

# The Potential for Escalation: Attacks on American Forces by Pro-Iranian Militias

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**The increase in attacks by pro-Iranian militias against the US presence in Iraq and Syria, and the corresponding increase in the number of US forces in the region – coupled with the clear warnings from senior US officials that they hold Iran responsible for the tension – are signs of possible escalation. Although neither the United States nor Iran wants a direct confrontation, these developments, in addition to the potential deterioration of the situation between Israel and Hezbollah, have heightened the possibility of such a conflict. If American deterrence fails, it will become necessary for the United States to translate the threats into actions – including direct and kinetic operations against Iranian targets. The clearer the US messages, the greater the chances that Iran will try to prevent escalation into a direct conflict in which it has no interest.**

Since the outbreak of the war between Israel and Hamas, and following the unequivocal support by the United States for Israel, pro-Iranian militias have intensified significantly their attacks on US targets in Syria and Iraq. At the same time, the Houthis, who are supported by Iran, launched several barrages of surface-to-surface missile and drones from Yemen in the direction of Israel and Egypt; these were intercepted by US and Israeli forces. These attacks came after several months of calm resulting from certain agreements between the US and Iran as part of the prisoner-exchange deal that also saw frozen Iranian funds released.

In response to the attacks against them, US forces targeted two weapons storage facilities belonging to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and their allies on the Iraq-Syria border. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austian [stressed](#) that these "precision self-defense strikes" were meant to send a message to Iran that the United States would not tolerate such attacks and would defend itself, its forces, and its interests. He also said that the Biden administration is not interested in a conflict and has no desire or intention to carry out further activity, adding that these operations were separate and distinct from the ongoing fighting between Israel and Hamas. The militias, for their part, made exactly the opposite argument, emphasizing that US support for Israel in the fighting against Hamas was the motive for their attacks.

The White House also stated that US President Joe Biden sent a direct message to the Iranian leadership, warning it against continued attacks against US targets in the Middle East and against taking advantage of the circumstances and instructing Hezbollah to broaden the war against Israel. Alongside these diplomatic messages, several senior US figures – including President Biden himself and Secretary of State

Antony Blinken – have publicly warned Iran that if these attacks on American targets continue, the United States will respond. Blinken stated quite explicitly in his address to a special session of the United Nations Security Council that the United States is not looking for confrontation with Iran, but added that if the Islamic Republic and its proxies continue to attack US assets, the administration will act “swiftly and decisively.” Moreover, President Biden has repeatedly warned Iran, including on his visit to Israel, when he said that his message to Iran and Hezbollah “or any other hostile actor thinking about attacking Israel remains the same as it was a week ago: Don’t. Don’t. Don’t.” Immediately after the Hamas attack on October 7 in the western Negev and given the large number of Israeli casualties and hostages, the Biden administration recognized that there was serious potential that the incident could escalate far beyond another round of fighting between Israel and Hamas and could spread to other fronts. In order to deter Iran and Hezbollah, the United States augmented its forceful messages of deterrence by significantly increasing the presence of its forces in the Mediterranean. For his part, the Iranian leader responded that according to information he received, Israeli policy in its attacks on Gaza was dictated by Washington, which therefore bears responsibility for Israel’s actions.

Over the past two weeks the administration has significantly beefed up the number of US forces in the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf. Two aircraft carriers have already been deployed to the region: the USS *Gerald R. Ford* and its strike group is currently off the coast of Israel, and the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* and its strike group is en route to the Persian Gulf, where it will join , 2 with the already deployed US 5th Fleet. In addition, two amphibious warships, the USS *Bataan* and the USS *Carter Hall*, are currently approaching the Red Sea, making this the largest mass of US ships in the region in decades. The US Air Force has augmented its fighter aircraft squadrons in the region and sent THAAD anti-ballistic missile defense systems to Saudi Arabia, and the Patriot defense system will be deployed in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Iraq, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. This is in addition to the two Iron Dome batteries that were sent from the United States to Israel. Moreover, the Pentagon announced that roughly 900 more US troops are preparing to deploy to the Middle East.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi confirmed that the United States had relayed messages to Tehran and said in response that it had “received a tangible answer on the ground” and that the US “is asking us not to move while it provides broad support to the Zionist entity...This is an unacceptable demand.” Other senior Iranian officials, including Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian at the emergency UN meeting on October 26, are conducting an intensive public diplomacy campaign. Iran has two main purposes: efforts to deter the United States by intimating that continued attacks against Iran and its interests in the Middle East would incur a heavy cost for Washington, and reassurance to Iran’s allies in the region that it remains steadfastly behind them. In this framework, Abdollahian warned the US that continued support of Israel would lead to “more fronts opening up.” A spokesperson for the Revolutionary Guards also warned that “there are some hands that cannot reach this regime but can reach the American forces that are managing this war.” He added that Iran is monitoring US bases in the region.

The Israel-Hamas war curtailed at once the efforts of recent months by the United States and Iran to calm bilateral relations. The Biden administration hoped to get through the upcoming election year without having to invest much effort in the Iranian issue, while Tehran is benefiting from the unfrozen money and from the expectation that pressure with regard to its nuclear program will be eased. Yet while the impression is that neither the United States nor Iran has any interest in further deterioration and certainly not in direct conflict between them, the intense regional pressure at the current time significantly lowers the bar for what could spark broader conflict, and it seems that both sides are testing the respective thresholds. The US administration is adamant that it will not turn a blind eye to attacks on US assets, especially if lives are lost. Iran, for its part, claims that it has no control over the organizations operating in Iraq and Syria, but Washington counters that it knows that Tehran gives them the green light for continued attacks.

The IDF ground operation in the Gaza Strip is expected to increase pressure on Hezbollah and other Iranian-backed groups in the region to respond, which would increase tensions between them and the United States. The fact that the administration has clearly identified Iran as responsible for attacks on US targets also indicates that Washington sees Iran as a potential target for response. Especially important in this context was the comment by National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on October 29 that the United States would respond if Iran again attacked US soldiers.

What happens from here on depends on how determined the US administration is to translate the red lines it has drawn (even if it does not use that terminology) into offensive action. More than that, however, it depends on how the Iranian leadership – especially Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has consistently shown himself averse to direct conflict with the United States – assesses the seriousness of the American threats.

President Biden's decision making processes take into account many different issues, alongside the need to ensure no US soldiers are killed. These issues include Washington's image among its regional allies, the President's personal standing, given that he is about to enter an election year, and the experience of the negative impact to the standing and credibility of the United States following President Barack Obama's decision to back down from the threat of military action against Syria the moment that it crossed his red line and used chemical weapons.

Therefore, in light of the determination Biden is showing to fight against what he calls "bad actors," and despite the desire to avoid escalation, it can be (cautiously) predicted that continued provocative attacks against US targets will lead to a more significant response – including against Iran directly. It is still too early to say whether events in the Middle East will lead to a reassessment in Washington with regard to the overall US relations with Iran, including in the context of the nuclear program. Yet it is doubtful that the US will consider the nuclear issue a reason to delay any response, if it concludes that Iran has crossed a line from the US perspective and that a more concrete response – including a military one – is required.

This is the first significant test for the "axis of resistance" that the Islamic Republic has created and nurtured. Hamas's success in igniting the war is seen as major

achievement that begins the “process of Israel’s collapse.” As far as Iran is concerned, the incident obligates both preventing total failure and proving that the axis is effective. On the other hand, Iran does not want Hezbollah to suffer major losses, so it backs the policy that the organization has taken – but without entering into the overall campaign and while still trying to distance itself from the operations of the militias in Syria and Iraq. Iran’s central goal – independent of the Hamas attacks – was and remains the removal of any US presence in the Middle East in general and Iraq and Syria in particular. The attacks against Americans in recent days serve both this long term goal and are also payback to the members of the axis of resistance for the war waged by Hamas. In an effort to dissuade Washington from responding, Iran even alluded to the possibility of attacking US bases in the Gulf, which would be a reversal of the policy that Tehran has pursued over the past two years – rapprochement with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Although Iran is not interested in direct conflict with the United States, it is doubtful at this stage whether it believes that this is a likely eventuality and could therefore take measures to force the US administration to respond.

Despite the fundamental interests of both the United States and Iran, the current situation has very real potential to lead to direct confrontation between the Islamic Republic and its proxies and the United States. If American deterrence fails, the administration will be forced to translate its threats into actions – including direct kinetic actions against Iranian targets. The louder and clearer the American messages, the greater the chances that Iran will work to prevent the situation deteriorating into a conflict that it does not want – and certainly not one that it planned.

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