Biden Misinterprets Iran's Proxy Warfare

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 13.02.2024

The Biden Administration's assertion that Iran lacks full control over its proxies, in the context of Kataib Hezbollah's involvement in the fatal drone attack in Jordan that killed three Americans soldiers, is one aspect of an effort to absolve Iran of its responsibility for the attack. Through the media, the US Administration even conveyed to the Iranian Regime its lack of intention to retaliate against Iran. On January 31, the US did indeed kill the senior operative who was responsible for the attack, but in all the other counterattacks carried out by the US in Syria and Iraq, not a single Iranian or IRGC asset was killed. It appears that the Administration is adhering to its strategy of restoring trust with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, in order to allow for a return to the JCPOA.The US Administration's claim that Iran does not have full control over its proxies and, consequently, that there is no need to retaliate, is a misunderstanding of the Khamenei doctrine of proxy warfare. Led by Iran, the Resistance Axis, comprised of Shiite and Sunni militias and organizations that act within a framework of overlapping interests, opposes the US, Israel, and the governments of the Sunni Arab states.

Even so, there is an incomplete alignment of interests between Iran and its network of affiliates. Cases where this lack of alignment was displayed include Hamas' support for Syrian rebels in the first years of the Syrian Civil War, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad refusal to condemn Saudi Arabia after it started a war against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015.

Another prominent example occurred in 2021, when Gholam-Reza Rashid, a key figure in Iran's security establishment, declared that Houthis, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and the Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria all work in the service of Iran, significantly enhancing its deterrent capabilities. This statement drew widespread public criticism from Hamas and Islamic Jihad, who emphasized that they were acting in the Palestinian national interest and were not "in Iran's pocket." Arab media circles also leveled sharp criticism against Iran's proxies in the region, which were embarrassed by the Iranian statement. At the center of the criticism was the claim that they were being used as a tool for Iranian subversion in their own countries, rather than as a force against the US and Israel. The situation thus provided a good overview of the limits of Iran's

influence vis-à-vis its proxy network. Tehran has systematically armed, financed and trained its proxies, and therefor possesses substantial influence over them, but not total influence. The Iraqi Shiite militias are among those militias which were established by Tehran, and therefore, the US Defense Intelligence Agency assessed after the attack in Jordan that Iran-aligned militias will continue to attack U.S. personnel and facilities in Iraq and Syria as long as Iran does not direct a halt to these activities.

It is imperative to understand the role that proxy warfare is intended to play within Iran's security doctrine. Since the early 1980s, Iran has directed terrorist campaigns against the US in the region and, at various times, against pro-American Sunni regimes. The founder of the Islamic Regime, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, held that revolutionary Iran was in an uncompromising identity struggle, specifically against the US. According to Khamenei, this was an existential struggle, one between truth and lies, the believers and infidels, light and darkness. Khamenei believe that the various American administrations may change tactics, but that the overarching US strategic ambition is to depose the Islamic regime in Iran, defying the fulfillment of God's will. The Iranian viewpoint is that the Americans unfailingly plan to return and take over Iran, as they did during the time of the Pahlavi Shah, loot Iran's oil and gas resources, and take advantage of Iran's geopolitical assets.

Khamenei believes that Iran must strive for its independence, and that a military nuclear capability will serve as an important component of this independence. Iran cannot afford to wait for the US to act against it, or to establish a front line in the region, but must actively embark on a defensive war throughout the region.

As such, Iran established some of these proxy organizations and nurtured existing militias as part of its security concept, aspiring to establish a new regional order and achieve regional hegemony. It aims to establish an Islamic bloc under its leadership, pushing the US out of the region and working to destroy Israel. It facilitates this with comprehensive financial aid, training that the Quds Force provides to various operatives, and an advanced smuggling system designed to deliver advanced missile systems, ballistic missiles, and UAVs.

During the time of Qassem Soleimani (1998-2020) leadership, the IRGC's Quds Force gained influence over its clients thanks to Soleimani's close and long-standing ties with the heads of the militias and senior commanders in the terrorist

organizations. His successor, Esmail Qaani, believes in a more decentralized management of the affiliates, and his relationship with the leaders of the militias apparently is not as intimate as it was during the time of Soleimani, leaving more room for the affiliates to make decisions. Consequently, Iran's proxy warfare is currently characterized by decentralized management and a more distributed leadership.

Without a deep strategic partnership with any country in the region, Iran relies on the various regional Resistance Axis organizations – firstly, to guarantee its national security and only later to promote their various interests. The relationship between Iran and the members of the Resistance Axis does not reflect a 'command and control' relationship; it does, however, have influential power. Iran lacks direct control over the operational decisions of the leaders of the various terrorist organizations but benefits from their actions that serve its overall strategy and goals: securing its security and borders, pushing the US out of the region, destroying Israel, and establishing a new regional order under its leadership.

Since the early 1980s, Tehran has been playing with fire. With its extensive influence over Shia militias in Iraq, it has gone further, encouraging its proxies to escalate attacks against the American forces in Iraq and Syria to compel Israel to stop the war in Gaza. This directive has been reflected in statements by both militia leaders and Tehran.

Iran cannot be absolved of responsibility for the terrorist actions of its agents. The Biden Administration's claim that it lacks full control of its proxies' attacks represents a critical misunderstanding of the Iranian proxy doctrine. It is unsurprising that Tehran has been indirectly encouraged by the US' choice to refrain from attacking Iranian assets, interpreting this as American weakness. With this in mind, the Iranian Regime continues to provide its proxies with intelligence and armed assistance, despite American strikes.