Targeting the ”head of the octopus”

written by David M. Weinberg | 06.04.2024

The targeted assassination this week in Damascus – allegedly by Israel – of Gen. Mohammad Reza Zahedi, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Quds Forces in Syria and Lebanon, was long overdue.

As part of its post-October 7 updated doctrine of security, Israel can no longer make do with fighting Iran’s proxies but rather must target Iran itself in response to Tehran’s key role in the current attacks on Israel and destabilization of the region. Israel must now strike directly within Iran, while also taking further action against the Quds Force. Iran’s self-perceived shield of impunity must be pierced.

Unfortunately, the Biden administration purposefully continues to misinterpret Iran’s proxy warfare. Blindly, willfully, and wrongly, Washington asserts that Iran “lacks full control over its proxies.” (This was said in the context of Kataib Hezbollah’s responsibility for the recent drone attack in Jordan that killed three Americans soldiers.) It refuses to finger Iran for all its escalatory muckraking, as detailed below.

Washington prefers to make nice and dream that Iran will calm down. Sure enough, the Biden administration rushed to assure Tehran this week that it had no advance knowledge of or responsibility for the hit on Mohammad Reza Zahedi.

The administration is sticking to its “strategy” (if you can call it that) of “restoring trust” with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, to smooth the way towards a return to former president Barack Obama’s rotten nuclear deal with Iran – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action – and to avoid further conflict with Iranian-backed rebels in Iraq and Yemen who threaten both American troops and global shipping and security.

For those who have not been paying sufficient attention, here is a summary of the Iranian record.

- Iran is carving out a corridor of control – a Shiite land bridge – stretching

from the Arabian ("Persian") Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea, including major parts of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, under the control of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its Qods Force, various Shiite militias, and the Hezbollah organization. This corridor gives Iran a broad strategic base for aggression across the region.

- Iran is establishing air and naval bases on the Mediterranean and Red seas, and especially in Syria, to project regional power. It has also stepped-up its harassment of international shipping and Western naval operations in the Persian Gulf. Iranian UAVs and missiles endanger civilian flights across the region, too.

- Iran's proxy army in Yemen, the Houthi rebels, seeks control of the Horn of Africa and the entrance to the Red Sea – a critical strategic chokepoint on international shipping. In recent months, the Houthis have struck more than 40 times at commercial ships in the Red Sea and Gulf of Eden, through which almost 15% of global seaborne trade usually passes.

- More than 100 American service members suffered traumatic brain injuries from an Iranian ballistic missile strike on US troops in Iraq, four years ago. Last year, Tehran's proxies in Yemen struck at a base in the UAE housing American military forces; and Iranian proxies struck at US targets in Iraqi Kurdistan and Syria. These attacks are part of Iran's effort to evict America from the Middle East and coerce US partners into accommodating the Islamic Republic.

- Iran is fomenting subversion in Mideast counties that are Western allies, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan. It is particularly focused on destabilizing the Hashemite regime in Jordan to gain access to Israel's longest border (its border with Jordan) and from there to penetrate Israel's heartland. Israel this month rushed troops to the northern Jordan Valley following indications that Iraqi Shiite militia groups supported by Iran planned to invade Israel via Jordan and conduct a large-scale terror attack against Israeli communities near the border, like the October 7 attacks by Hamas.

- Iran is threatening Israel with war and eventual destruction. The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khomenei, regularly refers to Israel as a cancerous tumor in the Middle East that must be removed and speaks of

the complete liberation of Palestine (meaning the destruction of Israel) through holy jihad.

- Iran has armed enemies on Israel's northern border (Hezbollah and most recently, also Hamas in Lebanon), southern border (Hamas and Islamic Jihad), and terrorist undergrounds in the West Bank. It has equipped Hezbollah with an arsenal of over 150,000 missiles and rockets aimed at Israel and supplied Hamas with the arms and rockets that fueled four significant military confrontations with Israel over the past decade. Since October 7, Hezbollah has struck over 3,000 times at Israel, essentially depopulating the upper Galilee. These attacks have killed ten IDF soldiers and reservists as well as eight Israeli civilians.

- There is dispute as to the extent of Iran's foreknowledge of the October 7 Hamas attack, but Hamas would not have been capable of the attack without the systematic assistance it has been receiving from Tehran for decades. My colleague Dr. Yossi Mansharof has exposed the boasting of Iranian leaders (like Esmaeil Kowsari of the Iranian Majles Foreign Affairs and Security Committee, and formerly a high-ranking commander in the IRGC) about the involvement of former Qods Force leader Qasem Soleimani (who was assassinated by the US in January 2020) in the planning of the Hamas attack and the build-up of its forces.

- In the massive array of Hamas subterranean terror attack tunnels in Gaza, the IDF has found millions of pieces of weaponry, technological hardware, and documentary evidence of Iran's multi-layered funding channels, material supply networks, and military training regimes for Hamas.

- Iran is sponsoring terrorism against Western, Israeli, and Jewish targets around the world, including unambiguous funding, logistical support, planning and personnel for terrorist attacks that span the globe, from Buenos Aires to Burgas. Iran maintains an active terrorist network of proxies, agents, and sleeper cells worldwide. (It again is threatening to unleash these operatives against Jewish and Israeli diplomatic targets "in response" to the strike on Zahedi.)

- Iran is building a long-term nuclear military option, with enrichment and armament facilities buried deep underground. According to the IAEA, Iran has enriched uranium to near-bomb-ready levels (84%, which is close to

the 90% level necessary for a nuclear weapon) and in recent months has tripled its accumulation of weapons-grade uranium, enough for production of an estimated six nuclear weapons within four weeks.

- Iran is developing a formidable long-range missile arsenal of great technological variability, including solid and liquid propellant ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and ICBMs. The latest Iranian ICBM, called the "Khorramshahr," seems to be based on the North Korean BM25 missile with a range of 3,500 km. The entire Iranian ballistic missile program is in violation of United Nations Security Council prohibitions.

- Like his predecessors, US President Biden has pledged that he will never allow Iran to acquire a nuclear weapon. But American military leaders now say only that the US "remains committed Iran will not have a fielded nuclear weapon" (– Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley to Congress in March 2023). This suggests that the Biden administration is now prepared to tolerate developed nuclear weapons in Iran's hands, provided the weapon is not "fielded," in other words, deployed.

- Iran is providing Russia with armed attack drones for President Putin's war against Ukraine. Experts presume that in return Iran will be getting sophisticated Russian military technologies such as aerial defense systems and fighter jets for its wars against Israel and pro-Western Arab regimes in the Mideast.

- Overall, Iran is strengthening its ties to Russia and China, and tightening ties to Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Armenia as part of a unified front against what it calls the "Great Satan," America, and the "Small Satan," Israel.

Sorely missing is a US strategy to combat the evil influence and hegemonic ambitions of the mullahs. Prof. Walter Russell Mead has warned that "As Washington shrugs at challengers like China and Iran, world leaders make other plans like partnering with China and Iran."

But Jerusalem cannot ignore Iran's pincer war on Israel, its circling of Israel with strangulating "rings of fire," its drive to enervate and destroy Israel.

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