
Iran and Erbil, Unity of Fields, and a Reckless Attack

18-01-2024

Authors

Dr. Sardar Aziz, Dr. Yassin Taha, Dr. Hardi Mehdi Meeka

Summary : Under heightened scrutiny following attacks in Gaza, Kerman, and the Red Sea, Iran is compelled to address these pressures. The Iranian authorities, seeking justifications for themselves and their regional proxies, engage in a nuanced strategy. While Iran persists in indirect attacks through proxies in Iraq, instances where it directly acknowledges responsibility and releases imagery aim to assert its capability, ownership, and use of ballistic missiles.

Iran and Erbil

Under heightened scrutiny following attacks in Gaza, Kerman, and the Red Sea, Iran is compelled to address these pressures. The Iranian authorities, seeking justifications for themselves and their regional proxies, engage in a nuanced strategy. While Iran persists in indirect attacks through proxies in Iraq, instances where it directly acknowledges responsibility and releases imagery aim to assert its capability, ownership, and use of ballistic missiles.

In the aftermath of the Gaza War, Iran, concerned about escalating pressure or threats, and aims to demonstrate its strength. Choosing Erbil as a target is strategic, as Iran anticipates minimal retaliation. The attack on Erbil reflects Iran's apprehensions and limitations in directly targeting its primary adversaries, firstly Israel and then the United States. This calculated move aligns with Iran's overarching strategy for deterrence.

The Kurds find themselves primarily as victims, with the situation exploited to coerce their submission to Iran. The complexity arises from Erbil serving as a stage for showcasing strength and deterrence, creating a challenging scenario. This issue extends beyond Kurdish-Iranian relations, exploiting Kurdish vulnerability for a broader geopolitical strategy. Iran's cultural inclination toward oppressive measures against the powerless and a show of strength complicates the situation.

Unity of Fields

The recent violent Kerman bombing and Israel's targeted actions against Revolutionary Guards commanders in Syria have posed challenges for the Iranian security system, causing embarrassment even among the regime's supporters. Reacting to this security setback has become a top priority. Media and research efforts have portrayed the Kurdistan Region as having affiliations with Israel, posing a threat to Iran. This narrative aims at enhancing self-promotion and responding to the sentiments of the Iranian public, particularly those who strongly believe in conspiracy theories and the notion of a "second Israel."

In the ongoing Gaza conflict, Iranian proxies have introduced the concept of the "Unity of Fields," signifying Iran's unspoken engagement in wars across Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. This approach suggests a collective response from these nations against perceived adversaries like the United States, Israel, and entities aligned with the Western project. Despite the Assad regime's historical restraint against Israel, Lebanon's Hezbollah's remaining in limited conflict with Israel has created a kind of embarrassment. What remains is Yemen and Iraq, in Yemen Houthis focused more on their own interests, Iraq emerges as a vulnerable target due to its lack of a robust central state.

In addition to creating narratives and justifications for its actions, Iran is causing embarrassment to the United States and Western countries that fail to safeguard their allies, as evident in the attack on Erbil. Furthermore, Iran is enticing influential regional forces to seek compromises for their protection, emphasizing the examples of Saudi Arabia and the UAE from a few years ago. Despite once being in a position similar to Erbil, both countries are now relatively calm amidst ongoing tensions.

A Reckless Attack

Examining the timing, location, and indicators of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' drone and missile attacks on the Kurdistan Region, it becomes apparent that this is not merely a new conflict or pretext against Erbil. Instead, it seems to be Tehran's response to the West, targeting both the Kurdistan Region and Erbil. This behavior results from the recent developments in Tehran and its pro-Iranian proxies, this hindered its ability to extend beyond the Kurdistan Region.

The inquiry arises: Why is Tehran directing its focus on Erbil amid the heightened aftermath of the Gaza events and the potential for strikes on Hezbollah-like entities in the region? To address this query, we will delve into two key levels:

Firstly, on the external and regional fronts, unlike previous instances where Washington or an ally imposed sanctions or undermined Iran's interests, Tehran had a broader array of options for retaliation and attacks on various points of political geography. This included immediate responses across Africa, Asia, and even Latin America, or escalating attacks in Saudi Arabia, the waters near the UAE, Lebanon, central Iraq, and Syria. However, Iran's current constraints emerge from recent agreements with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, restricting its ability to confront them directly. In Syria and Lebanon, any maneuver carries heightened risks, particularly in Hezbollah-controlled areas, where it could escalate tensions with Israel and potentially transform the ongoing strife in southern Lebanon and the Gaza conflict into a full-fledged war involving Tehran. In Sunni regions, there's a sense of repression, with many political forces and figures, unlike in the Kurdistan Region, having largely acquiesced to Iranian agendas, marking them as less pro-Western.

While the attack on Houthis underscored a flaw in Iran's foreign policy and its failure to safeguard proxies, it concurrently conveyed a message of Iran's aversion to an all-out conflict. This caution extends to Lebanese Hezbollah, emphasizing that similar to the Houthis, they should not be targeted. Iran strategically regards Hezbollah's position in relation to the Kurdistan Region as a significant point of interest for both Israel and the United States.

Secondly, at the domestic level of Iran, there are several internal factors that are no less important than external factors. The recent bombings in Erbil on January 16, 2024, revealed Iran's clear motive for revenge due to the Kerman bombing on the anniversary of the death of Qasem Soleimani. However, a deeper motivation lies in Iran's apprehension of renewed protests, potential election boycotts in East Kurdistan, and a heightened push by the Kurdistan Region for Kurdish rights within the Islamic Republic of Iran. Erbil serves as a strategic battleground for these issues, evoking memories of past challenges and complexities for Tehran.

Internally, Iran's recent actions reveal a discrepancy between rhetoric and action, leaving its supporters unconvinced. Iran has not taken any tangible actions to satisfy its supporters in the past two months, despite incidents like the bombing in Kerman, attacks on the Houthis, and the killing of Hezbollah and Iranian leaders in Syria. The need for a visible display and assertive behavior became essential to prevent the diminishing impact of its discourse and threats. Tehran's justification for targeting an alleged Israeli activity center seems driven by a desire to maintain public support, otherwise, where is it closer to Israel than Azerbaijan?

Hence, while the Kurdistan Region maintains relationships comparable to those with the West and neighboring nations, it holds a unique position for Iran. It serves as one of the closest points, offering a cost-effective means to execute political maneuvers to influence public sentiment. By strategically engaging in this region, Iran signals to the United States and its allies, urging them to refrain from further interventions in Lebanon and Yemen. This approach aims to avoid coercive behavior that, while not highly profitable, could be imposed upon Iran.

Therefore, the missiles and drones sent to Erbil served a dual purpose: Partly it was to eliminate domestic threats and influence public sentiment, on the other hand it was a compulsory step by Tehran, which was tied up in other places besides this place (the Kurdistan Region) and could not take a step without paying the price of a more intense war.