

What If Analysis
The Middle East: A Renewed Arab-Israeli Conflict

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The main analytic line being challenged in this analysis is that an Arab-Israeli War in the future is unlikely, due to Israel's military strength, the financial and military support it has from the U.S., and the reluctance of Arab countries to attack Israel.

Event and Impact

The New York Times reported on 28 March 2020 that an attack on Israel by Iran and its Middle Eastern allies has sparked a renewed Arab-Israeli war. According to the *New York Times*, the conflict started around 4 a.m. with an Iranian missile hitting a military depot in Tel Aviv, Israel, killing 80 Israeli soldiers and wounding 26 others. A few hours later, Israel retaliated by bombing key military outposts in Iran, including a nuclear research center. The conflict has only grown since and Iran has garnered the military support of its allies in the Middle East, including: Iraq, Gaza militants, Syria, Lebanon, and Hezbollah.

Argumentation

In the first pathway, the trigger event is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's sudden death due to natural causes. His greatest political opponent, Benny Gantz, is well-positioned to take over as prime minister. However, Israeli citizens are divided - Gantz supporters want him in power, while others want to have a proper election, leading to a full-on civil war. Iran, who has long opposed the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, sees this as an opportunity to attack Israel. Iran calls on its Arab allies to aid it in its effort they launch an attack on Israel to retake Palestinian lands. Israel responds, leading to a war.

In the second pathway, the trigger event is the U.S. suffering a severe economic collapse. As such, the U.S. loses global influence and retreats into isolationism to focus on its economy and find a way to reconstruct. Iran sees this as an opportunity to retaliate for the U.S. killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, calling on its allies in the Middle East to attack Israel. Israel responds to the attack, leading to a war, but it lacks U.S. support.

In the third pathway, the trigger event is the accidental killing of an American intelligence officer by Israeli intelligence. Despite it being an accident, the U.S. decides to withdraw all financial and military resources it gives to Israel. Iran sees this as an opportunity to attack Israel and calls on its Arab allies for help. Israel responds, but lacks U.S. support, leading to a war.

In the fourth pathway, the trigger event is an Israeli mass genocide campaign against Palestinians. When Iran and its allies find out about the genocide, they are outraged and decide to attack Israel. Israel responds and a full-scale war occurs.

Scope of Impact

An escalation of the conflict could have a drastic impact, including what becomes of Palestinian land, how and if the U.S. will directly aid Israel in the war, and a massive loss of life. The conflict could also worsen the current refugee crisis, creating another large wave of migrants and displaced persons. There is also the potential for either side to use nuclear weapons, turning the conflict into a nuclear war. This would have severe consequences, including the

destruction of infrastructure, the loss of millions of lives, and a destructive aftermath that would cause the depletion of food resources and the occurrence of environmental disasters.¹ Mitigating these risks necessitates U.S. or United Nations involvement in the war. A call for a ceasefire early-on could prevent the possibility for nuclear war and a renewed, if not expanding, refugee crisis. Aside from diplomatic intervention to end the war, the members of the United Nations could also use this as an opportunity to restart talks of a two-state solution in Israel, highlighting the negative events that can occur if it is not created.

Indicators

Pathway 1	Pathway 2	Pathway 3	Pathway 4
Netanyahu experiences health problems	U.S. stock markets plunge in value	U.S. conducts intelligence operations in Israel	Palestinians fight Israelis over their land
Iran makes public claims against Israeli occupation of Palestine	The U.S.'s economic downturn impacts the rest of the world	Israeli intelligence has experienced some mishaps recently	Israelis torture and kill innocent Palestinians
There is a political divide among Israeli citizens	The U.S. withdraws itself from international organizations and trade treaties	The U.S. and Israel have had some diplomatic problems	There is an increase in Israeli bombing of Palestinian-dominated areas
Iran holds diplomatic meetings with other Arab nations	Iran publicizes its anger over Soleimani's death		Millions of Palestinians suddenly disappear

Pathway Ranking

Based on likelihood and impact, the highest ranked pathway is the first, in which Netanyahu dies suddenly of natural causes. The second most likely and impactful is the fourth pathway, where Israel commits a mass genocide of Palestinians. Next is the second pathway, where the U.S. suffers economic collapse, due to its unlikelihood, but grave impact. Finally, the pathway in the last rank is the fourth, where Israeli intelligence accidentally kills an American intelligence officer. This is very unlikely to occur, and even if it did occur, would likely not have the grave impact outlined in the pathway.

¹ David Bressan, "Even a Small Nuclear War Would Still Have Effects on Global Scale," *Forbes*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidbressan/2017/08/12/even-a-small-nuclear-war-would-still-have-effects-on-global-scale/#185af571507d>

Key Assumptions Check

Assumptions	Supported	Supported w/ Caveats	Unsupported
Iran and its allies have the capacity to attack Israel	✓		
The U.S. will come to Israel's defense		✓	
Iran's allies will come to its defense		✓	
The Syrian War is de-escalating			✓
Netanyahu will stay in power		✓	
Israel will never agree to a two-state solution		✓	