

THE GAZA CRISIS: MAPPING THE MIDDLE EAST'S SHIFTING BATTLE LINES

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The effects of the Gaza war are spilling over into countries across the Middle East, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

This ECFR mapping project sets out the domestic and regional dynamics driving these interconnected conflicts – including the underlying confrontation between Iran and its allies against the United States and Israel.

The Gaza Crisis identifies key hotspots and potential triggers of further escalation. It suggests ways for European policymakers to calm tensions and prevent deeper regional conflict.

GAZA

Escalation epicentre

Gaza is engulfed in fighting, death, and destruction. Five months after Israel launched its military offensive in response to the Hamas-led attacks on Israeli civilians on 7 October, over 30,000 Palestinians have been killed. Much of the Gaza Strip lies in ruins, with the risk of famine growing, and 1.7 million people – three-quarters of the population – forcibly displaced.

Israel's military campaign has damaged Hamas, but it is unlikely to uproot the Islamist group from Gaza entirely. The campaign is, however, exacerbating a catastrophic humanitarian crisis. With over a million Palestinians trapped along the border with the Sinai peninsula, the conflict could pose major political, security, and economic risks to Egypt's domestic stability.

Egypt, Qatar, and the United States are continuing their mediation efforts to broker a pause in

fighting to release the remaining Israeli hostages and increase aid flows to the strip. But the lack of a political roadmap for post-conflict Gaza remains a core impediment to achieving this and any long-term stabilisation. Without a sustainable ceasefire, Israel risks becoming trapped in an unwinnable drawn-out war against Hamas that will only prolong Palestinian suffering and cause conflicts to escalate elsewhere in the region.

What Europeans should do

In the absence of a viable military solution and with humanitarian costs mounting, Europeans should continue pressing for an immediate cessation of hostilities, combined with the release of Israeli civilian hostages and a surge in humanitarian support for Gazans. But without a long-term political track, any pause in the fighting will only provide limited respite. Europeans should therefore use a ceasefire to wedge open space for a wider diplomatic pathway to stabilise Gaza.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) remains the only body that can conceivably take over the governance and security control of Gaza in the long term. But it will likely fail if pushed too quickly: it has long been absent from Gaza and is facing profound domestic crises (many of its own making) in the West Bank, where it is based. Europeans should focus on re-legitimising the PA, steering it away from its increasingly autocratic tendencies and boosting its public support in both the West Bank and Gaza. This cannot simply mean strengthening the PA financially and militarily, but also addressing the need for deep-rooted reforms. However, in supporting Palestinian domestic transformations, Europeans will have to factor in that Hamas will likely remain a core part of the Palestinian national movement.

Europeans will also need to work with the US and regional actors to establish a reinvigorated political track to address the overarching Israeli-Palestinian conflict. A credible diplomatic pathway for securing Palestinian self-determination remains the best means of siphoning away support for Hamas and ensuring lasting security for Israelis and Palestinians. Without a viable horizon to end Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory and secure Palestinian self-determination, there is little prospect of ending the cycle of conflict.

A chronic crisis

Gaza's humanitarian suffering pre-dates the current conflict. It is the result of destructive wars between Israel and Hamas, internal Palestinian divisions, and decades of Israeli restrictions against the Gaza Strip. In the mid-1990s Israel began to blockade Gaza, and significantly expanded this when Hamas took over the strip in 2007. This followed a brief Palestinian civil war during which Hamas ejected PA security forces controlled by the rival

Fatah party of President Mahmoud Abbas.

Since taking power, Hamas has entrenched its rule, developing its own parallel institutions increasingly separate from those of the PA in the West Bank. Despite numerous rounds of talks between Hamas and Fatah since, a national reconciliation agreement to reunify the West Bank and Gaza under PA rule has remained out of reach. During this time, successive Israeli governments negotiated a series of ceasefire arrangements that allowed for a limited easing of Israeli border restrictions and an influx of Qatari cash into Gaza, some of which went to support civil servants employed by Hamas.

WEST BANK

Escalation points

The political and security situation in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) is dire. Last year was the deadliest for Palestinians there since the second intifada, which ended in 2005. This increase in violence is being driven by frequent attacks by Israeli settlers, Israeli military raids, killings and detentions, and the resurgence of Palestinian armed groups. Even as the conflict in Gaza rages, the hard-right Israeli government has accelerated the pace of Israeli settlement expansion, further dispossessing Palestinians, eroding the potential for a two-state solution, and driving escalation.

Intensifying violence in the West Bank will almost certainly further entrench the wider Israeli-Palestinian conflict, undermining the goals of reinvigorating a viable Israeli-Palestinian political track and weakening Hamas. Amid this, a fragile and unpopular PA leadership is on the brink of financial collapse due to Israeli sanctions. It was already losing ground to hardliners such as Hamas, which capitalised on Palestinian support for armed resistance. Since the start of the Gaza war, this support has only grown.

What Europeans should do

Europeans' immediate imperative should be to prevent the ongoing expansion of conflict. This will require robust measures to challenge Israel's settlement of occupied Palestinian territory and disproportionate use of violence, which remain the core drivers of escalation. The European Union and its member states should: follow and expand on the US and UK decision to sanction violent Israeli settlers; fully support ongoing International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice investigations; and deepen differentiation measures against the settlements, including banning all settlement-linked products and financial

services.

Europeans must also act to revive Palestinian institutions and governance. This will have to go well beyond cosmetic gestures, such as appointing a new prime minister, and include far-reaching structural changes such as: restoring judicial independence; tackling human rights abuses and loosening restrictions on political mobilisation; advancing national reunification; and holding long-overdue elections when conditions allow. These steps would increase popular support for the PA across Palestine, facilitating its return to Gaza.

However, to help the PA return to Gaza, re-legitimise Palestinian institutions, and ultimately reach a lasting peace agreement with Israel, Europeans will have to acknowledge that a degree of buy-in from Hamas will be required to prevent it from playing a spoiler role.

A Palestinian house in disorder

Israel's decades-long military occupation of the West Bank has undermined prospects for successful peace talks. Growing hopelessness and anger among the Palestinian public are strengthening their support for armed resistance, boosting Hamas's popularity, and energising Palestinian armed groups across the West Bank.

A dysfunctional Palestinian government is exacerbating this instability and insecurity. Over almost two decades, President Mahmoud Abbas has consolidated and maintained power by edging out his political rivals, hollowing out and delegitimising the Palestinian political system in the process. Alongside this, other intra-Palestinian rivalries have further fractured Palestine's leadership and governance. Combined with the absence of national elections since 2006, much of the Palestinian public has become alienated from the established political order.

ISRAEL

Escalation points

Prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu's objective of completely removing Hamas from Gaza is unobtainable. It risks trapping Israel in an open-ended conflict with no clear exit strategy nor any realistic prospect of returning the remaining Israeli hostages held by Hamas. Hard-right ministers in Netanyahu's coalition also remain focused on the West Bank, where they see a historic opportunity to realise the settlement movement's dream of a Greater Israel between the Mediterranean Sea and Jordan River.

Meanwhile, further escalation may come from Israel's expansion of strikes on Hizbullah targets in southern Lebanon in response to rocket fire by the group. Although they have said they would prefer a diplomatic solution, Israeli officials have warned they may launch a large-scale operation to remove the threat that Hizbullah forces pose along the border. However, the threat posed by Hizbullah's current positioning is limited, although around 100,000 Israelis have been displaced from the north of the country.

In the meantime, Israel is intensifying its attacks against Iranian-linked targets in Syria and the broader region, including high-level assassinations. Over past months, Iran and its allies such as Hizbullah have limited their response to these deepening Israeli strikes, fearful of being sucked into full-scale conflict. But Israel's strike against Iran's consulate in Damascus in April 2024 crossed an Iranian red-line. In retaliation, Iran launched an unprecedented drone and missile attack against Israeli territory, hitting the Nevatim and Ramon air bases. Despite Iran signalling its desire to end this escalatory cycle, Israel has threatened a "painful" response. This risks engulfing the Middle East in a wider direct war between Israel, backed by the United States, and Iran and its network of associated groups.

What Europeans should do

In conjunction with the US and regional partners, Europeans must do more to push the Israeli government to develop a realistic vision for post-conflict governance and security for Gaza. The European goal should be to transition towards a broader diplomatic track, including bringing Israel's offensive in Gaza to an end. Netanyahu has so far remained wholly unreceptive to such urgings, and will remain so unless Europeans are prepared to deploy significant leverage against his government. When doing so, they should make clear that, without a realistic political track on the horizon, Israel will be unable to secure the release of hostages or disengage from managing Gaza after the conflict.

European leaders need to continue pressing Israel to make the hard choices required to salvage prospects of reaching a two-state solution and advance Palestinian self-determination. This should focus on sustained international efforts – through a mixture of diplomatic engagement and robust counter-measures – to shift Israeli government policy and public opinion in favour of a two-state solution based on international parameters.

Europeans should also strongly warn Israel against further escalation, whether towards Iran, Lebanon, or the wider region. In the present circumstances, an Israeli decision to initiate a wider conflict should be seen as a choice rather than as necessary self-defence. Europeans should signal to Israel that if it chooses this path, as some in the Israeli government appear

intent on doing, it will do so without European support.

The mirage of total victory

The Israeli government has vowed to keep fighting in Gaza until it reaches “total victory” over Hamas and all hostages are released. The US has pledged unwavering military support for the country even as it grows increasingly frustrated with the Israeli government’s hardline approach. Netanyahu has previously expressed concern that a permanent ceasefire would allow Hamas to regroup. He may also worry that an end to Israel’s offensive will create the political momentum within Israel to force him out of power given his dwindling popularity and renewed anti-government protests. The 7 October attacks – which killed nearly 1,200 people – were the worst in the country’s history in terms of civilian casualties and severely undercut Netanyahu’s claims to provide strong security. If he is not forced from power, it is unlikely he will survive the next election.

IRAN

Escalation points

Iran provides support to Hamas and a number of groups engaged in confronting Israel and the United States – but has made clear it wants to avoid being directly drawn into a regional war. After 7 October, Iranian-backed groups, such as Kataib Hizbullah in Iraq, significantly increased their attacks on US forces based across the Middle East. But Tehran’s growing fears of direct confrontation with Washington appear to have led it to press these allies to now pause their attacks.

Despite the deniability afforded by the proxy nature of Iran’s partners, US and Israeli voices allege Iranian orchestration behind recent incidents, including the killing of three US soldiers. Like Tehran, the Biden administration has made clear it also wishes to avoid direct conflict with Iran and has taken care to avoid steps that would force this. However, increasing Israeli strikes on Iranian officials in Syria, which culminated in the destruction of Iran’s consulate in Damascus in April 2024 and the killing of 7 IIRG officials, forced an unprecedented Iranian drone and missile attack against Israeli territory. Despite Iran signalling its desire to end this escalatory cycle, Israel has threatened a “painful” response.-

There are concerns in the West that current dynamics could push Tehran to advance its nuclear programme. Iran claims that it has ushered in a new security equation in which it will respond to future Israeli attacks against its assets or personnel with direct strikes from Iran.

But Tehran's desire to avoid getting sucked into direct conflict may weaken its deterrence posture. The relatively little damage caused by Iran's attacks on Israel may also strengthen an Israeli perception that Tehran is on the back foot, lacking the willpower and capacity for deeper engagement in a conflict, and that Israel has the necessary military might to inflict a long-desired deeper blow on Iran and its regional proxies. Advancing its nuclear programme could be a means for Tehran to re-establish a deterrence capability – albeit now based on a nuclear rather than proxy dimension.

What Europeans should do

Unlike the US, European governments remain in direct contact with Tehran. Europeans need to use this dialogue to press Iran for de-escalatory openings and lay out the prospect of mutually beneficial pathways. They should focus on areas where Iran could deploy constructive influence over its partners across the region. But this will only be viable if it is part of a wider agreement tied to a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza. Areas of focus could include: pressing Hizbullah to allow negotiations over border disputes between Lebanon and Israel; and pushing the Houthis to commit to a political process in Yemen that would be tied to ending their attacks in the Red Sea.

But in so doing, Europeans should firmly press back against Tehran's support for these regional proxies, as well as any attempts to progress its nuclear programme. They should make clear that further problematic moves on these issues will bring about intensified sanctions enforcement. Such enforcement would aim to undermine Iran's attempts to maintain oil sales and improve economic ties with the Gulf states.

Europeans can strengthen these efforts by enhancing their cooperation with Saudi Arabia, given Riyadh's recent moves to boost Saudi-Iranian relations to support de-escalation. Saudi Arabia could be a key facilitator of potential constructive processes with Iran; greater European engagement with Riyadh should aim to strengthen this position. This could include supporting a Saudi economic package to incentivise Tehran to address the nuclear crisis, given that Iranian concessions will depend, among other things, on its securing of economic benefits.

Iran's regional network

Iran provides funding and military support to partners across the Middle East. In addition to the pursuit of regional influence and security capabilities, Iran is using these groups to pressure the US to withdraw from the region. However, Tehran does not wield absolute authority over its partners, even if they all operate under the same strategic umbrella. Its

degree of control in Iraq was diluted by the US killing of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in 2020 and in Lebanon it delegates significant decision-making to Hizbullah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

YEMEN AND THE RED SEA

Escalation points

The ripple effects of the war in Gaza have also reached the shores of war-torn Yemen. Since November, dozens of merchant vessels passing through the Bab al-Mandab strait and the Red Sea have been targeted by the Houthis with drones and missiles. These attacks are part of a multi-front pressure tactic by Iran-aligned movements across the region (such as Hizbullah and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq) to push the international community to force Israel to declare a ceasefire in Gaza. In so doing, the Houthis are aiming to be seen as a decisive member of the 'axis of resistance', rather than one fighting group among many in Yemen. Using their new leverage, the Houthis may want to push for wider political and economic gains related to the conflict in Yemen.

The Houthi attacks threaten freedom of navigation in one of the world's most strategic maritime chokepoints. Months of instability have pushed up insurance rates and forced a quarter of the world's container shipping to re-route, adding two weeks' travel time. Europe has been particularly affected given that 40 per cent of its trade with Asia and the Middle East passes through Red Sea shipping lanes.

In December, the United States launched a multinational maritime security mission, Operation Prosperity Guardian, to escort and defend commercial vessels. As attacks continued, the US and the United Kingdom – supported by Bahrain, Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands – commenced a series of strikes against Houthi military assets in Yemen. While the strikes have degraded Houthi capabilities, they have failed to stop the attacks and maritime shipping largely continues to avoid the Red Sea. Securing a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza will be key to reopening these lanes. But the longer this takes, the more likely it is that this escalation will develop a life of its own.

What Europeans should do

Multiple European countries have joined the US coalition, but some are concerned that unconditional US support for Israel and a military-focused approach will spur more instability in Yemen. This could provoke further Houthi attacks and jeopardise the fragile peace process

to end the country's longstanding civil war.

It is notable that France did not join either of the US missions, and the European Union has since announced its own defensive maritime mission, Aspides. (Unlike the US approach, it will not launch offensive attacks on the Houthis.) But to deter Houthi attacks, this mission needs to be more meaningfully resourced and should actively engage involved regional partners wary of the US approach, especially Egypt and the Gulf monarchies.

To complement this maritime approach, Europeans should focus on supporting a political agreement to end the conflict in Yemen. Europeans should support dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran as the diplomatic track most likely to restrain the Houthis – and advance a Saudi-Houthi political agreement that could then serve as a platform for a necessary intra-Yemeni political agreement. Saudi political and economic carrots for this settlement, possibly accompanied by European support, could also be key to ending Houthi aggression in the Red Sea.

A long-running civil war

The Houthis have been fighting a civil war against the internationally recognised government since 2014. Despite an intense bombing campaign by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, supported by the US and the UK, the Houthis have emerged as the country's dominant force. Saudi Arabia is now trying to extricate itself from the war and is engaged in direct peace talks with the Houthis. But a permanent Saudi-Houthi agreement needs to be followed by an effort to address ongoing internal conflict between the Houthis and militia and political groups in the country's south, without which the country will remain mired in instability.

IRAQ

Escalation points

Since 7 October, Iraqi militias operating under the umbrella of the Iranian-backed Islamic Resistance in Iraq (IRI) have launched more than 170 attacks on US bases in Iraq and Syria. This unprecedented escalation provoked a US military response against Iranian-supported militias, including the assassination of a Harakat al-Nujaba leader in Baghdad on 4 January, wider counter-strikes on 3 February, and the killing of a senior Kataib Hizbullah leader on 7 February. The last two strikes came in response to an IRI attack on the Tower 22 US base in Jordan on 28 January, which killed three American soldiers. After this, in anticipation of a US

response – and under Iranian pressure, given Tehran’s fears of being dragged into a direct conflict – the IRI announced a pause on attacks on American forces, which has largely held.

US counter-strikes may succeed in degrading the capacity of Iranian-backed militias, but Washington – limited by its desire to avoid a full-blown conflict – will struggle to establish sustained deterrence against them. New attacks are likely to erupt sooner rather than later given the conflict in Gaza and the desire of Iraqi militias and Iran to push American forces out of the country. Moreover, despite enduring US strikes, the militias’ political position is strengthening: domestic pressure is growing on the Iraqi government to bring the US presence to an end.

Even if a Gaza ceasefire comes into force, the confrontation between the United States and Iranian-backed groups in Iraq could continue regardless: recent escalation may have now assumed an irreversible logic of its own.

What Europeans should do

Europeans’ diplomatic efforts should focus on ensuring US-Iranian de-escalation in Iraq by emphasising the mutual desire to avoid direct conflict. Europeans should use diplomatic channels with Tehran to press Iranian-backed militias to maintain the current calm, while simultaneously working for a ceasefire in Gaza which will deny Iraqi militias the key public justification for their actions.

Europeans are aware of the near impossibility of displacing Tehran’s influence in Iraq. But they should increase political and economic support for prime minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani’s government – in order to strengthen its institutional capabilities to counter the dominance of Iranian-backed actors, and boost Sudani’s worth in the eyes of the Iraqi public. This could also include preparing to fill the security vacuum created by a US exit from Iraq, should its presence become untenable. Of particular importance will be ensuring continued assistance for operations to counter the Islamic State group and stabilisation support.

Between Iran and the US

Iraq sits at the centre of an ongoing confrontation between Iran – acting through its network of local militias – and the US, which has been ongoing since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Tehran has long sought to oust the US from the region and increase its own influence.

Over recent years the Iraqi government has tried to strike a careful balance between competing Iranian and US influence. Each side possesses key levers of pressure over

Baghdad, whether through Iranian-backed militias or threats of US sanctions. The Iraqi government has also tried to position itself as a platform for regional dialogue to prevent wider conflict, whether between regional actors or the US and Iran.

Sudani and the Iraqi military may see the value of the US retaining a presence, including in terms of having a counter-weight to Iranian influence. But their space for political manoeuvre is shrinking given the prime minister's dependence on support from Iranian-backed groups and the deeply entrenched nature of their militias, whose numbers far outstrip the approximately 2,500 US troops in the country.

SYRIA

Escalation points

Syrian president Bashar al-Assad has not taken a strong stand on Gaza. But in a sign of the weakness of Assad and the wider Syrian state, the country has been steadily sucked into the regional dimension of the war. Since 7 October, Israeli attacks on Iranian-linked targets in Syria have risen sharply, including repeated strikes on the country's airports and the assassination of a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) general in Damascus in December 2023. Israel further escalated when it bombed Iran's consulate in Damascus in April 2024, killing 7 IRGC officials, including a top IRGC commander. At the same time, Iranian-backed militias have intensified their attacks on US facilities, with more than 170 attacks in Syria and Iraq, using American support for Israel as justification. A drone attack by the Iranian-backed Islamic Resistance in Iraq on the US Tower 22 base in Jordan killed three US soldiers and prompted US counter-strikes in Syria and Iraq.

The attacks show that Syria could become a central theatre in a wider regional conflict. Both Iran and Israel consider Syria a key front in their face-off. Further Israeli strikes may lead Tehran to mobilise allies in Syria to launch attacks on Israel from the Golan, which has remained relatively quiet since 7 October. Syria could also be directly drawn into conflict if Hezbollah and Israel go to war in neighbouring Lebanon, given the overlapping Iranian influence in both countries.

This escalation is also raising new questions about the longevity of the US military presence in north-eastern Syria, which now numbers around 900 troops. Iranian-backed militias are using the attacks to increase pressure on the United States to withdraw, and the Biden administration is facing growing calls at home to justify this presence. Should a withdrawal happen without a coordinated political plan for what comes next, it could create space for

brutal competition between local forces, the regime, Iran-backed militias, Turkey, and the Islamic State group (ISIS). Ankara is already capitalising on the international focus on Gaza to intensify operations against Kurdish forces in north-eastern Syria.

What Europeans should do

Europeans have a strong interest in preventing Syria from becoming a theatre for intensified Iranian-Israeli or Iranian-US conflict. Such conflict would throw the country and wider region into deeper instability, potentially allowing ISIS to make further gains.

There is little space for an active role for Europeans in Syria given their unwillingness to engage with the Assad government. As elsewhere, a ceasefire in Gaza will be key to containing escalating violence in Syria. But Europeans should also use channels of outreach to all the other engaged parties given the cost that intensified conflict would impose on all parties. They should particularly aim to work with allies such as the United Arab Emirates, which is uniquely placed to negotiate between Syria, Israel, and Iran.

Amid wide fatigue, Europeans – and the US – need to also strategically re-engage with the question of Syria’s future. While there is little prospect of dislodging Assad, the Hamas attacks and Gaza war are clear warnings of the risks of ignoring simmering conflicts. While their options are limited, Europeans can do this by: identifying more effective pathways to support the Syrian population on the ground (at minimum by maintaining humanitarian aid and expanding early recovery assistance); reviving moribund political negotiations to achieve lower-level stabilisation gains (as opposed to an unreachable comprehensive settlement); and outlining a clearer strategy for north-eastern Syria, premised on an anticipated eventual US withdrawal.

A broken country

Syria is divided into different zones of control, including a core regime-governed area backed by Iran and Russia, the US-controlled north-east, and rebel and Turkish-backed zones in the north. The country is experiencing a catastrophic economic and humanitarian crisis. The central Assad-controlled area has become hollowed out by a decade of conflict and sanctions and possesses little capacity to deliver basic services. The Russian military’s diversion to Ukraine has also given Iran greater room for manoeuvre on the ground, leading to increased numbers of Israeli attacks inside Syria.

LEBANON

Escalation points

Since 7 October, Israel and Hizbullah have ramped up their attacks against each other, in what has become their most intense period of conflict since the 2006 Lebanon war. Nearly 300 Hizbullah fighters have been killed by Israeli strikes while nearly 100,000 Israelis have been displaced from the north of the country. Hizbullah has warned it will keep firing rockets until there is an end to fighting in Gaza; the longer the conflict continues, the higher the risk of escalation. Despite this, the clashes have largely played out under established 'rules of the game' whereby strikes are limited to border areas to prevent wider escalation.

But Israel is steadily stretching these rules by intensifying its attacks, including the killing in January of a senior Hamas leader in Beirut. For the moment this has not triggered a broader conflict, in part because Hizbullah appears to want to avoid a direct war, anticipating the destruction it would bring. While the group has launched thousands of missiles at Israel to demonstrate support for Hamas and tie up Israeli military resources, it continues to contain the nature of its strikes. Rather, the push for a wider conflict will likely come from Israel. Figures within the Israeli security establishment argue that war with Hizbullah, or at least a more aggressive campaign, is necessary to secure northern Israel – in order to allow the population to return and degrade Hizbullah's capabilities.

A full-blown war would have devastating implications for Lebanon given past statements from Israel stating it would not differentiate between Hizbullah and the Lebanese state – and given Hizbullah's store of more than 150,000 missiles. Even though Washington is trying to prevent such an escalation, apparent US commitments to support Israel in a bigger war, along with Iran's backing for Hizbullah, could see the conflict quickly intensify.

What Europeans should do

Europeans need to more forcefully support a sustainable ceasefire in Gaza if they want hostilities in Lebanon to end, given clear messaging from Hizbullah that a halt to the conflict is dependent on this step. But they should engage in immediate dialogue with Israel and Lebanon to press the case for immediate de-escalation steps. US and European efforts – including via direct European engagement with Hizbullah – to persuade the group to pull back from the immediate border area could help buy some temporary calm. Europeans should also use their engagement with Hizbullah and its backer Iran to reiterate the likely

devastating consequences of a broader conflict for both Hizbullah and Lebanon, while working with the US to caution Israel that Western support will not be forthcoming if Israel starts a war with Lebanon.

A ceasefire in Gaza could create the opportunity for wider negotiations, potentially along the contours of United Nations Security Council [resolution 1701](#), which calls for the Lebanese armed forces to be deployed to southern Lebanon. Hizbullah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, has [indicated](#) an openness to talks once the Gaza war ends. Europeans should also assess how the UN's interim force in Lebanon, led by a Spanish general and made up of a [large number](#) of European soldiers, can play a larger role in securing the peace.

State of collapse

With Iranian support, Hizbullah has emerged as the dominant political force in Lebanon as the state has crumbled. The Lebanese government barely functions and the country's economy remains parlous. While Hizbullah is tightly tied to Iran, Nasrallah has considerable autonomy in how he leads the group. In 2022 he indirectly agreed to support a [maritime agreement](#) between Israel and Lebanon despite the group's longstanding conflict with Israel.

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