

U.S. Retaliation Against Iranian Proxies in Syria

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On August 24, U.S. airstrikes targeted Iranian-backed groups in Syria that had attacked American troops there on August 15. Later that day, a second round of Iran-backed attacks injured three American service members and U.S. counterstrikes killed four Iranian-backed militants. American troops reportedly conducted a third round of strikes in Syria on August 25, marking the most extensive exchange of fire between U.S. and Iranian-backed groups in Syria since President Biden took office. The U.S. responses have been too limited and, at least initially, avoided targeting militants, even as the Iranian-backed groups sought to kill American troops. In light of Tehran's use of its proxies' attacks as leverage against Washington, and given that previous limited U.S. retaliatory strikes failed to significantly degrade or deter further Iranian regional or nuclear aggression, the Biden administration urgently must adopt a much more robust policy of consistent and comprehensive military pressure that, like Israeli operations, imposes direct costs on Iran and not just on its proxies.

What Happened?

- At 4 am local time on August 24, [nine U.S. airstrikes](#) targeted nine ammunition storage and logistics support facilities used by Iranian-backed groups in in Deir ez-Zor, Syria, after those terrorists launched two strikes targeting U.S. forces in Syria on August 15.
 - » According to a U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) [statement](#), the U.S. strike was a “proportionate, deliberate action intended to limit the risk of escalation and minimize the risk of casualties.”
- During the evening of August 24, U.S. attack helicopters [launched a second round](#) of [strikes](#) that killed two to three militants in retaliation for further rockets attacks by Iranian-backed militias that injured three Americans.
- On August 25, the United States reportedly [carried out a third set](#) of airstrikes, reportedly killing Iranian-backed militants and destroying rocket launchers. Later that day, [Israeli airstrikes](#) reportedly struck Iranian-related military targets in Masyaf, Syria.

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



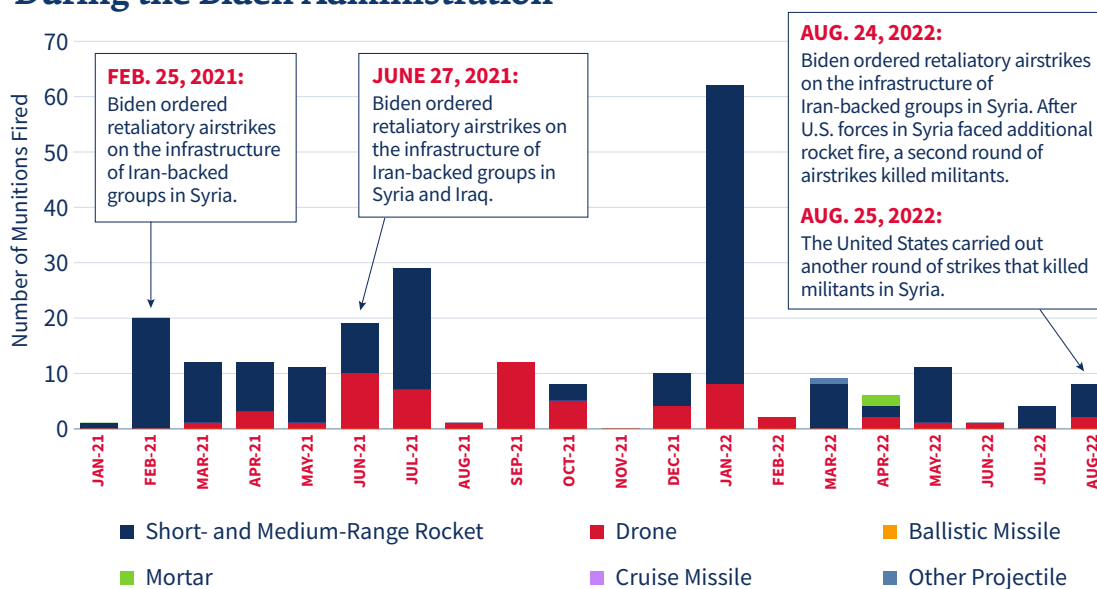
- JUNE 8**
2017 • An Iranian drone struck U.S. and coalition forces.
- JUNE 20**
2017 • U.S. forces shot down an armed drone near Tanf, Syria.
- JUNE 28**
2021 • U.S. service members responded with artillery fire after facing artillery strikes from Iran-backed groups.
- AUG. 21**
2021 • A U.S. Air Force 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.
- AUG. 24**
2022 • Rockets targeted the al-Omar oil and the Conoco gas fields in Deir ez-Zor.

Why Is It Important?

- Though President Biden has ordered retaliatory U.S. airstrikes for similar Iran-backed attacks in the past, these have failed to deter further aggression because they have been too limited, inconsistent, and clearly intended [to avoid](#) imposing costs directly on Iranian forces or other assets. Indeed, after each prior U.S. response, Iran's regional partners continued to launch strikes, indicating that America's actions did not have a deterrent effect and, in fact, appeared to convey U.S. self-deterrence.
 - » It is not clear if the second and third rounds of airstrikes on August 24-25 represents just another tit-for-tat. Continuing to respond with force against Iranian-backed attacks would significantly bolster deterrence against these groups.

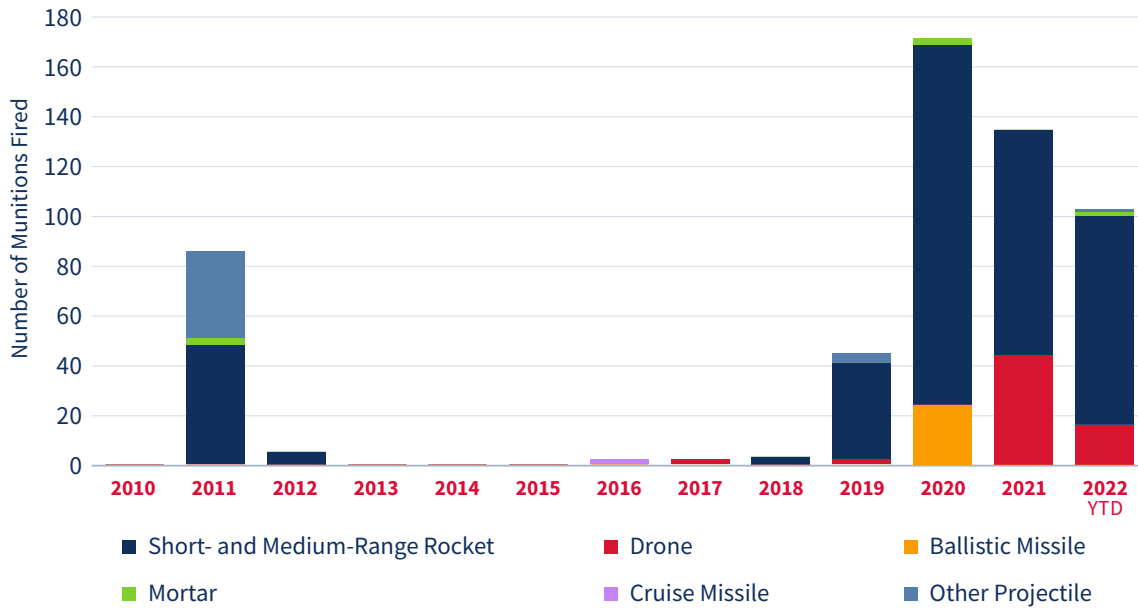
- » Despite Iranian-backed groups attempting to kill American service members on August 15, the Biden administration limited the initial retaliatory fire on August 24 to strikes against infrastructure. Only after American troops had been injured in the retaliatory fire later on August 24 did U.S. forces conduct strikes that killed militants.
- At a [press conference on August 25](#), Brigadier General Pat Ryder, the Pentagon spokesperson, pointed to the fact that no American personnel were killed in the August 15 strike as evidence of the U.S. retaliatory strike being proportional. However, he undercut this claim by noting there “was a concerted decision not to strike individuals who, you know, suspected militants, because again, we were aiming to do a proportional strike,” despite the fact that the Iran-backed militants on August 15 did target American troops in comparison to the U.S. strike on August 24 that did not.
- » As Michael Makovsky, JINSA President and CEO, and John Hannah, JINSA’s Randi and Charles Wax Senior Fellow, [have recently argued](#) “if Iran’s leaders were certain that every time they attempted to harm an American they would suffer a response, whether covertly or overtly, of greater lethality and higher cost, their enthusiasm for targeting the United States would quickly temper.”

Iranian-linked Munitions Targeting U.S. Service Members and Defense Contractors in Iraq and Syria During the Biden Administration



- » Since Biden took office, Iranian-backed groups have fired over 230 munitions, including over 210 since the U.S. airstrike in February 2021, at positions hosting an American military or defense contractor presence in Iraq and Syria. The groups fired over 130 projectiles at U.S.-linked targets in 2021, down from over 170 the previous year and have fired just under 100 this year.

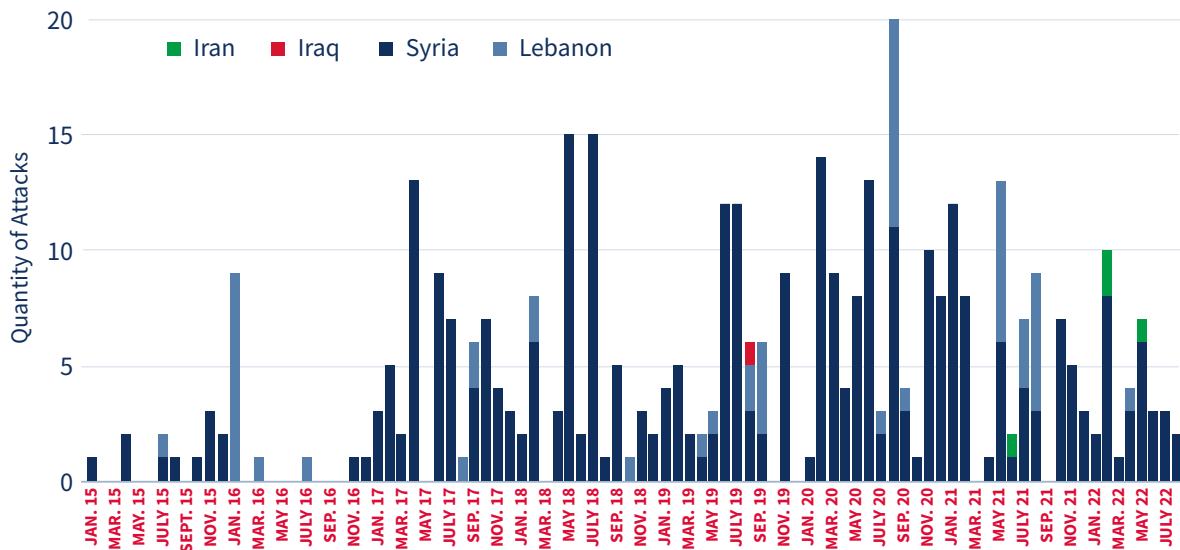
Iranian-linked Munitions Launched at U.S. Service Members and Defense Contractors in Iraq and Syria



- » While the number of munitions fired against Americans in Iraq and Syria has steadily declined since reaching a high in 2020, solely relying on this metric ignores that U.S. presence and influence in Iraq also decreased over this period.
- Moreover, because Iran uses such attacks to build leverage against the United States in ongoing nuclear talks, the Biden administration’s clear reluctance thus far to retaliate more forcefully and deter further attacks also undermines its credibility at the negotiating table.
 - » Tellingly, the August 15 attacks in Syria occurred the same day as Iranian diplomats demanded U.S. concessions on a new nuclear agreement.
 - » Considering also the exposure of [several](#) Iran-directed or -inspired [plots](#) to [kill](#) Americans on U.S. soil, the latest Iran-backed attacks in Syria indicate that U.S. deterrence is insufficient, and that Washington’s conciliatory approach in nuclear talks may be inviting greater Iranian provocations.
 - » According to General Ryder’s [press conference on August 25](#), it is the Department of Defense’s “assessment that, again, these groups are testing, attempting to see how we might respond.”
- Since [Israel was moved](#) to CENTCOM’s [area of responsibility](#) early last year, U.S.-Israel coordination regarding operations in Syria has become much stronger and closer.
 - » Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz [visited CENTCOM](#) headquarters in Tampa on August 25 to discuss security issues with CENTCOM commander General Michael Kurilla and [met](#) with National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan on August 26.

- As detailed in this [JINSA NatSec Brief](#) after the August 15 strikes, the limited consequences that the United States has imposed after attacks has not only emboldened Iran’s aggression but also made it a favorable target for Iranian-backed attacks compared to Israel.
- » In stark contrast to the United States, 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 began to impose real costs directly against the head of the octopus—Iran—instead of only its tentacles, i.e. proxy militias.

Locations of Israeli Airstrikes to Roll Back Iranian Expansionism



- » According to reporting by [The New York Times](#), Syria has not wanted attacks launched from its soil at Israel because it fears a large war, so military experts from Syria, Iraq, Lebanese Hezbollah, Yemen, and Iran’s Quds force agreed to instead target U.S. bases in Syria after each Israeli strike with the objective of pressuring Washington to compel a halt of Israeli attacks against Iranian and proxy targets. That group of Iran-affiliated officials also determined that the United States would retaliate against attacks but that the Biden administration would focus on minimizing the risks of escalation. Absent deterrent U.S. military force that shifts this calculation, Iranian-backed attacks against the United States will likely persist.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- The Biden administration should acknowledge both the linkage between Iran’s regional aggression and its nuclear diplomacy, and the failure of its limited and inconsistent retaliation to date, by building its own leverage against Tehran and more credibly deterring future attacks through a [Plan B](#) of comprehensive diplomatic, economic, and military pressures. including by imposing direct costs on Iran and not just its proxies. Specific steps should include:
 - » Consistent and forceful military action to preempt and respond to Iran-backed aggression that—similar to Israel’s “Octopus Doctrine”—provides more direct signaling to Iran that it cannot attack U.S. targets with impunity than tit-for-tat responses against Tehran’s proxies;
 - » Bolstering partner capabilities, including Israel’s self-defense, to better protect against and target 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 the development of a [regional integrated air and missile defense network](#) among U.S. partners like Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and potentially Saudi Arabia.