

Deterrence Is Failing in the Middle East

By

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The current skirmish with Iran and its proxies is testing American power and risks exploding into a major war if deterrence of Iran is not restored. Americans must recognize that Iran remains undeterred and unafraid of American military and economic power. Iran is also confirming the benefits of opportunistic aggression in the eyes of America's adversaries.

Efforts to conventionally deter Iran failed with Iran-inspired fighting [spreading from Gaza to the Red Sea, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria](#). Recently, three American soldiers [were killed](#) and 34 wounded in a drone attack by Iran-backed militants in northeastern Jordan, according to US Central Command. The Pentagon has reported more than [160 attacks](#) by Iranian-linked militia groups on American bases and forces in the Middle East since Israel was attacked on October 7, 2023. These actions place immense [pressure upon President Joe Biden to strike](#) the sovereign territory of Iran, which Iranian leaders may view as an act of war.

Moreover, recent political decisions render the threatened use of sanctions against Iran's nuclear program impotent. In February 2021, the Biden administration [rescinded President Trump's](#) United Nations (UN) sanctions restoration. This was followed by President Biden's decision to release [\\$6 billion](#) "in exchange for the release of five Americans detained in Iran" and another [\\$10 billion](#) in a sanctions waiver that grants Iran access to money from Iraq in exchange for electricity purchases.

Recently, Maj Gen Hossein Salami, the head of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards, [said](#) the country is not seeking war with America, but is not afraid of it either. Iran's aggressive behavior certainly lends credence to the statement. Iran is emboldened by its allies and empowered by its proxies. This, of course, is backstopped by an eerie sense of confidence that Iran may soon become a nuclear power. In May of 2022, the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced that "[Iran has accumulated enough enriched uranium to build a nuclear bomb](#)," with a uranium stockpile enriched to 60 percent that had grown four times in just 90 days.

David Albright, a former UN weapons inspector and founder of the US Institute for Science and International Security, [said](#) that if Iran continues producing enriched uranium at the same rate, the regime will have enough weapons grade material to make 12 nuclear bombs within five months. Meanwhile, Iran [successfully launched three satellites](#) into space using a two-stage, liquid-

fueled rocket. This achievement undoubtedly accelerates Iran's ability to perfect and field a future intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), likely the regime's preferred nuclear weapon delivery system.

The United States is now experiencing coordinated aggression. The Biden administration's [2022 Nuclear Posture Review](#) warns, "In a potential conflict with a competitor, the United States would need to be able to deter opportunistic aggression by another competitor. We will rely in part on nuclear weapons to help mitigate this risk, recognizing that a near-simultaneous conflict with two nuclear-armed states would constitute an extreme circumstance."

Furthermore, the Department of State's International Security Advisory Board recently warned in their [Report on Deterrence in a World of Nuclear Multipolarity](#) that the United States must be concerned that adversary states could engage in opportunistic acts if or when the United States is engaged in other conflicts.

The bipartisan [America's Strategic Posture: The Final Report of the Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States](#) also advised that the possibility of opportunistic or simultaneous multi-state aggression should no longer be construed as improbable. According to the report, "The new partnership between Russian and Chinese leaders poses qualitatively new threats of potential opportunistic aggression and/or the risk of future cooperative two-theater aggression." Opportunistic aggression can translate to other hostile states like Iran and North Korea in league with Russia and China if they perceive American limitations in capability, capacity, or the will to fight with enough ferocity as to induce the fear to attack in the first place.

It appears that Iran is taking advantage of an already beleaguered United States that continues to support Israel in its war with Iranian-backed Hamas; exports arms, munitions, and intelligence to Ukraine; deters a hostile North Korea; and must endeavor to discourage Iran's top oil importer (China) from invading Taiwan. All of these "fronts" are collectively testing American diplomacy, burdening the American taxpayer, challenging the American defense industrial base, negatively impacting military readiness, and now producing [American casualties](#).

[Killing Americans](#) is a clear escalation and yet another indication that Iran remains undeterred by the current threat of American power. These acts are timed to take advantage of an overburdened America and are designed to frustrate American efforts within the region and ultimately convince the United States to abandon its Middle East interests and allies. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan's untimely proclamation on September 29, 2023, that "[\[t\]he Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades](#)" was a complete misreading of the region.

Successful deterrence requires the consistent application of power. Deterrence messaging must not be muddled or muted. It must be clear, powerful, and credible. How is this done?

First, the Biden administration must immediately end sanctions relief of Iran. The United States can never fund its adversaries.

Second, the United States must take a systematic approach to eliminate the weapons, command and control, and supplies of Iranian proxies. They must not be allowed to threaten American and allied forces across the region.

Third, the United States must credibly communicate through strength by moving nuclear assets closer to the region. The United States seems content to use ballistic missile nuclear submarines (SSBN) [to deter North Korea](#). An SSBN in the Arabian Sea would communicate a similar deterrence message.

Fourth, America must heed the warnings of opportunistic multi-state aggression and prepare a robust capability to address this very real and demonstrated threat. To do otherwise risks abandoning regional allies in conflict.

Fifth, America must not attack Iranian targets within sovereign Iranian territory unless President Biden and Congress are ready to declare war. What may be a regional conflict for the United States is a fight for survival for the Mullahs in Tehran.

Iran and its proxies are not deterred from attacking American forces, whether motivated by opportunistic aggression or existential circumstances. It is time to create a real sense of fear within the Iranian leadership. They must dread economic isolation, the destruction of proxies, and potential attack on what Iran holds most valuable—themselves and their nuclear facilities.

However, unless prepared to declare war, the United States must limit its retaliation to targets outside sovereign Iran. To attack Iranian soil would be a clear indication that deterrence has failed and could potentially lead to an all-out war. Restoring deterrence after such an event would come at a much higher cost.

Deterrence aims to make the adversary afraid to attack by creating a preferable condition of war avoidance. The goal is to convince the adversary that maintaining a peaceful status quo is the best option. Starting a war to prevent another war is a bad strategy, and it does not qualify as deterrence.

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