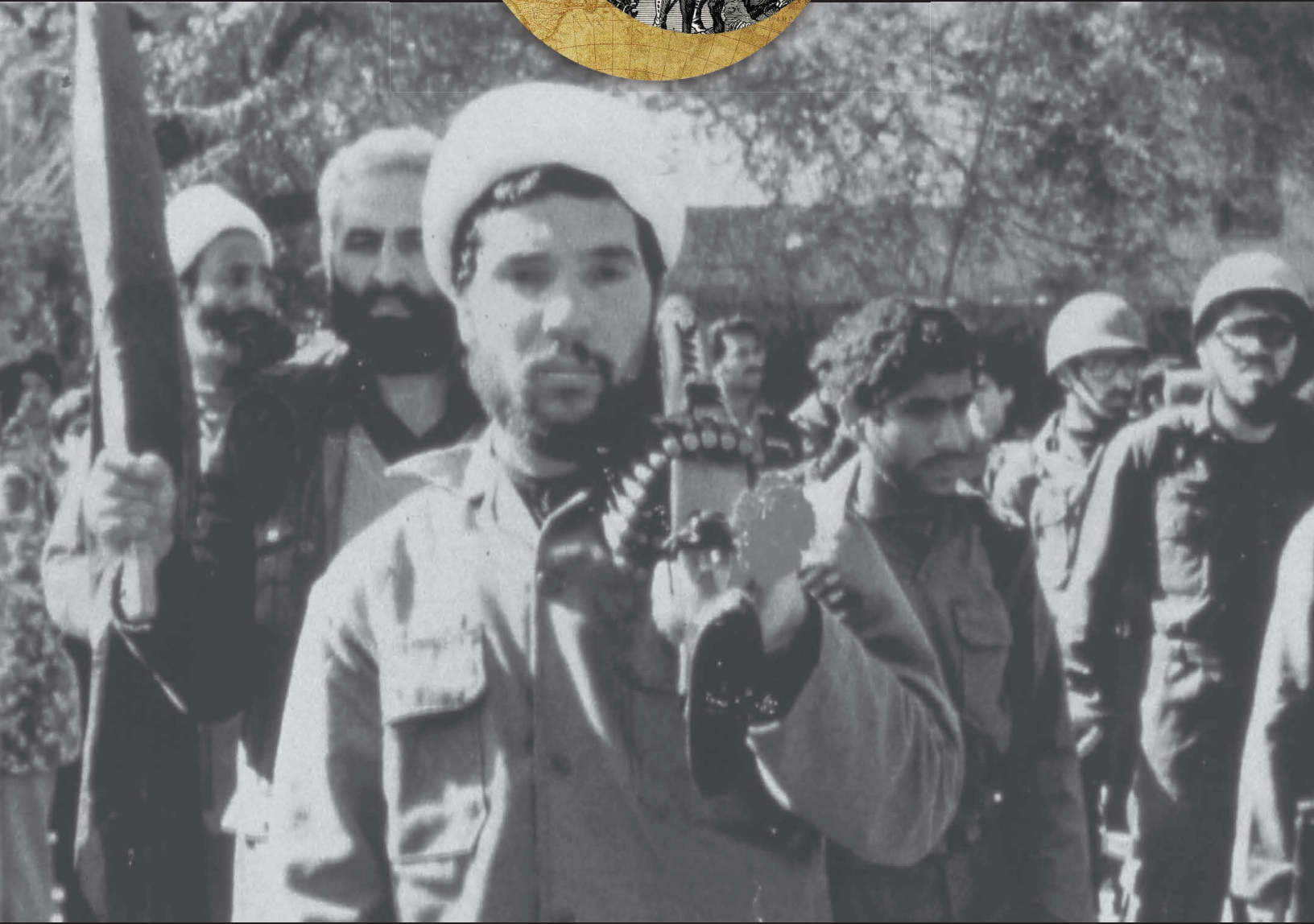


STRATEGIKA

ISSUE 90

Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

APRIL 2024



IRANIAN PROXIES

IN THIS ISSUE

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ABOUT THE POSTERS IN THIS ISSUE

Documenting the wartime viewpoints and diverse political sentiments of the twentieth century, the Hoover Institution Library & Archives Poster Collection has more than one hundred thousand posters from around the world and continues to grow. Thirty-three thousand are available online. Posters from the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia/Soviet Union, and France predominate, though posters from more than eighty countries are included.

The United States Really Can Deter Iran, but Only If It Really Wants To

By Edward N. Luttwak

The evident failure of the United States to deter Iran is manifest in the concurrent aggressions of its three Twelver Shia militias in Lebanon (*Hezbollah*), Syria, and Iraq, which have wounded many American troops and killed three; the aggression of the Fiver Shia *Houthi* militia of Yemen that has attacked U.S. as well as other ships in the Red Sea with Iran's missiles and drones, seriously damaging the Egyptian and world economy; the Iran-funded aggressions in Gaza of the Shia Islamic Jihad and, on a much larger scale, the violence of Sunni Hamas—all would be inexplicable given Iran's extreme economic fragility and the severe limitations of its armed forces, were it not for the persisting effect of Obama's one contribution to American foreign policy: his Iran negotiations, whose protagonists remain on center stage in Washington.

After sundry U.S. bombings that utterly failed to stop militia attacks against U.S. troops and Red Sea shipping, on February 2, 2024, a pair of *B-1* heavy bombers sent out from Dyess Air Force Base in Texas flew some 7,057 miles to launch 125 missiles at 85 militia targets in Iraq and Syria. Next, on February 3, the U.S. Navy with both missiles and jets and Royal Air Force jets out of Cyprus attacked 36 Houthi targets in Yemen.

It was an impressive reminder that the United States can bomb any target anywhere from home bases, and that the British are still capable of war (there is also a "European Union" flotilla in the Red Sea whose inactivity is also impressive in its own way).

But none of these attacks are at all likely to persuade Iran to stop further supplies of missiles and drones to its militias, if only because multiple U.S. officials immediately and most emphatically have denied any intention of bombing any targets within Iran . . . without adding the necessary proviso as to Iran's behavior. Moreover, the ample public warnings given before the February 2–3 air strike undoubtedly ensured that Iran's own Revolutionary Guards were nowhere near the sites that were attacked, nor missiles for that matter.

Israel has repeatedly and very deliberately targeted Iran's Revolutionary Guard officers, very recently killing four senior colonels and junior generals, but not the United States—except for Trump's decision to kill Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020, which was duly criticized for violating Obama's unwritten law that Iran may attack any and all, but none may attack Iran or its treasured leaders. It all started at the very beginning of the Obama administration.

When Obama entered the White House he had promises to keep like all his predecessors, but he also had a promise he was really determined to keep, the one he had made only to himself: to achieve a true reconciliation with Iran, not only to remove a constant irritant and intermittent danger, but also to reduce, or even remove the strategic necessity of backing two regional allies he personally detested, Israel and Saudi Arabia.

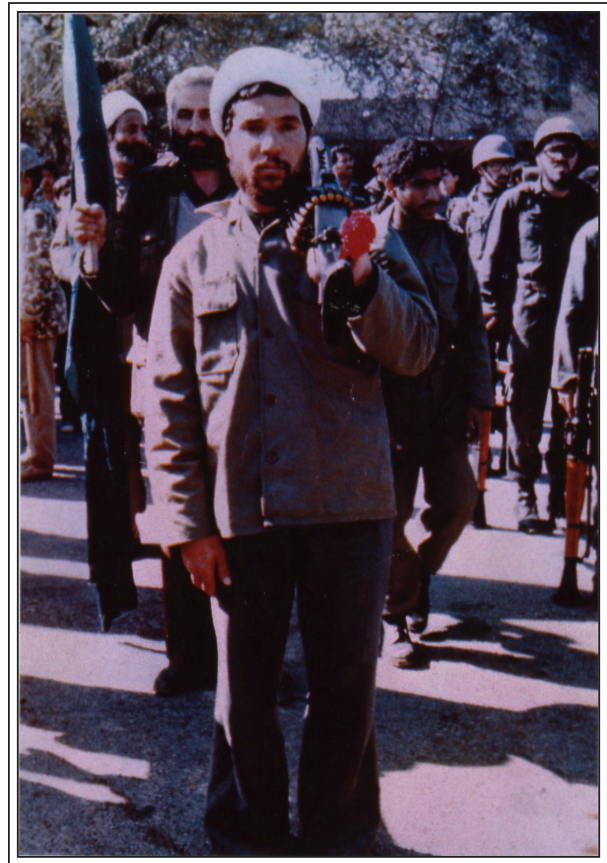


Image credit: Poster Collection, IR 143-12, Hoover Institution Archives.

Obama also had a plan of action: he would first win over the Ayatollahs by apologizing for America's nefarious past in Iran—not the past documented in historiography, but the one depicted by the global Left, whereby it was a handful of U.S. and British agents who overthrew the inept, prostrate, and tearful Prime Minister Mosaddegh in August 1953, and not the mass uprising recorded in films and photographs. Having proved his sincerity, Obama would offer the Islamic Republic the alluring prospect of U.S. strategic disengagement from Israel and Saudi Arabia in exchange for the resumption of diplomatic relations—with an implicit promise not to imprison U.S. diplomats again, one presumes. To make concessions merely to have diplomatic relations is a thing done only by pariah states. But for Obama, it was a really very clever scheme, because what he would offer to Iran's rulers was no more than what he wanted for himself.

But Obama could not simply task the Government to carry out his plan, not only because both Israel and Saudi Arabia have a Washington presence that could quickly mobilize opposition in Congress and beyond, but also because very few if any officials across the executive branch shared his opinion of all three countries, and his implicit assumption that Iran's rulers would want his longed-for reconciliation. That was certainly the case with his national security advisor and head of the National Security Council, ret. General James L. Jones, who viewed Iran with perfectly justified suspicion, while considering the security of Saudi Arabia an important U.S. interest, and Israel as an all-weather ally with some unusual operational capabilities.

But for this too Obama had a remedy: his very own Iran team, starting with his old Harvard friend Robert Malley who was brought in very early as an advisor to his first presidential campaign, and Valerie Jarrett. Malley had no Iran expertise and he had yet to acquire his later Iran affiliations, but he was the right man nonetheless because he was an absolute second-generation anti-Zionist (I first heard of his parents in Paris where they both worked for the Algerian FLN, then striving to exceed all other Arabs in their hatred for Jews and Israel). And he detested the Saudi monarchy. Valerie Jarrett, a considerable Chicago pol who had helped to ease Obama's meteoric rise, had no such antipathies but happened to have been born in Iran to American parents, and spoke Farsi as a child. Jarrett was given a large staff in the White House albeit to work on domestic affairs, but her sentimental regard for Iran was useful for Obama's propitiatory messaging to Tehran, and Jarrett would also be useful in assuaging the concerns of her Chicago Jewish friends who had been Obama's earliest backers.

That Malley was caught out very early in Obama's first campaign, when *The Times of London* revealed on May 9, 2008, that he had been talking with Hamas—not so infamous as it now is, but already a listed terrorist organization whose charter called for the killing and not just the expulsion of Israel's Jewish population. The campaign was forced to eject him but Obama's reliance on Malley was undiminished. He was first eased into the White House as a consultant, then elevated as a Special Assistant, finally becoming the chief U.S. negotiator with Iran. Obama finally had an official who would relentlessly advance both sides of his plan, the reconciliation and the distancing. Even after leaving office, Obama imposed Malley on Biden, who was duly appointed "Special Envoy to Iran" very early in his Administration on January 28, 2021, retaining that position until late April 2023 when his security clearance was revoked. That the news first came from Tehran is revealing in itself: Malley's Iranian associates in Washington included sympathizers with the Islamic Republic, hardly the usual stance of Iranian exiles.

The agreement that Malley oversaw in his earlier apparition as Obama's Iran official, the Joint Plan of Action, a.k.a. the Geneva interim agreement of November 24, 2013, would lead to the multilateral Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of July 14, 2015, which was ostensibly negotiated by Secretary of State John Kerry and Under Secretary Wendy Sherman in Geneva. Sherman photogenically posed for the photographs while Kerry for his part made it clear that he would not leave Geneva without an agreement, acting very much like the tourists most beloved by all bazaar merchants, the ones who choose the carpet they really, really, really want . . . before bargaining to set the price.

But the shortcomings of Obama's two official negotiators were of little real consequence, because the actual negotiations, backstopped by Malley in the White House, were conducted out of sight in Oman by then Deputy Secretary of State William J. Burns and Vice President Biden's national security advisor Jake Sullivan. It was Burns and Sullivan who actually secured the agreement by making seemingly procedural concessions

that were not disclosed until they were deliberately leaked by the Iranian cleric (Seyed) Abbas Araghchi, to humiliate the Americans. One was that the “heavy water” of the Arak reactor, which was critical for the plutonium path to the bomb, would not be stored in a remote location in Kazakhstan or Russia as had been publicly mooted, but in Oman, just across the water from Iran, and not guarded by neutrals but rather by Iran’s own Revolutionary Guards, ensuring that it could be returned to Arak in a matter of hours rather than days. They also agreed that no private U.S. economic claims against the Islamic Republic would be deducted from the repayments to Iran for the Shah’s last military purchase that was never delivered.

Because Burns and Sullivan were closely monitored by Obama’s likeminded pal Malley to ensure smooth progress towards the real aim of reconciliation, their Iranian counterparts must have formed the impression that they were emollient chaps, who would make concessions if pressed hard, instead of pushing back just as hard. Nor was the deterrence of Iran enhanced by the continuous messaging that sought to justify and exculpate the regime, most recently just before the February 2 air strike when an “American official” cautioned that analysts were still gathering and evaluating the information available to determine whether Iran had ordered the “more aggressive attack in Jordan that had wounded many Americans and killed three or a militia group decided to do so on its own.”

Because Iran’s leaders saw in front of them that the United States was led by people they knew very well and emphatically did not fear, and were advised until last August by a man who maintained amicable relations with their own Washington friends, they could not be easily deterred. Indeed, they went on a rampage with their four Shia militias and Hamas too. Hence for the Biden Administration in particular, the only way to deter Iran was to attack it directly as soon as its Revolutionary Guards first attacked Americans with their militias. A target in Iran that would harm no civilians, but to the contrary encourage the silenced majority—which detests the regime and loathes the Revolutionary Guards for diverting oil revenues to fund their adventures—would be the Guards’ own Thar-Allah Headquarters in Tehran. That might not be the right target for any number of reasons, but the principle involved is that if deterrence fails, it can only be restored—if at all—by deliberately disproportionate retaliation, not by expensively sending precision weapons halfway around the world to attack empty buildings.



EDWARD N. LUTTWAK works as a contractor for the U.S. Department of Defense and for some treaty allies, and has served as consultant to the White House chief of staff, the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. Army, Air Force, and Navy. Luttwak also cofounded and heads a conservation cattle ranch in the Amazon. His books, including *The Rise of China vs. the Logic of Strategy*, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, and *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*, have been published in multiple English-language editions, and also in 25 other languages, including Arabic, Bahasa, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, Mongolian, Korean, and Russian. He has also published other books in Italian and in Japanese only, and has a number of honorary as well as academic degrees.

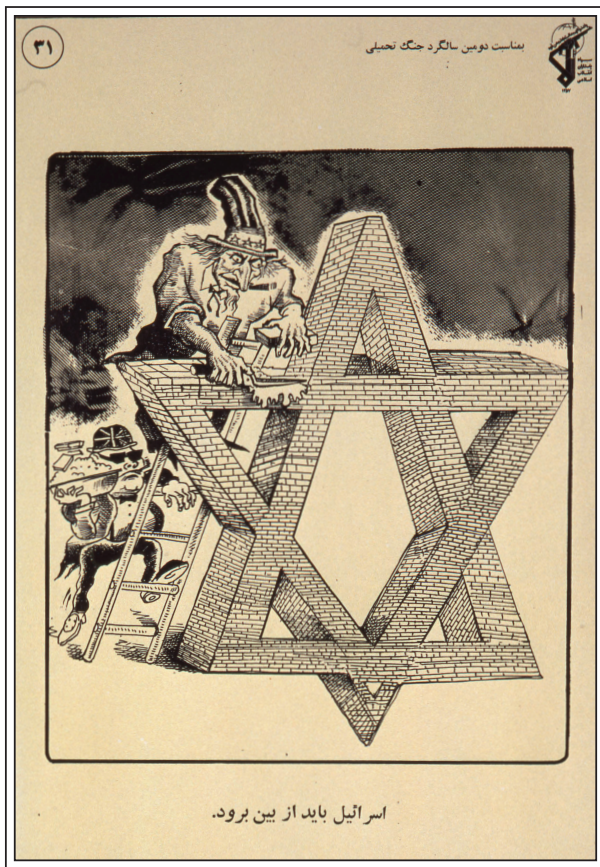


Image credit: Poster Collection, IR 139, Hoover Institution Archives.

How to Stop Iran

By Jerry Hendrix

Deterrence theory rests upon the idea that the limited use of force, or a threat of the use of force, can convince an opponent not to take an action or, alternatively, compel them to take an action desired by the initiating power. However, this theory rests upon an assumption that both parties involved have a reasonable understanding of the “language” of the other power, and that both parties are sufficiently coherent in their communication of the threat and the desired equilibrium point. There is reason to suspect that such a common understanding in terms of both language and the desired outcome does not exist between the United States and Iranian Islamic Republic.

The first breakdown in this communications loop is found in the assertions of the American side of the conversation. The leaders of the Biden administration all share a common philosophical belief in a ubiquitous cultural understanding of the importance of racial survival (the human race, not the ethnic definition) as well as an adherence to a progressive vision of societal

evolution. These beliefs guide the Biden team towards a postulation that Iran and its proxies will prioritize their personal survival and peaceful advancement above other priorities so long as political grievances for past actions are sincerely addressed. These conjectures also reflect an all-too-common attribute of the enlightened West, mirroring, wherein the Biden team looks at Iran and sees themselves, their own beliefs and aspirations, and their foreign policy goals, looking back at them. Regarding Iran, they could not be more incorrect.

Iran understands how the United States and the broader West views them. They recognize the willful ignorance of Iran’s broader political, cultural, and religious goals, and they seek to use that misperception to their own ends. Iran’s ayatollahs continue to promote a revolutionary vision of Shi’a Islam that is combined with a belief in the supremacy of the Persian culture. Iran’s religious leadership believe that their sect of Islam is fated to dominate the Middle East and that, culturally, Persia is fated to govern the world once again as a hegemonic great power. As members of the “Twelver” sub-sect of Shi’a Islam, they also believe that if they are unable to achieve their goal, a cleansing religious end of the world scenario is acceptable. This is perhaps too simplistic a statement, and it certainly doesn’t reflect the desire of every citizen of Iran, but it does capture the undergirding zeitgeist of Iran’s ruling theocracy.

The unwillingness of the United States to hold Iran directly responsible for the actions of its proxies—Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis—has ceded the strategic initiative to Iran despite its relatively weak position militarily, economically, and diplomatically, while reducing the regional political stature of the West in the process. Having gained the initiative, Iran has continued to escalate its attacks against the West both horizontally across the region and vertically in terms of the severity and number of attacks.

Thus far the Biden administration, still eager to engage Iran diplomatically and to establish the new regional balance of power first proposed by the Obama administration, has insisted on either not responding to the attacks by Iran’s proxies—initially restricting American ships to shooting down missiles targeted at them, but not attacking the launchers that fired them—or responding “proportionally” to those attacks by

hitting Houthi positions, but never their Iranian backers. The net result is that the Biden administration's response to attacks upon the interests of the United States and its allies has been so muted as to dissipate any compelling effect upon the Iranians.

If the United States is to reestablish a deterrent role in the Middle East, it must not fear to climb the escalation ladder by hitting Iranian targets. Candidate objectives should include Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps installations, Iranian naval assets, critical energy infrastructure, and even nuclear weapons development facilities with strike packages that are more destructive than any launched by Iran's proxies. Iran's religious leaders must feel the ground shake under their own feet both politically and militarily. If this threat is not made manifest in their minds, they will continue to feel free to attack American and other Western interests wherever and whenever they wish. Until the words we say match the words they hear, there can be no diplomatic *modus vivendi* between our two countries. Once they feel fear of American strength again, then respect will also return, and stability. Until then, if the United States continues to appease the ayatollahs, there will be no peace.

POLL: How best does the global community stop Iranian-inspired terrorist attacks?

- It is a UN matter and can be resolved by multiparty talks and the airing of grievances on all sides.
- Proportionate responses by the global community to terrorist attacks by Iranian surrogates will eventually end them.
- Iran must be sanctioned again, and its oil sales embargoed.
- NATO and its allies must stop Iran's support for terrorism by disrupting Iranian supply routes to its terrorist appendages.
- The only solution is for the U.S. to take out Iran's military bases and nuclear sites by preemptive air attacks.



JERRY HENDRIX, a senior fellow at the Sagamore Institute, is a retired U.S. Navy captain with 26 years of active service. During his career Hendrix served in a variety of maritime patrol aviation squadrons as well as on supercarriers and light amphibious assault ships. His shore duty assignments were as a strategist on the staffs of the chief of naval operations, the secretary of the navy, and the undersecretary of defense for policy, and within the Office of Net Assessment. After his retirement from the navy following a standout tour as the director of the Navy History and Heritage Command, he worked as a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and as a vice president at a Washington, DC, defense consultancy. Dr. Hendrix holds a bachelor's degree from Purdue University in political science, a master's in national security affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School, a master's in history from Harvard University, and a PhD in war studies from Kings College, London. He is the author of *Theodore Roosevelt's Naval Diplomacy* (2009) and *To Provide and Maintain a Navy* (2020).



Image credit: Poster Collection, IR 67, Hoover Institution Archives.

Can Iran and Its Surrogates Be Contained?

By Bing West

Iran's theocrats retain power by projecting America as the devil [Satan usually] determined to kill all Muslims. The Islamist regime cannot survive without branding America as the implacable enemy. The Biden administration—with a top staff carried over from the Obama administration—believes that Iran can be assuaged by diplomacy, goodwill, moderate sanctions, and a restrained response to attacks upon U.S. forces and other targets in the region.

Since October, Iran's proxies in Iraq and Syria have launched successive missile and drone strikes at our few small bases in those two countries. After 160 tries, three American soldiers were killed. U.S. retaliation was fairly strong, including a drone strike that killed a terrorist leader in Baghdad. However, the sharply

added costs for defense at those bases does raise the prospect that some bases may be closed, since they can now devote less time to the anti-ISIS mission that justifies their presence.

Iran has also provided the Houthis, a 9th-century tribe, with missiles and drones to attack commercial ships in the Red Sea. From January through mid-February, the Houthis have launched more than seventy attempted strikes. This piracy has forced the diversion of \$200 billion of trade, sharply increasing costs, and adding to supply chain pressures.

As commander-in-chief, President Biden could strike back fiercely. The British ended the 18th century Golden Age of Piracy by hangings, a lot of them. In one afternoon, our navy could destroy all Houthi radars, electronics, and especially, its command centers and leadership.

Instead, our navy has been restricted to tit-for-tat retaliatory strikes. These restrictions are determined by a few officials in the West Wing, chaired by Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan. He has said, "We have to guard against and be vigilant against the possibility that, in fact, rather than heading towards de-escalation, we are in a path of escalation that we have to manage." That recursive mélange of words is devoid of resolve.

More disturbing is its repetition by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General C. Q. Brown. "We don't want," he said, "to go down a path of greater escalation that drives to a much broader conflict, within the region." That fear of an Iranian response has conceded the offensive to Iran and its surrogates.

Biden has also chosen not to enforce oil export sanctions upon Iran, permitting annual sales in excess of \$40 billion, or 70% of Iran's revenues. Iran's present-day ghost fleet of 383 tankers has been expanded from 70 tankers in 2020. As a policy, the administration has chosen to allow the oil sanctions to be mocked. It's no secret about where these vessels are. Their transits could quickly be foiled, curtailing Iran's oil exports in accord with existing sanctions. What we have here is a failure of resolve by our policymakers, not a failure in our intelligence and military capabilities.

Iran has seized the strategic geopolitical momentum. As the destruction in Gaza continues, with images posted daily on the global internet, anger in the Middle East and elsewhere about U.S. support for Israel grows. Iran capitalizes on this by encouraging its surrogates to attack U.S. bases. Iran is clear on its goal: drive American forces out of the Middle East by small, violent attacks and by undermining our standing with Arab nations.

The odds are high that Iran will deploy nuclear weapons. The time has passed when Israel can successfully bomb Iran's nuclear sites. Iran is biding the time when it will suggest, without confirming, that it has developed nuclear weapons. That portentous ambiguity will present Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey with Hobson's choice: acquire their own nuclear weapons—despite U.S. opposition—or accept that the balance of power in the Middle East has tilted sharply in Iran's favor.

A nuclear-armed Iran still could be contained, as is North Korea. To do so, however, requires determination across both our political parties, and a firm stance by not one, but a succession of American presidents. It also requires agreement and conforming behavior by the European Union and faith by Saudi Arabia and a dozen other Middle East nations.

However, believing that such unified determination will materialize requires a leap of faith. The strikes against our bases are, to borrow from William Blake, "To see a World in a Grain of Sand." In themselves, the attacks are small. But they illustrate our failure to stand up to Iran's aggression. That augurs ill for the future. It is discomfiting in 2024 that Iran with impunity directs strikes against our bases. It will be a severe defeat for our global credibility and for regional stability when Iran leaks that it has nuclear weapons. We can only hope for the caprice of the fates to smite Iran, since we won't do so. What an epitaph.



BING WEST is a military historian who has written a dozen best-selling books about the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. His most recent books are *The Last Platoon: A Novel of the Afghanistan War*, and with co-author General Jim Mattis, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead*. A graduate of Georgetown and Princeton Universities, where he was a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, he served in the Marine infantry in Vietnam and later as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs. Among other awards, he is the recipient of the Defense Distinguished Public Service Medal, the Marine Corps Heritage Award, Tunisia's Medaille de Liberté, the Colby Military History Award, the Goodpaster Prize for Military Scholarship, the Marine Corps Foundation Award for Leadership, the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Media Medal, and the Free Press Award.

Related Commentary

- Bruce Thornton, "U.S. Power of Deterrence is Disappearing," Front Page Mag, December 27, 2023, <https://www.frontpagemag.com/u-s-power-of-deterrence-is-disappearing/>.

Discussion Questions

1. How can Iran and its terrorist surrogates such as the Houthis and Hezbollah be successfully contained, deterred, or defanged?
2. Would a preemptive strike on Iran's military bases or nuclear sites be best conducted by Israel alone, or America alone, or by a joint American Israeli operation?
3. Do military strikes on Iran's assets by Western powers solidify or weaken Iranian support for the current theocratic government?
4. Which is the wiser course: To hit first Hezbollah and the Houthi Iranian satellites, or to focus on and strike Iran itself, which supplies both?
5. What are the chances of a popular Iranian uprising against the government, in the manner of the 2009 failed Green Movement?

IN THE NEXT ISSUE
Drones



Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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