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The Middle East is on the brink of all-out war – what happens next?

Benjamin Netanyahu under pressure as he plots Israel’s crucial next move against enemies in Iran and Lebanon

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The pressures bearing down on the Israeli prime minister as he calibrates his promised retaliatory strike on Iran are immense.

Caught in a military cul-de-sac following the Oct 7 massacre and a feeling in **Middle East** | Latest updates Israel and Iran on brink of war Analysis: Iron Dome breached
been taking the fight to his enemies and is once again riding high in the polls.

His strategy is “escalation dominance” – one in which you convince your enemies that there is nothing you will not do to win.

In Jerusalem street talk, “Bibi” is the guy in a backgammon bar with a broken bottle of arak and swivelly eyes who no one sane is going to mess with.

It is not only his football-supporting core, the Bibistim, who love it but parts of liberal Israel as well.

“So far, so good” is certainly the consensus view of Israel’s military defence establishment, who, after a year of tension, are embracing “new Bibi” as one of their own.

Old Bibi, they say, was just an “operations guy”, favouring a quick in and out, a brief mowing of the terrorist lawn. Now he has shown himself willing to commit himself to his enemies’ destruction by engaging in full-blown war.

His ascent of the escalatory ladder has come in small, incremental steps – a pause between each to allow domestic sceptics and international allies time to adjust to the new normal.

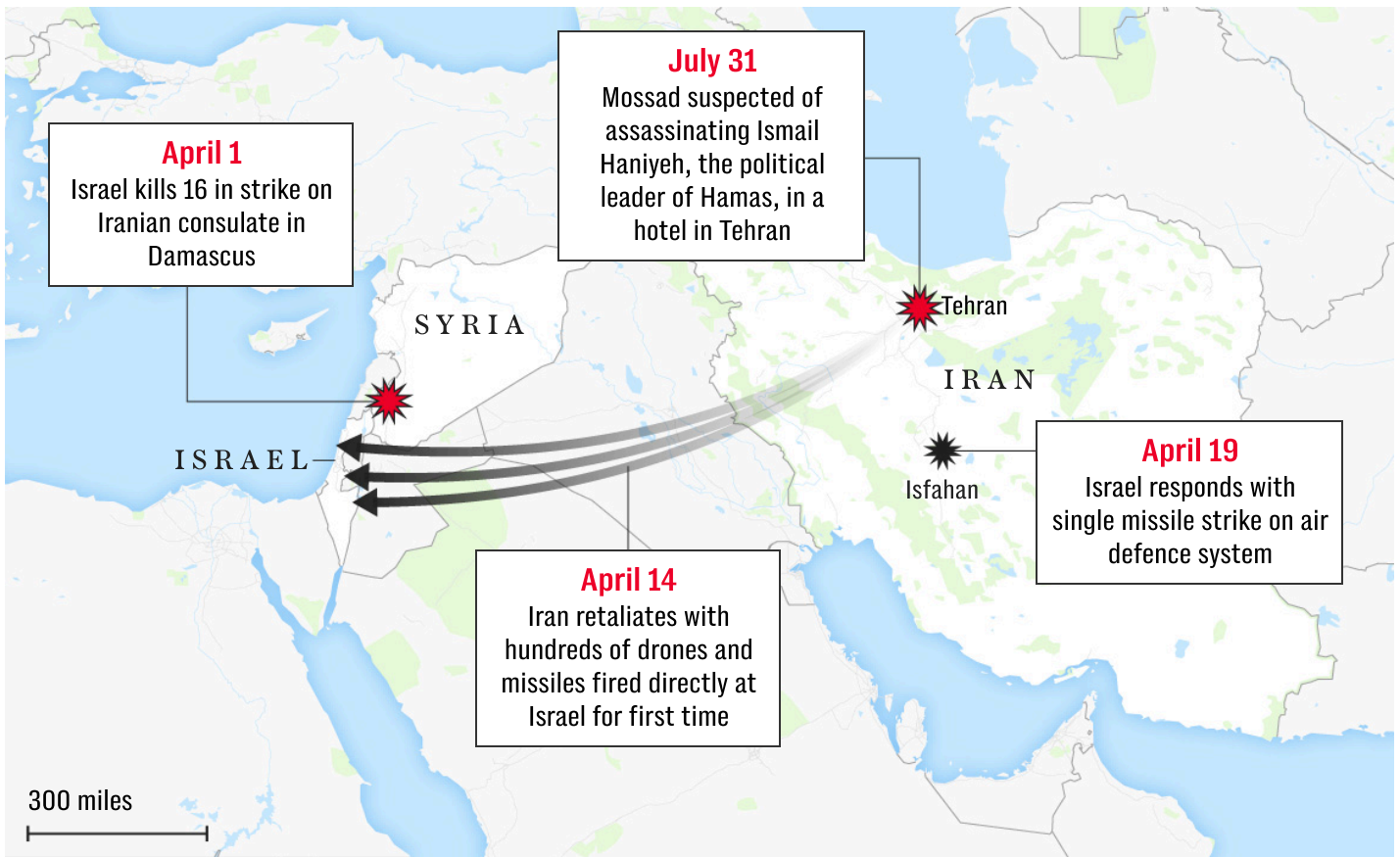
A master of brinkmanship, he has treated Joe Biden like a frog in a pot, occasionally reducing the flame but always heating the water.

Iran’s first direct strike on Israel came on April 13, two weeks after the attack on its consulate in Damascus that killed 16 people, including eight officers of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

The attack was well telegraphed in advance allowing the US-led Centcom alliance to shoot down almost all of its 300 drones and missiles.

Mr Biden urged Mr Netanyahu to “take the win”, which he reluctantly did, but soon he was turning the heat up again.

Israel confronts Iran



Iran had been widely expected to hit Israel for a second time in August after the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh, the political leader of Hamas, in Tehran on July 31, but the attack never came.

After keeping a badly stressed Israeli population on tenterhooks for three weeks, the Iranians took the “off ramp” offered by the US-led Gaza-Israel ceasefire and hostage negotiations.

Perhaps sensing weakness (and further gains in the polls), Israel sought to push home its advantage. The dramatic pager attack in Beirut three weeks ago paved the way for a no-holds-barred assault on Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Then, in the wake of the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah leader, Mr Netanyahu’s star soared again. The feeling among defence analysts – and the wider population – was that Israeli pride had been restored and deterrence re-established across the region.



The pager attack in Beirut three weeks ago paved the way for an assault on Hezbollah in Lebanon, including the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, its leader Atta Kenare/AFP via Getty Images

But things change quickly in the rollercoaster that is modern Israel.

On Tuesday, nine young Israeli soldiers were killed in Lebanon, six people were murdered by gunmen at a light rail station in Tel Aviv and a blitzkrieg of some 200 ballistic missiles was fired at Israel from Iran.

Worse, it quickly transpired that two military bases had been hit and a large number of missiles had penetrated Israel's defences, with more than 30 striking one air base alone.



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So how and when will Mr Netanyahu, who again finds himself under fire, respond?

The trouble with a policy of escalating to de-escalate is that it is difficult to get off the ladder once you've started climbing, both militarily and politically.



Iranians celebrated their country's latest missile strikes on Israel with defiant posters vowing to wipe out their enemy Atta Kenare/AFP via Getty Images

Already the Bibistim are calling for something more decisive and rallying round the call from Naftali Bennett, the prime minister's rival, for a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. "Just finish it," they say.

But there are obvious constraints.

Mr Biden, increasingly chided for allowing Israel to drive US policy, appears to have climbed out of his pot, ruling out US-backed strikes on Iran's nuclear or oil facilities.

He's not quite said it yet, but in April he told Mr Netanyahu he was "on your own" if he failed to follow US advice on Iran.

Analysts note that while it may suit Israel to bring about the collapse of the regime in Tehran – to chop off the head of the octopus, as Mr Bennett puts it – the same is not true for the West.

Rightly or wrongly, the US and most of Europe sees the security threat from Iran as something that can be managed, as it has been for decades.

What they fear most is being sucked into another open-ended regional war in which they would pay dearly in blood and petrodollars. The western nightmare is a re-run of Iraq.

Paul Nuki, Global Health Security Editor, responds to reader questions on the Middle East conflict, from Tel Aviv

‘Why has Israel not yet retaliated?’

Reader B. Junejo asks: "After the latest Iranian attack upon Israeli soil (on October 1), why is it that Israel has yet to retaliate by launching a similar attack upon Iran? Why are all the strikes being carried out only upon Lebanon and, to a lesser extent, Yemen?"

Paul Nuki responded: *"Israel is taking time to carefully calibrate its response. It relies on the US Centcom alliance for protection from Iran's missiles, so to some extent it is bound by what they say. It also knows from last Tuesday's strike on its airbases that Iranian missiles can get through. It must respond to reassert its deterrence but can not afford for all out war. At least that's the assumption. With Bibi at the helm you never quite know - as Hesbollah found out in Lebanon."*

‘Should the West be worried that a wider war could break out?’

Luke Bailey-Harris wanted to know: "In the likelihood that a war does break out with Israel and Iran, whether that be boots on the ground or a consistent exchange of missiles, should the general public in the West be worried that a wider war, maybe even with Western and Russian influence or involvement, could break out?"

Paul Nuki answered: *"Yes, a wider war is a serious worry. Iran is a huge country with a population of 88m people. It also exports a huge amount of oil. Even if British troops can avoid being sucked in - and remember we are part of the Centcom alliance - a scenario in which Iran collapses would likely spark a global economic crisis. The current regime could also be replaced with something worse. We need to be careful what we wish for."*

‘Is Iran closer to getting a bomb than it ever has been?’

A question from Rich Williams: "There has been a lot of reportage and comment as to whether Israel would attack Iran's nuclear facilities.

"With it being known that Iran has supplied missiles to Russia for the Ukraine war, is it widely accepted that they did this in return for help/know-how in regards to nuclear technology? In other words – is Iran closer to getting a bomb than it ever has been, and if so, does Israel (and the West) have to confront this threat at some point, even if Israel and its allies back away from that choice in the coming days and weeks?"

Paul Nuki said: *"It's a difficult question. Iran is not thought to be far away from developing a nuke. There's even an outside possibility it already has one. Containing the Iranian*

nuclear threat has been a project of decades. The agreement Trump undid while in office has reduced transparency. We need to start by trying to get that visibility back, say most experts. Many in Israel, in contrast, think it best just to destroy it but that could have all sorts of unforeseen consequences."

Russia and China are also unlikely to sit idly by in the face of a potentially regime-changing assault on a major supplier of oil and weapons.

The next move, think several Israeli defence experts, should therefore be another incremental step on the escalation ladder.

Something “serious and significant” which is, at the same time, not interpreted by the Iranians as existential. An attack on some missile production sites, perhaps.

As for the timing, it could come on or after Monday’s Oct. 7 commemorations.

To do it on the day would have symbolic value and would be welcomed by some, but many others – most notably the hostage families – would be angry and hurt.

Last, Mr Netanyahu needs to consider the rationality of his opponent, an unstable theocratic regime which is famously big on martyrdom.

Following Tuesday’s strikes, he knows that Israel’s cities and other population centres are potentially open to Iranian counter attack.

The strategy of escalation dominance, his more cautious generals will be telling him, only works if your enemy does not itself believe it can win.