

There Is Still Time to Stop a Wider War in the Middle East

by [Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#)

Aug 15, 2024

Also published in *New York Times*

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dana Stroul \(/experts/dana-stroul\)](#)

Dana Stroul is Director of Research and Shelly and Michael Kassen Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Articles & Testimony

Part of a series: [Risks and Opportunities in the Post-April 13 Middle East \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east\)](#)

or see [Part 1: The Palestinian Arena in the Shadow of the Iran-Israel Crisis \(/policy-analysis/palestinian-arena-shadow-iran-israel-crisis\)](#)

Because the landscape has shifted since April, the Biden administration’s previous script for preventing irreversible escalation may no longer work.

Since the Oct. 7 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, President Biden has had two goals in the Middle East: to support Israel’s [right to defend itself \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/10/10/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-terrorist-attacks-in-israel-2/\)](#) against terrorism and to prevent the Israel-Hamas war from [escalating into a regional conflagration \(https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/16/politics/us-prevent-wider-middle-east-war/index.html\)](#) that would compel the United States to step in.

To prevent a regional war, the Biden administration has used a series of measures over the past 10 months, ranging from diplomacy to beefing up America’s military presence to employing lethal military force. So far, it’s managed to keep multiple low-level conflicts from spiraling into a full-scale conventional war that risks a direct U.S.-Iran confrontation.

But since Iran’s unprecedented [attack \(https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/13/middleeast/iran-drones-attack-israel-intl-latam/index.html\)](#) on Israel in April—and a series of dangerous developments since—the landscape has shifted sharply. Mr. Biden’s playbook may not be enough this time.

Iran’s attack marked a decisive change in its regional strategy—and the security of the Middle East. For decades, Tehran has projected its military force across the region through a network of proxies and militias, a strategy intended to keep fighting out of its territory and to maintain some deniability. But in April, when Iran ignored Washington’s warnings and directly attacked Israel for the first time, Iran moved the goal posts. It’s no longer clear how Iran might use its [military \(https://nytimes.com/2024/04/12/world/middleeast/iran-israel-military-weapons.html\)](#) and its network. With Israel’s subsequent [strike \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/19/world/middleeast/israel-strikes-iran-why.html\)](#) deep inside Iranian territory, America’s script for preventing state-on-state attacks started to fray.

Preventing regional war has been one of Mr. Biden’s priorities from the early days of his administration. After the deadly attack on Israel by Hamas, a terrorist group sponsored by Iran, the Biden administration warned Tehran and its proxies publicly and [privately \(https://www.axios.com/2024/05/17/biden-us-iran-regional-attacks\)](#) not to go further. Washington reinforced its diplomacy with rapid deployments of more forces and capabilities across the Middle East, including two aircraft carriers.

At the same time, Mr. Biden was [directing targeted military strikes \(https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/27/precision-strikes-syria-biden-middle-east-iran-00124000\)](#) against Iran’s proxies, which ramped up attacks on U.S. forces after the war in Gaza began. In the following months, the president ordered unilateral strikes, first against Iran-affiliated infrastructure in [Syria \(https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/us-strikes-iran-linked-targets-syria-retaliation-drone-attacks-rcna122155\)](#), then Iran-affiliated [facilities \(https://www.military.com/daily-news/2024/01/23/us-strikes-three-facilities-iraq-following-attacks-american-forces-iran-backed-militias.html\)](#) in Iraq, and finally against Iran-aligned [militia leaders \(https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/drone-strike-in-baghdad-kills-high-ranking-militia-leader-linked-to-attacks-on-american-troops-u-s-military-says\)](#) in Iraq.

In Yemen, where the Iran-backed Houthis, claiming to [defend Palestinians \(https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2024/02/07/why-are-houthis-attacking-ships-gaza-iran/72477419007/\)](#), launched an assault against military and commercial vessels in the Red Sea, the Biden administration pulled together two international coalitions to [protect vessels \(https://www.newsweek.com/joe-biden-expensive-red-sea-plan-major-hurdles-houthis-yemen-1854855\)](#) traveling through the region and to hit [military targets inside Yemen \(https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3652569/us-forces-allies-conduct-joint-strikes-in-yemen/\)](#). While the Houthis’ [attacks have continued \(https://www.dia.mil/News-Features/Articles/Article-View/Article/3805451/dia-report-details-effects-of-houthi-attacks-on-commercial-shipping/\)](#), the coalitions’ efforts have managed to stop them from completely shutting down international maritime traffic.

This combination of tactics was working until Iran sent over [300 \(https://apnews.com/article/strait-of-hormuz-vessel-33fcffde2d867380e98c89403776a8ac#:~:text=Israel%20says%20Iran%20launched%20more,99%25%20of%20which%20were%20intercepted&text=Loud%20booms%20were%20he\)](#) attack drones and missiles into Israel on April 13. The attack was launched in response to the assassination of three Iranian commanders in Syria, which was suspected to be at the hands of Israel. An [air defense coalition \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-middle-east-defense-alliance-is-as-vital-for-israel-as-the-air-we-breathe/\)](#), which included the United States, Israel and European and Arab partners, managed to intercept nearly all of Iran’s attack drones, and most of Iran’s missiles failed or were intercepted by Israel. But despite Washington’s warnings, diplomacy and defensive military posture, Iran was undeterred. Had more of its weapons done greater damage to Israeli military sites or civilian areas, Israel would have almost certainly responded in kind, making the march toward regional war unstoppable.

Now, once again, the region is teetering on the edge. [A July 27 attack \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/27/world/middleeast/israel-golan-heights-lebanon-rocket.html\)](#) on a town in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights, which killed 12 children and which Lebanon’s Hezbollah was clearly behind (even if it has denied it), is exactly the kind of mass casualty event that pushes leaders into irreversible escalatory cycles. Israel responded by assassinating a senior [Hezbollah commander in southern Beirut \(https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/30/world/middleeast/fuad-shukr-hezbollah-israel-strike.html\)](#); Hezbollah vowed to respond. A day later, a top Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh, was killed while staying at a government guesthouse in Tehran in an attack Iran says Israel carried out. Humiliated by the security breach, Tehran also vowed to respond.

The Biden administration has once again thrown its playbook at the problem. It has sent [another aircraft carrier \(https://apnews.com/article/israel-hamas-gaza-war-us-submarine-carrier-43e2574e746af59993f54e4ef250a640\)](#), another [squadron of fighter jets \(https://www.airandspaceforces.com/f-22s-land-in-middle-eastcountering-iran-and-its-](#)

[proxies/#:-:text=Air%20Force%20F%2D22%20Raptor,Central%20Command%20announced%20Aug.%208.](#)) and a nuclear-powered [guided missile submarine](#) (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3868837/readout-of-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iiis-call-with-israeli-minister/>) to the region. It is applying [diplomatic pressure](https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/artc-blinken-urges-diplomatic-intervention-to-prevent-iran-israel-escalation) (<https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/artc-blinken-urges-diplomatic-intervention-to-prevent-iran-israel-escalation>) to rally every ally and partner to call on Iran to stand down. Gen. Michael Erik Kurilla, the U.S. military's top commander in charge of forces in the Middle East, was in Israel this past week [organizing another air defense coalition](https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/06/politics/us-israel-iran-de-escalate/index.html) (<https://edition.cnn.com/2024/08/06/politics/us-israel-iran-de-escalate/index.html>). And Mr. Biden has sought to counter any question of the growing distance between Washington and Israel when it comes to the latter's [defense](https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-news-08-04-2024-5b480a3b22538edec9fa05908f28303f) (<https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-news-08-04-2024-5b480a3b22538edec9fa05908f28303f>) so that Iran and its proxies, including Hezbollah, all understand that Washington will step in to defend Israel.

But preventing state-on-state war in the Middle East is a fundamentally different enterprise than it was five months ago. Mr. Biden's efforts didn't stop Iran from attacking Israel in the spring; it is difficult to see how the same moves will be sufficient now. Tehran has paid no significant price for its actions, and the United States has not specifically threatened to impose costs on Iran should it attack Israel again.

U.S. and Israeli officials may still believe that neither Iran nor Hezbollah seek full-scale war. Yet both are wrestling with global humiliation in the aftermath of Israel's strikes; there is a serious risk that their revenge instinct outweighs their pragmatism. If Iran once again ignores international pressure to hold back, it is likely to design a larger response than it carried out on April 13, which could include multiple direct attacks against Israel or coordinated attacks with its proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria. There's also a risk that Iran directs Hezbollah to strike first in an attempt to drain Israel's air defenses before launching a direct attack of its own. If Iran wants to avoid a wider war, its response will avoid civilian infrastructure and population centers. Implementing such a response—something more than April 13, but less than a march to war—carries tremendous risk of miscalculation or error.

Tehran is most likely to stand down if its leaders perceive the regime's own security is at risk. Mr. Biden should consider signaling that he is ready to shift the use of American military force from targeting Iran's proxies to targeting inside Iran, such as weapons storage or production facilities. The additional forces and capabilities he has sent to the region could be used not only to defend Israel after an Iranian attack but also to punish Iran directly.

European and Arab leaders should be encouraged to move their own goal posts, too. Consequences for more Iranian aggression should include economic pressure, diplomatic isolation and additional commitments between European and Arab allies toward security cooperation to counter Iranian threats.

As the world awaits Tehran's response, other fronts are heating up. Iran's militias in Iraq and Syria [restarted attacks](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-personnel-hurt-attack-against-base-iraq-officials-say-2024-08-05/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-personnel-hurt-attack-against-base-iraq-officials-say-2024-08-05/>) against U.S. forces last week, one of which resulted in serious injuries. Mr. Biden has not yet directed any U.S. strikes in response, which Tehran could misread as a green light to continue. In late July, a Houthi [drone attack on Tel Aviv](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-says-tel-aviv-blast-apparently-caused-by-drone-2024-07-19/#:-:text=TEL%20AVIV%2C%20July%2019%20(Reuters,military%20and%20emergency%20services%20said.)) ([https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-says-tel-aviv-blast-apparently-caused-by-drone-2024-07-19/#:-:text=TEL%20AVIV%2C%20July%2019%20\(Reuters,military%20and%20emergency%20services%20said.\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-military-says-tel-aviv-blast-apparently-caused-by-drone-2024-07-19/#:-:text=TEL%20AVIV%2C%20July%2019%20(Reuters,military%20and%20emergency%20services%20said.))) prompted the [first unilateral Israeli strike in Yemen](https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/21/middleeast/israel-strikes-houthi-rebels-explainer-intl/index.html) (<https://www.cnn.com/2024/07/21/middleeast/israel-strikes-houthi-rebels-explainer-intl/index.html>), and from Lebanon Hezbollah's attacks into Israel are increasing even as the American force buildup accelerates.

To buy time and space for diplomacy, Mr. Biden issued a rare [joint statement](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/08/08/joint-statement-from-the-leaders-of-the-united-states-egypt-and-qatar/#:-:text=August%2008%2C%202024-.Joint%20Statement%20from%20the%20Leaders,United%20States%2C%20Egypt%2C%20and%20Qatar&text=It%20is%20time%20to%20bring,hostages%20and%20detainees%20re) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/08/08/joint-statement-from-the-leaders-of-the-united-states-egypt-and-qatar/#:-:text=August%2008%2C%202024-.Joint%20Statement%20from%20the%20Leaders,United%20States%2C%20Egypt%2C%20and%20Qatar&text=It%20is%20time%20to%20bring,hostages%20and%20detainees%20re>) with leaders of Egypt and Qatar calling for a meeting on Thursday to finalize an agreement for a cease-fire in Gaza and the release of the remaining hostages held by Hamas. Administration officials believe an end to the fighting in Gaza could open opportunities for a cooling on all other fronts, since Iran and its proxies have tied their attacks to the Israeli campaign there.

On Tuesday, Mr. Biden said he expected Iran to hold off on an attack if a cease-fire deal is achieved, and Iranian officials [warned](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/only-gaza-ceasefire-can-delay-irans-israel-response-sources-say-2024-08-13/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/only-gaza-ceasefire-can-delay-irans-israel-response-sources-say-2024-08-13/>) that only a cease-fire deal would prevent retaliation. But the prospects for the success of the talks are grim: Hamas has [rejected](https://www.axios.com/2024/08/11/gaza-hostage-ceasefire-deal-hamas-talks) (<https://www.axios.com/2024/08/11/gaza-hostage-ceasefire-deal-hamas-talks>) any adjustments to the cease-fire framework, and the [negotiating team](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/israeli-negotiating-team-fears-netanyahu-extra-conditions-for-hostage-deal-intended-to-cause-a-crisis-reports/) (https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/israeli-negotiating-team-fears-netanyahu-extra-conditions-for-hostage-deal-intended-to-cause-a-crisis-reports/) of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel has reportedly accused him of undermining the negotiations.

Iran, recognizing the distance between the parties, appears to be seeking to legitimize its use of force against Israel. If that's true, all those who want to prevent the big war should reject Iran's cynical play and prepare actions to break Iran's stranglehold over the region.

Dana Stroul is the Kassen Senior Fellow and director of research at The Washington Institute and former deputy assistant secretary for the Middle East at the Pentagon. This article was originally published on the New York Times website (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/08/15/opinion/iran-israel-middle-east-war.html>). ❖

PART OF A SERIES

Risks and Opportunities in the Post-April 13 Middle East (</policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east>)



There Is Still Time to Stop a Wider War in the Middle East

(</policy-analysis/there-still-time-stop-wider-war-middle-east>)



Security Cooperation in a Changed Region: How to Advance the U.S.-GCC Defense Working Groups

(</policy-analysis/security-cooperation-changed-region-how-advance-us-gcc-defense-working-groups>)



[How Sustainable Are Defense and Deterrence Methods in Light of Iran's Attack?](#)

(/policy-analysis/how-sustainable-are-defense-and-deterrence-methods-light-irans-attack)

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Even After Houthi Attacks, Russia-Linked Tankers Return to Red Sea](#)

Aug 22, 2024



Noam Raydan

(/policy-analysis/even-after-houthi-attacks-russia-linked-tankers-return-red-sea)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The Yazidis in Sinjar: When Politics Controls the Fate of Minorities](#)

Aug 22, 2024



Izat Noah

(/policy-analysis/yazidis-sinjar-when-politics-controls-fate-minorities)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Analyzing the Successes and Failures of Iraq's 5th plus and 6th Oil and Gas Bid Rounds](#)

Aug 21, 2024



Muhammed Abed Mazeel al-Aboudi

(/policy-analysis/analyzing-successes-and-failures-iraqs-5th-plus-and-6th-oil-and-gas-bid-rounds)

TOPICS

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)