway between Israel and the US** will decide on the scale of the response to Iran and its consequences appear to largely depend on the extent of the damage inflicted to Iran's nuclear programme, the main legacy of the Khamenei era, which takes precedence over the durability of the axis of resistance. Finally, the **hostilities between Iran and Israel** come amid a **changing international geopolitical situation** marked by the **international community losing credibility** and allowing the powers that be (United States, Russia, China) to assert themselves.

Although the "limited ground operations" in Southern Lebanon appear to be a risk for the Israeli army, which has announced the death of 8 soldiers in fighting with Hezbollah in less than 48 hours, the Israeli government could decide to launch another military strike on Iran, which will undoubtedly be quite different in scope from the Israeli bombing of a military target near Isfahan last April. It was easily concealed by the Iranian regime, which could this time either decide on de-escalation again to ensure its stability and spare its nuclear programme, or fan the flames of a regional conflict.

## Recommendations

Given that the regional situation is highly volatile and is liable to develop in the immediate future, it is advisable to be **extra vigilant** for all upcoming trips to the Middle East.

It is worth noting that in countries that are directly exposed to the conflict, such as Lebanon, many chancelleries have advised their citizens to **leave the country via commercial flights that are still available** (Middle East Airlines in Lebanon).

In Israel, it is advisable to fly with **El Al, the national carrier**, when planning to leave the country in order to limit the risk of flights being postponed or cancelled at short notice.

Expatriates and travellers should remember to **register with their diplomatic representations**.

It is advisable to consider **postponing any non-essential travel** of staff to the said countries in the coming days.