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Territorial Integrity at Risk:
Israel and Russia's Strikes
By
Marina Tovar I Velasco



30 September 2025

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For information about Rosa&Roubini Associates, please send an email to info@rosa-roubini-associates.com or call +44 (0)20 7101 0718.

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- ✦ Russia and Israel's strikes showcase how the Westphalian norm of territorial integrity is eroding. The violations are *allowed* due to lax norm enforcement and the fact that both states leverage ambiguity and plausible deniability. The strikes weaken the rules-based order and increase system instability, contributing to normalising a post-Westphalian order where norms become increasingly diluted.
- ✦ Systemic stabilisers reduce the likelihood of a Third World War despite increasing threats coming from Russia and Israel. Stabilisers that prevent escalation include nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, and domestic political restraints.

Key Picture: Israel Attacks Six Countries in 72 Hours (8-10 September 2025)



Source:
[AI](#)

[Jazeera, Liveuamap](#)

1. Background: Eroding the Westphalian Principles of the Modern International Order

Following the conclusion of the Thirty Years' War in Europe in 1648, the Peace of Westphalia gave rise to the international system of independent nations. The established paradigm promoted the idea that political power should be defined by territory and that boundaries were inviolable.

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These ideas were transformed into three main tenets of the modern international order: non-intervention, sovereignty, and legal equality of states. Consequences *should* stem from violations of these norms. When a state breaches the territorial integrity of another country, it runs the danger of being labelled an aggressor, facing diplomatic, economic, or military countermeasures. However, over recent decades, the erosion of the territorial integrity norm has become apparent in various scenarios.

Russia has asserted influence or direct control over parts of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and Moldova (Transnistria and Crimea) without consequent sanctioning. China's claim over Taiwan challenges the Westphalian guarantee of sovereignty for *de facto* states. Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza put to the test norms. In September 2025, Israel's strikes in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Qatar, and Yemen, together with Russia's violation of Poland and Estonia's airspace, illustrate the post-Westphalian time we are living in. These incidents demonstrate how the diffusion of territorial integrity norms and lax enforcement may lead to unintentional escalation.

2. Israel in Gaza: Genocide

On 16 September, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry, the UN Human Rights Council-mandate commission, concluded that Israel committed genocide in the Gaza Strip.¹ This finding sits alongside operational data from UN humanitarian agencies. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) highlighted that over the week of 15 September, Israeli forces continued to carry out heavy bombardment from the air, land, and sea across the Gaza Strip, striking residential buildings, tents, and school sheltering Internally Displaced People (IDPs).² In addition, UNRWA confirmed either direct or indirect strikes on 12 UNRWA premises in Gaza City, including nine schools and two health centres sheltering over 11 000 individuals between 11 and 16 September 2025.³ Furthermore, OCHA reported that about half of more than 246 8000 displacement movements recorded since mid-August took place in the past week alone, with growing reports of displaced families sleeping on the streets and struggling to survive.⁴

UNRWA reports that the 'massive destruction of civilian infrastructure, combined with severe disruptions to humanitarian operations and access constraints, severely hinders the last remaining lifelines for civilians in Gaza City'.⁵ If bombardment and access constraints continue, malnutrition caseloads are likely to continue rising and excess mortality to climb. Closed treatment centres disrupted supply lines, and attacks on shelters make detection and care extremely difficult. This scenario is already emerging, as early indicators show rising malnutrition, increasing deaths, and extensive shelter damage, and it is likely to continue if bombardment, displacement, and restricted humanitarian access persist.

3. From Gaza Outwards: How Israel's Strikes May Regionalize the War and Escalate Tensions

On 9 September 2025, Israel struck Qatar's capital Doha to carry out an assassination attempt on top Hamas leaders as these were meeting to discuss Trump's ceasefire proposal. Hamas reported its senior leadership had survived, although six other individuals were killed, including a Qatari officer and the son of its Gaza chief Khalil al-Hayya.⁶ Concerns about the breakdown of mediation efforts and further escalation have been raised by the Israeli attacks in Doha, which have sparked a serious regional response. The strikes do, in fact, highlight Israel's continuously escalating military operations in the area.

Over the past weeks, Israel has carried out strikes in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, and Yemen.⁷ In southern Lebanon, Israel launched on 18 September airstrikes against Hezbollah military targets to stop the group rebuilding in the area.⁸ In Syria, Israeli troops carried out a ground operation in the southeastern Deraa province on 14 September, and continued air raids against Damascus in various locations.⁹ In Iran, no major new Israeli strikes were reported in September 2025. However, intense exchanges occurred in June as Israel carried out nearly 360 attacks across 27 Iranian provinces, comprising multiple aerial strikes, killing around 1 100, while Iran conducted at least 36 direct hits, killing at least 28 people and injuring 3,000.¹⁰

Finally, in Yemen, Israel struck the Yemeni capital Sanaa and the northern province of al-Jawf on 10 September, with the Houthi health ministry saying it killed 35 and wounded 131¹¹, and on 16 September struck Houthi shipping infrastructure at Hudaydah Port.¹²

Israel's operations showcase that it is extending its kinetic operations beyond Gaza into neighbouring and regional states. At the same time, attacks on sovereign nations erode the principle of territorial integrity norms and the potential collapse of mediation space as the conflict regionalizes, increasing the likelihood that misattribution or cross-border incidents spiral into far broader confrontation.

4. Russia's Airspace Violations and NATO's Article 4 (lack of) Responses

In 10 September, '19, cases of incursion by Russian drone-type objects into Polish airspace were recorded',¹³ with Poland shutting them down with the backing of NATO aircrafts, constituting the first time a NATO member fired shots since Russia started its war against Ukraine in February 2022.¹⁴ Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk stated it 'was the closest we [Poland] have been to open conflict since World War Two', while also recognising that they 'had no reason to believe we are on the brink of war'.¹⁵ That same day, Poland requested consultations with NATO members under the Treaty's article 4.¹⁶ Two weeks later, on 23 September, Estonia requested consultations under Article 4 as three armed Russian MiG-31 aircrafts violated Estonian airspace for over ten minutes.¹⁷

According to NATO, these incursions 'are part of a wider pattern of increasingly irresponsible Russian behaviour' as not only have Estonia and Poland seen their airspace being violated, but other Allies, including Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, and Romania, have experienced airspace violations by Russia recently.¹⁸ Multiple incidents of Russian drones entering NATO Members' airspace have resulted in high tensions at the NATO-Russia boundary territories. The current pattern raises the risk of accidental escalation, primarily through misattribution and domestic pressure to respond swiftly. Tensions could further escalate if a drone were to accidentally or deliberately kill a domestic or third-party national or hit a state's assets, prompting potential retaliatory responses.

5. Escalation by Misstep? Analysis and Conclusions

Russia's airspace breaches and Israel's strikes are more than isolated violations of Westphalian norms. These instances show how state actors are increasingly taking advantage of ambiguity and plausible deniability with no repercussion other than public censure, posing severe concerns and risks. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), in Russia's case, Russia's drone incursions serve to test NATO's political unity and probe air defence gaps without necessarily triggering retaliation.¹⁹ Israel's regional strikes serve a different purpose but contribute to a similar erosion of normative boundaries. Indeed, its strikes in Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, and most recently Qatar outline the weakening of the principle of non-intervention and reinforce the precedent that territorial sovereignty can be overridden in pursuit of national security interest.

Can Russia and Israel's actions trigger a Third World War by accident? When taken as a whole, these instances show a larger pattern within a post-Westphalian order. Russia and Israel's activities increase the risk of escalation, especially in areas where regional conflicts and great power alliances meet. What can start out as a well-planned action, like a drone strike in Doha, could unintentionally cause civilian fatalities or other incidents that set off cascading reactions. In this sense, Russia and Israel's actions are potential markers of an international system that drifts towards increased instability, where the erosion of territorial integrity increases the risk of accidental large-scale conflict. Nevertheless, while the current pattern poses an elevated risk of conflict, World War III remains unlikely. This is explained because stabilizers are significant: nuclear deterrence, economic interdependence, de-escalation mechanisms – NATO article 4 –, and domestic constraints explain why missteps raise tensions but rarely ignite world war.

All things considered, Russia's drone attacks in NATO airspace and Israel's strikes show a wider breakdown of Westphalian norms by normalizing actions that undermine the common standards of the rules-based international order. However, World War III is still unlikely. The true threat lies in normalising state behaviour that undermines the foundations that establish the international order, resulting in the gradual deterioration of norms, heightening instability.

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