The US is absolving Iran of responsibility for terrorist proxies

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 07.02.2024

From a historical point of view, the deadly drone attack that resulted in the death of three American soldiers in Jordan did not necessarily reflect an escalation in the relationship between Iran and the U.S.

However, it did reflect the expansion of attacks carried out by pro-Iranian Iraqi militias against the U.S. in recent months in Iraq and Syria.

Since the 1980s, Iran has been promoting a terrorist campaign against the U.S. as a central anchor in its ambition to achieve regional hegemony and push the U.S. from the region.

In 1983, through Hezbollah, Iran committed a deadly incendiary attack against the bases of the multinational force in Beirut, where 241 American soldiers and 58 French soldiers were killed. Its leading role in the attack was revealed by the American National Security Agency (NSA), which intercepted a transmission from the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence to the Iranian ambassador in Damascus in which the order was passed to encourage the attack carried out by Hezbollah and with the help of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Forces.

Since Iran activated its strategy of proxy warfare, in a process spanning decades, it has established and nurtured an impressive array of militias and Shiite and Sunni terrorist organizations in the Middle East, all financed, trained, and armed by Tehran. This is how it managed to fight the U.S. (and its main rivals in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia) while not being attacked in return, except for the assassination of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020.

During the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Iran used this proxy network to fight Saddam Hussein and to punish Saudi Arabia and the U.S. for their support in Iraq. In the 1990s, the network of proxies expanded to al-Qaeda, which received significant aid from Tehran for the devastating attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania (August 7, 1998), in which 224 civilians were killed and 4,000 were injured.

After the American invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Iranian terrorist sponsorship also included the Taliban (albeit to a lesser extent), which received funding, training, and military personnel to fight the Americans.

In the Iraq War (2003-2011), Iran operated a terrorist array that included four Shiite militias and two Sunni ones; its goal was to prevent the U.S. from establishing a forward base where they could operate militarily against Tehran. According to a 2019 assessment by the Pentagon, through an activation of proxies, Iran was responsible for the killing of 608 American soldiers and contractors during the Iraq War.

One decade later, during the Syrian civil war, Iran expanded its network of proxies and succeeded in preventing the ouster of Assad. They accomplished this by sending in a variety of Iraqi Shia militias, an Afghani militia, a Pakistani militia, and the Lebanese Hezbollah to Syria.

In recent months, statements from Tehran and Shia militias in Iraq have asserted that attacks against Americans in Iraq and Syria will stop if the U.S. instructs Israel to stop the war in Gaza. This leaves no room for doubt about Iran's standing behind these attacks. They are carried out by the group Islamic Resistance in Iraq, which also accepted responsibility for the attack in Jordan. This organizational framework includes several pro-Iranian militias in Iraq; chief among them is Kataib Hezbollah, the spearhead of the Iranian formation in Iraq.

Since the drone attack, in various briefings to the American media, the Biden administration has signaled its intention not to engage in a conflict with Iran. Indeed, immediately after the attack, senior Iranian officials rushed to emphasize that Tehran was not related to the responsible organization, though it did welcome it.

Differentiating Iran from its affiliates is an essential part of the Iranian strategy of proxy warfare. Accordingly, the American retaliatory attacks in Syria, Iraq and Yemen focus only on IRGC-backed militias, and aren't likely to cause an escalation between the U.S. and Iran.

Basically, the Biden administration is absolving Tehran of responsibility for its terrorist proxies. The administration still seeks to "restore trust" between Tehran and Washington, with the ultimate aim of restoring the JCPOA nuclear deal from President Obama's time in office.

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