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Drone Strike Against U.S. Forces in Tanf, Syria

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A coordinated drone and rocket attack, likely from an Iranian-backed militia, struck the U.S. outpost at Tanf in southern Syria on October 20. Groups with ties to Tehran have significantly escalated their attacks on, and use of drones against, U.S. military personnel, partners, and interests in the Middle East this year, probing for weaknesses.

In the near-term, the United States must respond forcefully against the perpetrators of the Tanf attack, and the Iranian network supporting them, to deter further attacks. To protect U.S. personnel from further Iranian-backed attacks it is imperative that the Biden administration restore deterrence against Iran which has only be eroded by its limited and inconsistent retaliation for some past attacks, non-response to many others, withdrawal from Afghanistan, and reduction of U.S. forces in the Middle East.

What Happened?

- On October 20, at least two [drones struck](#) the U.S. outpost at Tanf in southern Syria, where roughly 200 American military personnel are positioned on a highway between Damascus and Baghdad.
 - There were no reported U.S. casualties, though it remains unclear if the drones were intercepted or failed to hit U.S. forces.
 - U.S. officials told reporters that the U.S. forces also faced [indirect rocket or mortar fire](#).
 - An Iranian-backed militia is the [most likely perpetrator](#), given their freedom to operate in Syria and history of launching similar such attacks.
 - The last Iranian-linked drone attack against Tanf, in [June 2017](#), was shot down by a U.S. F-15.

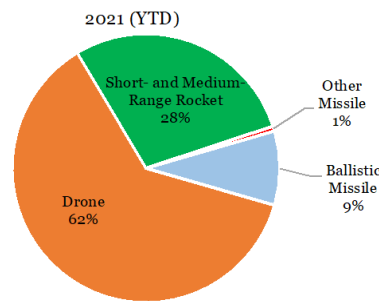
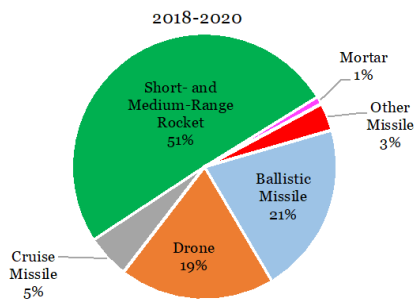
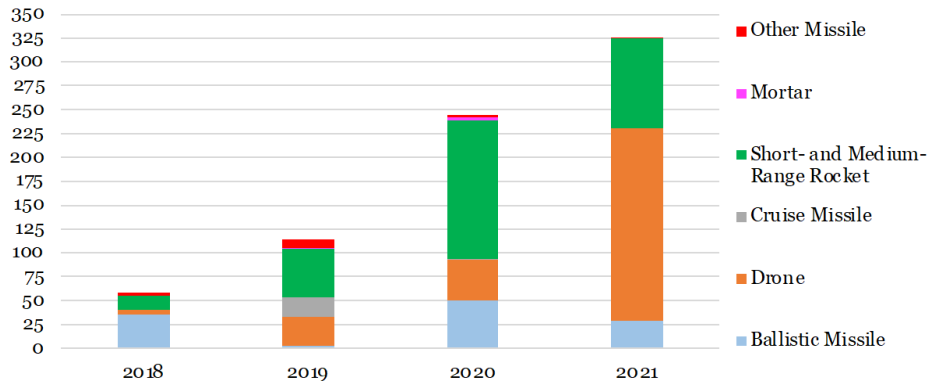
- After the attack on October 20, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) spokesman Capt. Bill Urban [stated](#), “We maintain the inherent right to self-defense and will respond at a time and place of our choosing.”

Why Is It Important?

- This attack, only the most recent in a rampant escalation of Iranian-backed drone attacks in 2021, suggests that the United States has not sufficiently deterred, and perhaps, through its recent reduction of forces in the region and pursuit of nuclear diplomacy with Iran, has even inadvertently emboldened, Iran and its proxies.
- Iran has [encouraged its proxies](#) to target U.S. service members, partners, and interests in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. Tehran’s strategy is to raise costs on America’s presence in the Middle East to hasten a U.S. withdrawal from the region.
 - Iran has exported drone and other projectile technologies to Shia militias operating inside Iraq and Syria like the Badr Brigades, Harakat Hezbollah al Nujaba, Kataib Hezbollah, and Kataib Jund al Imam; the Houthis in Yemen; Hezbollah in Lebanon; and Hamas in Gaza.
 - Israeli Defense Minister [Benny Gantz claimed](#) on September 12 that “terrorists from Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon are receiving training on how to operate Iran-made drones in the Kashan Base north of Isfahan. Kashan is leading Iran’s export of aerial terrorism in the region.”
- Iranian-backed attacks have not only occurred on land but also in the maritime domain. An Iranian [drone struck the MT Mercer Street](#) offshore of Oman on July 29, killing two crew members. While Secretary of State Antony Blinken vowed a [“collective response”](#) alongside the United Kingdom, Israel, and Romania, there has not been a public response to date.
- The Biden administration’s use of military force to preempt or respond to Iranian-backed attacks has been too narrow and inconsistent to achieve deterrence or significantly degrade Iranian-provided capabilities.
 - President Biden ordered [airstrikes on February 25 in Syria](#) and again on June 27 in Syria and Iraq in response to Iranian-backed groups targeting U.S. forces in Iraq. However, each of those strikes targeted primarily the groups’ infrastructure—including a border control point and weapons storage facilities—that were not tied to the attacks on U.S. forces and did not degrade the groups’ military capabilities or personnel. Multiple other attacks on U.S. personnel in the region have gone without a U.S. response.
 - Iranian-backed militias [continued to strike](#) positions in Iraq hosting U.S. service members after each of Biden’s airstrikes, signaling their lack of deterrent effect.
- During 2021, the Biden administration has also overseen the withdrawal of anti-air defense systems from the Middle East and, to disastrous effect, all U.S. forces from Afghanistan. These actions signaled to Iran and other U.S. adversaries that the United States could be pushed to leave the broader Middle East through the continued application of force.

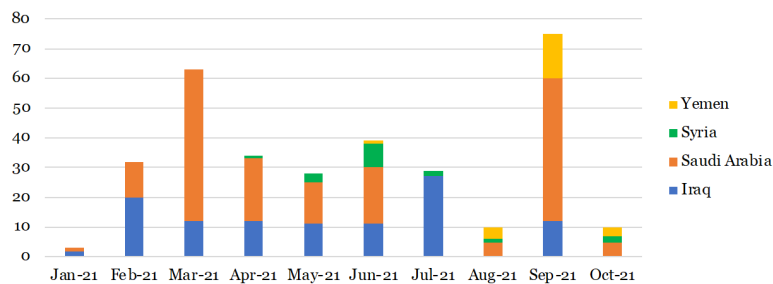
- [According to data compiled by JINSA](#), drones are the increasingly preferred method for Iran and its partner militias to attack U.S. personnel and partners. They have launched 326 projectiles to date in 2021, including 202 drones, compared to 244 projectiles during all of 2020 with only forty-three drones.
- In 2021 unmanned systems account for sixty-two percent of the total munitions fired, compared to just nineteen percent between 2018 and 2020.

Iranian-linked Munitions Fired Against U.S. Personnel and Interests in the Middle East 2018-Present



- The American base at Tanf provides it a strategic position in Syria near the Jordanian and Iraqi borders. The United States set up the garrison principally to conduct counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State. Since Islamic State is no longer active in the area, the deployment enables an important mission to contain Iran, including intercepting personnel and weapons being moved by Iran between territory it controls in Iraq and Syria.

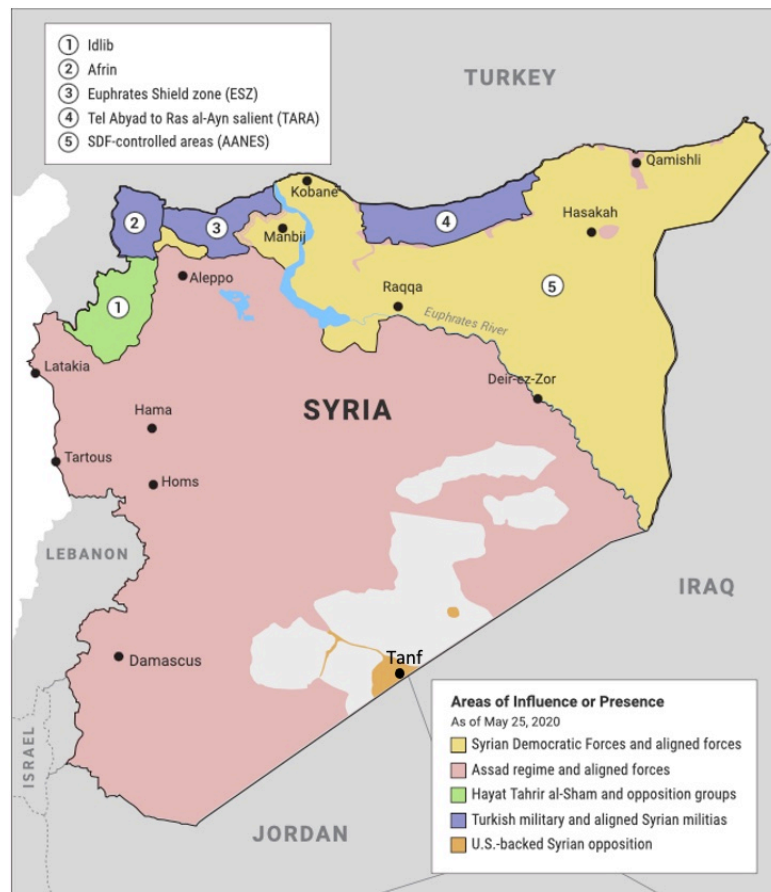
Iranian-linked Projectiles Fired Against U.S. Personnel and Interests in 2021 By Country



What Should the United States Do Next?

- Immediate Action Items:
 - President Biden should order strong, deterrent airstrikes against the perpetrators of the attack on Tanf and the Iranian networks that enable them. The United States should use consistent force after further attacks to signal that there are consequences for Iranian aggression.
 - Congress should hold public and classified hearings examining the significant escalation of attacks on U.S. bases in the region this year.
 - Legislators should ask Pentagon and CENTCOM officials about how they plan to deter combatants from launching strikes and improve protection of U.S. and partner military personnel.
 - CENTCOM should report to Congress where it has currently deployed air defenses, including counter-unmanned aerial system (C-UAS), and evaluate if any deployments of U.S. military personnel lack sufficient protection. The U.S. Air Force should redeploy air defenses to mitigate any gaps in protection.
 - Congress should hold hearings on the current state of C-UAS capabilities and authorize emergency funding to increase protection as necessary.
 - Congress should pass legislation mandating the U.S. Treasury Department reimpose a terrorist designation on the Houthis, who routinely fire munitions at civilian populations in Yemen and Saudi Arabia as well as ships traveling through international waterways. The Biden administration [removed the designation](#) in February after the Trump administration [announced sanctions on the Houthis](#) in January shortly before leaving office.
- Long-term Action Items:
 - The United States requires a comprehensive strategy to deter, defend, and respond against the growing challenge of Iranian-backed aggression, particularly through drone attacks. This approach should include:
 - Consistent and more forceful military responses against those responsible for attacking U.S. service members, partners, and interests that is not limited only to local proxies but Iranian targets as well;
 - Increasing joint military exercises with Israel and Arab partners to conduct land and maritime interdiction, surveillance, and strike operations;
 - Maintaining and expanding U.S. air defenses in the Middle East by expediting the deployment of the U.S. Army's two Iron Dome short-range air defenses, which Israel has proven can intercept drones;

- Developing a regional early warning and air defense network among countries in the region to better enable the identification, tracking, and destruction of Iranian-linked munitions;
- Joint research and development with Middle Eastern partners to improve air defenses, especially against drones; and
- Provisioning precision-guided munitions to regional partners, like Israel, so that they can degrade Iranian capabilities and deter further aggression.



Adapted from: Max Hoffman and Alan Makovsky, "Northern Syria Security Dynamics and the Refugee Crisis," Center For American Progress, May 26, 2021

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