

MEANWHILE IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Fears are rising of a widened Middle East war and US troops are in the firing line

CNN

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Smoke rising from Gaza is seen from Israel as the Israeli army's air, sea and land attacks continue on December 26. (Mostafa Alkharouf/Anadolu/Getty Images)

Escalating attacks on US troops and commercial shipping and incidents often involving **Iran** and its proxies are causing new concerns that Israel's war

in Gaza could widen into a regional conflagration with grave political and economic consequences.

With American service personnel increasingly in a dangerous firing line and with US and allied naval assets on high alert after multiple drone attacks, the deteriorating situation is leading to a tense holiday period for the White House.

The rising possibility of US combat deaths and the worsening security situation from the Indian Ocean to the Red Sea and stretching through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Israel represents an unwelcome new foreign crisis as President Joe Biden's reelection year dawns. And it is becoming a petri dish for a new geopolitical trend — endless tests of America's will and credibility by its adversaries and their proxies. Warnings by Israel that its war against Hamas in Gaza will last for months, despite US pressure for a ratcheting down of the intensity of the conflict, threaten to heighten the chances war could spin out of control and drag the US further in.

A flurry of dangerous escalations

Initial anxiety that a regional war could erupt after Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel killed 1,200 and Israel launched its onslaught on Gaza didn't immediately materialize even amid limited exchanges between Israel and Hezbollah forces in Lebanon on one of the most hair trigger fronts in the area.

But the pace of attacks and escalations in recent days appears to be gaining its own deadly momentum, fueling fears of further rising tensions.

- Biden ordered airstrikes on Monday against facilities used by pro-Iranian Kataib Hezbollah militia fighters in Iraq that the US accused of using a drone to attack Erbil Air Base, critically injuring one American service member. It was the latest attack by Iranian proxy groups against US forces in Syria or Iraq that are engaged in anti-terror operations.
- US forces intercepted a barrage of drones and missiles on Tuesday over the Red Sea fired by **Houthi rebels** — an Iranian-backed group in Yemen — US Central Command said. The US previously said **Iranian intelligence** has been active in helping plot attacks on commercial shipping, which have prompted some freight lines to reroute their vessels around Africa instead of the more economical passage through the Suez Canal, sparking fears for the global supply chain. Iran has repeatedly denied involvement.
- The geographic footprint of instability is now stretching toward India after a **chemical tanker operating in the Indian Ocean** was struck by an Iranian attack drone Saturday, 200 nautical miles from the Indian coast, the Pentagon said. Iran repeatedly denied involvement.

- Iran and several of its proxies accused Israel of assassinating a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps commander in an airstrike in a suburb of the Syrian capital Damascus. Israel refused to comment on the claims, but the IRGC threatened to avenge the killing of Seyyed Razi Mousavi, saying “the Israeli regime would undoubtedly pay the price for this crime.”

The consequences of a worsening security situation

The spate of fresh incidents underscores the potential for a dangerous escalation of the war, reveal the extent to which US forces are directly exposed and help explain increasingly urgent entreaties from Washington for Israel to scale down the war in Gaza.

Future incidents in which US soldiers are killed or naval assets are seriously damaged would leave Washington little choice but to get sucked deeper back into the Middle East after the last three presidents tried to disengage from the region.

Christopher O’Leary, a former director of hostage recovery for the US government, said on “CNN News Central” on Tuesday that while the regional situation had not approached worst case scenarios so far, the potential for deterioration was ever-present.

“The Israel-Hamas war is part of the grander scheme from the axis of resistance, the Iran-controlled strategy to get regional influence and power through groups, surrogate groups like Hamas, like Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah, and the Houthis,” O’Leary said.

“So, although there has been sustained attacks, they have been measured, to a point, including the Houthi attacks (on) ships on the Red Sea. But these are warnings what could possibly come. If Iran actually takes the gloves off and turns loose the surrogate forces with all of their might, we have a real regional problem, yes, against the US troops stationed in Iraq and Syria.”

The situation for US troops in Iraq and Syria is especially dangerous as they are within easy reach of militant groups that are loyal to Iran. Republicans have long accused Biden of not taking sufficient action to deter such adversaries, but the administration has taken pains to try to avoid escalating a fraught moment into a bigger war. The line between proportional responses and effective deterrence is getting increasingly thin. The attack on the airbase raises questions about how the installation was so vulnerable to being penetrated by a drone. And a deeper issue is now whether the latest US air strikes — which were blasted by Iraq as a hostile act — have done anything to deter future attacks.

“I would argue that we’re playing whack-a-mole here, that we’ve got to go after these troop formations and the leadership,” Ret. US Army Maj. Mike Lyons told CNN on Tuesday. “I don’t think our deterrence has been anything that’s allowed the Iranians to recognize that we’re serious about this.”

Economic as well as military reverberations

A broadened conflict could have painful economic consequences given the **Red Sea**'s critical importance to global supply chain routes for energy and goods. The waterway is bordered on its eastern flanks by Yemen and Saudi Arabia and to the west by Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt. It feeds into the **Suez Canal** at the Sinai Peninsula, which belongs to Egypt and borders Israel. The potential for disruption in the canal, which offers the shortest sea route between Europe and Asia, was laid bare when a ship got stuck across its breadth in 2021, causing global reverberations.

Given the threat to their vessels and crews from drones and missiles, several shipping firms have ordered their captains to take the more expensive and time-consuming route around Africa. The potential economic disruption has prompted the US to frame an international coalition to protect merchant ships from Houthi attacks. The United States said before Christmas that nations including the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, and the Seychelles had signed up.

Houthis have launched at least 100 attacks against 12 different commercial and merchant vessels in the Red Sea over the last month, in a “very significant breadth of attacks” not seen in at least “two generations,” a senior US military official said last week.

The possibility of military action in the Middle East is the last thing that Biden — who is already deeply invested in trying to save Ukraine from a Russian onslaught — would have hoped to be dealing with as 2024 begins. Any

impression that the president is struggling to exert authority on a world that sometimes seems to be spinning out of control could be politically detrimental at a time when Biden is plagued by approval ratings of less than 40% — perilous territory for a commander-in-chief seeking reelection.

Perceptions that Biden is failing to respond robustly to challenges from US adversaries meanwhile could play into public concerns that at 81, he's not up to the demands of a second term — a narrative that Republicans are seeking to reinforce in the minds of voters.

Ex-President Donald Trump, who presided over a period of chaos and division at home and abroad in his first term and alienated the US from its allies, is nevertheless trying to create a picture of global disarray and disrespect for the United States as the 77-year-old markets his vision of strongman leadership. So Biden has little room for political maneuver against the GOP front-runner if the situation suddenly takes a turn for the worse.

This tenuous political reality was the backdrop to fresh consultations between the Israeli government and the Biden administration on Tuesday. This came after intense fighting erupted in Gaza between Israeli troops and Hamas forces following days of US calls for a less intense phase in the conflict. Ron Dermer, one of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's top confidants, met with officials in the White House and State Department. Netanyahu had earlier visited troops in Gaza and declared a "long fight" lay ahead.

Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant meanwhile declared that his country was in a "multi-arena war, we are being attacked from seven different

sectors,” he said, referring to Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, Iraq, Yemen and Iran.

That is a scenario that the United States, and Biden especially, cannot allow to become a long-term reality.