

**Opinion** Middle East and north Africa

## The Guardian view on escalation in the Middle East: the region is inching towards the abyss

*Editorial*

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The deaths of three US soldiers in Jordan this weekend will prompt retaliation. But what then?

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📷 Houthi supporters in Sanaa, Yemen, demonstrate against US-led airstrikes. Photograph: Osamah Abdulrahman/AP

Earlier this month, Joe Biden was asked if the [airstrikes on Yemen](#) were working. “Are they stopping the Houthis? No,” [replied](#) the president. “Are they going to continue? Yes.”

There is an obvious logic to the US approach. If it - and its allies - do not show the Houthis and their Iranian backers that there is a price for attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, then there is no reason for its adversaries to halt. That is even more clearly the case when it comes to the [attack](#) that killed three US soldiers and injured dozens more in Jordan on Sunday. It has been claimed by [Islamic Resistance in Iraq](#), a loose coalition of Iranian-backed militias; though Tehran denied involvement, Mr Biden blamed “Iran-backed” groups and vowed to respond.

He could hardly do otherwise, especially as an unpopular president in an election year - though for the same reason, he will want to avoid the kind of escalation that will see gas prices soar, still more a direct clash with Tehran. But that does not mean that tit-for-tat will take the US or the region where Mr Biden wants it to go. For the same logic also pertains to Iran’s thinking. If the US hits it hard, it will feel obliged to retaliate - almost certainly via proxies - to [shore up](#) or advance its position and undermine America’s.

Both Washington and Tehran say they are not looking for war. But calibration is an art and not a science. However carefully chosen the target, the damage caused is unpredictable - though the deaths of US personnel were probably a matter of time given the scores of rocket and drone attacks by Iranian-backed groups in recent months. The other side’s assessment is also uncertain. Domestic pressures weight the response. The [Houthis](#) and Islamic Resistance in Iraq pursue their own interests as well as Iran’s. Most worryingly, a gradual and apparently containable escalation can suddenly gather pace.

The regional war that the White House hoped to stave off [is already happening](#). Jordan is only the latest to be drawn in. This spiralling crisis will not end while the conflict at its heart rages. More than 26,600 have been killed in Gaza, according to the health ministry, and survivors are in desperate need. Yet the US, UK and eight other countries have [withdrawn funding](#) from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees following Israel’s allegations that 12 employees participated in the Hamas atrocities of 7 October.

The UN is right to urgently investigate these horrifying claims, and anyone responsible must be held fully accountable. The withdrawal of support, however, is wrong. The agency employs 13,000 people in Gaza - itself testament to how bleak things were already - and is supporting almost 2 million. The UN special rapporteur on food has [warned](#) that famine is now “imminent” and “inevitable”.

For many in the region and beyond, the suspension of funding over as yet unproven allegations against individuals stands in glaring contrast to the dismissive reaction to the international court of justice’s [finding on Friday](#) that there is a plausible case for Israel to answer on allegations of genocide in Gaza.

The restoration of support, freeing of hostages and a ceasefire in Gaza are essential for the region as a whole and those involved in it. With the broader

conflict increasingly developing a life and momentum of its own, there is no time to lose.

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