Biden Wants to Leave the Middle East, But He's in a Vicious Bombing Cycle in Iraq

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Articles & Testimony

Caught between aggressive Tehran-backed militias and a skeptical Congress, the administration needs a better approach.

President Joe Biden is starting to do what every administration talks about but never manages to really do: Get U.S. forces out of the Middle East. His administration has removed Patriot missiles from the region, curtailed B-52 shows of force against Iran, and is preparing to bring home U.S. aircraft carriers after decades of dangerous Gulf deployments. In addition, of course, Biden is ending what he himself **called (https://www.npr.org/2021/04/14/986955659/biden-to-announce-he-will-end-americas-longest-war-in-afghanistan)** the "forever war" in Afghanistan.

But if the goal is to reduce military involvement in the Middle East, then it should be alarming that the Biden administration has bombed Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria more times in the last three months than the Trump administration did in all of 2020. If the current exchange rate continued, we would expect a total of nearly 50 attacks on U.S. bases by militias with ties to Tehran, a handful of U.S. deaths, and half a dozen U.S. retaliatory strikes by the end of the year. On **Monday (https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/27/airstrikes-iran-syria-iraq-496651)** and **Tuesday (https://twitter.com/OIRSpox/status/1409976897698766850)** , the United States hit back for the second and third times since Biden took office, striking militia targets in Iraq and Syria in response to increased drone and rocket attacks on U.S. troops in those two countries.

I've worked in Iraq, including with militias, for two decades. In January I **predicted**

(https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/01/02/why-an-iran-attack-could-be-bidens-hour-one-crisis-453477) in POLITICO that attacks by these militias would trigger Biden's first use of force and in February, that's precisely what happened **(https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/17/iran-just-handed-biden-his-first-credibility-test-469484)** . The dilemma for the White House is that it sees maintaining a small, focused counter-terrorism mission in Iraq and Syria as a worthwhile alternative to a full withdrawal, which would benefit adversaries like the Islamic State and Iranian hardliners. But Iran-backed groups will not stop attacking those outposts. Now, it seems the administration is caught in a vicious cycle of using small, pinprick strikes in an effort to deter the militias while avoiding escalation, but these half-measures achieve neither intended outcome. The Biden team needs to end the tit-for-tat cycle by hitting back smarter, harder and less openly.

The U.S. strike in February retaliated against a wildly reckless militia rocket attack on an American base in Iraq, but the pinprick strike only killed one night watchman. This first retaliatory exchange seems to have whetted the appetite of Iran-backed militias for more attacks on Americans. According to statistics compiled **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqs-drone-and-rocket-epidemic-numbers)** by the Washington Institute's Militia Spotlight **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight)** project, since Biden took office, militias have mounted 24 attacks on U.S. bases but only received three retaliatory responses. These groups are increasingly striking U.S. assets with drones, with the more accurate drone attacks starting to outnumber unguided rocket strikes.

This week's strike by U.S. jets may have killed five militiamen, according to claims by the affected militias, but if true, they were all junior troops. It's hard to assess whether the United States did material damage to Iran-supported militia drone workshops, but given the low cost of making drones (typically under $10,000 each), the damage will be quickly made good. For Iran-backed militias, this is an ideal situation. They get to flaunt their apparent strength by poking a superpower foe, without suffering meaningful costs.

The Biden team has been periodically hitting back at a time and place of its choosing, wisely separating provocation from retaliation in time. But the strikes have not been inventive or bold enough to affect the calculations of the militia leaders, instead hitting targets that just don't matter. The administration seems fixated on sending clear and unambiguous deterrent messages that are anything but clear and unambiguous to Iran and her militias. This is because U.S. strikes are deliberately limited in order to avoid escalation—but this means they are too weak to deter. Each U.S. strike has been calibrated to roughly mirror the prior militia strike in destructiveness, but when 11 of every 12 militia attacks go unanswered, the cost exchange is still heavily in the group's favor.

Meanwhile, U.S. lawmakers have been questioning the administration's right to enter into a long-running sequence of retaliatory operations against Iran-backed militias. Sen. Chris Murphy **(https://www.politico.com/news/2021/06/28/syria-airstrikes-war-powers-debate-496737)** (D-Conn.) noted after this week's strike that "the danger here is that you fall into a pattern of military escalation that becomes war without voters ever having a say." After Biden's first use of force against Iraqi militias in February, Murphy similarly questioned **(https://www.murphy.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/murphy-statement-on-us-airstrikes-on-syria)** whether retaliatory deterrent strikes could be termed self-defense, saying "retaliatory strikes, not necessary to prevent an imminent threat, must fall within the definition of an existing congressional authorization of military force." Between the two incidents, the House of Representatives voted to revoke the 2002 Authorization for the Use of Military Force in Iraq.

Stuck between relentless militia foes and a skeptical Congress, the Biden administration has to find a formula that will work better than the tit-for-tat of the past few months. Having seen during my time in Iraq what does and doesn't deter these militias **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deterring-militias-iraq-what-works-and-what-doesnt)** , the solution is simple to say, harder to do, but nonetheless essential.

First, hit enemies harder than they hit you. In my experience closely watching, operating near and even meeting Iraqi militia leaders, there is only one consequence they really fear—their own deaths. This was apparent watching militia leaders disperse, cower and keep a low profile after the U.S. slaying of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi militia kingpin Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020.

But instead of reaching for the most extreme option, the administration should start by hinting at it. In practical terms, the United States needs to achieve a deliberate near-miss on a very sensitive target, such as a senior militia leader. And the next time a major rocket or drone attack occurs against a U.S. base, a militia leader should instead be killed, at a time and place of our choosing.

Second, to reduce the risk of escalation, do not announce U.S. involvement. The U.S. was criticized by Iraq's government for the recent strike inside Iraq, yet Iran and the militias it backs in Iraq were not criticized for their rocket and drone strikes because they do not openly claim such attacks. Israel has, for years, not claimed many of its deterrent strikes, which has given its enemies some leeway to ignore, prevaricate over or delay retaliation. Although unclaimed strikes will raise valid concerns about oversight and transparency, the U.S. government has procedures not only for undertaking strikes using Title 50 intelligence community and covert action authorities, but also for informing Congress of these actions in closed session.

Third, do not allow Iran to hand off risk to proxies. Iran must understand that there is a cost to giving advanced drones to their militia proxies. Send messages to Iran's security establishment—separately from the nuclear talks happening in Vienna—that the U.S. will match Iranian covert action with its own.

The de-escalation with Iran through the nuclear negotiations is not likely to bring any relief. Those talks have not prevented the escalation of militia attacks under Biden (after the original nuclear deal went into effect in 2015, Iranian military activism and proxy warfare similarly accelerated). Iran's new president-elect Ebrahim Raisi has said that Iran's military, missile and drone activities are "non-negotiable" and the Biden administration is tabling those issues for a later point as well. The only way to safeguard U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria is plain old-fashioned deterrence. To use Raisi's phrase, America's right to defend its forces should be non-negotiable.

Biden wants to reduce the U.S. footprint in the Middle East and de-escalate with Iran, and congressional leaders like Murphy want to avoid open-ended uses of force in the name of self-defense. The administration's approach thus far has, somewhat paradoxically, damaged all these hopes. Relying on periodic, limited strikes has clearly failed to deter Iran-backed militias from attacking U.S. sites, which only requires more strikes and keeps the U.S. and Iran on a collision course. Hitting back harder and more quietly is the best way to end the vicious cycle. If, as the Biden team is fond of saying, the Middle East is a problem that can only be managed but not solved, let's at least manage the problem as efficiently as possible and get the Middle East off the president's agenda.

Michael Knights is the Bernstein Fellow with The Washington Institute and coauthor of its 2020 study Honored, Not Contained: The Future of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces **(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/honored-not-contained-future-iraqs-popular-mobilization-forces)** *. This article was originally published* on the Politico website **(https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/07/02/biden-iraq-bombing-vicious-cycle-497699)** *.* ❖

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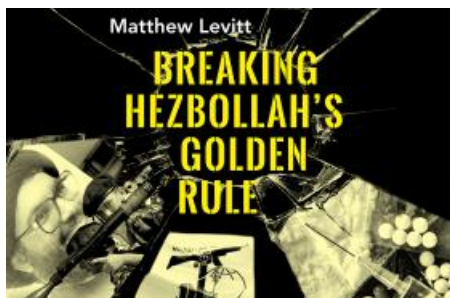(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

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