

Conflicting considerations leave 'few' options for Biden

OPINION

THE ARAB WEEKLY—The killing of three US troops is dragging the United States further into a proxy war with Iran that President Joe Biden had hoped to avoid and that he still hopes can be contained.

After years of trying to ease tensions with Iran through dialogue, and then months of seeking to keep the Israel-Hamas war from escalating, the drone strike by Iranian-backed fighters on US forces in Jordan crossed an unstated red line for the Biden administration. The United States has already been hitting another Iranian-backed group, Yemen's Houthis (also known as the Ansarullah movement). The strikes come after warnings failed to dissuade Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, which the pro-Iran militias say are acts of solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza being bombarded by US ally Israel.

The White House has promised a "very consequential" response to the Jordan attack, which comes at the start of an election year in which Biden's Republican rivals are going on the offensive and urging direct attacks on Iran. But the Biden administration has already stated that it does not want war with Iran, and officials have sought to distance themselves from the attack.

"It's a fork-in-the-road moment," said Alex Vatanka, founding director of the Iran programme at the Middle East Institute. He said that Iran's goal since the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel has been "to avoid war with Israel and the United States, but to use this opportunity to squeeze both as part of a long-term game plan." The state knows that, "like Iran, the United States is not interested in a regional escalation."

But Iranian officials also know that, with elections approaching, "President Biden is already being hampered for being weak in the face of foreign adversaries, and that politically, he has to do something."

Vatanka expected further US strikes on Iran's so-called "Axis of Resistance," with messages sent to Iran to make clear that it cannot afford greater escalation.

Thomas Warrick, a former State Department official now at the Atlantic Council, said the United States had no good choices.

Iran will not be deterred by attacks on its backed groups, and a full-blown assault in Iraq could hand Tehran a strategic victory by strengthening calls for US troops to leave.

"The Iranian regime doesn't believe in deterrence the way US policymakers and strategists do," he said.

Other options could include directly targeting a top military site inside Iran or eliminating Revolutionary Guard positions in Syria, where Israel has also been striking Tehran's capacities.

"Neither of these options are good, and both risk keeping the United States embroiled in a regional conflict that the Biden administration was hoping to avoid," he said.

Conflicting pressures

In 2020, after another flare-up with Iranian-backed groups at the start of an election year, then-president Donald Trump ordered a

strike at the Baghdad airport that killed General Qassem Soleimani, the storied commander of an elite Revolutionary Guards unit.

But months earlier, Trump abruptly cancelled plans to strike Iran itself, wary of escalating conflict over Tehran's shooting down of a US unmanned drone.

The Biden administration took office, seeking diplomacy with Iran and negotiating through the European Union on restoring a 2015 nuclear deal scrapped by Trump. The talks collapsed in part over Iran's demands for greater sanctions relief, and an agreement became politically toxic.

But US officials since then have quietly spoken to Iran about regional tensions and, until October 7, the Biden administration had boasted that it had brought attacks on US troops down to a standstill.

Now, while US officials are not speaking in the language of regime change, Vatanka said they have concluded that a "fundamental part of a solution to a large-scale sustained de-escalation in the Middle East requires a very different political order in Tehran".

Ali Vaez, Iran project director at the International Crisis Group, said US fatalities marked a "major step up the escalation ladder by Iran-backed groups" and that Tehran's denials of responsibility carried little weight.

But he said that last year's diplomacy had brought calm, while US strikes in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have only made Iran-backed fighters more brazen.

"While there is no political space in Washington for engagement with Iran in an election year, diplomacy is the only approach that has reined Iran in," he said.

Striking Iran would dramatically escalate the risk of the wider war Biden says he is trying to avoid, not to mention the possibility of more US caskets coming home in the months before polls open.

But with Republicans urging the 81-year-old to "hit Iran", Biden can ill afford to portray weakness against Tehran as he struggles with low approval ratings ahead of a likely rematch with Donald Trump. "He's under tremendous pressure; the administration's in a kind of a lose-lose situation," Colin Clarke, research director at the Sofian Center in New York, told AFP.



The illustration depicts the complex situation before Iran, the US, Israel, and other regional players after a drone strike by an Iranian-backed Iraqi group hit a US base in northeastern Jordan, killing three soldiers and injuring more than 40 others.

Is US Army going to war?

OPINION

B92—Washington has announced that it will respond to a drone attack on a military base in Jordan, in which three American soldiers got killed.

The Americans claim that the attack was carried out by fighters supported by Iran.

The conflict in the Middle East escalated dramatically after Hamas fighters attacked Israel on October 7 last year.

People across the region are bracing for more violence, but does that mean a major war is likely?

US President Joe Biden blamed the attack on the base on "radical groups supported by Iran and operating in Syria and Iraq" and vowed retaliation. However, Iran denies its involvement and claims that the groups in the region "do not take orders from Iran".

Will there be open conflict?

Over the past decades, we faced the risk of open conflict between Iran and the US on many occasions, which both sides have tried to avoid. However, Biden's political opponents in America point out that there have been 160 attacks on American troops since October 7 and accuse the White House of not doing enough to rein in Iran.

"He has turned our soldiers into easy targets. The only response to these attacks must be devastating military retaliation against Iran's terrorist forces, both in Iran and throughout the Middle East," said Republican Senator Tom Cotton.

However, even Republican presidents have been reluctant to engage in direct confrontation with Iran. During his tenure, Donald Trump repeatedly threatened to attack Iran, but in the end, he did not go beyond economic sanctions and an attack on Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, with the aim of killing Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani. After that, Tehran announced a big revenge. Héloïse Fayet, who works for the International Federation for Human Rights in Paris, thinks it unlikely that the US will

attack Iran directly unless it is shown that the order to strike the base in Jordan came directly from Tehran. "America is more likely to attack Iranian associates," she said. Andrew Boren, a former American intelligence officer, thinks the same. "Calculating the risk of a war with Iran will not be easy and must include an assessment of Iran's nuclear capabilities and the regime's possible responses. The position of regional partners such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Turkey, Israel, and Egypt should also be taken into account," he pointed out in an interview for Politico.

Possible US responses

Biden, who has so far pursued a policy of avoiding conflict and dragging the US into another war in the Middle East, ordered his team to come up with several potential responses to the deadly attack. Among the options are attacks on Iranian personnel in Syria and Iraq or an attack on Iran's navy or facilities in the Persian Gulf, and the Iranian government has already said that a direct attack on Iran would mean crossing a red line.

The US strikes are expected to be carried out within days and could include strikes

on multiple targets. The scale of the attack is not yet clear, but any military action is likely to cause unease among key allies in the Middle East, who fear the outbreak of a regional war. Saudi Arabia wants a restrained response, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has accused the US and Great Britain of trying to turn the Red Sea into a sea of blood. Biden therefore faces a major challenge: how to respond to the attack without risking escalation? He has already announced a response to the deaths of three Americans, and his absence would leave him vulnerable to name-calling from Donald Trump, with whom he is likely to run for president later this year. Whatever decision he makes, it seems that Biden will hardly have the open support of his European partners, with the exception of Great Britain.

"There is no appetite among European states for a major conflict with Iran or in the Middle East. Europe should be worried, but it is difficult to deal with it and worry about Ukraine at the same time, so the Europeans will probably let the US solve these problems on its own," Fayet pointed out.



US soldiers patrol the countryside of the oil-rich town of Rumeilan in Hasakah province, northeastern Syria, on June 7, 2023.