



Why is the Biden Administration Scared of Iran?

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With Israel and Hamas still vowing to destroy one another, and with full combat resuming after a tenuous truce, Washington says it doesn't want to do anything to provoke Iran into a wider regional conflict.

That's reportedly why, in recent days, Washington and its European allies chose not to censure Iran over its growing defiance of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors who seek to monitor Iran's nuclear activities.

Washington's concerns about provoking Iran, however, seem oddly misplaced. As events make clear, Tehran is already stirring a wider regional conflict, including a conflict with the United States, through its "Axis of Resistance" – a proxy network that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) coordinates and that includes Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, and Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Nor is Tehran making any secret of it. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei told IRGC forces the other day that while Hamas attacked "the Zionist regime," that attack was part of a larger war between Iran-backed forces and the United States, one he vowed would bring a "de-Americanization" of the region. Meanwhile, Iran's foreign minister warned of "consequences" if Washington maintains its support of Israel.

Iranian aggression demands a stronger, more consistent, more comprehensive U.S. response. Rather than fear provocation, Washington should commit more fully to deterrence in the form of Cold War-style containment.

Consider the points of military conflict in today's Middle East and the tentacles of Iranian influence.

Tehran has provided funding, training, and other support for Hamas ever since its creation in 1987, and it reportedly helped plan and provide training for the group's slaughter of 1,200 Israelis on October 7. A top Iranian official said he visited Hamas' tunnels and trained terrorists to launch missiles and rockets.

Nor is Hamas – which vows more October 7-like attacks on Israel to "annihilate" the Jewish state – alone as it battles Israeli forces in Gaza. Other Iranian proxies are attacking Israel to multiply Jerusalem's military challenges while also attacking U.S. forces in the region.

In Iraq and Syria, the New York Times reports, Iranian-backed militias have launched "more than 70 rocket and drone attacks" on U.S. troops since October 7. U.S. and coalition forces suffered four attacks on Thanksgiving Day alone.

From Yemen, Houthi rebels in recent days fired two ballistic missiles at a U.S. warship in the Gulf of Aden, marking only the latest in a string of attacks by the Houthis on Israel and U.S. forces.

What should Washington do?

It should recognize that Iran seeks regional hegemony and is mounting a multi-faceted effort to achieve it.

Tehran's efforts are inter-connected, not disparate. It's sponsoring terrorism, destabilizing other governments in the region, confronting U.S. forces on the ground and water across the region, expanding its nuclear pursuits, and advancing the sophistication of its ballistic missiles that, down the road, could carry a nuclear warhead. Progress in one area emboldens Tehran to seek progress in another.

Rather than downplay Tehran's efforts on any front (e.g., the nuclear front) due to fears of provocation, Washington should meet Iranian action with a comprehensive plan of its own. In essence, it should apply, to Iran, the approach that George Kennan recommended in 1947 for the Soviets: "adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, but which cannot be charmed or talked out of existence."

What would that look like?

For starters, Washington should give Jerusalem the leeway to finish destroying Hamas, rather than – as mounting voices around the world are urging – turn any temporary pause into a permanent ceasefire that will embolden Iran and raise prospects (as Hamas vows) of more October 7-like attacks.

Washington also should respond less “proportionally” and more forcefully to attacks by Iranian proxies. Administration officials say U.S. military reprisals to date are designed to create deterrence, but they’re clearly not deterring Iran from continuing to deploy its proxies against U.S. forces and Israel.

In addition, on its own and through the International Atomic Energy Agency, Washington should step up financial, diplomatic, and other pressure on Iran over its nuclear progress, rather than ease up in the vain hope of reviving the 2015 global nuclear deal with Iran. U.S. failure to do so since Tehran, this fall, ejected a third of the IAEA’s inspectors on the ground can only further encourage the regime.

Fearing provocation, Washington is emboldening rather than deterring Tehran in the aftermath of October 7. That raises the chance that Tehran will go too far, igniting an even larger and more dangerous regional conflict.

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