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Possible Attack From Iran: Analysis & U.S. Policy Implications

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As the anniversary of the U.S. strike that killed Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani on January 3, 2020 nears, the U.S. military is reportedly preparing for Iranian reprisals. Although important, strategic signaling, such as by flying B-52 bombers over the region, is not adequate to stopping more likely lower-level Iranian attacks, especially since the U.S. is drawing down its regional forces at the same time. To deter and defend against Iranian aggression, both the Trump and Biden teams will have to communicate resolve to defend U.S. personnel and partners, alike. This policy memo from JINSA staff provides background on U.S.-Iran tensions in 2020, possible Iranian motivations if the regime decides to strike, and policy recommendations for U.S. officials.

Key Takeaways

- The main rationale that Iran would have to launch a reprisal attack for Soleimani's death a year ago would be to deter further such U.S. military actions. However, Tehran might conclude that retaliation at this point would have minimal deterrence value against the United States as President Trump is soon leaving office and President-Elect Biden is less likely to be as militarily aggressive.
- However, Iran might want to retaliate for domestic political reasons and/or to deter further sabotage of its nuclear program, such as the recent assassination of top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakrizadeh.
- Iran might take action that: 1) saves face domestically; 2) happens close enough to, or shortly after, the U.S. presidential inauguration that it is difficult for Trump to respond; 3) is not severe enough that Biden feels like he has to respond or is dissuaded from negotiations/sanctions relief.
 - Two options would be either low-level proxy attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and/or Syria or targeting Israel or other U.S. regional partners.

- Current U.S. actions and statements, when contrasted with the ongoing withdrawal of U.S. military forces and even diplomatic personnel from the Middle East, might not be sufficient to deter the most likely Iranian reprisals.
- In preparation for an attack by Iran or its proxies, the Trump and Biden teams should:
 - Issue forceful, public declarations that any Iranian aggression against American or partner interests will not go unchecked;
 - Maintain a strong military and diplomatic presence in the Middle East and deploy necessary deterrent and defensive assets;
 - Establish clear communication between the outgoing and incoming administrations about intelligence and contingency plans.

Background to U.S.-Iran Tensions in 2020

- On January 3, a U.S. drone strike killed Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's elite Quds force within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).¹ This began a pattern of Iranian acts, or threats, of retaliation and U.S. military deterrence actions.
 - On January 8, Iran launched ballistic missile attacks on Al Asad and Erbil airbases in Iraq that host American military personnel, which Iranian officials claimed was part of "Operation Martyr Soleimani."²
 - In early March, Iranian proxies began a series of rocket attacks on U.S. soldiers in Iraq that killed two American servicemembers and coincided with a U.S. pullback from bases. These assaults continued intermittently throughout 2020, peaking in frequency from March to August.
 - In April, Iran provocatively escalated tensions in the Persian Gulf when its "vessels repeatedly crossed the bows and sterns of the U.S. vessels at extremely close range and high speeds," according to a statement from U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT).³
 - Beginning in early June, nearly daily rocket attacks, likely from pro-Iranian militias, targeted Americans in Iraq.⁴
 - After weeks of calm, Iranian-backed Shia militias resumed their attacks on American positions in Iraq in late November by firing several rockets at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.⁵
 - On December 20, 21 rockets hit inside of the Green Zone in Iraq, the largest attack the area has faced in a decade.⁶
- During 2020, Iran's nuclear program suffered several major sabotage incidents.

- JINSA previously concluded that an explosion at Iran's Natanz nuclear enrichment on July 1, 2020 "likely delayed the mass expansion of Iran's enrichment program by at least a year;" however, it did not set back the roughly four months Iran would need to break out to a nuclear bomb.⁷
- On November 27, 2020, Mohsen Fakrizadeh was assassinated in Tehran. Fakrizadeh was a brigadier general within the IRGC and head of the AMAD Project, Iran's plan to develop covert nuclear weapons.⁸
- In recent weeks, the United States and Israel have taken several actions with the intention of deterring further Iranian aggression.
 - The Israeli government has reportedly directed the IDF to prepare for Trump to strike Iran in the closing days of his administration.⁹
 - Israel has had its embassies on high alert since November.¹⁰
 - Also at the end of November, the Pentagon announced that the *USS Nimitz* aircraft carrier would return to the Middle East and patrol the Persian Gulf.¹¹
 - The Pentagon ordered multiple B-52 bomber missions to the Persian Gulf in late November and December.¹² CENTCOM Commander Gen. Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie described these missions as efforts "to deter any potential adversary, and make clear that we are ready and able to respond to any aggression directed at Americans or our interests."¹³
 - The *USS Georgia*, an *Ohio*-class submarine that can wield 154 Tomahawk cruise missiles, traversed the Strait of Hormuz in late December on a visit to Bahrain.¹⁴
 - Israel has also taken precautionary steps, sending a *Dolphin*-class submarine through the Suez Canal and into the Red Sea, a decision that is significant on several levels.¹⁵
 - Israel's expeditionary deployment of the submarine to the Red Sea, having only occurred once before, in 2009, is foremost a deterrent signal to Iran.
 - Such defensive activities reflect Israel's new strategic relationships with the Gulf states like Bahrain and the UAE.
 - The move is a valid response to Iran's occasional past naval excursions to the Mediterranean.
 - Considering Egypt's traditional obsession and hostility towards Israel's presumed nuclear assets, including the long-standing unconfirmed reports alleging their deployment on submarines, it is noteworthy that Cairo would nevertheless green-light the canal transit.
 - In December, the U.S. government withdrew some of its embassy staff in Baghdad, reportedly a precautionary move as the anniversary of Soleimani's death approaches.

- In response to the December 20 rocket attack, Trump tweeted on December 23: “Our embassy in Baghdad got hit Sunday by several rockets. Three rockets failed to launch. Guess where they were from: IRAN. Now we hear chatter of additional attacks against Americans in Iraq...Some friendly health advice to Iran: If one American is killed, I will hold Iran responsible. Think it over.”¹⁶
- On December 21, IDF Chief of the General Staff Aviv Kochavi issued a clear warning: “if Iran and its partners, members of the radical axis, either directly or by proxy, will take action against the State of Israel, they will find themselves in a very costly endeavor.... The IDF will strike all those involved in activities against the State of Israel or against Israeli targets, whether in part or in full, whether near or far.... I say these things simply, clearly and with complete commitment: our retaliatory steps have been prepared and rehearsed. I advise our enemies not to test us.”¹⁷
- However, the medium- and long-term deterrent value of flyover missions and deployments of naval assets near Iran is questionable, especially if Iran continues to favor low-threshold proxy attacks on Iraqi soil.

Possible Iranian Strategic Calculus

- Iran’s leaders will have to weigh competing interests in deciding whether, where, and how to retaliate.
- On the one hand, Iran wants to save face domestically and internationally after the series of high-profile assassinations on its senior leaders and proxy forces as well as potentially deter further such attacks.
 - An overt strike from Iranian territory would be most likely if the leadership feels compelled to, and justified in, responding to the Soleimani strike and presumed Israeli sabotage and assassination. In other words, it would have less need for deniability.
 - If Tehran decides to act militarily against U.S. interests, it will likely intend for the attacks to serve as a propaganda tool to consolidate domestic support, but it is not clear that would be the result.
- On the other, Tehran does not want to take action that drives Biden to renege on his offer to reenter the JCPOA and grant sanctions relief.
 - An attack attributable to Iran that causes American casualties would be hard to ignore by any administration.
 - At the same time, there remains a danger that the Biden administration will prioritize new nuclear negotiations over fully backing Israeli or Arab Gulf State defenses, paradoxically setting the stage for exactly the regional security crisis Washington’s new leadership wishes to avoid.

- Faced with the competing desires to retaliate for the assassinations while keeping a return to the JCPOA open, Iran may choose to:
 - Launch precision missile and/or drone strikes on American personnel or positions on or around the January 3 anniversary of Soleimani's death. Tehran may calculate that such an attack would be too late in Trump's term for the outgoing president to respond effectively, but also far enough in advance of Biden's inauguration that the incoming administration will still be willing to reset relations.
 - Direct its Shia proxies to launch a series of low-threshold assaults on American positions in Iraq—as it has done throughout much of the past year—but this may not be deemed sufficiently dramatic enough to avenge their losses.
 - The most dangerous near-term scenario may be one in which Iran bides its time, striking against one or more American allies on or after January 20 to test the new U.S. administration's resolve and regional commitment.
 - The most likely target in this case would be Israel, which Iran's autocratic theocracy has asserted is the origin of so many headaches and embarrassments both within its borders and in Syria.
 - Iran may presume that Israeli leadership, possibly preoccupied with election politics and the COVID-19 pandemic, will not choose to unleash its full capabilities against Iran or its proxy, Hezbollah, while the Biden administration will resist getting drawn into hostilities that were not directed at U.S. forces.
- The Iranians may be overconfident, however, in calculating the severity of an attack that won't trigger escalation.
 - An outgoing President Trump may have little to lose and perhaps something to gain by retaliating to an Iranian attack with an open-ended conflict, leaving Biden a regional mess to contain.
 - A Trump strike that hit Iran hard could also serve some of Biden's interests by driving the Iranians to the negotiating table.

Implications and Options for U.S. Policy

- The outgoing administration must forcefully counter any Iranian or proxy violence that kills or injures Americans, as Trump has reiterated in recent days.
- At the same time, however, Tehran should not be under the illusion that causing U.S. deaths is a redline threshold below which Iranian terror and military force is somehow permissible.
 - Trump should make this clear with a public statement that clarifies American deaths are not the minimum triggering event to U.S. military force and extends U.S. deterrence and protection to U.S. regional partners.

- Maintain a strong military presence to deter an Iranian attack on regional partners.
 - Both the outgoing and incoming administrations should avoid further drawing down personnel and assets in the Middle East, particularly those in Iraq, while taking into account security concerns for civilian staff.
 - U.S. and Israeli vessels could rendezvous side-by-side on the surface beyond the Straits of Hormuz but close enough for Tehran to note the united front against their aggression.
 - The next flyover of B-52 or B-2 bombers to the region could also include a loop around Israel accompanied by Israeli fighter aircraft.
- In preparation for potential proxy attacks in Iraq, the United States should consider three options (the first two being difficult to accomplish on short notice):
 - Move missile defense assets to CENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR).
 - Deploy more military personnel.
 - Send a procession of high-level U.S. officials through Baghdad over the next three weeks and in the first hundred days of the Biden administration.
- The Pentagon should preposition B-52s or—even more forcefully—B-2s at Diego Garcia along with massive ordnance penetrator (MOP) bunker busters.
- Trump and Biden should publicly commit to responding with strong military, economic, and diplomatic force to any Iranian aggression against U.S. and regional partners.
- The Trump administration should fully brief the Biden transition team about contingency plans and ensure smooth and proper transition without giving Biden a veto before the actual transfer of power.
 - This should include plans to deter Iranian or proxy strikes and defend or redeploy personnel in the event of an attack.

Endnotes

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