



Deadly Iran-backed Attack Requires Response Against Iranian Regime Targets

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An Iran-backed group conducted a drone attack on January 28 that killed three U.S. service members and injured at least 34 in Jordan. This was the first known Iran-backed attack against U.S. forces in Jordan and, more significantly, the first time, since Hamas's October 7 invasion of Israel, that U.S. troops have been killed.

The Biden administration has previously only used limited and reluctant force to respond to attacks on U.S. forces. Indeed, it responded more regularly and strongly to attacks on commercial shipping (10 U.S. strikes in response to at least 46 attacks) than it has to those on U.S. forces (10 strikes in response to at least 165 attacks). The United States can no longer afford to be so hesitant. The killing of U.S. troops is a red line that demands a strong response. Failing to do so will result in more American casualties. To stop Iran-linked attacks, the United States will need to use force directly against Iranian regime targets as well as surge air defense assets to the Middle East that can better protect U.S. personnel and regional partners.

What Happened?

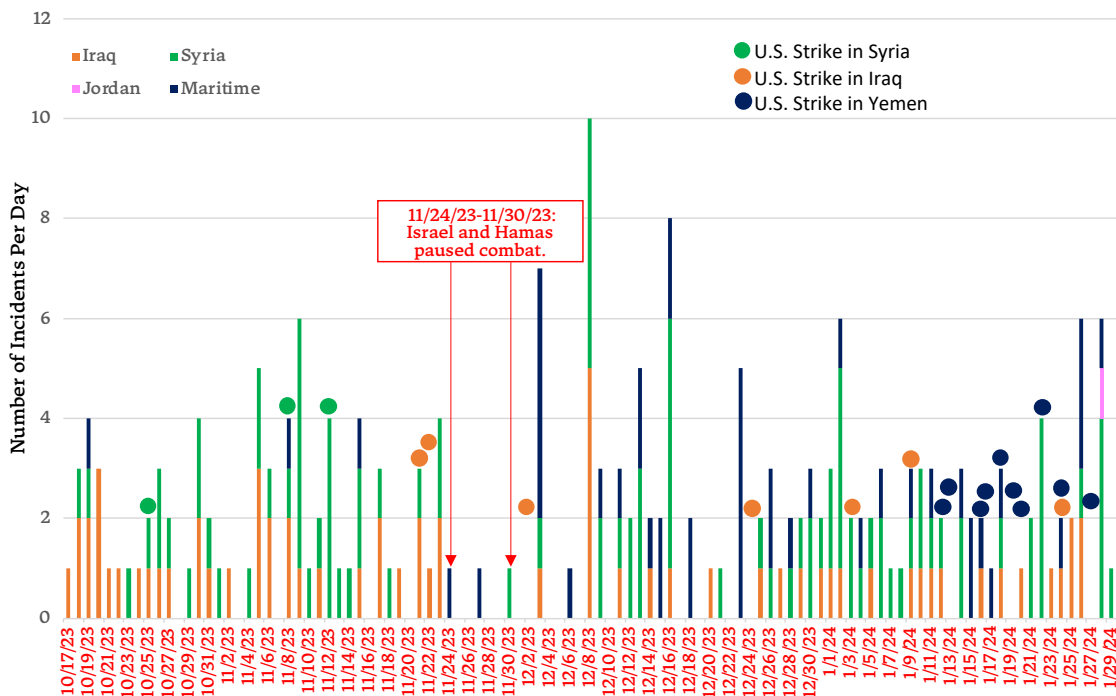
- On January 28, an Iran-backed group [launched](#) a drone attack that killed three and [injured](#) at least 34 U.S. service members at the Tower 22 facility in Jordan along the border with Syria.
 - » Later that day, President Biden [indicated](#) “we know it was carried out by radical Iran-backed militant groups operating in Syria and Iraq” and vowed to “hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner our choosing.”
 - » The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an umbrella organization of Iran-backed militias, [claimed](#) responsibility for attacks against three U.S. bases in Syria, including at Al Tanf, which is near the Iraqi and Jordanian borders.
- The attack follows U.S. airstrikes on January 24 against three facilities of the Iran-backed militia Kataib Hezbollah in response to the group's attacks against U.S. personnel, including an attack on January 20 against the Ain al-Asad base in Iraq that injured U.S. and Iraqi personnel.
 - » The U.S. strikes targeted Kataib Hezbollah “headquarters, storage, and training locations for rocket, missile, and one-way attack UAV capabilities,” according to a [statement](#) from U.S. Central Command.
 - » The United States also conducted airstrikes on January 24 that [struck](#) two Houthi anti-ship missiles that were prepared to launch at targets in the Red Sea.



Source: [CNN](#)

- Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria have launched at least 165 attacks on U.S. personnel since Hamas’s October 7 attack, beginning on October 17. The United States has launched 10 strikes against Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria and conducted another 10 strikes targeting the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, who have conducted at least 46 attacks on commercial and naval vessels since the Israel-Hamas war began.
 - » This was the first attack since that escalation began where an Iran-linked projectile was the direct cause of death for a U.S. service member.
 - » A U.S. contractor died from a cardiac incident during a previous attack.
 - » Before the January 28 incident, there had been roughly 70 injuries to U.S. personnel during the Iran-backed attacks since October 17.

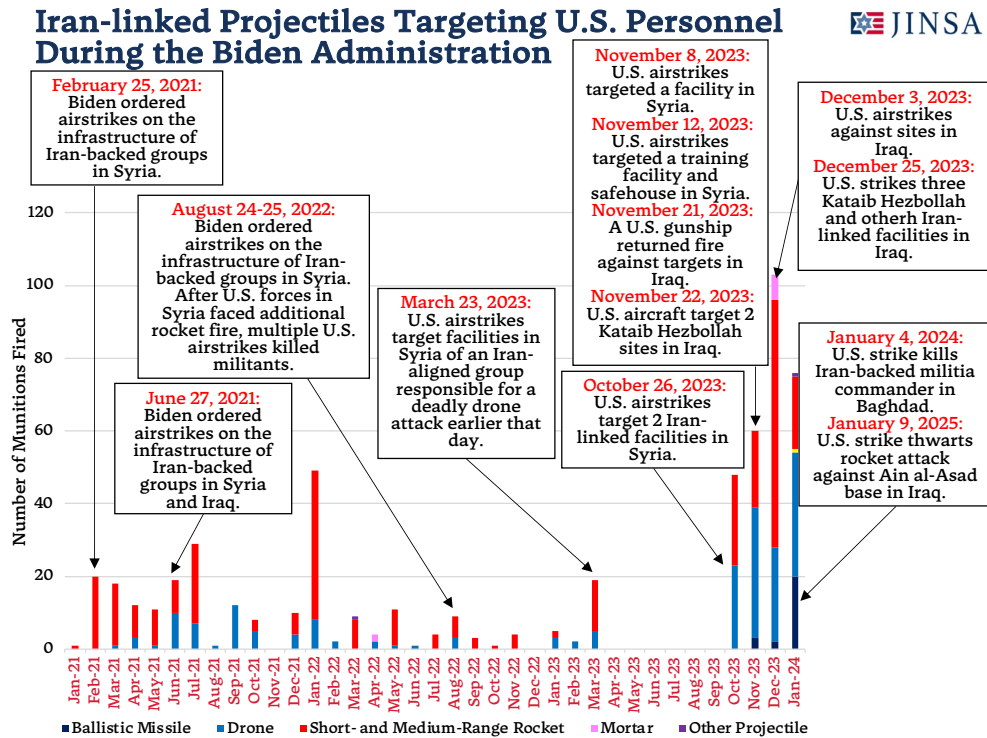
Iran-backed Attacks Against U.S. Personnel and Maritime Targets Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War



Why Is It Important?

- The death of U.S. service members is a redline that the United States must strongly and quickly reinforce any adversary from crossing. Yet, the Biden administration has shown much greater restraint in responding to Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces than to those on commercial shipping. That likely signaled to Tehran that there is a higher redline to trigger U.S. military force than in Middle Eastern waters like the Red Sea. Unless the United States corrects this perception by enforcing the redline against killing, if not injuring, U.S. troops, Iran will continue to endanger—and possibly kill—more Americans. But striking proxy group’s storage facilities will be insufficient to send a message to Tehran; the United States must hold the Iranian regime directly accountable for the attacks.
- In response to pressure, the Iranian regime has changed the location of its proxy attacks against U.S. interests.
 - » As Iran-backed attacks on U.S. personnel in Syria and Iraq mounted from October through November 2023, U.S. strikes slowly moved from Syria to Iraq and became more likely to target terrorist forces, not just infrastructure.
 - » But just as the United States began responding to attacks in Iraq in late November, Iran opened a new front with the Houthis attacking maritime targets, particularly in the Red Sea.
 - » The first Iran-backed to strike U.S. personnel in Jordan on January 28 followed the United States beginning to strike the Houthis in Yemen on January 12 and then launching nine more strikes in quick succession, with the latest one day before on January 27.
- However, the United States has been more restrained against Iran-backed groups who have regularly endangered U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria than against the Houthis who have targeted ships in the Red Sea.
 - » The United States has conducted 1 strike against Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria per roughly 16.5 attacks they have launched against U.S. personnel.
 - » The United States has targeted the Houthis at a much higher rate compared to its attacks, with 1 U.S. strike per 4.6 Houthi attacks against maritime targets.
- 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 194 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 between March 24 and October 17, even the more forceful U.S. airstrikes did not establish long-term deterrence, considering the large, sudden escalation against U.S. personnel.



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 use stronger, faster, and more frequent 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 United States should stop signaling a reluctance to respond to Iran-backed attacks with force and should update its messaging around these attacks to better reflect its a willingness to launch more destructive and deadly strikes if necessary.