

Iran's militias are getting more aggressive – and the US position more difficult

Michael Day

February 5, 2024

A theory doing the rounds says the Iraqi militia responsible for the attack that killed three US troops in Jordan last weekend hadn't expected their attack to prove so devastating.

Ketaib Hezbollah (KH), the Iran-backed group, may have counted on US air defences to take out the crude drone assault. Instead, it appears that US military error allowed it to hit the base.

Some analysts suggest the manner in which KH fighters fled their bases after the attack indicated a degree of surprise – and fear – as a result of their actions. Within 72 hours of Joe Biden vowing serious retribution, KH announced it was ceasing all attacks on US troops in Iraq and Syria.

But the US president, under intense pressure at home to be seen responding to the Iran-sponsored aggression, ordered dozens of air strikes against targets in Syria and Iraq on Friday, reportedly killing 16, in what he said would be the first phase in American retaliation for the drone attack.

Many analysts doubt such US retaliation will prevent the attacks on its bases – in the short or long-term.

Members of the Iranian air force at a meeting in Tehran on Monday (Photo: khamenei.ir / AFP via Getty)

“It [the US air strike on Friday] looks like a very significant action by the Biden administration, but on the other hand I don't think it's going to be anywhere near sufficient to deter these groups,” Charles Lister, director of the Middle East Institute's Syria programme, told the Washington Post. “These militias have been engaged in this campaign for more than 20 years, they are in a long-term struggle... an attritional campaign against the US.”

Already the militias are threatening fresh reprisals of their own.

The head of Iraq's pro-Iran Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF, or Hashd al-Shaabi) called on Sunday for Iraq to be “cleansed” of US-led global coalition forces. There are around 2,500 personnel in Iraq, spread around facilities like Union III and Ain al-Asad air base.

Ironically, late last month, just ahead of the deadly attack on the Jordan base, Washington and Baghdad had agreed to start talks to set a timetable for a phased withdrawal of US troops, whose presence the Iraqi government has said is provoking near-daily attacks by Iran-backed armed groups.

For now, the US appears stuck in the tit-for-tat situation with Iran's Islamist proxies in Iraq, Syria, and also Yemen, from where Houthi rebels continue to threaten shipping and world trade in the Red Sea.

The surge of Middle East violence makes Biden vulnerable to the charge that under his watch, the US continues to spend money and risk its troops' lives in another "forever war", of the sort he has vowed to extract his country from.

It was, after all, Biden who declared, ahead of America's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021: "It is time to end the forever war."

Some Republicans are already describing US support of Ukraine against Russia as a new "forever war" for the US.

In launching strikes on dozens of targets belonging to Iran-backed militant groups, Biden appears, to many, to be continuing American military intervention in the region that has not really stopped since its disastrous invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Biden and his Middle East team think some physical US presence is needed to deter what's left of Isis from regrouping, to offer a degree of resistance to Iran's plans for regional dominance – and probably to prevent Russia increasing its influence.

The US government had thought things were more or less under control in the Middle East.

"The Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades," Biden's National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan tweeted last September.

Only four months later, however, in January, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken saw fit to declare: "We have not seen a situation as dangerous as the one we are facing now across the region since at least 1973."

Israel's destruction of Gaza, prompted by the Hamas killings of 7 October, has lit the fuse in the Middle East. And Iran is very happy to exploit the disaster, sponsoring attacks at arms-length via its proxies.

US troops in Syria and Iraq are dotted across remote areas to disrupt Iranian influence and supply lines. But militants' ability to target the US bases with hundreds of rockets, and the success of Iran's proxies in causing mayhem elsewhere – in Gaza/Israel and the Red Sea – suggest their ability to constrain Iran is doubtful.

Biden could hardly allow the Houthis to continue attacking international shipping with impunity. Hence the US and UK air strikes on their bases. These have not yet stopped Houthi attacks, however.

And the US president must also be aware that Arab populations across the region are furious with the US for supporting Israel's brutal assault on Gaza, which is estimated to have killed over one per cent of the population there. Whether or not Iran is cynically exploiting the horror, the actions of Israel are making Iran's militias more aggressive – and America's position more difficult.

It looks like Biden is being played by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and losing miserably in the court of Arab public opinion.

“Biden and his administration know very well that as long as they back that war, US forces deployed in remote areas might as well have targets on their backs,” according to Justin Logan, director of defence and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute. “Why not bring them home?”

There may be good reasons to maintain a troop presence in Iraq and Syria – to help fight Isis and advise local forces, such as the Kurds in northern Syria. Donald Trump was criticised for largely abandoning the Kurds after they spilt much blood fighting Isis.

It’s been noted that, in another irony, the US soldiers killed in the attack in Jordan were in the region supporting the fight against Isis, which carried out the big attack on Iranian soil on 3 January.

Others say that maintaining small troop presences in such volatile places is not the same as fighting a “forever war”. But that argument only works for domestic consumption if American personnel don’t get killed.

Senator Chris Coons, a close Biden ally, told the New Republic: “I’m confident that he is carefully balancing how to deter Iran, how to strike back in a way that shows a firmness and determination to protect American troops, with an eye towards avoiding broadening the conflict.”

But the case will have to be made forcefully by Biden during a pivotal US election year. His isolationist opponent Trump will argue that the Democrat president is continuing to burn through US money and risk the lives of American troops with little to show for it.