

While Iran's recent strikes show weakness, its threat of escalation is working

Under attack on its own soil, Tehran had to hit back directly rather than via proxy; though that didn't scare Israel, Pakistan, or Islamic State, Washington is a different matter

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By Lazar Berman
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Head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Hossein Salami speaking at the funeral of Razi Mousavi, a senior commander in Iran's Quds Force who was killed on December 25 in an alleged Israeli strike in Syria, in Tehran, December 28, 2023. (Atta Kenare / AFP)

After months of watching its proxies wage war across the region, Iran drastically stepped up its own attacks over the last week, carrying out deadly strikes in three neighboring countries.

The first two took place last Monday, when the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps fired ballistic missiles at Erbil in Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan Region and attacked targets in Syria.

The Syria strike, said the IRGC, hit Islamic State positions and "destroyed the perpetrators of terrorist operations" in Iran, a seeming allusion to a January 3 attack

when at least 84 people **were killed** in two explosions near the grave of General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force who was killed in a US drone strike in Iraq four years earlier.

The Islamic State took responsibility for that attack.

Iran **claimed** the Erbil attack destroyed "one of the main Mossad espionage headquarters" in Iraqi Kurdistan, an assertion that was promptly dismissed by Iraq. A Kurdish businessman and his daughter were killed in the strikes, which landed near the US consulate in Erbil. Iran claimed the man was involved in selling oil to Israel.

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Iraq is in no position to respond militarily against Iran, making do instead with a complaint at the United Nations Security Council and a recall of its ambassador.



This image taken from video provided by Rudaw TV shows authorities and others near the site where missiles hit in an area near the US consulate in Erbil, Iraq, January 15, 2024. (Rudaw TV via AP)

But Iran picked on a far more dangerous neighbor as well.

On Tuesday, it **carried out** missile and drone attacks on Jaish al Adl, a Sunni terrorist group that killed 11 Iranian police officers in a December attack.

In response, Pakistan struck separatist groups within Iran, with Tehran claiming that four children were killed.

No need for proxies

Iran's recent strikes show a marked change in its operations, said Raz Zimmt, an Iran scholar at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

"In all of these cases, we see Iran going beyond the policy we are familiar with, which is the use of proxies," he said.

Iran's proxies have indeed been active.



Members of an Iraqi Shiite militant group carry the coffin of a fighter with the Kataeb Hezbollah militia, who was killed in a US airstrike in Babil Province, during his funeral in Baghdad, Iraq, Tuesday, Dec. 26, 2023. (AP/Hadi Mizban)

In Gaza, Hamas has been fighting a bitter war against Israel since sending thousands of terrorists across the border on October 7, who killed some 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and took 253 hostages.

Hezbollah in Lebanon has been fighting a more limited conflict against Israel since Hamas's attack, targeting civilians and military installations. Israeli strikes have killed over 160 Hezbollah fighters in response.

Meanwhile, the Iran-aligned Houthi militia in Yemen has been firing on ships in and around the Red Sea for the past several weeks, slowing global trade in what they claim is an attempt to blockade Israel in solidarity with the Palestinians.



Houthi fighters and tribesmen stage a rally against the US and the UK strikes on Houthi-run military sites near Sana'a, Yemen, on Sunday, Jan. 14, 2024. (AP Photo)

And since the Hamas massacre, the US military has come under attack at least 58 times in Iraq and another 83 times in Syria by Iran-backed Shiite militias, usually with a mix of rockets and one-way attack drones.

But with Iran suffering deadly attacks in recent weeks from ISIS, Balochi separatists, and [from Israel](#), it had to respond itself.

“Over the past two months, Iran has been facing worsening security challenges, both from at home and from abroad, some having to do with the war, some with domestic issues,” Zimmt said. “Iran is trying to create a combined response to the many challenges it faces.”

As the Middle East increasingly breaks up into shooting wars between the Iranian axis and its diverse adversaries, the last thing Tehran wants is to appear weak in the eyes of Israel, the US and its Arab allies, and domestic enemies of the regime.



People and rescuers gather in front of a building destroyed in a reported Israeli strike in Damascus on January 20, 2024 (Louai Beshara / AFP)

“They have to show the region that they’re strong after the attacks, so they found comfortable targets and are telling a story about their response,” said Yossi Mansharof, Shia expert at the Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy.

The limits of power

Though it’s boasting about hitting Israel and Sunni terrorists, Iran’s response shows undeniable weakness.

With Israel allegedly continuing to kill senior IRGC members, the best the Islamic Republic can manage is strikes against fictitious Israeli targets far away from the Jewish state.

And the Islamic State group will not be deterred by a few airstrikes after it managed to strike Iran at a ceremony for one of its most prominent heroes.

“It points at the limits of Iran’s power,” said Mansharof, and with nuclear-armed Pakistan hitting back inside Iranian territory, Tehran looks even less imposing.

“Pakistan showed you can attack Iran,” he said.

But even with the rather anemic response over the last week, violence from Iran and its proxies since October 7 has succeeded in one important way.



Youth activists of Muslim Talba Mahaz holding a banner against both Iran and Israel shout slogans during a protest against Iranian air strikes, in Islamabad on January 18, 2024 (Farooq NAEEM / AFP)

Tehran wants the US to pressure Israel to prematurely curtail its war on Hamas, and is using the threat of escalation to achieve that aim.

“Because the United States repeatedly declares that it does not want to escalate against Iran and that it is trying to head off a regional conflict, escalation and regional conflict is exactly what Iran is delivering,” said Blaise Misztal, vice president for policy at the Jewish Institute for National Security of America.

According to Misztal, Tehran is betting that if it can convince Washington that support for Israel risks igniting a broader conflagration, “it can force the United States out of the region and to either demand that Israel ends its fight against Hamas and Hezbollah, or at least end its support for it.”

Though there are also domestic reasons for growing pressure from the Biden administration on Israel to wind down its war on Hamas, the fear that the US could be drawn into a regional war has weighed heavily on decision makers in Washington.

“Escalation is in no one’s interest,” US Secretary of State Antony Blinken [said](#) during his recent trip to Israel.



US President Joe Biden walks to speak to the media before boarding Marine One on the South Lawn of the White House, Thursday, January 18, 2024, in Washington. (AP Photo/Yuri Gripas)

But if the White House ever does decide to dig in against Iran, it will find plenty of willing partners.

The responses by regional actors to Iranian attacks show that a regional coalition can be created to counter the Islamic Republic.

“But everything depends on one thing,” said Mansharof, “a determined American government. The Saudis want it, the Emiratis want it, the Bahrainis want it.”