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# Flash Executive Summary Report

The conflicts in the Middle East are many – and they are complex. This Flash ExSum explains the broad dynamics in view of recent U.S. military actions related to the Israel-Hamas War.

One of the outcomes of Israel's offensive against Hamas in Gaza following the terrorist organization's atrocities on 7 October 2023, has been the mobilization of Iranian state-sponsored proxies attacking Israel, the United States, and other nations supporting Israel's operations in Gaza. From the outset of Israel's response to the attacks up to the present, Iranian state-sponsored terrorist organizations including Lebanese Hezbollah, the Houthis in Yemen, and multiple Iranian-sponsored proxy forces known as the Popular Mobilization Forces (or PMFs), have been conducting attacks against Israel and the United States.

For decades, the U.S. has maintained a major presence in the Middle East to deter Arab and Iranian aggression against our strongest ally in the region, Israel. Today, Iran and its proxies pose the greatest threats not only to Israel but to stability throughout the region. The U.S. has established strong diplomatic, economic and security relationships with all the governments in the region except for Iran, Syria, and Yemen. The U.S. and its relationship with Israel and predominantly Sunni Arab states in the region, is seen as a direct threat to Iran's strategic objective of being the regional hegemon.

After the U.S. withdrew its forces from Iraq in 2011, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), grew rapidly in Syria and successfully occupied large areas of Iraq and Syria, with the goal of establishing a caliphate or Islamic State. This new terrorist organization born out of Al Qaida in Iraq, committed unprecedented atrocities against civilians and security forces it captured. Many states came to the aid of the Syrian Democratic Forces and the government of Iraq to destroy ISIS when the United States returned to Iraq, forming a coalition. From 2014 - 2018, Operation Inherent Resolve, led by the United States, successfully defeated ISIS and much of the territory in Iraq and Syria was reclaimed along with the estimated deaths of 80,000 ISIS fighters. The coalition ended in 2021 with its mission largely complete.

In addition to the 30,000 U.S. forces in the region supporting our partners, hundreds remained in Iraq to train and advise Iraqi security forces at the request of the Iraqi government following the campaign against ISIS. Some forces also remained in Syria to work with the Syrian Kurds and prevent ISIS and other nefarious actors from regenerating in the ungoverned spaces of northern and eastern Syria.

Iran is the central enabler of terrorism in the Middle East, controlling, equipping, training, and operationally advising its proxy forces scattered across the Middle East. Some are more tightly aligned to Iranian control than others. Dozens of Shia PMF operate throughout Iraq, usurping the legitimate responsibilities of the Iraqi Security Forces. These PMFs have carried out attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces working with Iraq's security forces dating back to the early years of Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003-2011). To the extent that Iran is ordering these attacks is unknown but given the certain integration of these groups by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, or IRGC, Iran certainly could exert control.

The U.S. and Iran are not seeking to start a war against each other. The U.S. will not relinquish its strategic partnership with Israel and Arab States in the region that seek peace and stability. Iran cannot win a war with the U.S. and Israel, so it uses its proxy forces to undermine Israel's security, concurrent with attacking U.S. bases, and by proximity, U.S. forces.



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Use of organizations like Katab Hezbollah (or KH) that attacked U.S. forces in Jordan can be a double-edged sword. When they are nascent, weak, and listen to their Iranian overseer, they are useful to Iran at competing with the more powerful U.S. and Israel below the level of armed conflict. However, when these organizations grow too powerful and stop listening to their overlord (Iran), they risk drawing the overlord into a war it cannot win with the U.S. and Israel. This is the dangerous quandary Iran finds itself in right now.

The United States historically has refrained from attacking Iran directly when responding to proxy attacks against its bases and personnel. The killing of former IRGC commander Qassem Suleimani in January 2020 was the most direct and provocative attack against Iran in recent history. This lethal strike took place in Iraq, not in Iran. The U.S. approach to influencing Iran behavior has been through diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions.

In support to Israel following the 7 Oct attacks on Israeli civilians, the U.S. increased its presence and posture in the region, by sending an additional Carrier Battle Group to the Mediterranean, deploying an additional fighter squadron to the region, and in providing intelligence and planning support, all designed to deter those that may try to expand the conflict, along with \$14B to bolster Israel's military forces. While these measures have deterred a widening conflict against Israel, the attacks against the U.S. and other countries who are supporting Israel militarily and diplomatically are increasingly at risk.

The Houthis in Yemen are holding regional maritime commerce at risk. So much so that almost all the commercial maritime commerce that transits the Red Sea is diverting to avoid Houthi drone and missile attacks. Attacks against merchant and military vessels have surpassed 30 since November 2023. The Houthis claim that their attacks are in support of Hamas and the attacks are against countries or shipping that is traveling to Israel. Most of the drone and missile attacks are against nations not allied or involved with Israel.

In response to these attacks, the U.S. formed a maritime coalition named Operation Prosperity Guardian to protect commercial shipping and freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. Additionally, the United States and United Kingdom, supported by other coalition members, continue to conduct strikes against Houthi military capabilities used to target shipping. Thus far, the coalition strikes are not deterring the Houthi terrorist activities. The Houthis, like KH, have a mind of their own and do not always act in Iran's national interest. Also, like KH, the Houthis risk sparking a regional conflict that Iran cannot win.

Following KH's attack against U.S. base "Tower 22" in northeast Jordan last week that killed three (3) U.S. soldiers, the United States was compelled to respond. The U.S. air strikes carried out in Syria and Iraq last Friday are meant to be the beginning of a protracted campaign to reestablish deterrence against the Iranian proxies operating against U.S. forces in Syria, Iraq, and now Jordan. Unfortunately, it has taken 165 separate attacks against U.S. forces since 7 October for the U.S. to respond forcibly. The 2 Feb U.S. strikes in Syria and Iraq employed 125 bombs against 85 targets including terrorist weapons storage, command and control, and potentially IRGC and PMF leadership. It is too early to know if these strikes and the additional strikes that will follow, will have the desired effect. Traditionally, terrorists do not consider proportional response a deterrent. U.S. presence and multiple conflicts in the region in the past four decades have certainly taught the U.S. this lesson.

It appears that the U.S. military strikes are exclusively focused on Iranian proxies and not against the key enabler, Iran. The Administration has stated that additional actions will be taken, both militarily as well as diplomatically and economically. We can expect the latter two elements of national power to focus on Iran proper, though Iran is already heavily isolated and sanctioned.

Employing the U.S. military instrument of national power directly against Iran, an option that appears not to be in current U.S. planning, would have a greater chance of restoring deterrence than simply tit for tat strikes against Iran's proxy forces. Iran cannot become embroiled in a war that it cannot win, hence, direct military action against Iran offers the best prospect to reestablish deterrence, but this road has not yet been taken.

## Forecast:

- Bottom line, Iran is insufficiently deterred.
- U.S. retaliatory strikes will continue, with a focus on degrading PMF capabilities in Syria and Iraq. Future strikes will also probably include IRGC advisors operating with the PMFs if they are actionable.
- U.S. retaliatory strikes on Iranian proxies may reduce attacks on U.S. forces in the region but will not stop them, as the U.S. Government does not have a clear end state – therefore the continuous back and forth kinetic and non-kinetic use of force will likely continue.
- Additional economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure will not deter Iran from continuing to arm, train, and to possibly (though not known for sure), encourage proxy attacks on U.S. personnel.
- If a temporary cease-fire is successfully brokered between Israel and Hamas to enable the release of more hostages, we will see a pause in attacks by most if not all Iranian proxies in the region for the period of the cease-fire.
- In the near-term, the U.S. and other major powers have a better chance of changing Houthi behavior through back-channel diplomacy with Iran to influence the Houthi leadership than stopping the attacks through incremental retaliatory military strikes.
- The actions by Iranian proxies in the region, even prior to 7 October, have highlighted the lack of a comprehensive U.S. strategy for Iran.

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