



# First Preemptive U.S. Strike Since 10/7

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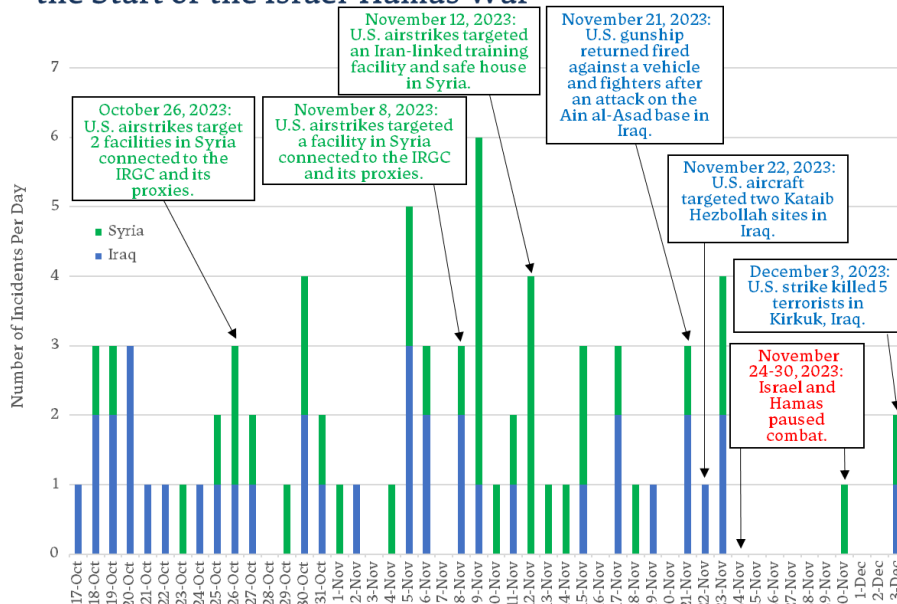
On December 3, the United States launched an airstrike against Iran-backed terrorists in Iraq as they prepared to launch a drone attack against U.S. forces. This was the first known use of preemptive U.S. military force to disrupt an attack before it could occur since a wave of Iran-backed assaults on U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria began last month. The U.S. strike occurred shortly after Iran-backed terrorist groups attacked U.S. forces in both Iraq and Syria on December 3. There have now been at least 76 attacks on U.S. forces in the last seven weeks—and six U.S. responses.

The resumption of Iran-backed attacks against U.S. personnel, after Tehran’s proxies in Iraq and Syria observed the pause in combat between Israel and Hamas from November 24-30, despite not being a part of the deal, indicates that the Iranian regime has not been deterred by previous U.S. strikes, even as the United States has expanded the location, rapidity, and intensity of its airstrikes. To accomplish this, the United States will need to hold the Iranian regime directly accountable for the aggression it enables by further increasing the speed, consistency, and strength of the military force it uses against the Iranian regime’s assets, personnel, and proxy forces, as well as surge air defense assets to the Middle East that can better protect U.S. personnel and regional partners.

## What Happened?

- Iran-backed militia [launched](#) several rockets at the Rumalyn Landing Zone in northeastern Syria and [launched](#) drones at the Harir Airbase in Iraq on December 3.
- Later on December 3, the United States [conducted](#) a "self-defense strike" against a drone staging site that posed an "imminent threat" near Kirkuk, Iraq, according to a U.S. official. The U.S. strike killed five terrorists.

Iran-backed Attacks Against U.S. Personnel Since JINSA the Start of the Israel-Hamas War

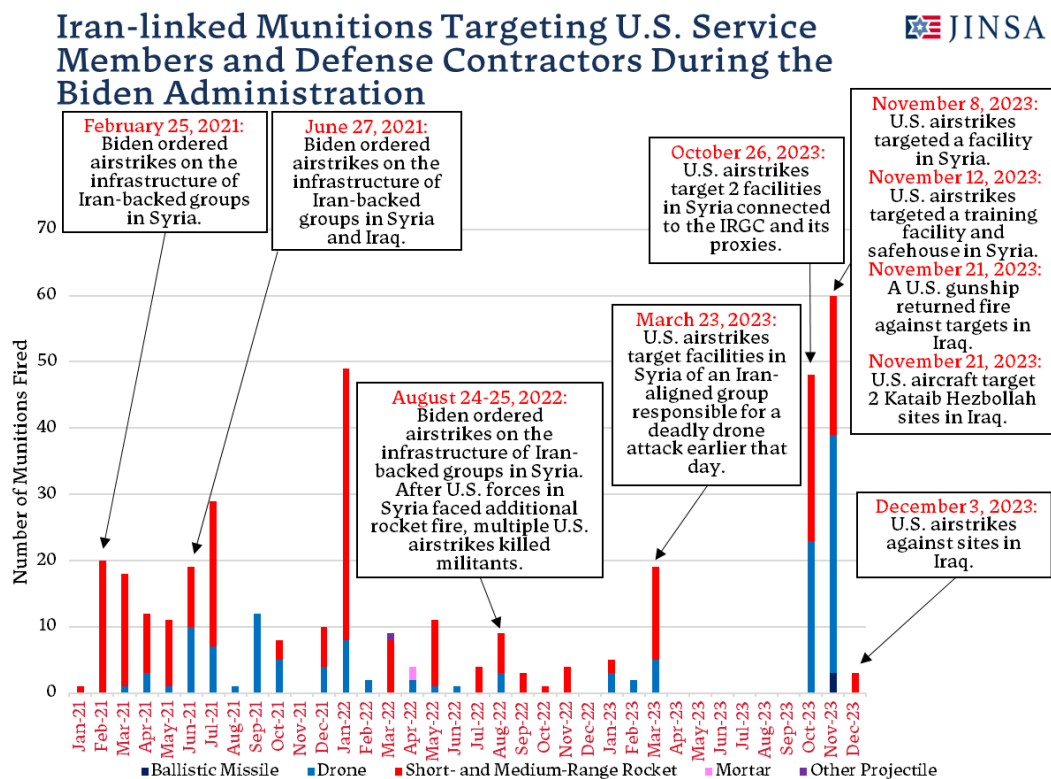


- The Iran-backed attacks and U.S. strike occurred amid an escalation of Iran-linked maritime harassment and attacks, in particular by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, who [launched](#) drones and missiles at three commercial ships over the course of five attacks on December 3. The USS *Carney*, which was in the area, intercepted three drones targeting the vessels.

## Why Is It Important?

- The U.S. strike on December 3 marks the first known use of preemptive force against Iran-backed groups preparing to launch an attack, indicating continued changes to the pattern and logic of U.S. use of force as it seeks a formula that would deter further Iranian attacks.
  - » Whereas previous U.S. strikes during the Biden administration against Iran-linked groups had focused on targeting their infrastructure, two of the three most recent strikes, including the one on December 3 targeted personnel.
  - » The last three U.S. strikes have occurred in Iraq, having previously avoided targeting sites in the country since the Iran-backed escalation began on October 17.
  - » Targeting Iran-linked fighters before they could conduct an attack was an important step to enhance U.S. force protection, credibility, and deterrence against Iranian regime proxies, but the Iranian regime itself is unlikely to be deterred by the deaths of its expendable proxy forces.
    - Building deterrence will require consistent military force that holds the Iranian regime directly accountable for the aggression it enables, considering that previous infrequent and limited airstrikes have not deterred the Iranian regime or its proxies.
- Following Hamas's 10/7 assault on Israel, Iran-backed groups began a wave of attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria on October 17. Since then, there have been at least 76 attacks, with 37 targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq and 39 in Syria.
  - » The attacks have [injured](#) roughly 70 U.S. personnel, at least 25 of them with traumatic brain injuries. One U.S. contractor died from cardiac arrest during an attack on October 26.
- In response, the United States has been trying to find a means of deterring these Iran-backed attacks. As the attacks have continued, U.S. strikes have become more frequent, have moved from Syria to Iraq, and have become more likely to target terrorist forces, not just infrastructure. They have so far failed to stem the tide of attacks on U.S. personnel.
  - » The first U.S. response came on October 26, after 19 Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces in just 10 days—an average of 2.7 per day.
    - U.S. F-16 aircraft struck two [weapons and ammunition storage facilities](#) in Syria.
  - » Between that first U.S. response, on October 26, and the second on November 8—a span of 13 days—there were another 23 attacks against U.S. forces, a slightly lower average of 1.7 per day, but still highlighting the first strike's lack of deterrent effect.
    - Not only did the attacks continue, but according to U.S. officials who spoke with [The New York Times](#), Iran-backed groups have attached larger loads of explosives — as much as 80 lbs.—onto drones they fire at U.S. personnel.
  - » There were at least nine Iran-backed attacks in the three days between the November 8 and November 12 U.S. strikes—a higher average of roughly three per day. Iran's Yemeni proxy, the Houthis, also shot down a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone during this period.

- » Between the U.S. strikes on November 12 and 21, Iran-backed groups conducted at least 15 attacks, another slight decline of roughly 1.6 per day, with nine in Iraq and five in Syria.
- » Following U.S. strikes on November 22 against two sites in Iraq affiliated with the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah, there were five strikes against U.S. personnel on November 22 and 23.
- » Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria agreed to abide by the pause in combat between Israel and Hamas, despite not being a party to that deal, with the exception of a single strike in Syria on November 30, the final day of the pause.
- That limited U.S. strikes against infrastructure are ineffective at deterring Iran-backed attacks against U.S. forces should not be surprising—it is the same approach that the Biden administration tried and failed—to produce deterrence from 2021 to early 2023. Since 2021, Iran-backed groups have launched at least 165 attacks targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria.
  - » Iran-backed groups launched nearly 90 attacks on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq between January 2021 to March 2023, while the United States has only launched four rounds of airstrikes against those groups.
  - » While Biden ordered airstrikes against Iran-backed groups in [Syria in February 2021](#), [Iraq and Syria in June 2021](#), and [Syria in August 2022](#), U.S. force was calibrated to “limit the risks of escalation and minimize casualties” and Iran’s proxies continued to target U.S. and partner forces in between each of these U.S. airstrikes.
  - » Unlike in the previous cases, the [U.S. airstrikes on March 23](#)—after a drone attack from an Iran-backed group killed an American contractor and wounded six other Americans—were not initially limited to avoid killing militants, with eight Iranian-aligned individuals reportedly being killed in the operation.
  - » While no Iran-backed groups had targeted U.S. service members since March, even the more forceful U.S. airstrikes did not establish long-term deterrence, considering the large, sudden escalation against U.S. personnel over the past week.



- The Biden administration appeared previously to have been reluctant to target Iran-linked groups in Iraq because of the [fragile political environment](#) there in which Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani had limited control over the Shia militias, whose support he needed to win the election last year and who now constitute an important bloc in his governing coalition.
  - » The Iraqi government [condemned](#) the U.S. strike that killed Kataib Hezbollah militants on November 22 as a “clear violation of sovereignty,” while also arguing that attacks by militias are against Iraq’s national interest.

## What Should the United States Do Next?

- Since previous rounds of infrequent and limited U.S. strikes against Iran-backed groups have not deterred them or the regime in Tehran that funds, arms, and directs them, establishing deterrence will require the United States to exert consistent and strong military force against Iran-linked targets that endanger U.S. personnel or American partners in the region.
  - » U.S. strikes should target the fighters, not only the facilities, involved in attacks on Americans and hold Iran directly responsible for attacks by its proxies.
- The Pentagon should further buttress the recent deployments of U.S. military assets to the region by deploying additional *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyers that can help protect U.S. troops and partners from Iran-backed attacks.
- As JINSA recently documented in a list of [recommendations](#) for the Biden administration and Congress to support Israel, the United States should reinforce deterrence, replenish the U.S. stockpile of American weaponry in Israel that Israel can draw from in an emergency, and provide Israel with the diplomatic support it will need to defend itself. This support will give Israel access to the large number of weapons it will need for the ongoing fight in Gaza, and to help deter and prepare for the potential war with Iran and Hezbollah.
  - » The Biden administration and Congress should work to quickly replenish Israel’s stocks of air defense interceptors and other critical weaponry it needs so that Israel can better protect itself and deter further aggression by denying the ability of Iran-backed groups to conduct successful strikes.
  - » During each [conflict](#) that Israel fights, international pressure mounts to force it to end it prematurely, along with spurious accusations that Israel violates the law of armed conflict (LOAC). U.S. officials should publicly make clear, especially at the United Nations, that Israel complies with LOAC and strongly support its right to defend itself from threats.