



Joe Biden's Real Iran Problem

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The United States, Winston Churchill is said to have remarked circa 1944, can be counted on to do the right thing once it has exhausted every other available option.

Back then, the British Prime Minister was talking about America's belated entry into the Second World War, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor made inaction impossible.

Today, it's a pretty good way to describe the Biden administration's Middle East policy.

On February 2nd, after nearly a week of dithering and public signaling, the United States finally launched a series of air strikes against Iranian-backed militias and elements of the country's clerical army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in both Syria and Iraq.

That, presumably, is just the beginning of what President Biden has signaled would be a protracted response to recent widespread aggression by Iranian-supported militias in the region.

The proximate cause of the American offensive is a late January drone strike on a U.S. military outpost in Jordan that left three servicemen dead and scores more injured. But the real purpose of the campaign is more strategic – to reset a U.S. deterrence posture which has eroded catastrophically in recent months.

That, however, could turn out to be a difficult proposition.

On Friday, in a public speech before members of the IRGC, Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi made clear that the Islamic Republic is on the march throughout the Middle East – and that America isn't in a position to stop it.

"The enemy cannot take any action against us because it knows that our forces are powerful and capable," Raisi said in comments that were carried by the official FARS news agency. "Previously... they [the United States] used to talk with threats and military options on the table. But now, there are no such talks, and they say they have no intention of conflict with the Islamic Republic. It is the strength of our people and our armed forces that has created this deterrence."

Raisi's message is abundantly clear: as Tehran sees it, today America is on the back foot in the region while the Islamic Republic is winning.

Accordingly, if it wants to reclaim the strategic high ground, Washington will need to be prepared to escalate further. Beyond targeting militants in places like Iraq and Syria, it will have to set its sights in earnest on the IRGC itself. So far, reports make clear, the United States has stopped short of targeting high-level IRGC assets, the way the Trump administration did when it eliminated Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the IRGC's paramilitary arm, the Qods Force, in January of 2020. Indeed, declaring open season on the IRGC is vital, since it serves as the connective tissue linking the Islamic Republic to its extensive network of terrorist proxies.

And, in extremis, if that isn't sufficient to temper Iran's regional policies, the United States will need to go further still. As a number of senior lawmakers have counseled, it may be necessary for the U.S. military to hit strategic targets within Iran itself in order to send a clear and unequivocal message to the Iranian leadership that their regional activism comes at a high cost.

That, however, is precisely the sort of escalation the White House is desperate to avoid. Administration officials, including President Biden himself, have been adamant that they do not want war with Iran. Nevertheless, truly resetting American deterrence might require taking steps that could risk a direct confrontation between the United States and the Islamic Republic.

Whether Team Biden, facing an increasingly difficult reelection at home, is prepared to do so is still very much an open question. Here, officials at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue would do well to remember a different, older aphorism: "if you want peace, prepare for war."