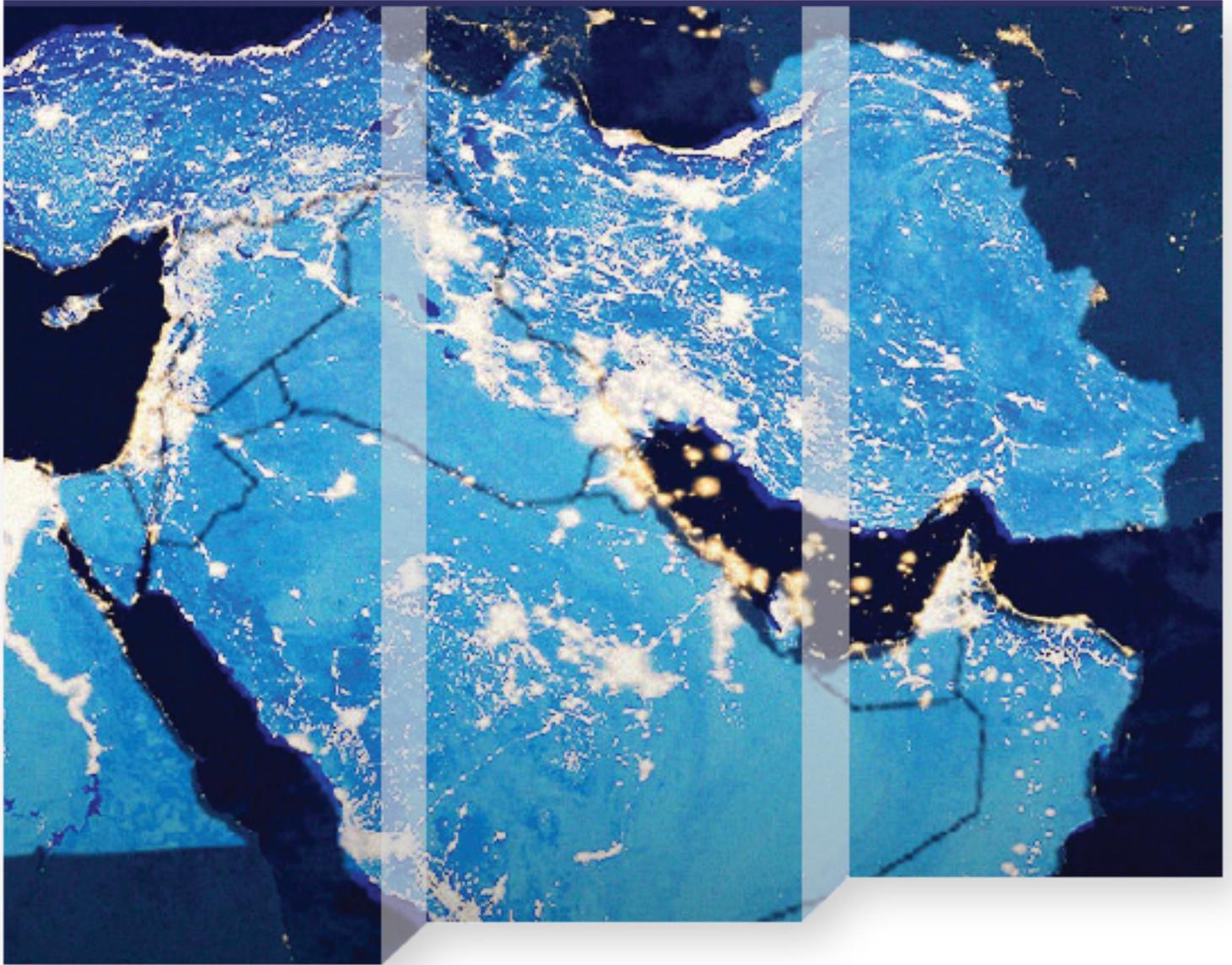




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Arab Renaissance for Democracy & Development



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Renaissance Strategic Center



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## **The Expanding War of South-West Asia**

*Structural Conflict, Regional Escalation, and the Risk of Global Crisis*



النهضة العربية للديمقراطية والتنمية  
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# The Expanding War of South-West Asia

## Key Takeaways

- The Middle East is entering a phase of escalation that risks transforming the current confrontation into a **broader regional and international crisis**.
- The conflict must be understood within **long-term structural dynamics**, including colonial legacies, geopolitical rivalries, and the unresolved question of Palestine.
- Escalation between **Israel, the United States, and Iran** is increasingly shifting from indirect confrontation toward more direct forms of regional military engagement.
- The expansion of military operations, particularly in **Lebanon and Gaza**, raises the risk of a **wider regional war**.
- A broader conflict could trigger **large-scale displacement, economic disruptions, and instability in global energy and trade systems**.
- Sustainable regional stability cannot emerge solely through military deterrence and alliances but requires **political solutions addressing structural injustices and inequalities**

## Executive Summary

The South-West Asia region, known as the “Middle East,”<sup>1</sup> is entering a phase of escalation that risks transforming the ongoing regional war into a broader international crisis. The confrontation between Israel, the United States, and Iran is unfolding across multiple arenas, drawing in both state and non-state actors and exposing several countries to direct or indirect military pressure. Military operations, retaliatory strikes, and heightened security postures are no longer confined to a single front but reverberate across the Gulf, the Levant, and the Eastern Mediterranean.

This brief situates the current escalation within its broader historical and political context. It examines the structural drivers of regional instability, including the unresolved question of Palestine, long-standing geopolitical rivalries, and the persistence of military-centered security frameworks. It also analyzes the roles of key regional and international actors and assesses the humanitarian, economic, and political implications of a possible expansion of the conflict.

The analysis highlights the risks associated with a widening regional confrontation, including the possibility of large-scale displacement, disruptions to global energy markets and trade routes, and the further deterioration of livelihoods across already fragile societies. The brief concludes by reflecting on the limitations of military-centered approaches to regional stability and emphasizing the importance of political solutions that address the structural roots of conflict and prioritize justice, rights, and inclusive development.

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<sup>1</sup> While the term “SWANA” (Southwest Asia and North Africa) is recognized by the author as the correct reference to the region challenging the colonial origins of the term “Middle East,” this brief retains the latter because it remains the most widely used designation in international policy and diplomatic discourse for now.

## 1. Historical and Structural Context

The Middle East is entering a phase of escalation that risks transforming the ongoing regional war into a broader international crisis. The current confrontation between Israel-United States and Iran is unfolding across multiple arenas and drawing in both state and non-state actors, exposing several countries to direct or indirect military pressure. Military operations, retaliatory strikes, and heightened security postures are no longer confined to a single front but reverberate across the Gulf, the Levant, and the Eastern Mediterranean, including in countries that host foreign military bases or occupy strategic positions within global trade and energy routes.

This moment, however, cannot be understood as an abrupt rupture. It is rooted in decades of political instability, unresolved conflicts, and overlapping regional and international interests that have repeatedly obstructed the realization of justice, sovereignty, and economic security for the populations of the region. Since the mid-twentieth century, the Middle East has been shaped by persistent colonial legacies, geopolitical rivalries, and external intervention (George 2018). Strategic alliances, military aid, and security arrangements have frequently reinforced asymmetric power relations while failing to address the structural drivers of instability and conflict.

At the center of these dynamics lies the question of Palestine: the actual moment cannot be understood without contextualizing it within the regional transformation that has been unfolding at least since October 2023, but is rooted in over 70 years of history. The current developments represent a continuation of longstanding Israeli political interests and military strategies in the region. The colonial project over Palestine has produced a prolonged condition of injustice—marked by violence, dispossession, displacement, and the ongoing annexation of land—that remains one of the most enduring sources of instability in the Middle East (Khalidi 2020). Rather than moving toward a political resolution, developments on the ground suggest a deepening of this structural conflict. The over two-year-long genocidal war on Gaza has dramatically intensified this reality (Amnesty International 2024; UN Human Rights Council 2025). The scale of destruction, the humanitarian catastrophe affecting the civilian population, and the repeated breakdown of ceasefire arrangements have generated widespread concern regarding the capacity and credibility of existing international response mechanisms, given also the limits of current diplomatic efforts. At the same time, developments in the West Bank, characterized by expanding settlement activity, increasing territorial fragmentation, and the consolidation of Israeli administrative and military control over Palestinian land and resources, point toward an accelerating process of de facto annexation (International Crisis Group 2024) that concerns neighboring countries and could have dramatic implications in regional dynamics.

## **2. Regional Power Competition and Military Escalation**

Within this broader trajectory, Israeli leadership has increasingly emphasized a strategy aimed at preserving and expanding strategic superiority across the region, with tension and wars cyclically being fought against neighboring countries. In this context, Iranian regional influence and nuclear ambitions have been consistently presented by Israeli officials as existential threats (Nasr 2006), justifying a doctrine of military preemption and deterrence.

This approach has involved sustained efforts to disrupt Iranian networks and allied actors across Syria, Lebanon, and other arenas, not only in the current moment but over the past decades. For many years, tensions between Israel and Iran were expressed primarily through indirect confrontation (Azizi 2020). Israel repeatedly targeted Iranian assets and allied forces across Syria and other arenas, while Iran supported regional partners capable of exerting pressure on Israeli and American interests.

Intelligence operations, cyber warfare, and proxy engagements allowed both sides to compete for influence without crossing the threshold of direct interstate war.

The current escalation suggests that this fragile equilibrium has weakened and a war for regional power is being fought with repercussions that go beyond domestic interests and can reshape broad international relations. The involvement of other actors at the regional level is signaling this shift.

Furthermore, the expansion of Israeli military operations reflects this trajectory. The invasion of south-Lebanon just this week forms part of this broader framework of regional competition and power domination while also intersecting with land expansion and geographic transformation on the ground. Israeli airstrikes and ground incursions have brought the Lebanese front back to the center of regional attention. The expansion of military operations into Lebanese territory has raised concerns across the region about the possibility of a wider conflict that could reshape existing political and territorial arrangements. Given Lebanon's internal fragility, marked by years of economic collapse, institutional paralysis, and deep social hardship, prolonged military escalation could produce severe humanitarian and political consequences.

Iran's regional strategy must also be understood in light of its long-standing perception of strategic encirclement. Surrounded by foreign military bases and facing sustained political pressure from Western powers, Tehran has invested heavily in building alliances with political movements and armed groups across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen.

This network, often referred to as the "axis of resistance" (Mansour 2021), has provided Iran with asymmetric leverage and deterrence capabilities against adversaries, particularly Israel. At the same time, it has also contributed to the regionalization of local conflicts, as these actors possess the capacity to transform national arenas into extensions of broader geopolitical confrontation.

Against this backdrop. The United States remains a central actor in shaping these dynamics. Its longstanding presence across the Middle East, extensive security partnerships with regional allies, and strategic commitment to them have significantly influenced the regional balance of power (Lynch 2016). Washington's support for Israeli military operations and its own involvement in strikes against Iranian targets reflect both alliance obligations and broader strategic objectives aimed at limiting Iranian influence in the region.

The reliance on military alliances, deterrence strategies, and large-scale arms transfers has reinforced patterns of security competition without addressing the political conflicts that underlie them. The current escalation illustrates how these dynamics can converge, drawing multiple actors into a cycle of confrontation that becomes progressively harder to contain.

### **3. Regional and Global Implications**

Beyond the immediate battlefields, the confrontation between Israel-United States, and Iran is already producing ripple effects across the wider region. Countries hosting foreign military bases or located along major logistical corridors face heightened exposure to retaliation and security disruptions. Maritime routes in the Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean, critical arteries for global trade and energy supply, are increasingly vulnerable to instability.

One of the most significant humanitarian risks associated with a wider regional war is the possibility of a new large-scale refugee crisis. The Middle East already hosts millions of displaced people as a result of conflicts in Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere (UNHCR 2024).

Neighboring countries have absorbed these populations over decades, often under considerable economic and infrastructural strain. A new wave of displacement, particularly if fighting expands in Lebanon or continues to devastate Gaza, could place additional pressure on societies that are already struggling to sustain existing refugee populations.

Such a development would likely reverberate far beyond the region, affecting migration governance, humanitarian systems, and political dynamics across multiple continents.

The economic implications of a broader regional war would likewise extend well beyond the Middle East. Disruptions to energy supply chains, maritime shipping routes, and financial markets could generate significant shocks across the global economy.

Given the region's central role in global energy markets and trade corridors (World Bank 2024), sustained instability would likely affect fuel prices, transportation networks, and food security worldwide. In this sense, the consequences of the current escalation reach far beyond regional security and directly affect the stability of the international economic system.

At the societal level, the continuation of conflict further undermines livelihoods and economic prospects across the region. Communities that have already endured years of instability face the

prospect of renewed displacement, shrinking economic opportunities, and declining access to basic services.

These pressures deepen social inequalities and reinforce a cycle in which insecurity and economic hardship feed political frustration and instability

#### **4. Rethinking Regional Stability**

The trajectory of the current crisis, therefore, raises fundamental questions about the frameworks through which regional stability has historically been pursued. For decades, security in the Middle East has largely been approached through military alliances, deterrence strategies, and shifting balances of power (Buzan & Wæver 2003).

While these approaches have sometimes prevented immediate confrontation, they have not addressed the underlying political disputes and structural inequalities that continue to generate instability.

A durable regional order is unlikely to emerge from military confrontation alone. Sustainable peace requires political approaches capable of confronting the structural roots of conflict and placing justice, rights, and human dignity at the center of regional governance.

Strengthening accountable institutions, supporting democratic participation, and addressing persistent economic disparities are essential components of such an approach.

Equally important is the development of forms of regional cooperation that prioritize economic development, shared security, and social well-being. Without progress in these areas, cycles of confrontation are likely to persist, periodically erupting into crises with consequences that extend far beyond the Middle East.

The present escalation, therefore, represents more than a struggle among regional powers. It reflects deeper questions about how peace, security, and political legitimacy can be constructed in a region marked by historical grievances, external interventions, and competing geopolitical ambitions.

Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond frameworks centered solely on military power toward political processes that recognize the centrality of justice, rights, and equitable development in shaping a more stable regional future.

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