

Iran-US Tensions Will Remain High, Despite Both Sides' Desire to Avoid a War

15 MIN READ

Jan 31, 2024



A woman holding an Iranian flag poses in front of an anti-U.S. mural on a wall of the former U.S. embassy in Tehran, Iran, on Nov. 4, 2023.

(HOSSEIN BERIS/Middle East Images/AFP via Getty Images)

Both Iran and the United States want to avoid direct military confrontation, limiting the risk that further attacks by Iranian-backed regional militant groups trigger a war between the two countries, but Iran's support of such groups will permanently alter the U.S. strategy against Iran, making it harder to find a path toward peace. On Jan. 30, the Iranian-backed Iraqi militia, [Kataib Hezbollah \(KH\)](#), announced that it was suspending attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, and called for its fighters to shift to a "passive defense" stance. The announcement comes two days after three American soldiers were killed in a drone attack in Jordan that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq umbrella group — of which KH is a member — has since claimed responsibility for. In his statement, KH

Secretary-General Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, who is likely at or near the top of the U.S. list of potential Iraqi militia leaders to be targeted in the U.S. response, said that many of KH's allies — specifically calling out Iran — "often object to the pressure and escalation [by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq] against the American occupation forces in Iraq and Syria," suggesting that Tehran was pressing KH and other hard-line Iraqi militias to suspend their attacks on the United States. Indeed, the announcement came one day after the commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, Ismail Qaani — who is Iran's point man for its regional militia strategy — traveled to Baghdad to reportedly meet with Iraqi officials and militia leaders of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq to "discourage" further attacks on U.S. forces, according to Iraq-based Shafaq News.

- On Jan. 28, three U.S. soldiers were killed and up to 34 were wounded in an attack at a training outpost in Jordan called Tower 22. A U.S. defense official said the Tower 22 strike had the "footprints" of a KH attack, and on Jan. 31, the White House formally blamed the Islamic Resistance in Iraq for being behind the attack.
- KH is one of Iraq's most powerful Iranian-backed militias and is one of four militias that make up the Islamic Resistance in Iraq umbrella group that claimed both the Tower 22 attack, along with 165 other attacks against Israel or the United States since the latest Hamas-Israel war broke out on Oct. 7.
- On Jan. 20, KH militants struck the Ain al-Asad airbase in Iraq, which is used by U.S. forces, with drones and ballistic missiles. The attack prompted the United States to retaliate on Jan. 24 by striking three facilities in the country used by KH and its allies. Even prior to the Tower 22 attack, the use of ballistic missiles, rather than less accurate and powerful weapons like rockets or rocket-propelled grenades, in the Ain al-Asad airbase attack demonstrated a significant increase in KH's intent to kill U.S. forces.
- U.S. officials have said that KH's announcement to suspend attacks will not alter their response plans. On Jan. 30, U.S. President Joe Biden told reporters that he had decided how the United States would respond to the Tower 22 attack, but has not made this public. Biden is facing pressure on both sides, as some Republican

Senators have called for the United States to directly strike Iran, while some Democrats are urging restraint.

- According to media leaks and speculation, the retaliatory options that have been presented to Biden include airstrikes primarily focused on Iraqi militias and facilities used by Iran and the militias for drone and missile storage, as well as a more sustained strike campaign with multiple waves of attacks in Iraq and Syria — including strikes on Iranian assets, such as the IRGC — in addition to strikes on drone and missile sites and Iraqi militias. According to sources cited in a Jan. 31 NBC News report, U.S. retaliatory attacks against Iranian-backed militias could be a weekslong campaign that "involve[s] both strikes and cyber operations," and targets Iranian interests "outside Iran."

If Tehran actively pushed KH to announce a suspension of attacks, it would further indicate Iran is trying to ensure that attacks by the regional militias it backs remain contained to existing proxy theaters and avoid direct U.S.-Iranian

confrontation. Since the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel and Israel's subsequent ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, Iran has let the regional militias it supports — including KH in Iraq, the Houthi movement in Yemen, and Hezbollah in Lebanon — take the lead on targeting Israeli and U.S. interests in the Middle East. However, Iran has also helped facilitate their attacks in recent months by, for example, continuing to deliver advanced drones and missiles to militias in Iraq and Syria. Tehran has also provided targeting and reconnaissance intelligence to Houthi militants in Yemen to support their attacks on ships transiting the Red Sea. For Iran, facilitating attacks by allied militias, which are in closer proximity to U.S. and Israeli assets than Iran, gives it a layer (albeit a thin one) of plausible deniability of involvement in attacks, which Tehran hopes will help spare it from any direct retaliation on Iranian soil. This strategy also aims to keep any U.S. and Israeli retaliation confined to proxy theaters where the United States, Israel and Iran all operate, such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Iran seeks to avoid direct military confrontation with the United States — up to and including war — because it would cause significant political turmoil at home and could even become an existential threat to the Islamic Republic of Iran if things escalate beyond just a quick series of one-off airstrikes. Moreover, U.S. and Israeli strikes

on Iran would be a major blow to the IRGC and the government's arguments that they can protect Iran from "Zionist" forces. Given that several U.S. Republicans in the Senate are now calling on Biden to strike Iran directly in the wake of the Tower 22 attack, Iran would be incentivized to press KH to suspend its attacks if it was truly worried that the escalation path between KH and Tehran may eventually result in U.S. strikes on Iran. Indeed, as KH has been effectively trying to kill American troops for weeks with its attacks, more U.S. deaths after the Tower 22 attack would increase the likelihood of a growing American consensus that strikes against Iran are necessary.

- Unlike the previous period of intense escalation in 2019-20 between Iran and the United States, where Iran was active in targeting ships in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, in the current crisis Tehran has rarely carried out any operations itself, with the exception of two attacks on ships in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman in December and January, respectively.
- Iran's conventional military power is extremely weak compared with the United States and virtually all of Iran's rivals in the region. Due to U.S. sanctions, for example, Iran has struggled to maintain its fleet of fighter jets, many of which were built by the United States before the fall of the Shah in 1979. A successful strike on Iran would undermine the IRGC and Iranian government's legitimacy as being able to protect the country, particularly as Iran is still reeling from the Jan. 3 Islamic State attack that killed at least 94 people in the city of Kerman.
- In response to major attacks by Iranian proxies, including the Tower 22 attack and the initial Hamas attack on Israel, Iranian officials have been quick to deny any direct involvement. This strategy is likely aimed at avoiding U.S. and Israeli blame, which has so far proven successful, as the United States and Israel have only tangentially tied Iran to recent militia attacks by saying things like "Iran helps facilitate" such strikes.

Despite its announcement that it would suspend attacks, KH will likely continue striking U.S. forces, but the pace of those strikes may slow as the Iraqi militia and its allies try to calibrate their violence to achieve their political goals. It appears unlikely

that KH will entirely stop its attacks against the United States. Al-Hamidawi's statement may instead be partially aimed at enabling KH and other Islamic Resistance of Iraq militias to claim the moral high ground ahead of the expected upcoming U.S. military response to the Tower 22 attack. From KH's perspective, it could now claim that any further U.S. strikes against the group are evidence of American escalation and justify further KH strikes on U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria as retaliation for U.S. aggression. Moreover, the pledge to suspend the attack was made only by KH, not other prominent members of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq group, like the Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) militia; though if Iran is pushing KH to reduce attacks on the United States, it is likely saying the same to other hard-line Iraqi militias. However, there are reasons to think that KH and its allies may be considering curbing the frequency of their attacks, which have effectively maintained a pace of around 50 attacks per month since mid-October. First and foremost, KH (as well as Iran) appear to be achieving progress toward one of their major strategic goals — namely, the withdrawal of U.S.-led coalition forces from Iraq — and further escalation may jeopardize this. On Jan. 25, Iraq's foreign affairs ministry and U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin announced that the two countries had agreed to start talks on setting a timetable for a phased withdrawal of U.S.-led coalition forces in Iraq. While no troop withdrawals are imminent given the current regional crisis, a pause in attacks on the U.S. and coalition forces will give time for those talks to continue. By contrast, any escalation of conflict directly between Iran and the United States would disrupt such talks by potentially incentivizing Washington to maintain a larger military presence in Iraq. Moreover, Israel and Hamas are currently weighing a three-phase cease-fire plan, which Biden administration officials reportedly view as crucial to stopping regional attacks. By pausing their attacks, KH and its allies are also hoping the Biden administration will push Israel to accept the cease-fire. Finally, the deadly Tower 22 attack on U.S. forces followed calls for retaliation from Iraqi militia leaders, including prominent AAH leader Qais al-Khazali, after previous U.S. strikes on Iraqi militia leaders resulted in several casualties. From these militia leaders' perspective, now that their attacks have successfully killed three Americans, the score may be settled.

- The intensity of any new KH operations will, in part, depend on Iran's willingness to try to restrain KH, though KH is somewhat an independent actor. It will also

partially depend on the exact nature of the U.S. response, with a multi-phased campaign that also kills al-Hamidawi and other senior KH (and other Iraqi) militia leaders likely prompting the largest response.

- According to a Jan. 31 report published by The Wall Street Journal, Israel and Hamas are considering a three-stage draft agreement that would result in hostages in Gaza being released and a six-week cease-fire.
- Awliyat al-Waad al-Haq (AWH), another group that is a part of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq and has been viewed by some as a front for KH, announced on Jan. 31 that it would continue to target U.S. interests in the region until "Zionist" forces, as well as U.S. and U.K. forces, halted their "aggression" against Palestinians. While the number of attacks may decline and Iran may be trying to reduce tension, AWH's statement suggests some attacks will continue.

Beyond Iraq and Syria, Iranian-backed Houthi militants appear set to continue attacking commercial shipping off the coast of Yemen, but the U.S.-led military campaign to degrade the Houthis' capabilities, as well as the smaller number of vessels now transiting the Red Sea, will probably reduce the overall number of maritime attacks. Houthi maritime attacks peaked at about one attack per day in mid-January, with attacks often involving multiple drones and/or missiles. But those attacks have declined sharply since the United States and United Kingdom launched their air campaign against the Yemeni militant group on Jan. 12, which has so far seen U.S. and U.K. forces conduct nine follow-up strikes. Nonetheless, Houthi attacks are still ongoing. The group launched its latest attacks on Jan. 30 and Jan. 26, with the latter resulting in a major fire aboard a naphtha-carrying tanker. These attacks will continue to disrupt maritime trade in the region, with the International Monetary Fund reporting on Jan. 31 that the Houthi attacks had resulted in a 30% decline in shipping through the Red Sea so far this year. But the Yemeni group's harassment of commercial shipping is more likely to result in U.S. attacks on Iraq than U.S. strikes on Iran. This is because Washington and Tehran have already established a strong precedent for targeting each other's interests in Iraq (which both view as an extension of Iran to a degree); Iran is also believed to have

less influence over Houthi actions than Iraqi militias' actions. Moreover, the Houthis are far less likely to conduct a successful attack that kills Americans aboard a U.S. Navy ship due to the lower frequency of attacks and the U.S. Navy's more focused defensive measures. Iran may even press the Houthis to avoid directly targeting American or British navies to eliminate the possibility of such an escalatory attack. A more likely way for Houthi attacks to end or decline substantially would be following a more permanent cease-fire between Hamas and Israel, but even then, the Houthis may carry out occasional attacks in response to any alleged Israeli transgressions while occupying Gaza.

- On Jan. 31, hours after KH's statement, a Houthi military spokesman said the group would continue targeting commercial shipping in the region, and that U.S. and U.K. naval ships were legitimate targets due to their participation in "aggression" against Yemen. This suggests that at least thus far Iran has either not tried or has not been successful in getting the Houthis to stop targeting the British and U.S. navies directly in their attacks.
- On Jan. 31, the U.S. military destroyed a surface-to-air missile that the Houthis were preparing to launch, and that the United States assessed presented an "imminent threat" to U.S. aircraft. The incident marks the first time the United States has struck Houthi anti-aircraft missiles instead of surface-to-surface missiles and demonstrates that, at least for now, the Houthis are still trying to launch attacks against the U.S. military directly, despite the potential risk of U.S. loss of life.

The success of Iran's regional allies in shutting down trade through the Red Sea and increasing attacks on U.S. and Israeli targets will likely lead the United States to prioritize curbing the proliferation of Iranian missile and drone technology over its concerns with Iran's nuclear program, making a path to Iranian-U.S. peace more difficult. Hamas' attack on Israel and the success that the Houthis have had in targeting commercial ships have demonstrated the risks that the proliferation of Iranian missile and drone technology has brought to the region. The fact that Iran has also been supplying Russian forces in Ukraine with similar technology puts only further pressure on Washington to curb these exports. No longer will the United States be able to treat curbing

Iran's regional military strategy as secondary to halting its nuclear program as the administration of then-U.S. President Barack Obama did when it negotiated the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. From the Obama administration's perspective, as well as Iran's, the nuclear deal could have been a stepping stone to improve bilateral relations and resolve other issues. Now with the United States arguably far more concerned with Iran's military support of regional allies (namely, via the transfer of missile and drone technology) compared with Iran's nuclear program, it would be political suicide for any U.S. president to offer Iran sanctions relief in exchange for nuclear concessions that do not also come with Iranian concessions on supporting regional allies. This will make it more difficult for the United States and Iran to negotiate a pathway to a more permanent reduction in tensions, making recurrent escalations — like those in recent weeks following the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, as well as those seen from 2019-20 after the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal — likely in the future. Finally, the United States will have few diplomatic levers to manage Iran's nuclear program, which continues to quickly stockpile highly enriched uranium. This will, in turn, also increase the likelihood of Iran eventually developing nuclear weapons — a scenario that would immediately trigger a major regional security crisis and inhibit the United States from achieving its longstanding goal of pivoting to the Asia-Pacific region.

- How far escalation between the United States and Iran goes may ultimately depend on the outcome of the 2024 U.S. election — and in particular, whether it results in Trump returning to the White House. Trump had a strong anti-Iran policy during his first term, but if he secures a second term, he also may try to avoid a direct confrontation that could draw the United States into a war with Iran. Indeed, several of Trump's anti-globalist allies, like former Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson, have chastised Republican lawmakers calling for U.S. strikes on Iran because such strikes could result in another forever war in the Middle East.
- Nevertheless, sustained tension between Iran and the United States, as well as periodic episodes of escalation by Iran's regional proxies, will make it more difficult for the United States to finally achieve its now two-decade-plus goal of fully pivoting its military attention to Asia by forcing Washington to maintain strong support for

Israel, as well as a higher presence in Gulf Cooperation Council countries and their surrounding waters.