Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024 / Iran and the Axis of Resistance

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

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NOEL KING (host): Since the start of the war between Israel and Hamas we’ve been hearing a lot about Iran-backed militias. One of these groups killed three U.S. service members in Jordan earlier this week.

*<CLIP> Secretary of State Antony Blinken: We will respond, we will respond strongly. We will respond at a time and place of our choosing …*

NOEL: Iran actually responded today saying it’s not looking for a war. Other Iran-backed militias include Hamas…

*<CLIP> Amna Nawaz, PBS: One of the largest financial backers and supporters of Hamas is Iran*

NOEL: Hezbollah…

*<CLIP> Tia Goldenberg speaking to Today, Explained 3 January: Of course, we know that Hezbollah and Iran have deep, deep ties. Iran is Hezbollah's sponsor.*

NOEL: And the Houthis.

*<CLIP> Joshua Keating speaking to Today, Explained 8 January: They received substantial funding and weaponry from Iran,*

NOEL: To Iran these groups are not “us-backed militias” they are something quite different.

Coming up on *Today, Explained*: the Axis of Resistance.

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[THEME]

NOEL: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Noel King. Ali Vaez is Iran Project Director for the International Crisis Group.

ALI VAEZ (Iran Project Director, International Crisis Group): Crisis Group is a conflict prevention organization, which basically operates based on the logic of talking to all sides involved in a conflict, trying to then draw a big picture of what that conflict is about and trying to come up with solutions that we then advocate with the parties and at the international level to try to mitigate or resolve conflict.

NOEL: We called Ali because this week, another “Iran-backed militia group” made news.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA: Three US soldiers have been killed in a drone attack on an American base in Jordan, near the Syrian border. They are the first American fatalities in the region since Israel’s war on Gaza began.*

ALI: Well, it appears that one of the militia groups in Iraq that is supported by Iran conducted this attack with drones. It appears that they did it in a relatively sophisticated manner. First of all, they targeted a US base that is, technically speaking, on Jordanian soil. It's very close to the Syrian border. But it was the first time that an attack had happened on Jordanian soil. And, that's, I think, one of the reasons that the US was taken by surprise, and also the way they did it is that the drone was following an American drone that was returning to base, and therefore the radar systems confused the hostile drone with the US drone. And that's one of the reasons that they succeeded. It seems pretty sophisticated. Which means that, probably Iranians were more closely involved in this attack. That has been the case in other scenarios. There have already been 165 attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria since October 7th. Thankfully, none of them resulted in fatalities with the exception of this one.

NOEL: Has Iran claimed responsibility? Like, how do we know Iran is involved here, for sure?

ALI: Well, in fact, Iran has denied responsibility. But, there is a long track record of Iranian financial and military support for these groups in the region. Mostly Shia militias, but some of them are also Sunni groups like Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Palestine. But the group that is primarily responsible for this attack, which is a – an Iraqi Shia militia, is actually particularly close with Iran and often coordinates these attacks with Iran. So the plausible deniability that Iran is after really doesn't apply in this case because of the history of Iran's involvement with this particular group.

NOEL: Ah, I see. Okay. And this is a term, Ali, “Iran-backed militias.” This is a term we've been hearing a lot since October 7th. Iran calls this “the Axis of Resistance.” What does that mean? Can you define “Axis of Resistance” for us?

ALI: The Axis is comprised of state actors like Iran and Syria, but also non-state actors like Lebanese Hezbollah, groups in Palestine like Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Shia militias in Syria, militias in Iraq and also the Houthis in Yemen.

*<CLIP> FRANCE 24: <chanting> Death to America, cry Hezbollah supporters in a packed hangar in Beirut’s Dahieh suburb…*

ALI: Also, we could include Shia militias from Afghanistan and Pakistan that Iran mobilized to fight in Syria during the Syrian civil war. But what glues all of them together is their animosity towards Israel and the United States that they view as seeking to dominate the region.

NOEL: Okay, so Hamas is in Iran's Axis of Resistance. How was Iran involved with October 7th? Do we know yet?

ALI: Well, we have a pretty good guess right now that Iran was actually surprised by Hamas's horrible attack on October 7th. It was not involved in the operation that took place that day. And, it basically appears that it actually undermined Iran's strategic objectives at the time. Iran, in September of last year, actually finalized a prisoner exchange deal with the United States, through which it actually got some economic reprieve because the US released some of Iran's frozen assets.

*<CLIP> KTVU: Happening now: five Americans have flown out of Tehran as part of a US-Iran prisoner exchange. Along with the release of five Iranian prisoners, Tehran is also getting $6B that South Korea owed Iran in oil payments that were frozen as part of economic sanctions.*

ALI: During the summer of 2023, Iran and the US were engaged in de-escalatory negotiations.And that is when we saw, actually, the longest period of no attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria for multiple months. So that was the trajectory that Iran was on, and it was hoping to resume nuclear negotiations with the U.S. in October. But when it happened, they had to deal with the consequences. And they're still, still dealing with those consequences today.

NOEL: Let's talk about October 8th and onward. Where have we seen Iran-backed militias? And again, this is a term I feel like we've heard in dozens of different ways in the last couple of months. Where have we seen them become party to Hamas and Israel's conflict?

ALI: Look, October 7th, posed a dilemma to Iran because it had two options: One was to sit on its hands and allow Israel to go after a member of [the] Axis of Resistance, Hamas, and see it diminished or destroyed without doing anything. The risk there was that it would lose face, and it would lose the credibility of this network as a deterrence strategy for Iran to deter strikes on its own soil. The other option was to get involved, get into the fray, or encourage its most powerful non-state ally in this network, which is the Lebanese Hezbollah, to get involved. And the risk there was that it might have lost Hezbollah's deterrent capabilities in a direct confrontation with the US, or Iran itself might get dragged into a very costly war. The way Iran squared that circle was to encourage its allies in this network to engage in calibrated and very careful escalation. So we've seen, step by step, going up this ladder – escalatory ladder – by both sides in the past few months. And Iran and its allies managed to engage in this escalation in a way that would put pressure on US and Israel, but without it allowing tensions to spiral out of control – until this attack in Jordan, which has resulted in the first American fatalities since October 7th.

NOEL: The Biden Administration clearly sees all of these groups, these militias, as instruments of Tehran. And it seems like Iran views them the same way. Iran, as I understand it, came up with the term, The Axis of Resistance: our guys. Do these groups view themselves as Iran's guys?

ALI: Look, there is not a single formula that could be applied across the board.

NOEL: Hmm.

ALI: These groups fall along a spectrum. On the one end, you have Hezbollah in Lebanon, whose relationship with Iran is akin to two NATO allies. There's absolute trust. There is full coordination between the two. And at the other end of the spectrum, we have the Houthis in Yemen, who are not really an Iranian proxy and have a long track record of even ignoring Iranian advice. And then there are different groups that fall in between, different shades of gray. So there's not a single formula that we can apply across the board. And understanding these nuances is important. Because then it helps, countering the activities of these groups in a much more delicate manner.

NOEL: This is where we should ask or consider what the Biden Administration can do here. Joe Biden has said the U.S. will respond to the killings of three U.S. service members in Jordan. Joe Biden also does not seem to want to war in the Middle East. What can he do?

ALI: Well, currently there are no really good options available to the United States. We are in a situation that was predictable. That if the war in Gaza was to get dragged on for months, both sides will continue to climb the escalatory ladder and would eventually end up in a situation [where] the options are going to look pretty unattractive. So the US would have to respond because there have been American fatalities, there's no doubt about it. And it has to be qualitatively different than some of the other strikes that the US has conducted in the past few weeks.

<SCORING IN> All Thumbs

ALI: There have been eight US retaliatory strikes in Iraq and in Syria. They've often targeted Iranian-backed groups and weapons depots in Syria and Iraq. In one case in Baghdad, the US, targeted and killed a senior commander of one of these groups affiliated with Iran. But overall, none of these attacks have deterred these groups or Iran from continuing these attacks. And right now, I think because Americans have been killed, the US's credibility depends on trying to exact the cost directly on Iran. So my expectation is that we will see a strike on Iranian Revolutionary Guards, personnel, and assets in Iraq, Syria, and potentially elsewhere, even on open seas. I wouldn't rule out the possibility that the US would target an IRGC naval asset, for instance, somewhere in [the] Persian Gulf or in the Gulf of Oman.

SCORING BUMP

ALI: But, you know, then we will end up in a situation that Iran feels obliged to respond. Otherwise, it would be seen in a position of weakness. And from their perspective, that would invite more U.S. and Israeli strikes on their assets and their interests in the region. And unfortunately, this vicious cycle will continue because all that the US or Iran are doing right now is that they're addressing the symptoms right here. Not the proximate cause, which is the war in Gaza. And as long as that conflict continues, unfortunately, these tensions will continue. And at any moment, they can spiral out of control because of mistakes or miscalculations.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group will be BACK soon to talk about the changing face of Iran-backed militias.

*<CLIP> TIKTOKER: Have y’all seen the hot Yemeni TikTok pirate lol? No, I haven’t seen this man. How has this guy not come up on my For You page?*

<SCORING OUT> All Thumbs

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: It’s T*oday, Explained* with Ali Vaez, Iran Project Director of the International Crisis Group. If you have even hazy memories of the early aughts, you may remember American President George W. Bush coining a term to refer to countries in conflict with the U.S.

*<CLIP> PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH: States like these and their terrorist allies constitute an Axis of Evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.*

NOEL: Iran’s Axis of Resistance appears to be a direct reference to Bush, although the alliances within the Axis are much, much older.

ALI: Oh, it precedes the “Axis of Evil” by about two decades.

*<CLIP> AP ARCHIVE: Iran-Iraq War Begins (1980)*

ALI: It all goes back to the 1980s. When Iran was engaged in a devastating war of aggression that Saddam Hussein in Iraq had, launched against Iran.

<CLIP> THAMES TV, “TV EYE”

*PETER GILL, CORRESPONDENT: At the beginning of last week, Iraqi MiGs bombed ten Iranian airfields. The next day, the Iranians hit back.*

ALI: At the time, Iran was really struggling because it was under an American arms embargo and an entire region and the great powers were supporting Iraq's war of aggression in Iran.

*<CLIP> THAMES TV, “TV EYE”*

*PETER GILL, CORRESPONDENT: The war with Iran has given Iraq a rare opportunity to brush off a pretty tarnished image.*

ALI: And so for a young, revolutionary system that had just emerged, it was a pretty traumatizing experience. And the way the Iranians figured that they could put pressure on the West and on the US and Israel, was to try to gain what is known as strategic depth—means that you fight your enemies, not on your borders, or inside your borders where you can't defend, but you try to deter them from striking you on your soil. Its raison d'etre, or its concept, stems from the fact that it does not have the conventional military strength to protect itself, because it has been isolated and under an arms embargo for many years.

<SCORING IN> Restless neutral (a) APM

ALI: Iran, I would argue, is an opportunistic power. And what it has been able to do is to exploit chaos in the region.

*<CLIP> AP: 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon*

*REPORTER: Israeli tanks rolled into southern Lebanon. Israel’s invasion was the biggest development in the area since the ‘73 war.*

ALI: So in 1982, Israel's invasion of Lebanon gave them an opportunity to create Hezbollah in Lebanon.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS:*

*ELIZABETH PALMER, CORRESPONDENT: With support from Iran and Syria, Hezbollah has grown into a popular movement with a well-armed military wing*

ALI: Then, the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003…

*<CLIP> BBC:*

*<bomb blast>*

*JEREMEY BOWEN, CORRESPONDENT: Shock and awe.*

ALI: …provided Iran with a golden opportunity to create all of these Shia militias in Iraq.

*<CLIP> BBC:*

*JEREMEY BOWEN, CORRESPONDENT: Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis were killed. No one knows how many, exactly. As armed groups fought each other, fought the Americans and killed each other's civilians.*

ALI: When Saddam fell and he was replaced by a Shia government, this basically created a natural alliance between Iran and Iraq and provided Iran for the first time since the 1979 revolution, with the possibility of projecting power, through a land corridor that extended from Tehran to Baghdad to Damascus to Beirut. And so it actually strengthened Iran's hands. The civil war in Syria in uh, 2011, created another opportunity to create even more groups in Syria.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*JAMAL EL SHAYYAL, CORRESPONDENT: This command center in Aleppo, home to Syrian Army soldiers and other pro-Assad militias—Iranians control the communications, giving orders of where to fight and when.*

ALI: Saudi war in Yemen created an opportunity for Iran to invest in the Houthis.

*<CLIP> EURONEWS: Shiite Houthi rebels have bombarded the president of Yemen's home and are trying to overthrow the government, says the information minister.*

ALI: And turn them into the disruptive force that they are today.

*<CLIP> REUTERS: Houthi rebels from Yemen were seen storming a cargo ship in the Red Sea.*

<SCORING OUT> Restless neutral (a) APM

ALI: If we understand how Iran operates, then, it basically gives us much better tools to try to counter it. It's not related to their financial capabilities, so sanctions won't necessarily work. It is not about flexing our military muscles, but it's about depriving them of the oxygen that they need to support this network, which comes through conflict and chaos. So the more the West is able to bring conflict in the region to an end, the less opportunities Iran would have to be able to support these groups.

NOEL: All right. So Hamas and the Houthis both existed before October 7th, but since October 7th, what they've done, what both groups have done, is they've used messaging to get themselves noticed far beyond the region. They're not just on the intelligence community's radar anymore. They are literally on my Instagram feed. Is this new? Is this a strategy by these groups to sort of present a different face?

ALI: There is certainly a soft power dimension here that the groups, these groups are fully aware of.

*<CLIP> FRANCE 24:*

*JAMES MULHOLLAND: Yemenis have been flocking to the port of Al Salif on the Red Sea to visit the cargo ship, which was hijacked last month by Houthi rebels.*

*SAMEER AL RABIT, HOUTHI MEDIA OFFICER: It's become an attraction for Yemenis from all over. Many come to tour it every day instead of going to parks and beaches. They're now visiting the Galaxy Leader.*

ALI: They know that at the end of the day, there is also a battle for hearts and minds. And the reality is that what has happened in the past few months, despite all the tragedies, in a way, has provided them with an opportunity to recruit more forces.

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*HEZBOLLAH CHIEF HASSAN NASRALLAH: We started to see the public opinion shifting as the whole world witnessed women, defenseless women and children, torn apart.*

ALI: The humanitarian disaster that has occurred in Gaza is radicalizing segments of societies in all of these countries, which, of course, makes recruitment much easier for these groups. And in order to be able to capitalize on that opportunity, they have to portray themselves in a positive and polished manner.

*<CLIP> THE HILL:*

*BRIAHNA JOY GRAY: Houthi militias have been targeting ships and the Red sea on the basis that they have an obligation under the Geneva Convention to stop genocide being carried out in Gaza.*

ALI: And I think that's what you're seeing on social media, as part of that effort to use this opportunity to grow. As I said, you know, all of these groups in Iran are opportunistic. And the more there is violence and chaos in the region, the more it will be beneficial to them.

NOEL: I've seen people on Instagram mooning over the hot Yemeni pirate.

*<CLIP> MIDDLE EAST EYE: Rashid Al Haddad, also known as Tim-Houthi Chalamet and Jihadi Depp, posted this video on social media and received an unexpected wave of comments.*

NOEL: And this is we're talking about young people who are looking at this young man and saying, oh, to me, he looks like one of the good guys.

*<CLIP> MIDDLE EAST EYE: Now it's not clear if he is a pirate, but he has been documenting his time at sea, including videos of him on cargo ships, possibly even one of the cargo ships that was hijacked by Houthi rebels in November.*

NOEL: Is the crush on the pirate, even though we might be tempted to not take that seriously, is that a problem for the United States?

ALI: It is certainly a problem. Whenever actors that are trying to disrupt the international system and are anti-status quo, and forces of instability gain popularity in the popular culture, it's a problem because younger people are going to start imitating them.

<SCORING IN> New Tension (07) All Thumbs

ALI: And again, this is one of the reasons that these groups overall see what's happening in Gaza as a golden opportunity, because it makes recruitment for them much easier. And then we would have more cases of lone wolves conducting acts of terrorism in Western cities, which of course would create a major problem for Western governments, and would not make Israel or U.S. allies in the region safer in any way.

SCORING BUMP

NOEL: That was Ali Vaez of the International Crisis Group. Today’s episode was produced by Haleema Shah and Amanda Lewellyn. Matthew Collette edited. Laura Bullard and Kim Eggleston fact-checked. And David Herman is our engineer. I’m Noel King. It’s *Today, Explained*.

<SCORING OUT> New Tension (07) All Thumbs

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]