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How Iran stumbled up the ladder of escalation

The Islamic Republic finds itself increasingly hostage to the hardliners it has empowered for years

When Masoud Pezeshkian was elected as Iran's new president in July, it was inconceivable that the nation would be in the middle of an all-out conflict before his administration passed the 100-day mark. The instinctual expectation after the pro-reform politician came to power was that the legacy of radicalism left by his deceased predecessor would be reversed and the Islamic Republic would begin to tread at least a slightly different path.

That Iran has experimented with a direct military confrontation with Israel for the first time and is now mulling over instigating the next phase of this perilous theatre is nothing that the fresh administration was prepared for. When, as a presidential candidate, Pezeshkian promised Iranians to curtail the 'magnitude of discrimination, humiliation and sanctions' against them, his conception of the future was clearly much rosier.

The new president was certainly aware that he was assuming power in a world upended by the reverberations of the October 7 attacks. Iran's global image was different now with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)' implication in the ongoing Gaza war as an instigator. As such, although with his constrained powers, Pezeshkian may not have personally generated this imbroglio, the Islamic Republic stumbling up the ladder of escalation so swiftly is a self-inflicted wound.

Home-grown problems

Iran believed it had good reasons to launch two rounds of drone and missile attacks on Israel on 13 April and 1 October. Similarly, Israel had its own rationale for striking back on 26 October, when it targeted 20 sites in Iran, killing four soldiers of the army, and according to the United Kingdom's Chief of the Defence Staff, taking down 'nearly the entirety of Iran's air defence system'. In the internecine tit-for-tat,

Tehran believes it's now its turn to react.

Israel has driven home its military might and exposed Iran's acute vulnerabilities. Still, the Islamic Republic's problems don't end there. Millions of Iranians continue to be beset by crippling power cuts and fuel shortages that have rendered the industries, schools, hospitals and homes dysfunctional.

The administration is also being taunted by a group of inflexibly radical parliamentarians determined to take revenge on young Iranians for the historic Woman, Life, Freedom uprising. As they push for the enforcement of the now paused new compulsory hijab laws, which UN experts said will enable a system of 'gender apartheid', the Majlis extremists are seeking to push the relatively pluralistic Pezeshkian into a new social crisis. By extension, they can prove in action people saying no to the 'Iranian Taliban' in the July presidential election can have consequences for them.

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Amid this chaos and a deplorable economy, calls for 'harsh revenge' keep being vocalised. Affiliates of the IRGC's volunteer force known as the Basij and ordinary citizens with conservative leanings are demanding the state to act in defence of the nation's 'dignity' and safeguard the 'martyrs' blood' by having Israel pay for October 26.

Amplified by state TV, which is monopolised by the associates of the defeated presidential aspirant Saeed Jalili, the self-styled shadow president in a country that doesn't have a shadow government, these entreaties are turning out to even provoke the theocracy itself as it finds the façade of its impregnability on the line. In shows saturated with expressions of fake nationalism and religious passion, hosts ask commentators to explain why Iran should deliver a lethal blow to its nemesis.

On social media, top-notch personalities with multitudes of followers publish graphic imagery, demand a violent response and promise a bloodbath to the 'Zionist regime'. Their implorations for vengeance are augmented by influential institutions close to the IRGC and seminaries that happily reproduce and earn inflated online impressions for war symphonies.

Every few days, a gathering erupts in an Iranian city before a government

office with a group of protesters urging the officials to give what should be codenamed True Promise 3 the greenlight — with True Promise 1 being the 13 April strikes and True Promise 2 being the 1 October operation. The purportedly organic rallies give the impression of crowds staged by shadowy sponsors infusing money into reactionary causes. While the state strictly stipulates that every demonstration should be approved by the Ministry of Interior, a rule which has been weaponised to outlaw and crush all anti-regime protests since 1979, it's unclear how the pressure groups obtain permits for their events.

'The party of God'

These supplications are expressed by groups of individuals who have indeed never represented Iranians as a nation. In the Islamic Republic's out-of-touch jargon, these folks are referred to as 'the ever-present-in-the-scene nation'. Put simply, they are foot soldiers who are on regular standby to go to polls whenever elections are called, boosting turnout numbers, take part in funerals for IRGC icons, populate politically-motivated religious ceremonies and participate in demonstrations on the anniversary of the 1979 revolution.

Over time, these squads have gained autonomy as the state's favoured citizens. As part of an evolutionary turn in the post-1979 Iran, the 'ummah of Hezbollah' is now the emergent sect to whom the country belongs, according to the supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei — they are the 'party of God'. Their theorists have suggested on multiple occasions that whoever is unhappy with the direction of the nation and cannot come to terms with the officially-mandated lifestyle is welcome to leave and go to countries where they can enjoy whatever they're looking for.

The 'party of God' people take on different mantles: members of the Basij militia, religious singers, locally known as *maddah*, 'media activists' and reporters of IRGC outlets and the state TV, and families of the Axis of Resistance martyrs. They are the country's most powerful electorate. Anyone wishing to achieve that status can try to pass the test of pious appearance, subscribe to the state's cultural preferences, mindset and lifestyle and be inducted into the sect.

Clearly, the Islamic Republic is hamstrung to contain this ideological army although it is aware

In line with a tradition that still lingers, they are allowed to storm music concerts and cancel performances, take down movies from theatres, attack foreign embassies when the regime falls short on diplomacy and cause havoc in events by independent speakers. As recently as 12

of the costs of cultivating it.

October, their activities continued uninterrupted when members of the Student Basij disturbed a speech by Pezeshkian at the University of Tehran.

The freedoms afforded to this group have expanded incrementally while the basic rights the ordinary Iranians are entitled to have shrunk to dismaying levels. The result is that there's an imbalance of power between these beneficiaries of state support and the patrons that shield and subsidise them. In the case of recent tensions, the young radicals have mounted such an irresistible campaign of political pressure that if the Islamic Republic initiates another war chapter against Israel, the revolutionaries can be safely acknowledged as one of the primary triggers.

One plausible empirical argument is that their pleas and growing criticism of a weakened establishment have convinced the ruling elite to venture into military confrontation with Israel — at least, their pressure was one factor dictating Iran's calculus to save face at home. Clearly, the Islamic Republic is hamstrung to contain this ideological army although it is aware of the costs of cultivating it.

If Tehran has stumbled up the ladder of escalation, it's only partly because its brand of politics is theocratic and unconventional. In large part, the state has been swayed by its own plainclothes 'young warriors of soft war', as Khamenei calls them. They dragged the state into a gamble with Israel, marking the beginning of an indefinite spiral of uncertainty. The conciliatory gestures of the president will have to remain in flux, changing the course of his tenure. Maybe in ways he never expected.



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