

JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy

U.S. Retaliation in Syria

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On February 25, 2021, President Biden ordered an airstrike, his first known use of military force, against buildings tied to Iranian-backed proxies in Syria in retaliation for recent attacks on American personnel in Iraq. This was a welcome response but likely insufficient to deter future Iranian aggression. Indeed, given reports of an explosion on an Israeli-owned ship in the Gulf of Oman just hours later, apparently linked to Iran, it remains to be seen if the United States, or Israel, intends to respond. As the U.S. pursues new nuclear talks with Iran, much in the region, and in U.S.-Iran relations, remains fluid.

This policy memo from JINSA staff provides details and context of the airstrike in Syria, background on Iranian-backed aggression against Americans in Iraq, and policy recommendations for U.S. officials.

What happened?

- On February 25, 2021, President Biden [ordered a retaliatory airstrike](#) against [“infrastructure utilized by Iranian-backed militant groups.”](#)
 - The strike was retaliation for three recent rocket attacks by Iranian-backed militias targeting U.S. bases in Iraq, including one that killed a non-American U.S. contractor and injured a U.S. servicemember.
 - Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [told reporters](#) that he was “confident in the target that we went after, we know what we hit” and that it was “the same Shia militants that conducted the [Feb. 15] strikes.” [Austin added](#) that the airstrike was upon his recommendation and that “we will respond on our timeline. And, once again [we] wanted to be sure of the connectivity and that we had the right targets.”
 - At a press conference the day after the strike, Pentagon spokesperson [John Kirby stated](#) that “the purpose for striking these targets was 2-fold: 1, clearly to try to make an impact on these groups and their ability to conduct future attacks and 2, to send a very clear signal that the US is going to protect its people, its interests and its partners.” [Kirby added](#) that “this really was a defensive strike, meant to help

protect in the future American forces and coalition partners given what we knew those structures were used for.... It was very much a defensive operation...to send a strong signal about our resolve.”

- The strike hit buildings near Abu Kamal, an eastern Syrian district on the border with Iraq, killing at least one militiaman and injuring several others.
 - Two F-15E Strike Eagle aircraft dropped seven bombs, [reportedly 500 pound](#) Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM), [totally destroying 9 facilities](#) and functionally destroying 2 others.
 - Pentagon spokesperson John Kirby [issued a statement](#) that the airstrikes “specifically destroyed multiple facilities located at a border control point used by a number of Iranian-backed militia troops, including Kataib Hezbollah and Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada.”
- The day after the airstrike in Syria, an [explosion damaged](#) an Israeli owned and Bahamas-flagged cargo ship traversing through the Gulf of Oman. The explosion is currently being investigated, with possible causes being a maritime mine or Iranian asymmetric activity.
 - The owner of the ship is reported to be close to the head of the Mossad, Israel’s intelligence agency.

Why does it matter?

- After initial hesitation and continued attacks, the Biden administration took military action to punish and deter attacks by Iran-backed groups.
 - The administration did not immediately respond to the original February 15 rocket attack that killed a U.S. contractor and injured a U.S. servicemember, stating instead that it would investigate it.
 - Two more attacks followed shortly thereafter, suggesting that further attacks were likely unless the United States took action.
- Biden chose a “proportional” response designed to balance between deterrence and de-escalation.
 - The administration described the strike as targeting “infrastructure,” not group members, meaning that it was intentionally seeking to lower the amount of damage caused but still wishing to degrade their capabilities in Iraq.
 - The strike targeted Iranian-backed groups, not Iranian personnel or facilities directly, suggesting that it was trying to avoid provoking Iranian retaliation. This could also potentially signal that U.S. intelligence determined that Iran did not explicitly order the rocket attacks against U.S. bases.

- The strike also occurred in Syria, not Iraq, in an effort to reduce anti-American backlash among Iraqis and perhaps also to reduce the pressure on Iraqi militia to retaliate.
- This approach to retaliation and deterrence against Iran is decidedly different than that of the Trump administration.
 - At first, Trump did not respond to over six months of escalating Iranian violence in 2019, including the downing of a U.S. drone, a missile attack on vital Saudi oil facilities, and rocket attacks against U.S. bases in Iraq.
 - Following the death of an American contractor and the storming of the U.S. embassy in Baghdad, however, Trump ordered the January 3, 2020 [U.S. drone strike](#) that killed Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of the Iranian proxy militia Kataib Hezbollah and a high-ranking official in Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces.
 - Trump demurred from retaliation for too long, but then chose to exercise escalatory dominance—reacting more severely than Iran imagined possible—an approach that appears to have effectively deterred further Iranian attacks, other than an Iranian response that was seemingly designed to avoid American casualties.
 - Through his action and further statements, however, Trump made explicit that future U.S. retaliation would occur in the case of loss of American life.
- Biden appears to have learned several lessons from Trump.
 - That avoiding or postponing retaliation would only increase Iranian aggression. Thus, Biden acted more quickly than Trump initially, to attempt to signal to Iran that the actions of its proxies were unacceptable.
 - That drawing a redline at loss of American life still left a lot of lower-level violence that Iran believed it could get away with. The Biden administration effectively and appropriately lowered (or expanded) the redline to include, in the words of Pentagon spokesperson Kirby, U.S. “its people, its interests and its partners.”
- Yet, by choosing a measured response, rather than the pursuing a more forceful response as Trump ultimately did, Biden might not have done enough to dissuade further Iranian aggression.
- Already, Iran appears to be testing whether Biden is actually resolved to protect not just U.S. personnel but also the assets of U.S. partners.
 - The suspected Iranian targeting of an Israeli cargo ship, within hours of the U.S. strike in Syria, suggests that Iran is not convinced that Biden is committed to either repeatedly intervene in the region militarily or use U.S. military force to protect Israel, despite Pentagon statements.

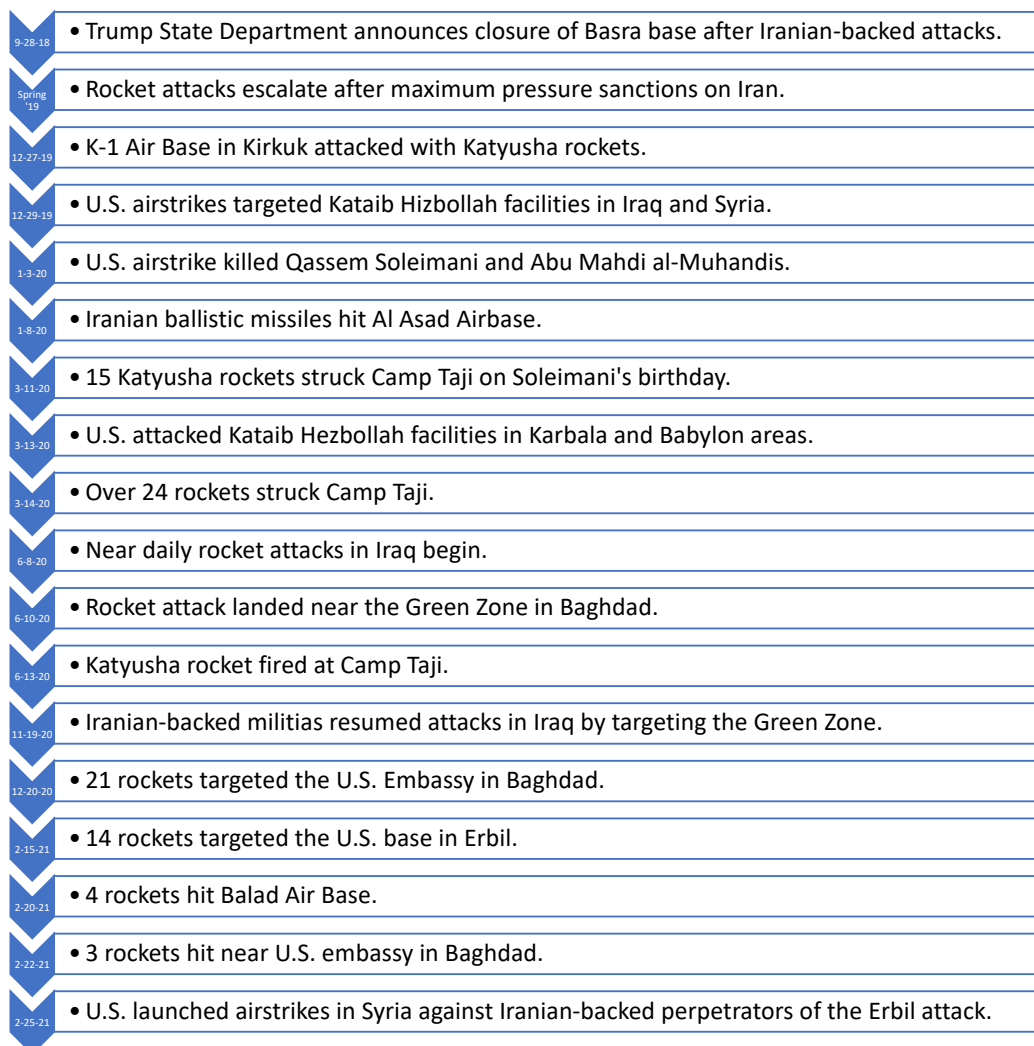
- If the cargo ship explosion is the result of an Iranian-connected attack, the U.S. decision on how to react will have implications not just for further Iranian aggression but also for its nuclear program.
 - Iranian motivations for attacking the Israeli ship might include gauging the strength of the Biden administration's support for Israel, especially given reported disagreements between the two partners on whether to pursue reentry into the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
 - Should the U.S. fail to respond to an Iranian attack on an Israeli vessel, Iran might draw two conclusions. First, that the United States will not, in fact, protect its partners, thereby diluting the just drawn redline. Second, that the distance between the United States and Israel suggests U.S. negotiators might not heed Israeli concerns in nuclear negotiations and, therefore, might be willing to accept a less stringent deal than Israel advocates.
 - Both these conclusions will suggest to Iran that further violence against non-U.S. targets is permissible and perhaps even useful leverage for nuclear diplomacy.

What should the United States do next?

- The U.S. airstrike was a welcome response to deter further Iranian aggression against Americans, but it was insufficient and must not lead to complacency.
 - Deterring further Iranian aggression will require taking forceful retaliatory action in the future. A limited, one-time airstrike in Syria is unlikely to deter Iran for long and will require reenforcing military action.
- If the cause of the explosion on the Israeli-owned ship extends back to Iran, the United States should hold Iran responsible and, in consultation and coordination with Israel, retaliate forcefully against Iranian assets.
 - Such action would be commensurate with Biden's [expressed understanding](#) of the president's authority, under Article II of the Constitution, "to direct limited U.S. military operations abroad without prior Congressional approval when those operations serve important U.S. interests," which certainly include defending U.S. partners and deterring further attacks.
- President Biden should explicitly link Iran's regional behavior to nuclear diplomacy.
 - The Biden administration should make clear that it will not negotiate with Iran over its nuclear program or consider any sort of sanctions relief, if attacks continue.
- To protect bases hosting U.S. personnel, the U.S. Army should rapidly fast track the testing and deployment of two Iron Dome batteries to the Middle East.

- Patriot and Counter-Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) batteries currently offer air defenses for American servicemembers in Iraq. However, the C-RAMs, which respond to short-range mortars and rockets common among Iraqi militias, are less effective than the Israeli Iron Dome. The United States provided funds to develop the Iron Dome and recently acquired two batteries. The U.S. systems are [still undergoing training and testing procedures](#) but Israel has [approved their deployment](#) to unspecified Gulf states.
- For its role in targeting American personnel and its ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, the Biden administration should designate Kataib Sayyid al-Shuhada and its leadership as terrorist entities.

Timeline of Major Proxy Attacks and U.S. Responses



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