

U.S. Forces Face Repeated Strikes in Syria

Ari Cicurel
Senior Policy Analyst

Unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) and rocket attacks targeted American forces in Syria on August 15, shortly after Israeli airstrikes against Syrian and Iranian positions in Tartus and Damascus. If conducted by Iranian-backed groups, as is likely the case, the strikes indicate that the lack of U.S. retaliation for previous attacks—including recently against American citizens on U.S. soil—combined with ongoing nuclear negotiations has emboldened Tehran and made the United States a more attractive target in comparison to Israel. Iranian-backed groups target U.S. forces because they will not suffer significant consequences. The United States should quickly identify Iran as the perpetrator of the latest attack if true, hold the regime in Tehran directly accountable, retaliate accordingly, end ineffectual nuclear negotiations, and adopt a comprehensive [Plan B policy](#) that increases U.S. pressure and leverage on Tehran.

What Happened?

- An [Israeli missile strike](#) killed three soldiers and destroyed a weapons store near Damascus, Syria on July 22. Israeli airstrikes that [targeted Syrian and IRGC positions](#) in Tartus and West Damascus suburbs also killed three soldiers on August 14.
- On August 15, multiple UAVs targeted [American troops in al Tanf, Syria](#) causing no casualties or damage. One of the UAVs was shot down and another impacted on the ground.
- Later on August 15, at least two rockets were fired at U.S. forces at the [Deir ez-Zor Green Village base](#) in northeastern Syria.

Strikes Against U.S. Forces in Syria Likely Linked to Iran



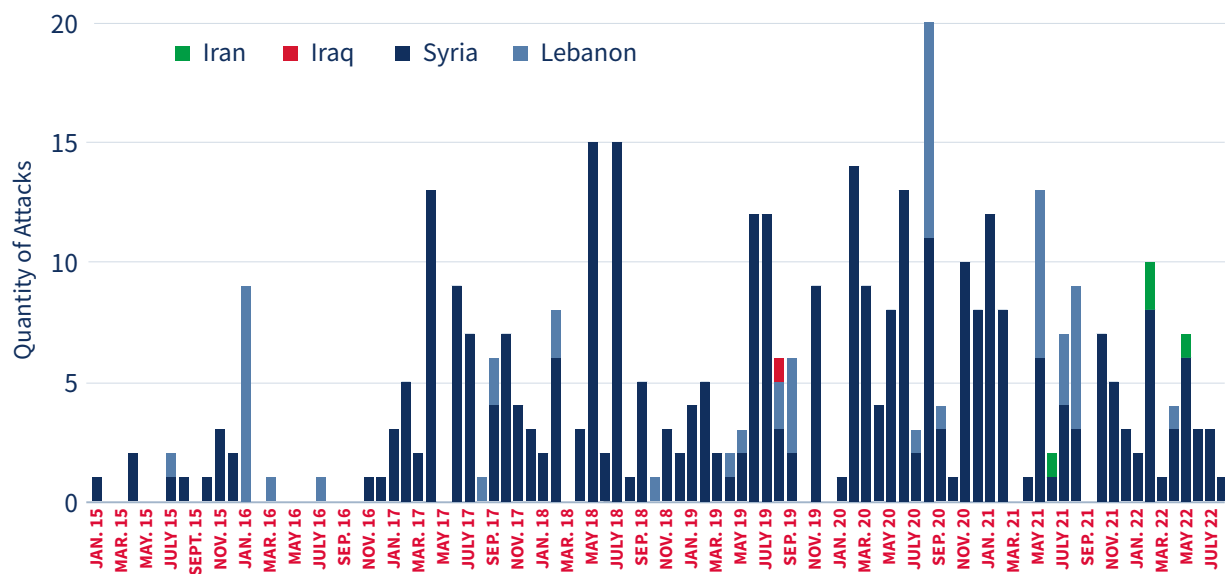
- JUNE 8**
2017 • An Iranian drone struck U.S. and coalition forces.
- JUNE 20**
2017 • U.S. forces shot down an armed drone near Tanf, Syria.
- JUNE 28**
2021 • U.S. service members responded with artillery fire after facing artillery strikes from Iran-backed groups.
- AUG. 21**
2021 • A U.S. Air Force F-15E shot down an Iranian drone that flew too close to the garrison at Tanf, Syria.
- OCT. 20**
2021 • As many as five drones struck the base at Tanf, Syria.
- DEC. 13**
2021 • A drone threatening the Tanf garrison was shot down.
- DEC. 14**
2021 • Rockets struck the U.S. base at Deir ez-Zor, with at least four explosions heard.
- DEC. 15**
2021 • After two UAS threatened the Tanf garrison, a British fighter jet with the Western counter-ISIS coalition shot down one of them using an AMRAAM.
- JAN. 5**
2022 • Operation Inherent Resolve claimed that Iranian-backed groups fired eight rockets at the base in Deir ez-Zor and later fired rockets at the U.S. base near the Conoco Oil and gas field.
- MAR. 16**
2022 • A SA-6 surface-to-air missile attack on two U.S. F-16s in Deir ez-Zor, Syria likely took place.
- APR. 7**
2022 • Rockets struck a U.S. base in Syria, injuring four U.S. personnel.
- MAY 30**
2022 • The Omar oil field was targeted in a rocket attack.
- JULY 27**
2022 • Four rockets were fired at Patrol Base Shaddadi in Northern Syria.
- AUG. 15**
2022 • At least two drones targeted the base at Tanf, Syria.
- AUG. 15**
2022 • Rockets landed in Deir ez-Zor in Syria.

Why Is It Important?

- If Iranian-backed groups are responsible for these latest attacks against U.S. forces, they are further indications that U.S. policy—including the lack of retaliation for attacks against American troops as well as ongoing nuclear negotiations—has not only emboldened Tehran’s aggression but also made America an easier target than Israel, which has repeatedly targeted Iran and its partner militias.
 - » While the United States has not attributed the recent strikes to a particular group and there has been no claim of responsibility, Iran was responsible for [similar attacks on the Tanf outpost](#), including a complex assault with as many as five suicide drones on October 20, 2021 that clearly intended to kill U.S. forces.
 - » The lack of attribution to Iran may be due to the precariousness of the negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. The European Union issued a deadline for Iran to respond to a final offer on August 15 after sixteen months of negotiations. Iran reportedly responded by [seeking flexibility](#) on three outstanding issues.

- In addition to Tehran’s desire for increased pressure on the United States so that it has greater negotiating leverage on the nuclear deal, the recent strikes targeting U.S. forces in Syria may be in retaliation for Israel’s airstrikes against Syrian and IRGC positions in Syria. Tehran could be calculating that the United States is less likely than Israel to respond with force directly against Iran.
- » Israel has launched over 400 airstrikes since 2009—including over 370 strikes since 2017—at targets linked to Iran. This “Campaign Between the Wars” seeks to degrade the capabilities of Iran and its partner militias and prevent Tehran from proliferating advanced precision weaponry.
- » Upon taking office in 2021, former Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett began what he called the “[Octopus Doctrine](#),” in which Israel directly targeted the head of the octopus—Iran—instead of only its tentacles—the proxy militias.
- » Both U.S. and Israeli intelligence [believe](#) that Iran’s October 2021 drone attack on U.S. forces in Tanf was undertaken as retaliation for Israeli airstrikes against Iran’s forces in Syria.

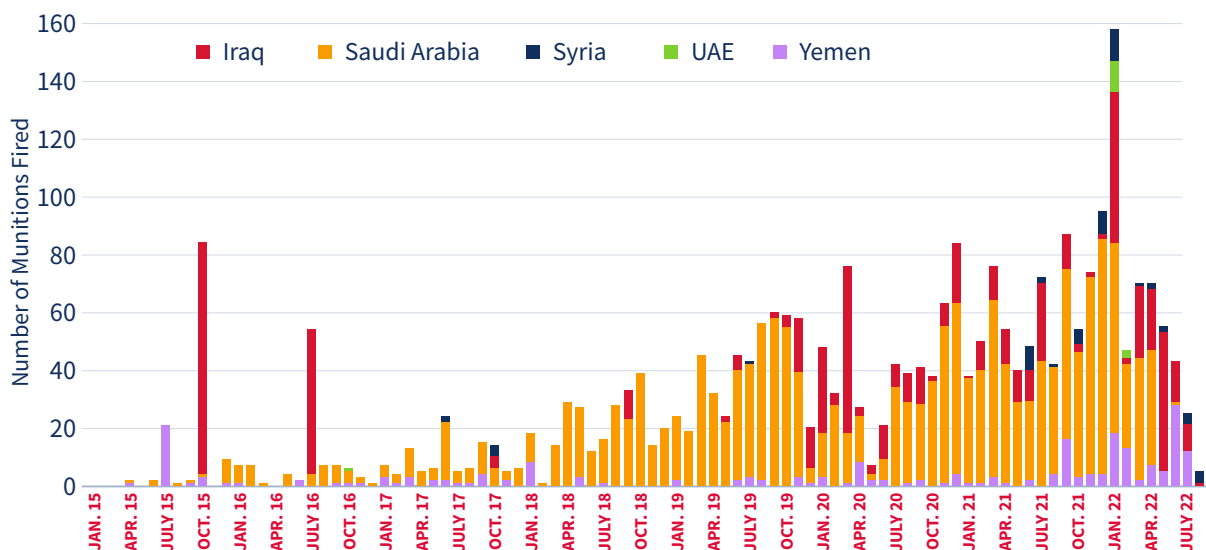
Locations of Israeli Airstrikes to Roll Back Iranian Expansionism



- » In targeting U.S. forces, Tehran may be calculating it can trigger U.S. pushback on Israel’s strikes against Iran and its partner militias.
- » Last year, Iran sought to pressure Israel by [harassing commercial shipping vessels](#) with ties to Israel, including a UAV strike on the [MT Mercer Street](#) that killed two crew members. The absence of similar incidents may indicate that Iran no longer has the capacity to conduct this aggression or believes that attacking U.S. targets will be more effective.
- Coming amid the exposure of [several plots to kill Americans on U.S. soil](#) that Tehran ordered or inspired, the Syria attacks demonstrate not only that U.S. policy has failed to deter Iran but also that its conciliatory approach and desperation to reach a nuclear agreement may be inviting greater Iranian provocations.

- The roughly 900 U.S. forces operating in Syria are part of the International Coalition for Operation Inherent Resolve, which formed to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.
 - » The Tanf outpost, which hosts approximately 200 U.S. troops, is strategically located on the Syrian-Iraqi border at the crossroad of a major highway between Baghdad and Damascus. Iran routinely uses the road to smuggle arms to its proxies in Syria and Lebanon, in particular Lebanese Hezbollah.
 - Iran likely hopes that its repeated attacks on Tanf will force the United States to abandon the strategic post so that it can increase its proliferation of weaponry through Syria.
 - Alongside the repeated Iranian-backed strikes on the Tanf garrison, [Russia launched two strikes](#) in June and August on Syrian opposition fighters near the base.
- The Biden administration’s use of military force has been too limited and infrequent to deter further Iranian-backed aggression. While President Biden ordered two pinprick airstrikes on Iranian proxies during the first six months of his administration after attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, the United States has [failed](#) to respond kinetically for more than a year—despite suffering in excess of 30 attacks by Iran and its proxies since October 2021.
 - » On February 25, 2021, [Biden ordered airstrikes](#) on infrastructure in Syria used by Iranian-backed groups that was used to launch three strikes in Iraq, which killed a non-American U.S. contractor and one U.S. servicemember. Biden approved airstrikes again on June 27, 2021 in Syria and Iraq. However, after each U.S. response, Iran’s regional partners [continued to launch strikes](#), indicating that America’s actions did not have a deterrent effect.
- According to [JINSA’s Iran Projectile Tracker](#), Iran and its proxies have launched over 470 mortar, rocket, drone, and missile strikes against U.S. service members, partners, and interests in Syria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen during 2022. This year, Iranian-backed groups have launched twenty-four such projectiles in Syria, the same number these terrorists fired throughout all of last year.

Iranian-linked Projectiles Launches Against U.S. Personnel, Arab Partners, and Interests Since 2015 by Country



What Should the United States Do Next?

- U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should provide quick and public attributions for the group or groups responsible for the strikes on U.S. forces in Syria on August 15.
- President Biden should direct CENTCOM to launch retaliatory strikes against the perpetrators of the recent attacks on U.S. forces in Syria that degrades their capacity and deters further aggression.
- The Biden administration should clearly and publicly link Iran’s regional aggression to its nuclear diplomacy. U.S. negotiators should cease any conversations about Iran’s nuclear program so long as Iranian-backed attacks continue against American troops.
- Recognizing that Iran’s regional aggression has increased despite President Biden’s minimal military responses and amid his administration’s conciliatory nuclear diplomacy, the United States should adopt a [Plan B policy](#) to increase pressure and leverage on Iran that includes:
 - » Consistent and more forceful uses of military action to preempt and respond against Iranian-backed aggression that—modeled on Israel’s “Octopus Doctrine”—ensures Iran does not have immunity when it enables aggression;
 - » Replacing the current approach of dealing with the nuclear and regional aggression issues separately with a comprehensive strategy that includes a balance of diplomatic, military, and economic tools;
 - » Building partner capabilities to better defend against and strike Iranian-linked forces, including through the expedited delivery to Israel of KC-46 aircraft refueling tankers, precision-guided munitions (PGMs), fixed-wing combat aircraft like the F-35, and additional Arrow, David’s Sling, and Iron Dome batteries as well as their interceptors; and
 - » Leading an effort to build a regional integrated air and missile defense architecture among U.S. partners like Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and potentially Saudi Arabia, initially with the development of a shared air threat picture.
- CENTCOM should review its air defense capabilities in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East. The Pentagon should deploy additional assets, in particular counter-unmanned aerial systems (C-UAS) as necessary.