

Iran Tries to Avoid War With U.S. After Stoking Mideast Conflicts

After Iran-aligned militants killed three American soldiers, Iran's leaders sensed a line was crossed, and are sending more conciliatory signals while awaiting President Biden's promised response.

By Farnaz Fassihi

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Iran's Supreme National Security Council held an emergency meeting this week, deeply worried that the United States would retaliate after an Iran-aligned militia in Iraq killed three American soldiers and wounded more than 40 others in Jordan.

The council, including the president, foreign minister, chiefs of the armed forces and two aides to the country's supreme leader, debated how to respond to a range of possibilities, from a U.S. attack on Iran, itself, to strikes against the proxy militias that Iran backs in the region, according to three Iranians with knowledge of the council's deliberations who were not authorized to speak publicly.

They relayed the plans developed at the Monday meeting to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the people familiar with the discussion said, and he responded with clear orders: avoid a direct war with the United States and distance Iran from the actions of proxies who had killed Americans — but prepare to hit back if the United States struck Iran.

For a repressive, widely unpopular government already struggling with a weak economy, outbursts of mass protest and terrorism, direct conflict with the United States risks not only death and destruction in Iran. It could threaten the theocratic regime's grip on power.



A photo released by the office of the Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, showing him speaking in Tehran in January. Office of the Iranian Supreme Leader, via Associated Press

By Wednesday high-level Iranian officials, including the foreign minister and ambassador to the United Nations, were publicly proclaiming the stance set out by Mr. Khamenei, trying to reassure Iranians anxious about the prospect of war, and to temper the response by President Biden, who has promised retaliation in the coming days.

“These days in between the words of American officials we hear some unnecessary threats,” Gen. Hossein Salami, the commander in chief of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, said on Wednesday, speaking at a conference in Tehran. “We tell them, you have tested us in the battlefield and we have tested you.”

“We will not leave any threat unanswered,” he added. “While we are not seeking war, we are also neither afraid nor running away from war.”

Indeed, while Iran said it did not want war, it was girding for it. It placed all armed forces on the highest alert, activated surface-to-air defense systems and positioned ballistic missiles along the border with Iraq, according to the three Iranians familiar with the planning, a current official and a former one.

Iran has been conducting a volatile balancing act since Oct. 7, when war began between one of its allies, the Palestinian group Hamas, and their mutual enemy, Israel. Iran has kept multiple fronts churning against Israel and the United States through the network of allied militias known as the “axis of resistance,” from Hezbollah in Lebanon launching rockets at Israel, to Houthis in Yemen firing missiles at ships, to multiple factions attacking U.S. bases in Iraq, Syria and Jordan.

But Iran has tried to carefully manage those conflicts, applying pressure to adversaries without direct confrontation. American and British forces have struck Houthi bases, and Israeli strikes in Syria and Lebanon have killed senior Iranian and Hezbollah commanders, but so far the clashes have not touched Iranian soil.



People attending the funeral of Iranian Revolutionary Guard members in January. Arash Khamooshi for The New York Times

Iran's relationship with its proxies was designed to afford it plausible deniability. Though Iran leads an overall strategy, the extent to which these groups coordinate their actions and take orders from Iran varies widely: Hezbollah is the closest ally; the Iraqi militias have somewhat more autonomy; and the Houthis are an unpredictable wild card, according to analysts and the Iranians interviewed.

But a war directly involving Iran and the United States has seemed just a misstep away, and that misstep may have arrived when Iraqi militants aligned with Iran conducted the lethal drone attack on U.S. troops in Jordan last Sunday. After more than 100 such attacks on U.S. bases since Oct. 7, it was the first to kill Americans.

Now Iran is trying to head off that direct war. After a visit from Gen. Ismail Ghaani, commander of the Quds Forces, Kata'ib Hezbollah, a militia that the Pentagon said was likely responsible for the drone attack, issued a statement on Tuesday saying that it would suspend attacks on U.S. forces, that Iran was not involved in its decision-making, and that in fact sometimes Iran disapproved of its attacks on Americans.

Iranian commanders left bases in Iraq and Syria that could become U.S. targets, avoiding the kind of high-profile killings that, in Iranian eyes, would demand a response.

And three years after sidelining a former foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, Mr. Khamenei's circle once again began consulting him regularly. Mr. Zarif, considered a moderate, is well known to American officials.

"They called on Mr. Zarif because he can better analyze the situation for them and explain it to an audience and in this sensitive time they need top foreign policy experts," said Sassan Karimi, a political analyst in Tehran who co-teaches a university class with Mr. Zarif. "The goal is to navigate this serious crisis with every tool and in a manner that results in America not attacking Iran."



Mr. Khamenei has told those close to him that he opposes war with the United States because preserving the Islamic regime's hold on power is the highest priority, and war would divert the world's attention from the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, according to a person affiliated with his circle and a military strategist with ties to the Revolutionary Guards.

War could also have disastrous consequences domestically for ordinary people, and Iran is already plagued by international sanctions, unemployment and corruption. Many Iranians do not want war, fearing it would worsen things. Over the past two decades, they have seen U.S.-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the civil war in Syria, sow chaos and chronic instability.

Nafiseh, a 36-year-old high-school teacher in Tehran, said in an interview that she has seen a change of behavior in her students this week. "The students are very afraid of the danger of war, they had all heard the news and had a much more emotional reaction," said Nafiseh, who asked her last name not be used in fear of retribution. She said the adults around her were clinging to hope that the United States would not strike Iran.

Fears of war drove down the value of the Iranian rial this week against the U.S. dollar, raising the prices of many goods.

For a government that has repeatedly resorted to violence to crush popular challenges to its rule, conflict risks more internal turmoil. There is dissension even among religious conservatives, and worry that the country's troubles are insurmountable.

"There is not even a glimmer of hope for things improving in the Islamic Republic," wrote Mehdi Nassiri, a conservative cleric who has broken with the government and turned into a vocal critic, on social media. "Today is better than tomorrow."

Mr. Khamenei has been deeply engaged in plotting Iran's course through this crisis. He has received daily briefings on regional developments from the head of the armed forces and his foreign policy adviser, and gives final approval to all decisions by the National Security Council, according to three people familiar with the discussions and a foreign ministry official.

In January, he approved the council's recommendation to launch ballistic missiles against what Iran said were terrorist groups' bases in Pakistan and Syria, and against what it called an Israeli operations hub in northern Iraq. Pakistan and Iraq, normally friendly with Iran, responded angrily, and Pakistan attacked what it said were terrorist bases in Iran. Mr. Khamenei later advised his commanders to avoid clashes like the one in Pakistan.

Mr. Khamenei, who typically opines publicly on national security matters, has been silent this week on the chatter of war, while remaining highly visible. He went to an exhibition of domestic industry, met with large groups and visited the graves of senior Quds Forces commanders assassinated recently by Israel in Syria.



A billboard in Tehran depicting Maj. Gen. Qassim Suleimani, the head of the Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force who was killed by an American drone strike in 2020, delivering weapons to Hamas. Majid Saeedi/Getty Images

“Mr. Khamenei is on top of every twist and turn during this heightened tension period,” said Nasser Imani, a political analyst close to the government, in an interview. He said that Mr. Khamenei’s public presence this week was to “project a sense of normalcy and strength and to show our enemies he is active and engaged.”

President Biden has said he has decided on a response to the deaths of its troops, which could come any day.

“The dilemma for the Biden administration is to try to bloody Iran’s nose without touching it,” said Ali Vaez, the Iran director for the International Crisis Group, a conflict prevention organization. “The problem is each side retaliates against the other, it generates the need for a counter-strike and this vicious cycle continues and at a certain point it will explode.”

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