

JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy

Iranian Aggression Despite U.S. Retaliation

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Aggression by Iran and its regional proxies continues to escalate along multiple lines of effort with a March 3, 2021 attack on U.S. forces at Al Asad Air Base in Iraq and several alleged attacks against Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Biden Administration's efforts to engage Tehran diplomatically while deterring it through a discrete, unilateral, and pin-prick military response in Syria on February 25 has not succeeded. Iran will likely continue its comprehensive regional counterpressure strategy of nuclear and military escalation so long as it believes it will be effective in achieving U.S. economic and geopolitical concessions. To establish deterrence, Washington should work with its regional partners to hold Iran accountable for its continued aggression against U.S. interests, using all elements of power, including covert action and debilitating military strikes.

This policy memo from JINSA staff provides details and context of the airstrike in Syria, background on Iranian-backed aggression against Americans in Iraq, and policy recommendations for U.S. officials.

What happened?

- On March 3, 2021, less than a week after President Biden [ordered an airstrike](#) to retaliate against three previous rocket attacks by Iranian-backed groups, ten rockets hit Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, which is used by U.S. forces.
 - During the attack, one U.S. contractor suffered a cardiac attack and died.
 - Initial reports indicate that the base was hit by ten [122 mm "Grad" rockets](#), which have a greater range and force than the 107mm rockets that Iraqi militias typically use.
 - [U.S. officials believe](#) that Kataib Hezbollah (KH) is responsible for the attack and is likely connected to the three February attacks.
 - Al Asad Air Base was previously targeted by Iranian ballistic missiles in January 2020, in response to a U.S. drone strike that killed Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and KH leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

- In addition to now four attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq, Iran and its proxies have also been responsible for other alleged aggression against U.S. partners across the Middle East.
 - On February 25, 2021, an [explosion damaged](#) an Israeli owned and Bahamas-flagged cargo ship traversing through the Gulf of Oman.
 - Israel has blamed Iran for the attack and [reportedly believes](#) that it could have sunk the ship but chose not to do so and that “a commando raid, probably using small speed boats, placed explosives on the ship’s hull and sped away.”
 - On March 3, 2021, Israel’s Environmental Protection Minister Gila Gamliel [accused](#) Iran of “environmental terrorism” for orchestrating an oil spill on Israel’s shores.
 - According to Gamliel, a Libyan ship sailing from Iran spilled the oil in early February; however, it is not clear if Israeli military or intelligence officials have [made the same assessment](#).
 - Iranian-backed proxies have also escalated attacks against Saudi Arabia.
 - On January 23, 2021, armed drones targeted the Saudi royal palace and are believed to have been launched from Iraq.
 - On February 27, 2021, Saudi officials claimed to have [intercepted](#) a Houthi missile attack over Riyadh and an explosive drone attack targeting the country’s south.
 - On March 1, 2021, the [Houthis attacked](#) Jazan, Saudi Arabia, injuring five civilians.

Why does it matter?

- With these attacks—four on U.S. personnel, perhaps two on Israel, and multiple targetings of Saudi Arabia—and its serious nuclear advances, Iran has greeted the Biden administration with a marked increase in aggression.
 - The simultaneous pursuit of nuclear and military escalation, the latter in multiple theaters directed at multiple targets, suggests Iran does not view these spheres as separate. Rather, it is conducting a comprehensive pressure campaign against Washington.
 - The message being sent by Tehran is that it will destabilize the region and harm U.S. interests—by developing nuclear weapons capability and/or attacking U.S. forces and partners—until its demands for sanctions relief are met.
 - A secondary objective for Iran is likely to further reduce U.S. presence in the Middle East by increasing its cost, in blood and treasure, and amplifying the general U.S. consensus toward ending “endless wars.”

- Biden's combination of diplomatic outreach and discrete, unilateral, and proportional retaliation have proven ineffective thus far.
 - His offer to enter into negotiations with Iran has been rebuffed.
 - The February 25 U.S. retaliatory strike against relatively insignificant Iraqi militia facilities in Syria did not have the administration's desired deterrent effect.
- Washington and its partners have not taken a holistic view of Iranian aggression.
 - U.S. officials have not commented on attacks on Israel and have done little more than condemn attacks on Saudi Arabia—without mentioning Iran's links to Houthi aggression and while simultaneously taking a series of actions designed to distance the United States from the Kingdom.
 - Israel sees the Iranian attack on its ship as an extension of the “war between wars” it has been waging against Iran in Syria and, thus, seemingly unconnected to the attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and the escalation of attacks against Saudi Arabia.
 - This narrow view both obscures Iran's larger strategy and hampers necessary coordination and cooperation between partners that is crucial to mounting a more effective response.
- Iran and its various proxies have likely made some or all of the following assumptions, each of which gives them escalation dominance over the United States:
 - Biden is unwilling to engage in a tit-for-tat with the Iraqi proxies or Iran and, therefore, his decision to target inconsequential infrastructure in Syria is not one he is likely to make after each rocket attack on Americans in Iraq;
 - Even if Biden does retaliate again, further U.S. airstrikes similar to the one in Syria are tolerable;
 - Biden is unwilling to conduct airstrikes inside of Iraqi territory because he does not want to upset the country's delicate domestic situation;
 - Biden is unwilling to directly target Iranian assets or personnel in order to avoid further escalation that he fears will endanger the prospects for negotiations to contain Iran's nuclear program.
- Iran will continue applying both nuclear and military pressure so long as it believes it will be effective in achieving U.S. concessions or until some or all of these assumptions are disproven and the United States establishes effective deterrence by:
 - Breaking the pattern of commensurate tit-for-tat retaliation;
 - Credibly demonstrating that the United States is willing and able to inflict greater damage to Iranian interests in the region than Tehran is willing to bear;

- Expanding U.S. redlines to make clear it will not tolerate, and will respond to, any aggression by Iranian-linked groups against U.S. partners;
- Working together with its regional partners to hold Iran accountable for its aggression;
- Explicitly linking the nuclear and military files such that no progress can be made on one without the other.

What should the United States do next?

- The United States should lead a multilateral, multi-prong effort to push back harder against Iran diplomatically, economically, and militarily.
 - Achieving this deterrence should be a necessary prerequisite to any nuclear talks with Iran so that American negotiators can have maximum leverage in their conversations.
- The Biden administration should clearly and publicly link Iran’s regional aggression to nuclear diplomacy, signaling that it will not negotiate or consider any sort of sanctions relief, if attacks continue.
 - The Biden administration should brief its European partners and issue joint public condemnations in support of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Where possible, the State Department should push American’s partners in the Middle East to issue similar statements.
 - The United States should push its European partners to support an IAEA censure resolution and issue new sanctions on Iranian institutions and officials in response to recent events.
 - As appropriate, Washington should use its March rotation as president of the United Nations Security Council to hold a meeting at which Israel could present evidence of Iran’s complicity in the cargo ship and oil spill incidents.
- The Biden administration should pursue joint U.S.-Israel consultations on possible military, cyber, and covert action responses that inflict serious but non-escalatory harm on the Iranian regime’s interests.
 - Such actions would follow Biden’s [expressed understanding](#) of his presidential authority under Article II of the Constitution, “to direct limited U.S. military operations abroad without prior Congressional approval when those operations serve important U.S. interests.” Defending America’s partners from attack could fall within this “limited” use of force so long as it does not draw America into a protracted engagement.
- As [JINSA’s memo](#) after the airstrike in Syria argued, “deterring further Iranian aggression will require taking forceful retaliatory action in the future. A limited, one-

time airstrike in Syria is unlikely to deter Iran for long and will require reinforcing military action.”

- To protect bases in Iraq with U.S. personnel, the Pentagon should rapidly fast track the testing and deployment of two Iron Dome batteries to the Middle East.
 - C-RAMs, which respond to short-range mortars and rockets common among Iraqi militias, are less effective than the Israeli Iron Dome. The United States provided funds to develop the Iron Dome and recently acquired two batteries. The U.S. systems are [still undergoing training and testing procedures](#) but Israel has [approved their deployment](#) to unspecified Gulf states.
- The Biden administration should designate Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and its leadership as terrorist entities because of its targeting of Americans and ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force.

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