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## *Israel's geopolitical gamble necessitates a high-risk counter*

Israel is betting heavily that its recent escalation across West Asia will pan out favorably. But its opponents are prepared to take heavy risks, too, and they are concluding that peace may only come with a sharp and accurate punch at Tel Aviv.



(Photo Credit: The Cradle)

When it comes to decision-making, particularly in the context of foreign relations, two critical factors come into play: “capability” and “desire.”

“Capability” refers to the tools and power available for countries to implement a decision in the real world.

Equally important is the **cognitive** framework of actors. “Desire,” or aspirations, become deeply intertwined within the cost-benefit analysis of policy decisions.

When a state or non-state actor possesses both significant and sufficient capabilities – and perceives considerable benefits with minimal or manageable costs – it is more likely to proceed with an action.

As an example, the Israeli occupation state not only possessed the capability to strike its desired targets but also experienced a crucial shift in its cost-benefit balance, especially in its foreign policy considerations. Recent escalatory events in West Asia draw attention to these two essential dynamics, particularly as analysts rush to assess likely calculations and counters by adversaries.

### **Upending rationality: Israel shifts toward riskier strategies**

Since the launch of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood last October, Israel has been perceived as an actor facing an existential threat, which has, therefore, increased its willingness to accept greater risks.

Yet only a month after the resistance operation was launched, *Politico* cited former Mossad director Tamir Pardo as blaming Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and US President Joe Biden for fueling the impression that “Israel was facing an existential crisis.” That shift in mindset became evident in Israel’s attack on the [Iranian consulate](#) in Damascus on 1 April. A day after, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said Israel’s goal is to “act everywhere, every day, to prevent the force build-up of our enemies.”

Tel Aviv’s decision-making process is influenced by two key factors: first, the US, and second, the deep state or establishment within Israel. These elements can either enhance rationality or reduce caution in risk acceptance, particularly among Israel’s influential extremists.

The current transformation of Israeli decision-making appears to be informed by one or both of these factors. Iran’s [Operation True Promise](#) in mid-April, which showcased the Islamic Republic’s military capabilities, has somewhat constrained Israel’s risk-taking behavior.

But concerns such as the potential for a full-scale war and its associated high costs have become more pressing, as [highlighted](#) by [Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi](#) when he emphasized Iran’s missile capabilities during the retaliatory operation:

**During Operation True Promise, more than 100 missiles were launched toward Israel in just 100 seconds, at a rate of one missile per second. The United States, Israel, and their regional allies never anticipated that Iran could execute such a precise and large-scale operation.**

### **Calculated escalations**

The [resignation](#) of Benny Gantz from the war cabinet in June could further embolden Tel Aviv’s hardline stance. In addition, President Biden’s shifting focus, particularly with the upcoming 2024 US elections in November, has also impacted some calculations.

The key question that should guide an appropriate response, grounded in analysis and reasoning, is: Why did Netanyahu decide to escalate on so many fronts?

Various interpretations offer different explanations. Some see it as an operational opportunity to carry out targeted, high-profile assassinations without altering overall strategy. Others interpret the [simultaneous assassinations](#) in Beirut and Tehran, along with the occupation state's acceptance of the associated costs and risks, as a strategic shift following Netanyahu's "[high-stakes visit to Washington](#)." Notably, about a week after this trip, at least two provocative acts of terrorism took place.

It's crucial to remember that merely having an operational opportunity for assassination, especially for political decision-makers, does not inherently justify carrying it out. This indicates that the risk of the assassination, which is almost certain to provoke a response from Tehran and its allies, was carefully considered.

Even Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi [remarked](#) during a meeting with Iran's newly elected President Masoud Pezeshkian that the move was an attempt by Netanyahu to spread conflict in the region.

### **High-risk diplomacy with Washington**

If we accept that a strategic change has occurred, particularly in the level or type of policy, three possible scenarios for US interactions with Israel, based on recent visits, stand out:

First, Netanyahu is seeking Donald Trump's victory and has possibly received a green light from him to escalate tensions, disregarding the Biden administration. This scenario suggests that while Trump does not desire a regional war, he may welcome increased pressure on Biden's administration and support from Zionists ahead of the elections.

Second, the recent operations might have been approved by the Biden administration. While Biden may wish to temper Netanyahu's behavior, he could have consented to the assassinations for electoral reasons, hoping they would not escalate into a regional war. This could be seen as a favor to Netanyahu in exchange for aligning Zionists and their influential US lobby behind Democrats in November.

Third, a design for a regional war involving active participation from both Israel and the US may have emerged, with the belief that incumbent governments tend to secure electoral victories during wartime. This would imply that Democrats might see leveraging regional conflict and military engagement as a strategy to secure victory in the presidential elections.

Among these scenarios, the third seems least likely due to the high costs and unpredictability of war, setbacks in the ongoing Ukraine conflict, US domestic challenges, and Vice President Kamala Harris' disagreements with Netanyahu.

The first two scenarios, or a combination of them, appear more plausible and suggest the emergence of a more proactive and independent Israel, displaying high-risk behavior, as evidenced by Tel Aviv's recent assassination spree. At the same time, Israel and the west are likely banking on the fact that the Axis of Resistance does not seek a regional war.

### **It's the Resistance's move**

Netanyahu's strategic shift and decision to carry out high-profile killings appear to be aimed at securing an arrangement with Washington's current or future decision-makers to escalate tensions in West Asia and maintain a state of crisis – setting a “new normal” in the region, if you will. This maneuver seems designed to align Tel Aviv's actions with broader US strategic interests, especially in the context of upcoming elections or shifting alliances.

The assassination of Hamas's political chief, Ismail Haniyeh, while significant, is primarily a tactical move rather than a strategic game-changer in the region. But targeting him *in Tehran*, especially following the inauguration of Iran's new president and during a pause in ceasefire discussions, could have profound strategic implications.

It challenges Iran's power-security image and exacerbates the already-volatile regional situation. This was underscored by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, who highlighted the heightened stakes in a statement by saying, “Iran itself is obliged to respond to this terror.”

The takeaway is clear: Iran and the Resistance Axis are likely to up the cost for Israel. This suggests a shift to a higher level of organized military activity, which could significantly impact Israel's willingness to engage and escalate the costs for the opposing side.

This readiness for a regional war would involve coordinated actions across multiple fronts, potentially resulting in targeted strikes and significant casualties. In the words of an Iranian diplomat quoted by *The Wall Street Journal*: “Our response will be swift and heavy.”

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