

Iran, wary of wider war, urges its proxies to avoid provoking U.S.

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People sit near paintings of military and political leaders during a protest on Friday in Sanaa, Yemen. (Yahya Arhab/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock)

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran, eager to disrupt U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East but wary of provoking a direct confrontation, is privately urging Hezbollah and other armed groups to exercise restraint against U.S. forces, according to officials in the region.

Israel's brutal war on Hamas in Gaza has stoked conflict between the United States and Iran's proxy forces on multiple fronts. With no cease-fire in sight, Iran could face the most significant test yet of its ability to exert influence over these allied militias.

When U.S. forces launched strikes this month on Iranian-backed groups in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, Tehran publicly warned that its military was ready to respond to any threat. But in private, senior leaders are urging caution, according to Lebanese and Iraqi officials who were briefed on the talks. They spoke to The Washington Post on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive conversations.

U.S. officials say the message might be having some effect. As of Saturday, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria hadn't attacked U.S. forces in more than 13 days, an unusual lull since the [war in Gaza](#) began in October. The militants held their fire even after a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad killed a senior Kataib Hezbollah official.

"Iran may have realized their interests are not served by allowing their proxies unrestricted ability to attack U.S. and coalition forces," one U.S. official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive matter.

The Biden administration has taken a similarly cautious approach with Iran. In launching dozens of strikes on Feb. 2 — retaliation for a drone strike last month that killed three U.S. service members in Jordan — U.S. forces targeted Iranian proxies in Iraq and Syria but did not strike inside Iran.

U.S. diplomats, meanwhile, are pressuring Israel and Hamas to agree on a cease-fire in Gaza. During the negotiated pause in the fighting in November, attacks by Iranian-backed groups dropped throughout the region.

To emphasize the new directive, Iran has dispatched military leaders and diplomats across the region to meet with local officials and militia members.

"Iran is doing its utmost to prevent the expansion of the war and the escalation from reaching the point of no return," said an Iraqi official with close ties to Iranian-backed forces there.

Days after Kataib Hezbollah claimed responsibility for the attack that killed the three U.S. Army reservists, an Iranian military commander landed in Baghdad last month to meet with the group's leaders. The commander pressured it to issue a statement suspending attacks on U.S. targets.

The leaders were unhappy with the suspension, the Iraqi official said, but acceded to the request of the country that has trained and armed their forces.

Still, the exchange might also have demonstrated the limits of Tehran's influence: After the U.S. strikes, the group reversed itself, pledging "painful strikes and broad attacks." It's been a balancing act for Iran since Oct. 7, when Hamas's surprise attack on Israeli communities near Gaza triggered the war there.

The Iranian-backed groups form the self-styled "axis of resistance," a loose alliance of armed militias that includes Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Kataib Hezbollah in Iraq and Syria. Tehran uses them to spread its influence across the region and serve as a forward line of defense against the United States and Israel. Though they're funded and trained by Iran, the groups operate independently and outside Tehran's formal security apparatus. The arrangement has allowed them to advance Iranian policy aims while insulating Tehran from direct responsibility — and possible retaliation — for their actions.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian praised the groups during a recent visit to Lebanon and promised continued support. He told reporters in Beirut that Israel sought "to drown the United States in the swamp of war in the Middle East."

But in private, Iranian emissaries have adopted a more measured tone. They've praised Hezbollah's sacrifices but cautioned that war with Israel would risk precious gains in the region.

Iranian officials met with members of Hezbollah this month in Lebanon. One Hezbollah member summarized Tehran's message: "We are not keen on giving Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu any reason to launch a wider war on Lebanon or anywhere else." The axis of resistance, the Iranian officials told the Hezbollah leaders, is winning. The war in Gaza has shifted the world's focus back on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and complicated plans for Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states to normalize ties with Israel.

But those gains could be lost, the officials warned, if Israel opens another front in Lebanon. The Hezbollah member summarized the message: Netanyahu is squeezed in the corner now. Don't give him a way out. Let us not give him the benefit of launching a wider war, because that would make him a winner.

In Iraq, the message was slightly different. Renewed conflict in Iraq, the Iranian officials said, risked upsetting momentum behind talks on a U.S. military withdrawal from the country, according to the Iraqi official. Iran has long sought to push U.S. forces out of the region; Tehran would view a pullout from Iraq as a major victory.

U.S. officials have expressed openness to withdrawing some forces from Iraq but privately add that the Iraqi government appears concerned about a full withdrawal and seems to want continued help countering the remnants of the Islamic State.

The Iranian campaign appears to have been effective. While there are near-daily deadly attacks across Israel's border with Lebanon, Hezbollah's leader, Hasan Nasrallah, has stopped short of declaring war. Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria have refrained from launching attacks since Feb. 4, despite the U.S. strike on Feb. 7 that killed senior Kataib Hezbollah official Abu Baqir al-Saedi.

Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder, a Pentagon spokesman, said Thursday that U.S. forces retain the right to self-defense if they are threatened or attacked.

Asked if the militia attacks were over, he declined to speculate.

“We’ll see,” he said. “I don’t want to predict the future. We’re staying focused on the mission we were sent there to do.”

One Iranian-backed group has given no indication of standing down. The Houthis in Yemen have disrupted global trade by harassing commercial shipping through the Red Sea, a key link between Asia, Europe and the Americas to protest the Israeli campaign in Gaza. They’ve launched at least 48 attacks since November, according to U.S. defense officials, including missile strikes, attack drones and uncrewed boats laden with explosives. The attacks have prompted shipping companies to avoid the area, adding time and money to operational costs.

The Houthis launched two missiles into the Bab al-Mandeb Strait on Monday and an anti-ship ballistic missile into the Gulf of Aden on Tuesday. On Thursday, an anti-ship ballistic missile launched from Houthi territory struck the cargo ship M/V Lycavitos, causing minor damage, U.S. military officials said. Beginning Friday, the group launched four missiles into the Red Sea, at least three of which were aimed at the M/T Pollux, a tanker ship, defense officials said in a statement.

U.S. forces have maintained a steady drumbeat of strikes on Houthi targets. Defense officials have cast them as self-defense, often against weapons that were staged to be launched. On Saturday night, U.S. forces carried out five self-defense strikes against three anti-ship cruise missiles, one unmanned underwater vessel and one unmanned surface vessel, defense officials said in another statement. It marked the first time that the Houthis had used an underwater vessel since their attacks began in October.

The longer the war in Gaza continues, the more difficult it could become for Iran and the United States to avoid escalation.

“Certainly, I welcome the fact that attacks have seemed to have stopped,” said Kenneth “Frank” McKenzie, a retired Marine Corps general who oversaw U.S. operations across the Middle East as chief of U.S. Central Command from 2019 to 2022.

“But we know from hard experience that setting deterrence in the Middle East is something that has to be constantly revisited and refreshed,” he said. “Organizations have a short memory in the Middle East for things like this.”

He questioned whether the United States might have forestalled some of the attacks if it had responded sooner and more forcefully to them.

Even if Tehran has directed its proxies to stand down, he said: “It doesn’t mean they control every one.”

“There’s always going to be some guy that doesn’t get the word.”