

US bombing strikes sending wrong message



By Peter Bergen
National security analyst

OPINION

Several media reports are echoing Biden administration talking points that the recent retaliatory strikes on more than 85 targets in Iraq and Syria were designed to “send a message” following a drone attack by an Iranian-backed militia that killed three US servicemembers in Jordan.

But what exactly was the message, and how is it likely to be received? Let’s consider how these strikes have been framed. On Tuesday, US President Joe Biden told reporters he had made his decision about what he was going to do, while the White House national security spokesperson said, “It’s fair for you to expect that we will respond in an appropriate fashion...” That gave any member of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps living in Iraq and Syria several days’ notice to pack their bags and head elsewhere. The Biden administration has also repeatedly said it doesn’t want to go to war with Iran. But part of establishing deterrence is not to say what you won’t do but to leave some strategic ambiguity about what you can and might do.



US President Joe Biden (C) attends a ceremony held at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, on February 2, 2024, for transferring soldiers killed in the Jordan attack on January 28.
● KEVIN DIETSCH/AFP

Given the largely unsuccessful history of such US strikes against Iranian proxy groups in the Middle East, the US’ response, along with any subsequent military action, is unlikely to deter Iranian proxies from further attacks on American targets and shipping in the region. To tamp down the possibility of a wider regional war, the US needs to focus its efforts on addressing the underlying cause of this roiling conflict: the continued war in Gaza.

Previous US strikes have failed to deter Iran and its proxies. The US has repeatedly struck Houthi targets in Yemen in recent weeks, but the Iranian-backed Houthis kept launching missiles at commercial shipping in the Red Sea and came close to striking a US warship on Tuesday. On Friday, US forces shot down 12 Houthi drones over the course of roughly 12 hours. On Saturday, the US struck six Houthi anti-ship cruise missiles just hours before the US and the UK conducted additional strikes on Houthi targets in Yemen, hitting at least 30 targets

across 10 locations. We’ve seen this time and again. In January 2020, the Trump administration ordered a drone strike that killed the most important Iranian military commander Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad, the capital of Iraq, framing it as an act of deterrence against attacks on Americans in the region. Less than a week later, Iran launched ballistic missiles at two US bases in Iraq, causing more than 100 US soldiers to be treated for traumatic brain injuries.

A US drone strike last month, which killed the leader of an Iranian-backed militia in Baghdad, had similarly undesirable knock-on effects. It gave the Iraqi government more ammunition in its negotiations with the US to call for the withdrawal of 2,500 American troops still based in Iraq — a move that would fulfill an important Iranian policy goal.

Let’s not forget that the Biden administration already made a grave mistake when it pulled all US troops out of Iran’s neighbor Afghanistan in the

summer of 2021. You can imagine the high-fives in Tehran when that happened. Withdrawing from Iraq would be another failure that only serves Iran’s interests.

From Iran’s perspective, its efforts to replace the US as the key regional player in the Middle East seem to be going well.

What we need is a clear-eyed acknowledgement that these strikes are not furthering the US’ strategic goals of stopping Iran’s proxies from attacking American targets and allies and that Tehran is continuing to spread its considerable influence in the Middle East from Yemen in the south to Lebanon 1,500 miles to the north.

The Prussian general and military strategist Carl von Clausewitz famously observed, “The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking.”

Does the US have any real clue about the kind of conflict it is embarking on?

Of course, there are no easy answers and the armchair warriors in DC who are pressing Biden to blow up targets in Iran don’t have to live with what the “day after” looks like and the knock-on effects that might lead to a wider regional conflict in the Middle East.

And while US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Friday that the strikes in Iraq and Syria were just “the start of our response,” there isn’t much evidence based on what we’ve seen so far to suggest additional strikes will help. It’s possible that US cyber-attacks in Iran could damage key elements of Iranian military command and control structures, but these kinds of attacks can take many weeks to prepare. The US must move quickly to address the underlying driver of the present regional conflagration that is engulfing the Middle East. That involves halting the war in Gaza, releasing the Israeli and American captives held by Hamas, and having a plausible plan for the “day after” the guns fall silent in Gaza.

That plan cannot involve defunding

UNRWA, which is the only institution that can keep Gazans fed, housed, and educated, having done so for decades. UNRWA was right to launch an investigation and immediately fire 13 members of its staff who are alleged by Israel to have had some role in Hamas’ October 7 attack. But the reality is that no Arab countries are going to have the capacity or will to feed and house nearly 2 million Gazans, and the idea that Israel will be able to do so as an occupying force without facing an intense local insurgency is wishful thinking of the highest order.

The Biden administration is forced to choose from a menu of difficult choices as it tries to contain the metastasizing regional conflict in the Middle East while also balancing America’s strategic objectives of helping Israel dismantle Hamas’ military wing and releasing the remaining Israeli and American captives held in Gaza, while also containing the threats from Iran and its proxies.

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Biden’s airstrikes won’t work, nor would hitting Iran



By Marc Champion
Columnist

OPINION

The US has hit 85 targets in Iraq and Syria with more to come in response to last weekend’s killing of three US reservists by Iran-backed militias, and it took no time for critics to declare the Biden administration’s action too weak to deter further attacks.

They’re right about that, but the belief that the answer is to bomb Iran itself is magical thinking.

Deterrence is too often seen just as a question of being tough enough: The bigger the threat or harder the hit, the greater the deterrent. But that’s as likely to force an opponent to scale their attacks up as down because for deterrence to work, what you do is no more important than what the other side is thinking. Or as a Rand Corp. study on the issue put it, you have to understand your opponent’s “interests, motives, and imperatives” and make use of those. In Iran’s case, the imperatives are clear, and regime survival is at the top of the pile. So, to back down in the wake of any American attack, the leadership in Tehran would have to believe their rule was more at risk of striking back than of appearing weak to a population that loathes it. That’s anything but clear.

We also know that Iran’s Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei wants the US and Israel out of the Middle East, allowing Iran to take up what he sees as its rightful role as the region’s dominant power because he has been telling that to the world for decades. From Tehran’s point of view, it’s been making great progress on that score ever since the US did it the enormous favor of invading Iraq and removing Saddam Hussein, the dictator whose Sunni-dominated regime fought a grueling war with Iran from 1981 to 1988. The Israeli and US responses to Hamas’s October 7 attack on Israel have been another gift.

With Saddam gone and Shiite allies in charge in Baghdad, Iran’s immediate priority is to get the US out of Iraq. It is very close to succeeding. Despite losing elections to a multi-ethnic coalition and westward-leaning government in 2021, Iran and its proxies used their control of the Supreme Court and other Iraqi institutions to take over the government a year later.

As Michael Knights and a team monitoring Iraq have documented, Iran-backed militias have been busy since, installing their own people in the intelligence, security, and other key services, as well as at the revenue-critical oil ministry. Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ Al-Sudani represents a coalition of mainly pro-Iran Shiite parties, and before Hamas set the region ablaze on October 7, he was getting ready to negotiate the departure of the remaining US troops from Iraq.

The umbrella group that claimed responsibility for the January 28 drone strike on US forces at the border between Jordan and Syria, Islamic Resistance in Iraq, includes Kataib Hezbollah, one of the Iraqi militias closest to Iran. At least some of its fighters get state salaries and it has commanders in the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), or Hashd al-Shaabi, a consoli-

dation of mainly pro-Iranian militias that are now part of the regular Iraqi military. So, it should come as no surprise if — as the Iranian news agency Tasnim reported — the PMF was among the targets the US bombed on Friday. It is in effect an Iraqi version of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in training.



Members of Iraq’s Hashd al-Shaabi paramilitary forces carry portraits of people killed in US strikes in western Iraq, ahead of their funeral procession in Baghdad on January 4, 2024.
● AP

In those circumstances, the few thousand US troops left in Iraq are inherently vulnerable. Still more so the few hundred in Syria. To think that Tehran and its proxies won’t pursue that advantage until the US presence is gone is naive. Their campaign merely accelerated under the cover of the war in Gaza. The attacks will no doubt continue once the current US airstrikes blow over, or at some later time convenient to Tehran because they contribute to a core Iranian foreign policy goal. That makes hitting Iran directly look like a natural alternative. Some have pointed to the example of Operation Praying Mantis in 1988, when the US Navy pounded Iranian naval vessels and oil platforms, to deter it from laying sea

mines, after one damaged a US warship. It was a great example of when a muscular deterrence policy has worked. Yet that doesn’t mean it would work again today, against a much stronger Iran and in a radically different geopolitical situation.

In 1988, Iran was exhausted by the war with Iraq and, genuinely, isolated inter-

nationally. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini considered the soon-to-collapse Soviet Union as a lesser Satan because of its atheism and war in neighboring Afghanistan. China was impoverished and absent from the Middle East, and there was no Axis of Resistance for Iran to deploy as a force multiplier abroad. The US, meanwhile, was near the height of its power.

Today, Iran has built up a large arsenal of drones and ballistic missiles, with ranges of 1,500 kilometers and perhaps beyond, as well as an as-yet untested but on paper sophisticated air defense system. It has proxies it can call on across a potential battlefield that stretches from Yemen in the south, to Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and

Iraq. It is internationally isolated only in Western imaginations. China has moved in to replace European investment, while Russia has become a key security partner, supplying high-end combat jets and other technologies. In Iraq, with a \$264 billion economy that dwarfs those of Lebanon and Syria combined, the IRGC is trying to replicate for its proxies the industrial and energy empire it built at home.

In this context, attacking Iran directly would be more likely to get the exposed US troops in Iraq and Syria killed. The aforementioned study found that there has been just one fatal attack on US forces among more than 160 since October because many were performative. With gloves off, that would change. The US, of course, still has a vastly superior force should it come to open warfare, which is why Tehran wants to avoid it. Yet it also knows the reluctance of Americans to get involved in yet another major Middle Eastern conflict, and for a deterrent strike to work, the Iranians would have to believe Washington was willing to go all the way.

If the US wants to put Iran back in a box, it will have to start by either withdrawing or reinforcing its troops in Iraq and Syria to make them safe. There are other, less satisfying financial, cyber, and other tools the US can use to put pressure on the Iranian regime. Whether those will be able to change its behavior after more than 40 years of trying is uncertain. But together with a rolling campaign of airstrikes against Iran’s proxies across the region and a deal that brought a sharp reduction in casualties in Gaza, they’re worth a try. That would have a better shot at success than bombing Iran and with a much lower risk of sparking the kind of war neither side can afford.

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