

IRAN: FROM STRATEGIC PATIENCE TO STRATEGIC IMPASSE?

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Introduction

Iran has been among the most fervently talked about countries over the past months. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with the revolution that took place in 1979, Tehran initiated the revolution-exporting project and vehemently put the liberation of Palestine and Jerusalem at the center of its official rhetoric. In the aftermath of Hamas' Al-Aqsa Flood Operation, and while Gaza was being devastated by Israel and Palestine was going through very heated times, it was natural for Iran's name to come to the fore in the political centers of power.

However, with the steps it has taken thus far, even if the criticism of its opponents is ignored, Iran has not even been able to satisfy its allies, leading to a certain level of disappointment in its alliance networks. Taking advantage of the windows of opportunity created by the turmoil caused by the Arab Spring, Tehran has increased its influence in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon through Hezbollah and has established a serious influence - more accurately, tutelage - over the policies of the capitals of the mentioned countries. However, while Gaza was being destroyed, Tehran did not directly intervene in the war but engaged in a power rivalry with Israel and the US through its non-state proxies. The most prominent organization in such a process was the Houthis in Yemen. The Houthis, who seriously affected the global maritime trade¹ in the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait with their attacks, quickly drew the wrath of the US and UK and was subjected to attacks.² Despite this, Tehran seems to have made considerable progress in its mission to create a second Hezbollah from the Houthis after the outbreak of the Gaza crisis. To put it plainly, Houthis have become a formidable fortress for Tehran as time passes. The epithets used for the Houthis in some outlets, such as the 'Yemeni Armed Forces,' show that the group has made progress in its search for legitimacy.

While making the current moves, Tehran remains in its comfort zone as it states that the armed organizations it allies with make their independent decisions, and Iran does not order anyone, employing plausible deniability. In other words, by embracing plausible deniability, Tehran tries to avoid the economic, political, legal, and military consequences of the actions taken by its proxies. Whether Iran can be deemed successful in this or not is a separate discussion.

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Tehran-Backed Militias Under Fire

The fact that Tehran has not engaged in a direct war with Israel has not deterred Tel Aviv and Washington from striking high-ranking figures of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as well as Tehran-backed militias. Since the beginning of the Gaza war, the US-Israeli duo has targeted senior Iranian-backed figures in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

Deputy Chairman of Hamas Political Bureau Saleh al-Arouri was assassinated³ in Lebanon, while Hashd al-Shaabi commander Abu Taqwa⁴ was targeted in Iraq, and IRGC General Reza Mousavi was killed in Damascus. Lately, 5 IRGC members, including Sadegh Omidzadeh⁵, an intelligence officer, were killed in the Sayyida Zainab area of Damascus, which is known as a stronghold⁶ of Iran. It is essential to see that following the outbreak of the Gaza war, Israel changed its strategy⁷ against Iran. Tel Aviv used to target depots, hardware, etc., belonging to Iran in Syria before the war. Yet, after the Gaza crisis, Tel Aviv directly targets high-level figures and attack planners affiliated with the IRGC.

Tehran Under Pressure, and Irrationality Prevails

Tehran has come under severe pressure due to the assassination of its senior military leaders by Israel and the US and the targeting of the organizations it supports. The country has not intervened in the Gaza crisis to the extent expected so far, disappointing at least some of its allies. Moreover, the fact that the coffins of senior military leaders of the IRGC who were targeted outside Iranian territory increases tension in domestic politics in the country when they arrive in Tehran. As if this crisis was not enough, the terror attack carried out by ISIS in Kerman⁸ killed dozens of people and wounded hundreds, strained the political atmosphere in the country. Iran responds to this tense atmosphere by taking harsher measures in domestic politics. Nobody is unaware of the recent execution news of political prisoners⁹ in the country. Moreover, countries such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia are constantly criticized in the Iranian media due to their so-far reaction to the Gaza war and not severing ties with Israel. This kind of criticism can also be read as defusing domestic tension by pointing to other areas.

In such a critical and tense time, policymakers in Tehran would have been expected to at least not engage in hostile actions against neighboring countries and amplify its alliance-building efforts. However, as the pressure on Tehran increases, it engages in more irrational actions. In other words, irrationality prevails over composure/balance in Iran. While Israel and the US constantly targeted the non-state armed actors supported by Iran, Tehran hit Erbil¹⁰, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and Idlib in Syria with ballistic missiles and drones. Subsequently, it attacked Pakistan¹¹ under the guise of the Baluch terrorist organizations - which was a counterproductive move given Pakistan's retaliation. The fact that the missiles fired from Iran hit targets 1200¹² km away and that they have a total range of 1450¹³ kilometers can be seen as a message to Israel. Nevertheless, it was an unexpected move that Erbil, which has been targeted by Iran-backed militias since 2020, was subjected to such an unprecedented attack, given the destruction of the missiles caused on the site. Therefore, it is clear that the Erbil attack is a new stage in Iran's 'missile diplomacy.'¹⁴

Strategic Patience: Quo Vadis?

The Iranian state mind has put forth the concept of 'strategic patience'¹⁵ in the aftermath of the assassination of IRGC Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani by the US in Baghdad in January 2020. Since then, Tehran has embarked on a long-term struggle against the initial promises of revenge against the US. As a matter of fact, since that day, Tehran has not taken very severe actions that could seriously harm the US. If Trump's remarks¹⁶ were factual, Iran even warned Washington about the US targets it would hit in Iraq in advance. Iran has tried to harm the US through long-term strategies and militia organizations' attacks over the past four years. However, the recent developments in the Middle East, which is on fire, and the fact that an attack carried out by Iran-backed militias led to the death of three US soldiers in Jordan and injured dozens of others indicate that Tehran may be stuck in a "strategic stalemate." The serious escalation of tension caused by the killing of US soldiers increases the risk dosage for Iran. That is to say, as the allies' pressure on Iran increases, the country moves away from rationality in its steps, given the fact that Tehran does not want to suffer a loss of trust among its non-state armed allies. As a result of the move away from rationality, Iran attacks neighboring countries that should not be made hostile.

In consequence, grave mistakes occur. The IRGC targeted the house of a Kurdish businessman¹⁷ in Erbil with ballistic missiles, claiming that it was Mossad's headquarters.¹⁸ The businessman in question was killed along with his one-year-old baby¹⁹ and three other persons. As if this mistake was not enough, a nuclear power, Pakistan, was attacked, which was a strategic mistake. It did not take long for Iran to realize that targeting Pakistan did not resemble targeting Syria or Erbil. Pakistan retaliated quickly. Iran's air defense systems and Tehran's deterrence have become questionable²⁰ due to Pakistan's targeting²¹ of Iranian territory under the pretext of terrorist organizations, the same pretext put forward by Iran. It goes without saying that the region's heavyweights, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are closely following the developments transpiring in Iran and that what is happening now will constitute a reference point for the steps Ankara and Riyadh will take in the coming period.

Although Iran seems to be gaining power through armed organizations it backs in the Middle East, its steps risk creating a rift with the region's capitals and neighboring countries in the political arena. Put it differently, Iran's risk of isolation is becoming greater than ever. For example, profound sympathy²² towards Iran among the Pakistani population is likely to decrease due to Iran's attack on the Pakistani territory. Moreover, it is known that Iran recruited hundreds of Pakistanis to fight on the side of the Assad regime in Syria under the name of the Zainabiyoun Brigade.²³ From this moment on, Iran's recruitment of

Shiite militias from Pakistan may also be at risk. Overall, what Iran was left with was the unnecessary tension it created with a nuclear power neighbor with a population of more than 200 million.

In addition to this, after the Erbil attack, there was an unexpected reaction to Iran in Iraq. The dosage of the reaction is quite surprising due to Iran's political influence on politics in Baghdad through Shiite political groups and militias. The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned²⁴ the Erbil attack and threatened Tehran that it could bring the attacks in question to the United Nations Security Council. More importantly, Iraqi Premier Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani, who has the backing of Iranian-backed Shiite political groups, canceled²⁵ his expected meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian in Davos.

Deterrence of Nuclear Power and Concluding Remarks

Although Iran contemplates that the United States cannot directly target its territory due to Iran's nuclear capabilities, it is not known whether Washington will act so rationally. Since the beginning of the Gaza war, neither Tehran nor Washington has desired to confront each other directly. Undoubtedly, who wants to pit the US against Iran is Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who is ready to do anything to prolong his political life in Israel. Considering the disasters caused by irrational decisions of leaders in world political history, Washington's possible intervention in Iran without taking lessons from its previous wars, such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Vietnam, corresponds to a disaster scenario for the entire Middle East.

After the killing of three²⁶ US soldiers in Jordan, voices of "Hit Iran" have begun to rise in the US. Especially, Republican senators²⁷ are raising their voices on this issue. Despite this, the US has acted rationally so far and avoided a larger confrontation with Iran. As a matter of fact, the US President articulated that he does not want to trigger a regional war²⁸, yet the US will respond to Iran. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken similarly remarked and claimed that their response to Iran would be multi-leveled²⁹, gradual, and long-term. This has crystallized in the US' concerted retaliatory air strikes in Syria and Iraq. In early February, major airstrikes were conducted on 85 targets³⁰ in Syria and Iraq against the Iran-backed militias.

Nevertheless, before the strikes, the Iran-backed militias largely evacuated³¹ their sites in anticipation of attacks. Despite this, casualties³² are taking place in Syria and Iraq,

including civilians. Shortly, Tehran is between a rock and a hard place. It cannot remain silent to US&Israel strikes as doing otherwise will further erode its deterrence. Depending on this, Tehran targets US allies. The Erbil attack and the recent targeting of the US ally in Syria, the SDF, which resulted in 6 casualties³³ are indicative of this situation.

The US and Iran have engaged in a war of attrition against each other amidst the rumors of US withdrawal^{34 35} from Syria and Iraq and avoided a direct large-scale conflict thus far. However, the current political and military climate of the Middle East suggests that the situation could spiral out of control at any moment due to the serious escalation. There is a limit to escalating tension in international relations, and it is impossible to predict every move of your interlocutor/rival.

US President Joe Biden undoubtedly sees the possibility of losing the election³⁶ to his probable rival, Donald Trump, due to his terrible management of the Gaza crisis. At such a significant time period for him, the US soldiers' coffins are arriving in the US, increasing domestic pressure on him. Therefore, the possibility of Biden embarking on a new adventure against Tehran stemming from Iran's reckless attacks in order to save face in the country is not a risk to be taken lightly. Only time will show whether Tehran's move to consolidate trust in the non-state armed actors it supports through attacks on Israel, the US, and their allies will result in the targeting of its territory. If Iran's brinkmanship strategy backfires due to its miscalculations and the US intervenes in the country, the whole Middle East will turn into hell.

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