

America fueled the fire in Middle East



By Stephen M. Walt
Columnist

OPINION

Iran's decision to retaliate against an Israeli attack on its consulate in Damascus, Syria, by launching drone and missile strikes reveals just how badly the Biden administration has mishandled the Middle East. Having convinced itself on the eve of Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack against Israel that the region was "quieter than it has been for decades," US officials have since responded in ways that made a bad situation worse. The most one can say in their defense is that they have plenty of company; the Trump, Obama, Bush, and Clinton administrations mostly made a hash of things, too.

The administration's response to Hamas's brutal attack on October 7 has had three main objectives. First, it has sought to convey steadfast support for Israel: backing it rhetorically, conferring regularly with top Israeli officials, defending it against accusations of genocide, vetoing cease-fire resolutions in the United Nations Security Council, and providing it with a steady supply of lethal armaments. Second, Washington has tried to prevent the conflict in Gaza from escalating. Lastly, it has tried to convince Israel to act with restraint, both to limit harm to Palestinian civilians and to minimize the damage to the United States' image and reputation. This policy has failed because its aims were inherently contradictory. Giving Israel unconditional support gave its leaders little incentive to heed US calls for restraint, so it is hardly surprising that they have ignored them. Gaza has been destroyed, at least 33,000 Palestinians (including more than 12,000 children) are dead, and US officials now admit that civilians there are facing con-



Iranian protesters burn US flags during a protest to condemn the Israeli airstrike against the Iranian consulate in Syria, seen in Tehran on April 1, 2024.
● MORTEZA NIKOUBAZI/NURPHOTO

ditions of famine. Houthi resistance groups in Yemen, claiming to demand a cease-fire, continue to target shipping in the Red Sea; a low-level conflict between Israel and Hezbollah is still simmering; and violence has risen sharply in the occupied West Bank. And now, Iran has retaliated against the April 1 bombing of its consulate by launching drone and missile strikes on Israel, raising the prospect of an even wider war. Because Americans are accustomed to hearing that Iran is the embodiment of evil, some read-

ers may be inclined to blame Tehran for all this trouble. Just last week, for example, the lead story in the New York Times alleged that Iran was "flooding" the West Bank with weapons in the hopes of stirring up unrest there. In this view, Iran is pouring gasoline on a region that is already in flames. But there's a lot more to this story, and most of it reflects poorly on the United States. But are Iran's efforts to smuggle small arms and other weapons to the West Bank (or Gaza, for that matter) especially heinous? And

is its decision to respond to Israel's recent attack on its consulate — killing two Iranian generals in the process — even remotely surprising? According to the Geneva Conventions, a population living under "belligerent occupation" has the right to resist the occupying force. Given that Israel has controlled the West Bank and East Jerusalem since 1967, colonized these lands with more than 700,000 illegal settlers, and killed thousands of Palestinians in the process, there is little doubt that this is a

"belligerent occupation". Acts of resistance are still subject to the laws of war, of course, and Hamas and other Palestinian groups violate them when they attack Israeli civilians. But resisting the occupation is legitimate, and helping a beleaguered population do so is not necessarily wrong, even if Iran has done this for its own reasons and not from a deep commitment to the Palestinian cause. Similarly, Iran's decision to retaliate after Israel bombed its consulate and killed two Iranian generals is hardly evidence of innate

aggressiveness, especially given that Tehran has repeatedly signaled that it had no desire to widen the war. Indeed, its retaliation was conducted in a way that gave Israel considerable warning and seems to have been designed to signal that Tehran did not want to escalate further. As US and Israeli officials typically say when they use force, Iran is simply trying to "restore deterrence".

Let's not forget that the United States has been "flooding" the Middle East with weaponry for decades. It provides Israel with billions of dollars of sophisticated military equipment every year, along with repeated assurances that US support is unconditional.

That support hasn't wavered as Israel has bombed and starved the civilian population in Gaza, and it wasn't affected when Israel greeted US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's recent visit by announcing the largest confiscation of Palestinian land in the West Bank since 1993. Washington didn't blink when Israel bombed Iran's consulate, even as it was condemning Ecuador's recent assault on the Mexican Embassy in Quito. Instead, top Pentagon officials headed for Jerusalem in a show of support, and President Joe Biden made a point of emphasizing that his commitment to Israel remains "ironclad". Is it any wonder that Israeli officials believe they can ignore advice from the United States?

Cabinets with unchecked power tend to abuse it, and Israel is no exception. Because Israel is vastly stronger than its Palestinian subjects — and deems itself more capable than Iran, too, for that matter — it can act with impunity against them, and it typically does. Decades of generous and unconditional US support have enabled Israel to do whatever it wants, which has contributed to its politics as well as its behavior toward the Palestinians becoming increasingly extreme over time.

The article first appeared on Foreign Policy.



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PERSPECTIVE

An alleged Israeli attack against Iran early Friday came despite US President Joe Biden's stringent warnings against doing just that to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, with the leaders appearing to become increasingly at odds about how Israel should respond against its enemies.

The US was only tipped off about the attack "at the last minute," according to the Italian foreign minister who spoke to American officials at a meeting of the G7 on Friday morning.

Netanyahu just flat-out ignored Biden's warning over Iran

Iran has played down the significance of the attack, with local media describing the incident as involving a few drones that were taken down without causing damage. American sources have claimed the strike involved missiles.

What is clear is that the US fears the alleged retaliatory strike could cause Americans to be put in harm's way. The US Embassy in Israel on Friday issued a security alert restricting the personal travel of American government employees and their families outside of specific areas. The advisory specifically cited "reports that Israel conducted a retaliatory strike inside Iran" as the motive for the restrictions.

The embassy had taken a similar step last week over fears that Iran was planning to attack Israel in retaliation for the airstrike on the Iranian consulate in Syria. When the unprecedented Iranian attack did arrive on April 13, the US shot down scores of drones and several

ballistic missiles in flight.

Despite the huge show of military support, Biden warned Netanyahu that the US would have no part in any retaliatory strike against Tehran. He also cautioned against seeking vengeance at all, instead reportedly encouraging Bibi to "take the win" of preventing Iran's strike from causing widespread death and destruction. Cornelius Adebahr, an associate fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace think tank, says Netanyahu's disregard for Biden's admonitions is yet another illustration of the limits of US leverage on Israel.

"This is something we've seen over the past six months play out in Gaza, where the US president has also been very vocal on what to do and what not to do," Adebahr told The Daily Beast. "The jury is still out on what happens next with Rafah, for example. So, to an extent, [Israel's strike] is a confirmation of an existing pattern

that no, the US president cannot dictate to the Israeli prime minister what to do."

It wasn't just Biden. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres said over the weekend that the entire Middle East is "on the brink" and said the region is facing the "real danger of a devastating full-scale conflict." "Now is the time to defuse and de-escalate," he said. European officials similarly warned against further escalation.

But the US, whose troops in the Middle East have faced hundreds of attacks from Iranian proxies in recent months following Hamas' Oct. 7 rampage, has more to worry about than the risk of an all-out war between Iran and Israel. New assaults targeting American forces, Adebahr says, are a "real concern".

"The concerns are very concrete when it comes to US troops in the region," he said. "They are much broader when it comes to, you know, where does this conflict