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IRAN DEMONSTRATES STRENGTH TO KEEP ADVERSARIES AT BAY

Bottom Line Up Front:

- In mid-January, Iran aimed a missile barrage at a range of adversaries based in Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria in a show of force intended to deter its two main adversaries, the United States and Israel.
- Iran's volleys deviated from Tehran's classic strategy of acting through a network of allied militias and movements.
- The strikes on Iraqi and Pakistani territory produced an unintended backlash from both neighbors, threatening Iran's regional relationships.
- Tehran calculates that displaying its military might will help accomplish its objectives on the spreading regional conflict sparked by the war in Gaza.

In the context of the [expansion](#) of the Israel-Hamas war throughout the region and Iranian leadership fears of a looming direct conflict with Washington, Iran conducted a significant show of force over two days last week. Yet, unlike the post-October 7 actions of Iran's allies in Iraq and Syria, the display of Iranian might was not directed against any U.S. forces or facilities but rather against non-state actors and purported agents of Israel. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC), whose air force fields Iran's missile arsenal, fired twenty-four ballistic missiles from three different regions within its borders on targets manned by Tehran's opponents based in Syria and Iraq. A day later, Iran carried out airstrikes in Pakistan's Baluchistan province, targeting armed groups Iran claimed had taken shelter there. To emphasize Iran's technological prowess, one of the missiles used in the strikes - reaching Syria's Idlib Province - was the Kheibar Shekan ("fortress destroyer"), a ballistic missile with a maximum range of 900 miles, not used or transferred previously.

Little directly links the target sets in the three countries struck. Firing the Kheibar Shekan into Syria's opposition-held Idlib Province, IRGC officials said they sought to strike militants of Islamic State (IS), a Sunni Muslim jihadist group opposed not only to Shia Muslim-dominated Iran but also to the United States, the broader West, and Israel. Tehran's motivation for wanting to attack IS is clear. In Idlib, IS works in parallel with other groups opposed to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a close ally of Tehran. Asserting it seeks to confront Iran's "projects" in the region, IS claimed responsibility for the January 3, 2024, suicide bombing against Kerman residents commemorating the fourth anniversary of the 2020 U.S. killing of revered IRGC-Qods Force commander Qassem Soleimani. The [Kerman bombings](#) killed more than ninety people, according to Iranian state media. IS has always blamed Soleimani for engineering Iran's campaign to help Iraq beat back the group's territorial conquests during 2014-2018. With respect to the volley that hit Pakistan's territory, the IRGC claimed to have struck Jaysh al-Adl, an extremist Sunni Muslim group that promotes the separatist aspirations of the mostly Baluch inhabitants of Sistan and Baluchistan province, which borders Pakistan. Jaysh al-Adl was responsible for a December 15 raid on a police station in Rask, a town in the province, which killed twelve Iranian police officers, according to Iranian state media.

In Iraq, Iran targeted a major regional adversary, Israel, rather than a non-state actor. The IRGC claimed its missile volley landing in Erbil, in Kurdish-run northern Iraq, destroyed facilities linked to Israel's Mossad spy agency as retaliation for Israel's killing of Sayyed Razi Mousavi, the IRGC-Qods Force's top commander in Syria, in a December 25 strike near Damascus. However, one of the victims of the Iranian barrage was a prominent Kurdish businessman that Iranian state media accused of harboring Mossad operatives in Erbil. The strike also reportedly hit the intelligence headquarters of the Kurdistan region, a site with little apparent connection to Israel, despite Tehran's assertions. Similarly, in March 2022, as part of a broader Iran-Israel "[shadow war](#)" underway for at least a decade, Iranian missiles struck a Kurdish target near the U.S. consulate in Erbil in what Iran claimed represented retaliation for an Israeli strike in Syria that killed two IRGC officers. Both of the main Iraqi Kurdish parties, who dominate the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, have close relations with the United States but have worked cooperatively with Iranian officials as well. Kurdish officials in northern Iraq have repeatedly denied that they harbor any Mossad or covert Israeli presence.

The scope of Iran's attacks sought to communicate a broader message to Tehran's most feared opponents – the United States and Israel. At the strategic level, Iran seeks to deter both powerful actors by demonstrating it has the resources and military technology to defend itself and its allies from aggression. Iranian leaders are well aware that there are increasing calls in Washington to not only confront Iran's regional allies more aggressively, but to expand U.S. deterrence efforts by striking targets inside Iran as well. Iranian strategists likely assessed that the U.S. decision in early January to begin pre-emptively striking Houthi missile systems signals that harder-line leaders in Washington might have begun to prevail in steering the U.S. response to the Mideast crisis. With its missile barrages last week, Iran arguably sought to warn the United States that it is not dependent on its axis of resistance partners to act in Iran's defense, but that Tehran's own forces are willing and able to apply pressure on the United States and its allies if needed. Attempting to message Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Tehran's use of the Kheibar Shekan clearly signaled that Iran can add significantly to any rocket and missile attacks against Israelis that its close ally, [Lebanese Hezbollah](#), might undertake in the event of a full-blown Israel-Hezbollah war. Iran is hoping to add to those voices in Israel cautioning Netanyahu that an escalation against Hezbollah to try to force the group to withdraw from the Israel-Lebanon border would produce devastating consequences for

Israel. To address internal political considerations, the volleys were no doubt intended, at least in part, to satisfy hardliners in the IRGC and other institutions who want to deter what they see as attacks on Iranian stability by outside powers, Sunni jihadist groups, and domestic Iranian collaborators with these adversaries.

Yet, Iran's escalation last week carries great risk for Iran's regional diplomatic position. By striking inside Iraq, Tehran risks its close relationship with, and significant influence over, the relatively pro-Iranian government in Baghdad. Iran's strikes represented a violation of Iraqi sovereignty, empowering those Iraqi political leaders who urge the government to distance itself from Iran, confront Iran's Shia militia allies in Iraq, and align more closely with Washington and U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf and broader Arab world. Suggesting that Iran's action lost its ground inside Iraq, the Baghdad government responded to Iran's strikes in Erbil by filing a formal complaint against Iran at the UN Security Council. Iran has had normal relations with Pakistan, despite the presence of anti-Iran Baluch separatist groups and other militants there. Over the past fifteen years, the two had sought to cooperate on an ambitious natural gas pipeline project, although the plan ultimately dissolved over Pakistan's concerns about U.S. sanctions on Iranian economic interests. Tehran likely did not expect that its [strike on Jaysh al-Adl](#) would produce the backlash that it did – Pakistan's withdrawal of its ambassador, followed by a significant Pakistani strike on anti-Pakistan Baluch militants inside Iran. Still, the two sought to lower tensions immediately after the Pakistani strike, including conducting a joint naval drill, suggesting the Pakistan-Iran front would not escalate.

If Iran sought to deter Israel, Tehran's message might not have gotten through. On Saturday, another Israeli strike in Syria killed five high-ranking [IRGC advisers](#) deployed there in support of the Assad regime. And Israel continued to escalate modestly against Hezbollah military targets across the northern border. Iran will have difficulty deterring Israel, in part because of Israeli confidence in its multi-layered missile and rocket defense systems. Some experts assessed that Iran's missile launches in the three neighboring countries struck "soft targets," facing missile defense not comparable in capabilities to those Iran would face in an attack on Israel. On the other hand, Iran's willingness to showcase its capabilities might succeed in empowering those in Washington who caution that attacking Tehran would stretch too thin U.S. forces and weaponry already committed to helping defend Ukraine, Israel, and commercial shipping in the Red Sea.