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Why an Iran Attack Could Be Biden's "Hour One" Crisis

by [Michael Knights](#)

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Tehran and its proxies may wait until after inauguration to take any action, potentially leaving Biden to decide how to balance the safety of American personnel with the chance for reengagement.

On January 3, Iran's leadership will mourn the one-year anniversary of the U.S. airstrike that killed Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps General Qassem Soleimani and Iran's senior Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. And the world seems preoccupied with the possibility of imminent armed conflict in the Middle East as Iraqi militias sponsored by Iran ramp up both rocket attacks on U.S. sites and roadside bombings of convoys, and the U.S. flies B-52 bombers and positions the Navy's hardest-hitting [strike forces](#) to the Gulf.

A number of observers have speculated that a violent clash with Iran would be President Donald Trump's final and most destabilizing act in office. But there is every possibility that revenge for Soleimani and Muhandis might be the first crisis of the Biden administration instead.

The evidence for a post-January 20 confrontation has been accumulating for some weeks. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei [cautioned](#) on December 16 that Iran's revenge would come "at its own time and place," and thus not necessarily under Trump, who has pledged to strike back hard if Americans are harmed. Inside Iraq, the key Iranian-backed militia, Kataib Hezbollah, has warned against revenge attacks [until Trump is gone](#), and even Mohammed al-

Hashemi, an Iraqi government envoy sent to Iran, was quoted in [Lebanon's Al-Akhbar newspaper](#) as beseeching Tehran to maintain calm “until the Biden administration takes over the presidency from Trump.”

Iran might restrain its militia partners until the end of the Trump administration but maybe not much beyond. In the inner circles of the U.S. government where threats are assessed, the January 20 transition is seen to represent a dangerous (and overlooked) window for escalation. One of Joe Biden's first duties could be to respond to a fatal attack on Americans in Iraq, Syria or the Gulf region.

Iraq has a habit of serving up early challenges for new presidents: Bill Clinton's first use of force was in Iraq, the [June 1993 cruise missile strikes](#) that avenged Saddam Hussein's efforts to assassinate former President George H.W. Bush two months earlier. President George W. Bush's first use of force was also in Iraq—a flurry of [airstrikes in February 2001](#) that irked Bush when they disrupted his first foreign trip (to Mexico).

A new president's first military crisis can be a foundational moment, particularly as great power competitors and rogue states alike take the measure of the new leader. Biden would need to weigh the consequences of action or inaction: one part of his political base would want to distinguish the new administration from the old, and extend an open hand to Iran, while foreign policy traditionalists would underline the need to demonstrate firmness, especially if an American is killed.

The best outcome for everyone is that Iran and its proxies recognize that striking U.S. interests on Biden's watch is not, in any sense, safer or less consequential than risking such a move under Trump. The president-elect should clearly communicate before January 20 that he will be ready, minute one, day one, to firmly respond to any threat to Americans. On January 20, the new administration should also quietly signal to Iran that its hand is outstretched but that revenge against Trump is still revenge against America and would place additional obstacles on the road to sanctions relief.

The incoming Biden team is having [problems gaining access](#) to the information that is typically provided during a transition. A very early priority should be a review of the military options that have been prepared, in order to familiarize the team and allow it to quickly request additions and make deletions. Biden's experienced national security team, particularly Defense Secretary nominee Lloyd Austin, a former commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, knows that the fraught moments after an attack are not the right time to play catch-up or to discover you have no military options that pass muster.

If Iran or Iran-backed militias in Iraq do attack American interests at too late a stage for Trump to react, or early in the Biden presidency, there will be a tension between quickly achieving deterrence and establishing U.S. credibility, on the one hand, and carefully weighing the facts and options, on the other. If the attack is powerful enough to kill Americans—who are typically well-protected—then it may have received a go-ahead from Iran, but the incoming administration can wait to ascertain that connection. Clinton waited 72 days until he struck Iraq's intelligence service for its role in the attempt on Bush's life in 1993.

If evidence does emerge of an Iranian role, then a Biden administration—like Clinton's before, but hopefully quicker—must not flinch from doing the right thing to deter future attacks on Americans. Only if Iran believes this to be the case will it hesitate against striking U.S. personnel in the first place.

What the U.S. could and should do straight away is to signal a cost to any attack on Americans, hit back at Iran's extended network and retain the option of further, more expansive strikes. Whenever rocket and bombing attacks have occurred against U.S. forces in Iraq this year, the network responsible for the attacks has been quite clear to the U.S. intelligence community within hours or days: some combination of the three vanguard groups of Iraq's networks—Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba. These groups are vulnerable to strikes and are already attacking the U.S.

Iran's militia partners are working hard every day to obscure the attribution of attacks on U.S. targets in Iraq, spinning off a bewildering number of new brands such as [Ashab al-Kahf](#) ("Companions of the Cave") and [Sarayat Qassem al-Jabbarin](#) ("Destroyer of Oppressors Company"). On March 13, these tactics successfully prevented Britain from joining [a U.S. strike](#) in Iraq to avenge the militia killing of two Americans and one Briton. British jets sat fueled and armed on the runway while government lawyers argued over who was actually to blame and who should be targeted. In the end, the Trump administration could not convince the British that Kata'ib Hezbollah was the right target, and British officials refused to permit their jets to take off. The Biden administration will strengthen deterrence if it does not allow potential attackers to play this shell game.

Though the inauguration on January 20 will be an exhilarating moment for Joe Biden and his team, it is also a moment when his mettle could be tested. History has shown that Iran probes the resolve of U.S. administrations, and that it can simultaneously poke an American president in the eye and sit at a negotiating table. Iran is struggling to restrain its proxies from seeking revenge but may see the opening of a Biden administration as the first safe moment to do so. Every other potential aggressor in the world will be watching and taking note.

Michael Knights is the Bernstein Fellow with The Washington Institute. This article was originally published [on the Politico website](#). ❖



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