

# Today's conflicts more dangerous than Cold War



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## OPINION

Wars in the Middle East and Ukraine are the wild cards that may determine the outcome of elections in the US and UK in the coming year. The best-laid plans of political leaders and central bankers are at the mercy of conflicts that they do not control — and may fail to understand. Who would have predicted six months ago that Gaza would explode and the US would green-light an open-ended Israeli assault that has already killed 25,000 people? Who would have guessed that in reaction to this bloodbath, a group in Yemen, the Houthis, would blockade one of the world's great trade routes passing through the Red Sea? The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered Israel yesterday to prevent any genocidal acts against Palestinians in Gaza, highlighted the calamitous conditions of those trapped in the enclave, and sought to give them a measure of protection. But Israeli compliance on the ground is dubious, and the war has already ballooned into an international crisis that is likely to escalate further.

### Nasty surprises

Other nasty surprises may be just around the corner. Gaza is turning out to be a detonator for a much wider crisis. What would happen, for instance, to inflation in the US and UK if not just the Babal Mandab at the entrance to the Red Sea but the Strait of Hormuz leading to

the Gulf, through which passes a fifth of the world's oil trade, became unsafe for shipping?

Politicians and economists are traditionally naïve and ill-informed about how wars and crises will upend their carefully modelled expectations. They

have only recently noticed that the nature of warfare itself has changed since high-precision missiles and drones are no longer the monopoly of a few military powers.

In the Iraq war in 2003, it was only the US and a few of its allies that pos-

sessed such weapons, but now they are commonplace in the arsenals of almost every military force in the world. You no longer need a powerful navy to impose a blockade on your enemies but can do so with drones and missiles.

### Nature of warfare

These military changes help explain why war is becoming an increasingly attractive option for many states and movements and why in the 2020s new wars erupt every few months.

The world order is becoming more fragile, militarily and politically. We have seen this in Gaza and in Yemen, but also in Sudan, where a ferocious civil war is killing tens of thousands of people and has forced more than five million to flee their homes. Nobody is paying much attention to this savage conflict, with its potential to destabilise a large part of Africa, and even fewer noticed last summer when Azerbaijan, well-equipped with drones by Turkey, took over the embattled enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, forcing some 100,000 Armenians to take flight.

### Mass migration

I have always been amazed by the way in which Western powers so often underestimate the blowback from wars they initiate. The cliché term for this is "unintended consequences", but this flatters the perpetrators, as the likely consequences are often all too obvious.

France and the UK, backed by the US, overthrew Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011 using local proxy forces. Libya collapsed into anarchy, destabilising North Africa — with the result that a great surge of immigrants started to cross the Mediterranean to reach Italy, where their arrival had a profound political impact. Much the same happened in Syria,

where the West was happy to see a war without a winner devastate the country, compelling millions of Syrians to flee to Turkey and later Europe in a mass migration that contributed to the UK vote for Brexit and created lasting turmoil over immigration in Germany.

The blindness of Western leaders to the self-destructive impact of foreign wars on their own political careers is also striking. An instinctive sense of racial superiority in the US and UK has led them again and again to underestimate their enemies, be they in the mountains of Afghanistan, the slums of Baghdad, or the ruins of Gaza.

### A walkover

Another reason why politicians get mired in wars they cannot win is simply that they underestimate the riskiness of war, where last year's winner is this year's loser. President Vladimir Putin committed one of the greatest political errors in history when he invaded Ukraine in 2022, ludicrously expecting a walkover. But last year it was the turn of Ukraine and its Western backers to overplay their hands, launching a counter-offensive that failed with heavy casualties, while Western economic sanctions turned out to be far less effective than

had been hoped.

Yet, though there is no credible plan to bring the war to an end, Trump's promise to do just that is viewed with horror by political and media establishments in the US and Europe.

In some respects, wars today are more dangerous than during the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union. Then the risk of a nuclear exchange was taken seriously as a constant threat and measures were taken to avoid it. But today, wishful thinkers downplay the menace posed by nuclear weapons.

### Dread of presidential candidates

President Joe Biden has managed to get the US involved in three wars — Ukraine, Gaza, Houthis in Yemen — any of which might blow up in his face and wreck his re-election plans. What he presumably intended as a show of American determination in Gaza has become a demonstration of weakness and indecision. He has managed to identify his presidency with a merciless Israeli war effort whose horrendous impact on two million Palestinians was graphically spelled out by the ICJ in its interim judgement.

For all his embrace of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his extreme right-wing cabinet, Biden has found that he has little influence on its actions, though he will be held responsible for them.

If the war does not end soon and spreads further, Biden may well suffer a self-inflicted political and economic "October surprise," the dread of presidential candidates, which would lead to his defeat in November.

