

# The drums of war beat louder as Israel plans Iran revenge attack

● We have entered uncharted waters with the Middle East's arch enemies set to battle it out



**Barry O'Halloran**

Though it was achieved with an appalling loss of civilian lives, Israel has destroyed Hamas as an effective fighting force in Gaza. Having endured a daily barrage of Lebanese Hezbollah rockets for 12 months, Israel has set about eliminating this major threat on its northern border.

Following months of aerial bombardment, Hezbollah's rocket-launching capabilities has been severely degraded. Of much more significance, however, was Israel's success in decapitating Hezbollah's military leadership.

In what may count as the most spectacular clandestine operation for many years, Mossad also incapacitated more than 1500 middle-ranking Hezbollah operatives with exploding papers and walkie-talkies.

As the drums of war beat louder in the Middle East, the apparent irrelevance of the EU in the unfolding drama seems painfully obvious.

Increasingly preoccupied with its internal political drift to the right, and with limited military capacity, the shortfalls of Europe's so-called "soft power" are being exposed.

Plaintive pleas from European countries — including Ireland — for ceasefires have so far fallen on deaf ears. In the short term at any rate, it's tanks not talk that will shape the contours of any re-ordered Middle East.

Once again, the United Nations has shown itself to be largely ineffectual. Its security council resolution 1701 was the formula that ended the last Israeli-Hezbollah war in 2006.

Under its terms, Hezbollah agreed to withdraw north of the Litani River. Up to 10,000 Unifil troops, including a 300-strong Irish contingent, were stationed in what was to be a demilitarised zone between the Litani and the Israeli border. The intention was to prevent Hezbollah from re-establishing bases to attack Israel.

In the intervening years, however, Hezbollah was allowed to build an extensive network of rocket-launch sites and tunnels under the noses of these

UN troops. In this regard at least, the Unifil mission has proved to be a failure.

With south Lebanon about to become a very active war zone, these troops — including Irish soldiers — are directly and unnecessarily in the line of fire. As mere observers in the middle of an imminent war zone, the Unifil troops serve little useful purpose.

Though there is now a strong case for withdrawing these UN soldiers to the safety of Cyprus until things calm down, the Irish Government has refused Israel's request to do so. If this refusal results in injuries or worse to these vulnerable Irish soldiers, the Government will bear a large part of the responsibility.

The Israeli incursion into Lebanon to eliminate Hezbollah's rocket infrastructure may simply look like a third Lebanon war. But that would be a mistaken interpretation.

**The Middle East conflict changed radically in April of this year when Iran launched its first ever direct attack on Israel with over 300 drones and missiles. These attacks were largely ineffectual — more of an Iranian warning shot than a purposeful attempt at mass destruction.**

However, last Tuesday's second barrage of 180 Iranian missiles was fundamentally different. Though smaller in number, these were Iran's most sophisticated hypersonic missiles. Travelling at four times the speed of sound, Iran's destructive intentions were unmistakable.

The shadow war between Israel and Iran that has gone on for decades came to an end on Tuesday. This was the opening salvo in a direct military confrontation between the Middle East's arch enemies. It could lead to a highly destructive conflict that might prove much bloodier than what has already happened in Gaza.

More immediately, however, the big unknown is how exactly Israel will respond to Iran's attack.

As the missile barrage descended on Israel, prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu made clear that retaliation



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● Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu

was imminent: "Iran made a big mistake tonight and it will pay for it."

Although fundamentally dependent on US military support for the best part of three decades, Netanyahu has never felt constrained in his dealings with successive US presidents. When speaking with staff after his first meeting with Netanyahu in 1996 Bill Clinton was apoplectic: "Who the f\*\*k does he think he is? Who's the f\*\*king superpower here?"

**Decades later much of the sheen has gone off America's superpower image since the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan. Nowadays, the Israeli prime minister is unlikely to be constrained by a weakened Joe Biden in the twilight of his administration.**

Netanyahu is much more likely to see the coming months before the changing of the guard in Washington as a window of opportunity for even more decisive action. Having already undermined the military capabilities of Hamas and Hezbollah he may now consider it opportune to attack their sponsor, Iran.

Even the leader of the opposition, Naftali Bennett, has urged Netanyahu to act now "to fatally cripple this terrorist regime." Furthermore, the latest opinion polls indicate that the overwhelming majority of Israelis also support attacking Iran.

This sea change in attitude among Israel's politicians and the public has been caused by the October 7 slaughter by Hamas of 1,200 music festival attendees and kibbutz residents, and the kidnapping of 250 others.

For Israelis, decades of defensive deterrence and containment strategy

were seen to fail spectacularly on that fateful day. Henceforth, strategic offence would be the new approach.

As a consequence, Israel's response to Iran's missile attack is likely to be aggressive and comprehensive. In the light of Israel's recent impressive display of espionage skills and military prowess in Lebanon, the Iranian regime is very nervous.

According to former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Ayatollahs have good reason to be worried. It seems that not only Hezbollah but the Iranian regime itself has been penetrated extensively by Israel's intelligence agency, Mossad.

Ahmadinejad told Turkish television on Monday that the head of an Iranian secret service unit set up to weed out Mossad agents in Iran turned out to be a Mossad agent himself.

And that a further 20 double agents had provided Israel with sensitive information on Iran's nuclear programme.

Like all repressive regimes, the Mullahs' rule in Tehran is brittle and maintained largely by brute force. Decades of sanctions have caused severe economic damage leading to hyperinflation and massive unemployment. As a result, the regime is deeply unpopular with its own people.

Israeli officials are briefing that Israel's retaliatory attack will be designed to cause "significant financial damage." This can only mean one thing — an attack on Iran's oil facilities. Oil revenues are the mainstay of the Iranian economy which are used to finance its Hezbollah and Hamas proxies. Over 90pc of this oil is exported from a single terminal on the tiny island of Kharg lying off Iran's southern coast. At a distance of 1,500km from Israel, it is well within fighter-jet range.

Fewer than a dozen US-supplied 2000-pound bombs would put paid to this facility and with it the revenue stream that the Iranian regime depends upon to keep afloat.

While Netanyahu will probably accede to Biden's request not to bomb Iran's nuclear sites, its oil infrastructure is likely to prove far too tempting a target to pass over.

If that happens, we will all have entered uncharted waters.

And despite the recent spate of genocidal calls of "from the river to the sea," recent military actions by Israel are further reminders to both its Muslim neighbours and the international community that Jews will never again go quietly on to the trains.