



PERSPECTIVES

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Iran Seeks to End Direct Clash with US and Return to Asymmetric Comfort Zone

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Tehran doesn't want outright war. It is sticking to the long game in its goal of ejecting US forces from the region and completing its takeover of neighboring Iraq.

Wednesday's wave of Iranian ballistic missiles, which struck two military bases in Iraq housing US personnel, was a clear Iranian attempt to conclude the current phase of escalation with Washington.

The missiles failed, intentionally or otherwise, to cause any casualties, after days of warnings by Iranian officials that US military targets would be hit—possibly an early warning designed to decrease the chance of victims when the strikes came.

Still, they were a display of accurate Iranian firepower. Iran's military industry is mass-producing guided ballistic and cruise missiles, and the attacks were a reminder of Iran's mounting accurate firepower—used, for the first time and openly, against American targets in the region.

The missile attacks were a highly calculated move by the Islamic Republic. Their object was to save face after being knocked back hard by the surprise killing by American airstrike of Quds Force Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani on Jan. 3 in Baghdad.

Despite its fiery rhetoric, the Iranian regime's leadership—Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme National Security Council, and the Islamic Republican Guards Corps's senior command—is capable of a rational cost-benefit analysis. Iran is perfectly aware that comparing its conventional firepower with that of the US is an almost childish exercise.

Iranian decision-makers have no interest in encountering incoming Tomahawk cruise missiles or experiencing B52 bombing raids on military bases and strategic sites in Iranian cities. Tehran understands that it miscalculated in recent weeks: it pushed too hard and misread the Trump administration, particularly when it ordered its militia to launch a deadly rocket attack on a US base and ordered mobs to storm the US embassy in Baghdad.

Despite the apparent de-escalation, the risk of war has not passed. The Iranians remain on a collision course with the US in Iraq, but are likely seeking a return to their comfort zone: proxy operations, outsourced to the Shiite militias in Iraq, or plausibly deniable attacks on American troops.

Tehran's goal, however, remains unaltered: to eject the Americans from Iraq and complete its takeover of that country as part of a wider scheme to destabilize the region and move toward violent hegemony. The regime calls this vision "exporting the revolution." This plan includes the goal of surrounding Israel with heavily armed terror armies. Soleimani was instrumental in trying to achieve this dangerous vision.

He also demonstrated that proxy warfare is the least risky way for Tehran to achieve its radical strategy. Building a network of armed forces and nourishing them with increasingly advanced weapons, cash, and orders was his modus operandi.

As the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies noted in a recent report,

By 2019, Iran's influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Yemen had become a new normal in a region where such a concept would have once been unthinkable by the region's leaders, including those in Tehran. Iran had achieved much of this change using a transnational Shia militancy, capable of fighting with varying degrees of skill and discipline, which confronted different Iranian adversaries on disconnected battlefields simultaneously.

Khamenei speech hints at intentions

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei addressed a regime-organized audience in a speech broadcast on Iranian television on Wednesday. The speech was translated by the Middle East Media Research Institute.

"There is one important issue: What is our role?" asked Khamenei, after chants of "Death to America!" and "Death to Israel!" had died down.

“After all,” Khamenei said, “something important has happened.” The US received a “slap last night,” he said, referring to the missile attacks. “As a response, such military operations are not enough. What’s important is that America’s corrupting presence in the region must come to an end.” The audience was then shown erupting in chants of “Allahu akbar!”

The broadcast was a regime propaganda message, but it nevertheless contained useful information about Tehran’s intentions.

The same message is echoing through the Iranian-Shiite radical camp across the Middle East. US soldiers and officers will return home in coffins, threatened Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah during a speech in Beirut a few days after Soleimani’s killing.

Iranian president Hassan Rouhani tweeted on Wednesday that “our final answer to his [Soleimani] assassination will be to kick all US forces out of the region.”

“Attacking foreign entities on Iran’s behalf”

Iran is signaling its intent to revert to asymmetrical combat tactics in the future via its network of proxies. It can also be expected to politically pressure the barely functioning Iraqi government to end all cooperation with the Americans.

The Popular Mobilization Front is an umbrella of Shiite militias in Iraq. It has tens of thousands of armed members and is dominated by organizations that are funded, trained, and equipped by Iran. They include Kataib Hezbollah, whose leader, Abu Mahdi Al-Mandis, was killed alongside Soleimani in the American strike.

Kataib Hezbollah, as well as other groups like Kataib Sayid al-Shuhada and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, are essentially Iranian attack teams that can be activated at any time against America. Iraqi Shiite paramilitaries are also active in Syria, where they have been part of Iran’s attempt to entrench itself and prepare attack bases against Israel.

As the Combating Terrorism Center at the US Military Academy at West Point said in a recent report, such groups “are growing in economic and political power and are attacking foreign entities on Iran’s behalf.” In Iraq, they remain present and powerful though they have encountered growing resistance from local civilians who are fed up with their government’s failures and Iran’s meddling.

Their presence represents a deep infiltration of Iraq by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. So while Iran may have taken a step back from

the brink with the Trump administration for now—opting for the long game of continuing to build up its network of terror armies and political influence—the Iranian takeover plan remains in place.

As a result, the situation in the region will remain highly explosive, with the smallest tactical incidents able to snowball into general war—whether or not either side wants that to happen.

Israel has not been a part of this latest escalation, but remains on high alert. The same Iranian-Shiite bloc in the region poses the most severe threat to its security from multiple directions.

The challenges facing the Jewish state are not decreasing, Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday, warning that those who seek to attack Israel will absorb a crushing counterstrike.

Blue and White Party leader and former IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz offered a similar warning, saying, “The Iranian attack on American bases again proves that Iran is a threat to world peace and Middle Eastern stability. The IDF is the most powerful military in the region, and I would not recommend for anyone to drag us into an incident that is not tied to us, and to test us.”

If such a provocation did occur, he said, “I am convinced that the response will be powerful, severe, and unequivocal.”

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