

# Spillover a source of growing concern

## Western officials in ME to prevent wider war

### International Desk

Fears of the spread of the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip into the entire Middle East region, especially an escalation between Israel and Lebanon, have once again drawn US and European officials to the region.

Since Israel began its onslaught on the Palestinian territory on October 8, resistance movements including Lebanon's Hezbollah, Ansarullah in Yemen, Islamic Resistance in Iraq, and many other groups have been targeting Israel's positions in response to its crimes in the Gaza Strip.

In the latest such attacks, the Hezbollah movement fired more than 60 rockets at an Israeli military base to take revenge on Israel's assassination of the deputy chief of the Hamas resistance movement Saleh al-Arouri and six others in Lebanon's capital on January 2.

Israel's military said it responded with artillery after munitions were fired from Lebanon. Warplanes also hit Hezbollah targets, the military said. Hezbollah and Israel have exchanged near-daily fire over the border since October 8, but the Arouri killing led to fears of a wider conflict.

Nearly three months of cross-border fire have killed 175 people in Lebanon, including 129 Hezbollah fighters, but also more than 20 civilians including three journalists, according to an AFP tally.

In northern Israel, nine soldiers and at least four civilians have been killed, according to Israeli authorities.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has already arrived in the region and discussed the issue with Turkish and Jordanian officials.

Blinken's spokesman, Matt Miller, said the US top diplomat is set to arrive in Israel on Monday where he will discuss specific steps to "avoid escalation".



An Israeli tank enters the Gaza Strip on January 7, 2024.  
● MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP

### Netanyahu's political objectives

US officials are concerned that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may see an expanded fight in Lebanon as key to his political survival amid domestic criticism of his cabinet's failure to prevent Hamas's Oct. 7 attack, which killed an estimated 1,200 people and resulted in some 240 captives being taken to Gaza.

Israel has made clear that it views as untenable the regular exchange of fire between its forces and Hezbollah along the border and may soon launch a major military operation in Lebanon.

On the other side, Hezbollah's chief has warned that, "Whoever considers going into war against us, will simply regret it."

"If the enemy thinks of waging a war on Lebanon, we will fight without restraint, without rules, without limits and without restrictions," Nasrallah said in a televised speech.

In private conversations, the US administration has warned Israel against a significant escalation in Lebanon. If it were to

do so, a new secret assessment from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) found that it will be difficult for Israel's military to succeed because its military assets and resources would be spread too thin given the conflict in Gaza, according to two people familiar with those findings.

### New fronts against Israel

Iran's officials have also repeatedly warned Israel about the continuation of its crimes in the Palestinian territory.

Days after the beginning of Israel's war on Gaza, Iran's Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said that fighting against the Israeli regime, which has brought the Gaza Strip under a deadly and destructive war, may expand to new fronts.

"Continuation of these war crimes will be followed by other reactions on other axes, for which the Zionist regime and its supporters would be responsible," he added.

The escalation also forced the European Union foreign policy chief Josep Borrell to visit Leb-

anon on Saturday.

"It is imperative to avoid regional escalation in the Middle East. It is absolutely necessary to avoid Lebanon being dragged into a regional conflict," Borrell said during a press conference in Beirut with Lebanon's foreign minister.

"I am sending this message to Israel, too: Nobody will win from a regional conflict," he added.

His visit was part of a diplomatic push to avoid further regional escalation and call for a solution to the Gaza war which has claimed the lives of at least 22,800 Palestinians so far.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said Sunday that at least 22,835 people have been killed in the besieged Palestinian territory since October 7.

The ministry said in a statement that it had recorded 113 deaths in 24 hours, while a total of 58,416 people had been wounded in the Gaza Strip during the three months of fighting.

### West Bank tensions

Meanwhile, nine people were killed Sunday in the occupied

West Bank, including seven Palestinians who were targeted in an air strike by the Israeli army, sources on both sides said.

Violence in the West Bank has surged to levels unseen in nearly two decades. Israeli forces carry out regular raids in the occupied territory, especially in the city of Jenin and its adjacent refugee camp.

"An Israeli occupation bombardment on a group of citizens killed seven people in Jenin," said the Palestinian Authority-run Ministry of Health, which is based in Ramallah.

Israeli police said an Israeli police officer was killed during an operation at the refugee camp.

"She (officer) was in an operational vehicle that was hit by an explosive device," the force said, adding three other officers were also wounded.

In another incident north of Ramallah, an Israeli civilian was shot dead, the army said.

Since October 7, at least 328 people in the West Bank have been killed by either soldiers or Israeli settlers, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry.

### Quds Force chief: Arouri's comrades to become Israel's 'nightmare'



The commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) warned of the "nightmare" facing Israel after the Tel Aviv regime assassinated Saleh al-Arouri, deputy head of the political bureau of the Palestinian Hamas resistance movement.

Brigadier General Esmail Qa'ani issued the warning in a letter sent on Sunday to Ismail Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau.

Qa'ani extended congratulations and condolences to Haniyeh over the martyrdom of Arouri in a terrorist Israeli drone strike in Lebanon.

"The world will witness how the comrades of Martyr Arouri turn into the nightmare of the child-killing regime," he wrote.

"Arouri was martyred with a brilliant record in the first, al-Aqsa and al-Quds intifadas," the IRGC commander added, referring to three Palestinian uprisings against the Israeli regime over the past years.

Arouri, 57, was assassinated in Beirut's southern suburb of Dahiyeh on January 2.

He was one of the founders of Hamas' military wing, known as Qassam Brigades, before taking on a political portfolio in recent years.

He was seen as a key player in the movement, masterminding its operations in the West Bank from exile in Syria, Turkey, Qatar and finally Lebanon after long stints in Israeli prisons.

Haniyeh said the cowardly assassination of Arouri proved Israel is seeking to evade defeat and cover up its failure in its ongoing genocidal war on the besieged Gaza Strip.

## 32 suspects arrested over Kerman attack: Prosecutor

All individuals suspected to be involved in the recent terrorist attack in the southeastern Iranian city of Kerman have been arrested, said the city's prosecutor Mehdi Bakhshi.

"Thirty-two people have been arrested in connection with the Kerman crime case and are going through preliminary interrogations," Bakhshi said during a televised interview on Saturday, three days after the terrorist attack, Press TV reported.

The judicial official added that before the terrorist attack, as many as "16 bombs were discovered throughout Kerman Province" whose explosive power was more than the suicide vests used in the Wednesday bombings.

The twin bombings, which were claimed by the Daesh terrorist group, were carried out near the burial site of Iran's late anti-terror commander Lt. Gen. Qassem Soleimani during a ceremony marking the fourth anniversary of his martyrdom. The blasts

left 91 people, including 14 Afghans, dead and 286 others wounded, some of them in critical condition.

Bakhshi dismissed rumors that the explosives used during the attack were placed in trash cans and were remotely detonated, saying both bomb blasts were conducted by suicide bombers, one of whom was from Tajikistan.

Emphasizing that terrorists were not able to plant any explosives inside the cemetery where martyrs are buried, the prosecutor said, "Over the recent months, as many as 23 Daesh terrorists ready to carry out suicide attacks have been arrested across Kerman Province."

The prosecutor noted that the province had to deal with a high number of threats during this year's martyrdom anniversary of General Soleimani, amid reports about potential terror attacks by Daesh and the anti-Iranian Mujahedin-e-Khalq terrorist cult.

"Therefore, the entire province was mobilized" to counter any possible threats, he said.

The Kerman's terrorist attack was the focus of talks between Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and his French counterpart Catherine Colonna on Saturday.

During a phone conversation, Amir-Abdollahian called for more efforts by the international community to counter terrorism in all its forms. Iran's top diplomat highlighted the need for more efforts by the international community to counter all forms of terrorism in a more effective and practical manner.

For her part, the French foreign minister reiterated Paris's condemnation of the terrorist attack in Kerman. Voicing concern over the escalation of tensions across the Middle East region due to the ongoing war in the Gaza Strip, she also urged Iran to play its role in preventing further expansion of the regional conflicts.

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