



Rebuilding U.S. Deterrence to Counter Iran-led Escalation

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The Biden administration's warnings of "don't" and its force buildup across the greater Middle East are highly welcome and necessary, but still far from sufficient, to deter Tehran and its proxies from dangerously escalating the Israel-Hamas conflict amid an impending Israeli ground operation in Gaza. By gauging U.S. willingness to respond and seeking to undermine the administration's pledges to support Israel and prevent a broader war, the recent spate of regionwide Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces shows how much work remains for the United States to overcome its profound credibility deficit in Tehran's eyes, maximize the prospects for successful deterrence, and fully prepare to deny or mitigate any ensuing escalation if deterrence fails. Redressing this deficit requires immediate and concerted steps by the administration to make explicitly clear it holds the Iranian regime responsible for escalation, and that it will respond directly against Iranian targets in any such scenario. These stronger warnings must be paired with additional and more robust U.S. military preparations across the broader Middle East.

What Happened?

- As Israel prepares for a large-scale Gaza ground operation, Iranian proxies are [launching](#) limited, but repeated, drone and missile strikes around the Middle East in recent days that have injured or otherwise threatened U.S. forces in Syria, Iraq, and the Red Sea:
 - » On October 19, a U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer in the Red Sea shot down at least four missiles and 15 drones fired by Iran's proxy in Yemen toward southern Israel.
 - » The United States has not imposed any costs in response to these attacks, beyond intercepting the missile and drone salvos originating from Yemen.
 - » On October 19, when asked [point blank](#) if the administration sees "any connection between Yemen, Syria, and Iraq at this point, in terms of Iran directing or some great hand directing the attacks," the Pentagon press secretary did not mention Iran, and instead responded: "I think you have to look at these individually."
- On October 21, the Pentagon announced additional steps to [enhance](#) U.S. force posture across the broader Middle East, including:
 - » Redirecting the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* Carrier Strike Group (CSG), which initially was deploying to the Eastern Mediterranean, to the area of responsibility for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which includes the waters surrounding the Arabian Peninsula. The USS *Gerald R. Ford* CSG currently remains in the Eastern Mediterranean;
 - » Deploying U.S. air defense assets throughout the region to protect U.S. forces; and
 - » Increasing preparedness for additional U.S. forces to deploy to the region as needed.
- Amid these events, Tehran has warned publicly that its proxy forces, and potentially its own, are prepared to [intervene](#) and escalate the current Israel-Hamas conflict, especially if Israel's current Gaza operation persists and/or expands to include a ground offensive.

Why Is It Important?

- Tehran is using this recent spate of attacks to gauge and erode the Biden administration's willingness to fulfill its recent pledges to support Israel's self-defense, including the president's explicit [warnings](#) against Iran or Hezbollah escalating the Israel-Hamas conflict.
 - » This does not necessarily mean Iran wants all-out war against Israel and/or the United States, but it does signal Iran's confidence that, by increasing the risks of such conflict, it can dissuade continued strong U.S. backing for Israel, discredit American leadership and deterrence across the region, and isolate and [constrain](#) Israel precisely as the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) launch a challenging ground campaign in Gaza.
 - » In the absence of a clear and strong U.S. response, such low-level probing could lead to a major conflagration by encouraging more severe Iran-led attacks against U.S. and/or Israeli targets, very similar to how Hamas and other proxies conducted limited [multifront assaults](#) to exploit and exacerbate Israel's perceived fraying readiness and deterrence in the months leading up to Hamas' far more escalatory October 7 attack.
- Despite the fact that such events quickly could spiral out of control with Israel's impending ground operations in Gaza, Iran's readiness to probe U.S. defenses and worsen the current crisis follows from its belief that it has an edge over the United States in both key elements of deterrence, namely willpower and firepower:
 - » *Willpower*: just as Iran's proxies [gradually](#) chipped away at Israeli deterrence for months before it was shattered by Hamas' October 7 attack, years of U.S. inaction and unfulfilled threats have steadily removed Tehran's fear that America has the will to carry out its new pledges and impose prohibitive costs for overstepping its redlines.
 - The administration has long advertised its [self-deterrence](#) and fears of escalation by responding only four times to eighty-plus Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq in 2021-23, and by [conveying](#) that its few responses were calibrated to "limit the risks of escalation and minimize casualties" – a posture which only counterproductively undermined U.S. deterrence and fueled further aggression.
 - For nearly three years, as Tehran repeatedly called the administration's bluff by [blowing past](#) multiple deadlines for rejoining the JCPOA nuclear deal and by accelerating its nuclear weapons program, the administration continued offering further talks and conspicuously avoided executing its [explicit pledges](#) to pivot to a "Plan B" of comprehensive pressure against the Iranian regime and its proxies.
 - » *Firepower*: with its formidable capacity to impose serious damage on U.S. forces and other regional assets, Iran acts as if it has a real measure of "escalation dominance" enabling it to counter-deter the Biden administration from upholding recent pledges to back Israel and intervene in a larger conflict instigated by Iran or Hezbollah.
 - Iran stands at the [threshold](#) of nuclear weapons capability, and can expand its enrichment capacity or rapidly produce several bombs' worth of fissile material at will – or merely threaten to do so – especially in light of the administration's transparent [reticence](#) for years to confront it on this issue, and now Israel's distraction from its pre-October 7 military [preparations](#) to neutralize such advances.
 - Just as it built a "[ring of fire](#)" around Israel, the recent spate of attacks threatening U.S. service members in Syria, Iraq, and the Red Sea offers a small glimpse of how Iran's proxy network [surrounds](#) U.S. land and naval forces with overlapping long-range precision fires – large combined salvos of sophisticated attack drones and cruise and

ballistic missiles – which give Iran “overmatch in the theater – the ability to overwhelm,” according to America’s former top [military](#) officer in the region.

- » Tehran’s willingness and ability to escalate is reinforced by its adroit use of non-Iranian proxy forces to conduct most attacks against, and bear the brunt of responses from, the United States and Israel, which also creates a veneer of Iranian deniability.
- In this larger context, Iran’s degree of direct responsibility for the October 7 attack matters less than the fact it now seeks ways to capitalize on the aftermath and that, in the absence of more serious U.S. efforts to redress its deep credibility and capability deficits, any expansion of the current conflict will be driven by the Iranian regime and its proxies.
- Despite this dire strategic situation for the United States, the Iranian regime grasps the basic arithmetic of force, reliably reining in its malign behaviors and backing down in the remarkably few instances where it [faced](#) credible threats of direct military action:
 - » In 1988, Supreme Leader Khomeini did the unthinkable in ending the interminable Iran-Iraq War – a decision he [deemed](#) “more deadly than taking poison” – once he believed the United States would intervene decisively on Iraq’s side, following a sharp Iranian defeat by the U.S. Navy, the accidental U.S. shutdown of an Iranian airliner, and U.S. intelligence support enabling Iraqi forces to collapse the stalemated frontline.
 - » In 2004, after lighting U.S. conventional victories over the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, Tehran inferred the clear consequences for terrorism-supporting rogue regimes and suspended key elements of its nuclear enrichment program.
 - » In 2011-12, Tehran climbed down from its recent verbal and concrete threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, once the United States pledged to “take action and reopen the strait,” and then backed up these warnings by assembling three carrier strike groups in the region and sending one of them through the Strait without incident.
 - » In 2012, Tehran altered its enrichment program to stay conspicuously short of a redline drawn by Prime Minister Netanyahu at the UN General Assembly, at a time when Israel was semi-openly preparing military options to counter Iran’s nuclear advances.
 - » Separately, though the Second Lebanon War’s outbreak in 2006 could be seen as Israeli failure to convey that it would respond massively to Hezbollah’s initial provocation, Hezbollah’s shock at its losses in that conflict sufficed to deter Iran’s primary proxy from [intentionally](#) starting another major war – even as it rearmed far beyond its 2006 force levels, and even as it publicly proclaimed itself the victor of 2006.
- In light of America’s deep deterrence deficit against Tehran, the Biden administration’s strong initial statements and actions supporting Israel’s self-defense against Hamas – and warning Iran and Hezbollah against escalation – are welcome and highly necessary, but also far from sufficient to reliably stave off a broader and much more costly conflict.
 - » Because successful deterrence convinces adversaries “we will do, elsewhere and subsequently, what we insist we will do here and now,” as Thomas Schelling [wrote](#), restoring deterrence against Iran would reinforce stability and U.S. leadership in the Middle East, and help dissuade future Chinese and Russian aggression more globally.
 - Since deterrence is fungible in this way, trying to limit conflict by compartmentalizing it therefore often [backfires](#), as Israel discovered in hindsight on October 7, after it spent months trying détente with Hamas in Gaza while still trying to deter other Iranian proxies there, and even as it fought Hamas on other fronts. This consideration takes on added importance in light of Tehran’s increasingly effective efforts to [integrate](#) its

various regionwide proxies strategically and coordinate their operations against Israel and the United States more cohesively.

- » Even as it continues [moving](#) forces into the region, [reiterating](#) the president's clear determination to support Israel's self-defense, and [emphasizing](#) the broader linkage of threats from Hamas, Russia, and others, the Biden administration avoids connecting these issues – or even referring – to Iran's central role in fomenting instability, threatening U.S. forces, and raising the risks of further escalation in the Middle East.
 - Encapsulated in the Pentagon spokesperson's October 19 [remarks](#), American officials continue broadcasting their hesitancy to inculcate Iran in the current crisis or in any looming escalation, precisely when Iranian officials, by sharpening and ramping up their own threats to intervene in the Israel-Hamas conflict, are directly testing American's resolve and readiness to uphold its redlines.
 - This is underscored by reports that Iranian officials [interpreted](#) the administration's "don't" warnings and force buildup as moral support for Israel, and lacking any real intention to fulfill those warnings and become involved in a broader war.
- » The administration's posture also will directly impact its larger regional agenda of using Israeli-Saudi normalization and economic development to [build](#) a "Middle East [that] is more stable, better connected to its neighbors," and more resistant to Chinese and Russian influence, precisely because Riyadh's readiness to take major risks for peace depends [directly](#) on its belief that America has its partners' backs against Iranian retaliation; conversely, in the [absence](#) of such belief Riyadh will hedge further toward Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow and away from Washington and Jerusalem.
- In this context, President Biden's October 19 Oval Office address worked at cross-purposes with his efforts to deter Tehran and Hezbollah by conspicuously [omitting](#) any reference to the Iranian regime, which forms the throughline of Russian aggression and Middle East instability at the center of his speech, even as he drove home how "Israel and Ukraine succeed[ing] is vital for America's national security" and how "history has taught us that when terrorists don't pay a price for their terror, when dictators don't pay a price for their aggression, they cause more chaos and death and more destruction."

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Building on its salutary but insufficient steps to date, the Biden administration immediately must take several unequivocal, mutually-reinforcing actions to restore long-frayed U.S. deterrence and confront Tehran with explicit and direct threats to impose prohibitive costs on any effort by it or its proxies to broaden and escalate the Israel-Hamas conflict.
- The administration must stop litigating Tehran's role in the October 7 attack and stop signaling its willingness to overlook the regime's central role in the current crisis. Instead, it must abruptly and uniformly adopt clear and consistent messaging that it holds Tehran directly responsible by name for any further escalation, or any threats of escalation.
 - » These statements must explicitly declare three inseparable elements of U.S. policy:
 - Iran is the center of gravity for all U.S. efforts to prevent the current crisis from broadening and escalating;
 - The United States will treat any attempt to broaden the conflict or test U.S. resolve, including attacks on Israel and/or American servicemembers or related targets or advancing its nuclear weapons program, as a direct and intentional move by the Iranian regime to cross stated U.S. redlines and warnings; and

- U.S. forces, including those now surging into the region, are ready to respond directly against Iranian targets in order to deter and deny any such escalation.
- » This entails no longer speaking out of both sides of its mouth, warning Tehran and Hezbollah “don’t” while simultaneously going to great lengths to avoid any mention of the word “Iran” when speaking of U.S. efforts to deter a broader regional conflict.
- » Even if the administration harbors serious concerns about the dangers and uncertainties of confronting Iran and/or Hezbollah, such public ambivalence and hand-wringing counterproductively feeds Tehran’s belief that it can ramp up its destabilizing actions, and probe for further weaknesses and opportunities, at acceptable risk to itself.
 - By emboldening Iran, this ambivalence actually raises the likelihood that President Biden would have to fulfill his blunt “don’t” warning and, with it, the chances of a much riskier, costlier, and more uncertain conflict involving the United States.
- In tandem, and given its deep deterrence deficit, the Biden administration needs to take several concerted, concrete steps to undergird and instantiate its new, clearer, and tougher line toward Iran. Recent reports of internal administration [assessments](#) that its initial warnings of “don’t” and its force buildup have successfully deterred Iran and Hezbollah, at least for now, risks complacency on the eve of a major Israeli ground operation and sends the exact wrong signal that Tehran still has room to ratchet up tensions.
 - » To make the costs of escalation painfully clear to Iran and Hezbollah, and thereby reduce the risks of such scenarios from occurring, the United States should utilize its enhanced force posture in the Eastern Mediterranean, and expand it further, by:
 - Conducting port visits to Haifa by guided-missile destroyers already deploying to the region, similar to past [practice](#) by the U.S. Navy;
 - Deploying U.S. KC-46A aerial refueling [tankers](#) and U.S. Patriot air defense batteries to Israel – the latter in keeping with existing U.S.-Israel contingency planning.
 - Following through with its recently-stated [willingness](#) to give Israel bunker buster munitions, in order to boost Israel’s ability to target Hezbollah and other Iranian-aligned leaders around the region, should they continue courting escalation.
 - » These moves will reinforce the stark deterrent message sent by moving a carrier strike group into the Eastern Mediterranean, but the United States also must project power in the Persian Gulf, where Iran can most directly and easily threaten U.S. interests, as well as harden high-value U.S. and partner targets in that part of the Middle East that are particularly vulnerable to Iranian drone and missile swarms. In addition to the recent positive announcements it will deploy U.S. air defense [batteries](#) to the region and redirect the *USS Eisenhower* carrier strike group to the area of responsibility for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the administration also [should](#):
 - Send U.S. naval vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, and shore up America’s naval presence in the adjacent Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman more generally;
 - Conduct and publicize overflights of the region by U.S. strategic bombers; and
 - Overtly deploy Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) munitions to Diego Garcia.
- Because President Biden’s concerted efforts to resupply Israel, and to project U.S. unity, resolve, and determination to support its partner in these dire circumstances also requires action and readiness by the legislative branch, Congress urgently must move beyond internal politics that uncomfortably mirror the domestic turmoil that damagingly conveyed Israel’s distraction and unpreparedness in the run-up to October 7.