Biden Pressure on Israel Raises Chances of Full-Scale War

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 15.02.2024

While most of the world's attention regarding Israel's current war is focused on Gaza, Israel is simultaneously fighting an entirely separate front against Hezbollah in Lebanon. It can be described as a war of attrition, as there has yet to be a ground invasion from either side, but in all other respects it is a war, and it is more severe than any of the skirmishes with Hezbollah since 2006. Immediately after Hamas' attack and through to today, Hezbollah began attacking Israel daily with missiles, RPG's, attack drones, and has amassed ground forces along the border, who are prepared to invade Israeli towns and enact a slaughter which would make October 7th look mild. This has forced Israel to evacuate the entire civilian population within a few miles of the border with Lebanon, creating a crisis in which approximately 80,000 residents of Israel's north have become internally displaced and remain so. Israel has struck back at Hezbollah targets, seeking to weaken the terror organization's military capabilities and command structure, but has not sought to undertake a large-scale maneuver while it is still focused on the Gazan theatre. But it must be understood, that this is an ongoing warfront and far from stable.

Recent reporting has suggested the Biden administration is heavily invested in negotiating a deal to end the battle between Israel and Hezbollah. In doing so, he is attempting to convince Israel to accept a deal that will slightly lower the immediate threat level, but essentially keep in place the continued strategic threat which Hezbollah poses to the entire country and most acutely to the northern region. The steps under discussion include having Hezbollah forces pull back 8-10 kilometers but they fall short of implementation of UNSC 1701, which requires Lebanon to disarm Hezbollah and outlaws its military presence south of the Litani river, close to 30 km from the border with Israel. Even worse, some reports have indicated that Israel is being asked to negotiate on surrendering control of territories along the "Blue-Line," the border demarcated by the UN in 2000, and reiterated by UNCS 1701. Among the points claimed by Lebanon is Mount Dov, an area of strategic topographic importance, which the UN has clearly declared as not belonging to Lebanon and should not be up for discussion.

Biden is motivated by a desire to prevent further escalation of the war between Israel and the Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, out of concern that this could eventually drag the US into a broader war against Iran. He also fears that a larger war with Hezbollah would undermine any chances for reaching a diplomatic understanding with Iran, which he hopes would stabilize the region and prevent Tehran's nuclear progress.

However, his current strategy of declaring publicly his commitment not to escalate vis-à-vis Iran, while pressuring Israel to stand down will likely have the precise opposite effect of what he is trying to achieve. In order to prevent further escalation, he must instead send the message that he is willing to escalate and that he will back Israel in its demands to fully enforce UNSC 1701.

Biden may be worried about a 'full-scale' war with Iran, but in reality, it is Khamenei who should be most concerned over this prospect. Given the vast disparity in military strength between the two countries, Iran understands that an all-out war with the US could lead to a collapse of the regime. Tehran is only willing to push the boundaries of aggression when it assesses that the US will not react with greater force, something Biden has all but given a written guarantee.

Iran's regional strategy turns upon the idea that it can attack its enemies through its Arab proxies while avoiding any direct retaliation against Iran itself. But historically speaking, any time the regime felt threatened directly, it has consistently turned to caution and sought to avoid escalation. A number of examples illustrate this pattern of behavior.

Most recently, after the assassination of Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani by the US in January 2020, Iran responded by launching 16 missiles at 2 US bases in Iraq, resulting in some damage but no American casualties. Supreme Leader, Khamenei, defined the purpose of the attack as "a blow to the dignity of the U.S. as a superpower," meaning it was a symbolic retaliation.

Not long before this, when the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal, adopted a policy of maximum pressure and began to return sanctions in 2018, Iran did nothing for a full year. When it attacked, ostensibly in response to Trump's policies, it was in the form of a carefully calibrated strike on oil tankers, a Saudi oil pipeline, cautious progress in the nuclear realm, and an attack on Saudi oil refineries, which was certainly egregious, but ultimately designed to

prove a point, not to start a war.

The last time Israel fought Iranian proxy, Hezbollah, in 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon and brought vast destruction to local infrastructure and Hezbollah installations, but Iran merely supported Hezbollah logistically and with strategic advice. It called for a ceasefire and conveyed messages to Hezbollah not to escalate beyond necessity.

In 2003, against the backdrop of the American invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, and President Bush's threats to continue the march on to Tehran, Iran froze its illegal enrichment of uranium and halted research into the military dimensions of its nuclear program.

This pattern held even under the founder of revolutionary Iran, Khomeini, when in 1988, in response to an Iranian attack on an American destroyer in the Persian Gulf, the US launched a punitive operation, sinking three Iranian ships and destroying two oil drilling rigs. The US then offered a cease-fire, which Iran swiftly accepted.

Since the beginning of the war, Iran has been testing US resolve, and because Biden has made it clear that his first priority is to limit the war at all costs, Iran's actions have become increasingly daring. Even as Washington has been forced to react, for example to protect maritime traffic against the Houthi threat in the Red Sea, and to retaliate against Iran's killing of three Americans, it has done this while declaring its intention to prevent a larger war, and limiting its response to targeting Iran's Arab proxies only. This only serves to clarify to Iran that it continues to have a free hand to attack the US, and to clarify to Hezbollah that if it threatens escalation, the US will likely pressure Israel to back down.

But it is precisely this dynamic that may drag Washington further into the conflict. If it continues, it will also clarify for Iran that it will not pay a price for progress on the nuclear front, and would therefore be more likely to attempt a break out in the next year, while it can still be certain that the Biden administration will be in power.

Instead, the US must show resolve and project its willingness to exact a higher price than Iran is expecting for its aggressions. Washington must also make clear that it will allow Israel to act as it sees fit to protect itself against Hezbollah's aggression, even if this means using force. Any pressure on Israel to make

territorial concessions, especially on land for which Lebanon has no legal basis to demand, would only strengthen Hezbollah's resolve. A pullback of 8-10 km from the border would be a minor and reversable concession from Hezbollah. If it were to agree to do this, it would behave just has it did in the past, following the 2006 war. Hezbollah will give the appearance of a pullback, while in practice it would simply go undercover, operate wearing civilian clothes, dig more bunkers under the cover of civilians and return fully to its positions at the first opportunity. It would do nothing to fundamentally change the severe threat that is posed to Israel's north, and would remain an intolerable security situation for Israel's civilian population, who rightly refuse to live as sitting ducks for the next slaughter. The only reasonable end-state can be a full implementation of UNSC 1701, and it is an embarrassment to Washington that even its opening position is not to demand the enforcement of the Security Council decision for which it played a crucial role in formulating 18 years ago.

This applies no less to the nuclear realm. The only reason Iran has to date not yet developed a nuclear weapon has been the credible threats of force that it has faced. In the 2000s, it felt this threat from the United States following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Throughout the 2010s it felt this threat mainly from Israel. Now is the time to strengthen this deterrence by clearly indicating that the US will not prevent Israel from acting directly against Iran if necessary. If Washington truly wants to engender the stability that will allow it to focus less on the region, it must stop restraining its allies and start supporting them decisively in their battles against Iran and its proxies.

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