

The Observer - Middle East and north Africa

The Middle East is drifting leaderless to catastrophe. War is just an airstrike away

Sunday 23 June 2024, by [TISDALL Simon](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2024).

From Netanyahu to Nasrallah, the region's politicians are flailing. Will no one stop the lunacy?

Protesters in western Jerusalem on 20 June demand the resignation of Benjamin Netanyahu.
Photograph: Anadolu/Getty Images

When [Benjamin Netanyahu](#) flies to Washington next month, he would be advised to avoid British airspace and airports. As a founding party of the international criminal court (ICC), the UK could find itself legally and morally obliged to detain Israel's prime minister should he stray into its territory.

That's because the ICC's chief prosecutor is seeking a warrant for [Netanyahu's arrest](#) for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in Gaza, where more than 37,000 people, mostly civilians, have died since the 7 October Hamas terrorist attacks in southern Israel, which killed about 1,200 people.

Sadly, the prospect of Netanyahu being led away in cuffs remains remote. It's probably too much to hope that Keir Starmer, as Britain's newly installed prime minister, would try to intercept this fugitive from justice. In its election manifesto, Labour strongly backs the ICC, which [relies on member states to enforce arrests](#).

But when it comes to Gaza, there are plainly pragmatic limits to Labour's devotion to justice for Palestinians, notwithstanding overwhelming evidence of [criminality](#) and revelations that Israel's spy agencies tried to [subvert the ICC](#). Netanyahu is also flouting an international court of justice order to [halt army operations in Rafah](#).

British double standards, not to say hypocrisy, over the atrocious behaviour of Israel's leadership are as nothing to that of the US Congress. The reason Netanyahu will soon be on his travels is an invitation to [address a joint session](#) of the Senate and the House of Representatives on 24 July.

This platform comes courtesy of hard-right, pro-Trump Republicans who count Netanyahu an honorary member of their cult. How galling this must be for President Joe Biden, who rushed to Jerusalem after 7 October, put his arm around Netanyahu's shoulder, and generously [promised support](#).

Biden is paying a high election-year price for an ill-judged display of unquestioning solidarity. Younger voters are appalled by the Gaza carnage, much of it caused by US-supplied bombs. Far from showing gratitude, Israel's leader obstructs US-brokered peace efforts and [picks fights with his benefactor](#).

The Israeli foreign minister, Israel Katz, has warned that IDF plans for full-scale war against Hezbollah are complete. Photograph: Robert Hegedus/EPA

Netanyahu attacked Biden last week for supposedly withholding arms deliveries while presumptuously casting himself as a latter-day Winston Churchill, demanding “the tools to finish the job”. The White House was furious. In fact, only “wide-area effect” 2,000lb US-made bombs, which kill indiscriminately, have been [held back](#). Washington is increasingly concerned that Netanyahu, more dependent than ever on racist extremists and religious Zionists after the collapse of his unity war cabinet, is spoiling for a no-holds-barred [fight with Iran-backed Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon after months of skirmishing.

Many in Israel share the US’s apprehension, accusing the prime minister of perpetuating the Gaza war to stay in power and out of jail (he faces domestic criminal charges in addition to the ICC). Invading [Lebanon](#) would be a logical next step in this mad progression.

Even as Biden’s special envoy was in Beirut and Jerusalem trying to prevent escalation, Israel’s foreign minister, Israel Katz, was warning that Israel Defense Forces’ (IDF) plans for full-scale war against Hezbollah are complete and a decision is “[very close](#)”. Katz vowed Hezbollah’s forces, though more numerous and better armed than Hamas, would be “destroyed and Lebanon will be severely beaten”. These are the same sort of dangerously [unrealistic promises](#) made before the Gaza campaign.

Given what some Israeli commentators see as the IDF’s worst wartime performance, such threats are nevertheless terrifying. If a repeat of the Lebanon invasions of 2006 and 1982 does occur, huge civilian casualties and suffering are a [certainty](#).

It’s often said that Hezbollah, despite its intensified rocket barrages into northern Israel last week, does not seek all-out conflict, and neither does its sponsor, Iran. If there’s a Gaza ceasefire, tensions will ease. But such analysis offers limited reassurance. Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah’s chief bullyboy, issued [dire threats](#) of his own last week. Like Netanyahu, Nasrallah lacks both a plan to end the violence and a strategic vision for a postwar future. Meanwhile, his bosses in Tehran are preoccupied with choosing a new president.

The death last month of the hardline incumbent, [Ebrahim Raisi](#), created an opportunity for Iran to reconsider its aggressive policy of regional “forward defence” using Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese and Yemeni proxies to extend its influence, protect its borders and pressure Israel and its allies. That opportunity is slipping away as six officially approved and vetted candidates vie to replace Raisi on 28 June. Only one, Masoud Pezeshkian, is considered a reformist. His long-shot candidacy gives the false impression of an open contest. The favourite is a veteran conservative, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf – the supposed choice of Iran’s hardline supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. If he wins, Iran will continue down the blind alley of confrontation with Israel and the US on everything from Palestine to [nuclear arms](#).

Another flashpoint could draw in the US. “The Syrian theatre risks sparking an even more deadly direct conflict between Israel and Iran,” the European Council on Foreign Relations [suggests](#), pointing to 170 attacks against US bases in Syria and Iraq since 7 October, Israel’s bombing of [Iran’s consulate](#) in Damascus, and Tehran’s retaliation.

A final descent into chaos may be only one random airstrike or assassination away. After nine merciless months in [Gaza](#), rarely has the risk of all-engulfing, region-wide war seemed higher. Yet if it happens, it will probably be more by accident than by design.

Who can halt this anarchic, rudderless drift towards catastrophe? The Arab states are ineffectual or disengaged. Russia plays spoiler, China is not serious, Iran's intentions are malign. Hamas hides behind civilians, the EU and UN are sidelined, Biden is flailing.

And in [Israel](#), Netanyahu is living, daily proof of a larger truth: everywhere, able leaders of integrity and vision are fatally lacking.

Simon Tisdall

P.S.

- The Guardian. Sat 22 Jun 2024 18.00 CEST:
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jun/22/benjamin-netanyahu-israel-lebanon-regional-war>

Simon Tisdall articles in the Guardian:
<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/simontisdall>

- Simon Tisdall is the Observer's Foreign Affairs Commentator.

Do you have an opinion on the issues raised in this article? If you would like to submit a letter of up to 250 words to be considered for publication, email it to us at observer.letters@observer.co.uk

Tens of millions have placed their trust in the Guardian's fearless journalism since we started publishing 200 years ago, turning to us in moments of crisis, uncertainty, solidarity and hope. More than 1.5 million supporters, from 180 countries, now power us financially - keeping us open to all, and fiercely independent.

Unlike many others, the Guardian has no shareholders and no billionaire owner. Just the determination and passion to deliver high-impact global reporting, always free from commercial or political influence. Reporting like this is vital for democracy, for fairness and to demand better from the powerful.

And we provide all this for free, for everyone. We do this because we believe in information equality. Greater numbers of people can keep track of global events, understand their impact on people and communities, and become inspired to take meaningful action. Millions can benefit from open access to quality news, regardless of their ability to pay for it.

If there were ever a time to join us, it is now. Every contribution, however big or small, powers our journalism and sustains our future.

- Support the Guardian
Available for everyone, funded by readers

[Contribute](#)

[Subscribe](#)