



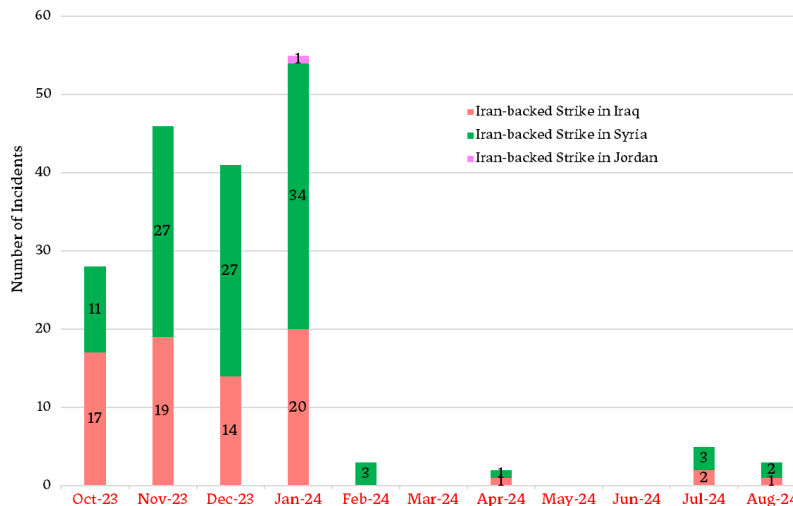
# Resumption of Iran-backed Attacks Against U.S. Troops After Israeli Operations

Ari Cicurel  
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

While Jerusalem and Washington wait for an Iranian and/or Hezbollah attack against Israel following the killing of senior Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, it appears that Iran has already started to retaliate against U.S. troops in the region. Iranian proxies have launched three attacks in August against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, as they previously have after Israeli military operations. There were also five attacks against U.S. troops in July, although likely for a different reason. These eight Iran-backed attacks in four weeks injured 15 U.S. troops and contractors.

This resumption of attacks after five months of almost complete calm suggests that the deterrent effect of previous U.S. strikes on the leadership of Iranian proxies has worn off. Tehran again appears to believe that it can use attacks against U.S. troops to force Washington to exert pressure on Jerusalem, without risking any consequences itself. The United States should respond with stronger, faster, and more frequent military force against Iranian (not just Iran-linked) targets that endanger U.S. personnel or American partners in the region.

Iran-linked Projectile Attacks Against U.S. Personnel Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War



## What Happened?

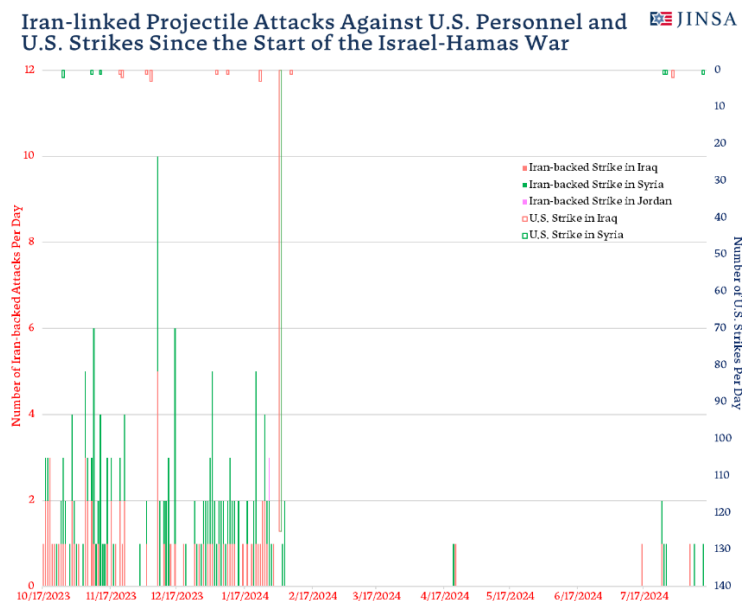
- On August 13, Iran-backed proxies in Syria launched six rockets at U.S. troops deployed to the Mission Support Site Euphrates facility near the [Conoco gas field](#) in Syria.
  - U.S. forces responded to the attack by launching artillery fire against the launch site.

- On August 9, Iran-backed militia launched an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that targeted the [Rumalyn Landing Zone](#) in eastern Syria, causing minor injuries to eight U.S. service members.
- On August 7, Iranian proxies in Iraq launched two rockets against the [Ain al-Assad airbase](#) in Iraq that injured five U.S. service members and two U.S. contractors.
- On July 30, U.S. forces “launched unilateral airstrikes” targeting 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 [targeted](#) facilities in Al-Qa’im near the Syrian border and Jurf al-Sakhar south of Baghdad, Iraq.
  - » The U.S. strikes killed four Iranian proxy group members, including a [Houthi UAV expert](#), and injured four other individuals.
- Iranian proxies also [launched](#) attacks against the U.S. Mission Support Site Euphrates near the Conoco gas field in Syria on July 25, 26, and 27.
  - » U.S. forces [returned fire](#) after the attack on July 26 against the launch site of the attack in Syria, but the location was empty by the time the U.S. responded and no militia were injured in the U.S. strike.
- On July 25, Iran-backed militia launched four rockets that [landed outside](#) of the Ain al-Assad airbase.
- On July 16, Iran-backed groups in Iraq [launched two drones](#) at the Ain al-Assad base in Iraq, which hosts U.S. troops. An Iraqi military official told Reuters that military forces downed one of the drones at the base perimeter.

## Why Is It Important?

- The recent resumption of Iran-backed attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria was likely the result of two factors. The attacks in July—which occurred shortly before and after meetings in Washington between U.S. and Iraqi officials—were likely an effort by Iranian proxies to signal their displeasure about the continued presence of U.S. forces in Iraq and security cooperation between the two countries. The more recent attacks in August were likely a decision by Iran to resume proxy attacks on U.S. forces in retaliation for Israeli military action.
- Following the deaths of senior Hezbollah and Hamas leaders, the attacks on August 7, 9, and 13 appear to be Tehran testing its ability to resume proxy attacks against U.S. troops in response to Israeli military operations.
  - » On July 30, an Israeli [strike](#) in Beirut, Lebanon killed Hezbollah’s most senior military commander, Fuad Shukr, in response to a Hezbollah rocket attack on July 28 that killed 12 Druze children and teenagers in the Golan Heights town of Majdal Shams.
  - » On July 31, Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas’s former political leader, was [killed](#) in Tehran, Iran. Iranian officials have blamed Israel for his death, but Israel has not claimed credit.
- Tehran has likely allowed its proxies to resume sporadic attacks on U.S. forces as a form of retaliation for Israel’s killing of Shukr.
  - » After the Majdal Shams attack, an Iraqi militia official told the *BBC*’s [Nafiseh Kohnavard](#) [that](#) Iran had given its “full blessing” to Iraqi proxies to continue their “full scale” attacks on U.S. forces if Israel conducted a massive retaliatory assault in Lebanon against Hezbollah. An Iranian official also told Kohnavard that “this time some other groups that didn’t take part in previous attacks in the last 9 months, will join the resistance operations too.”

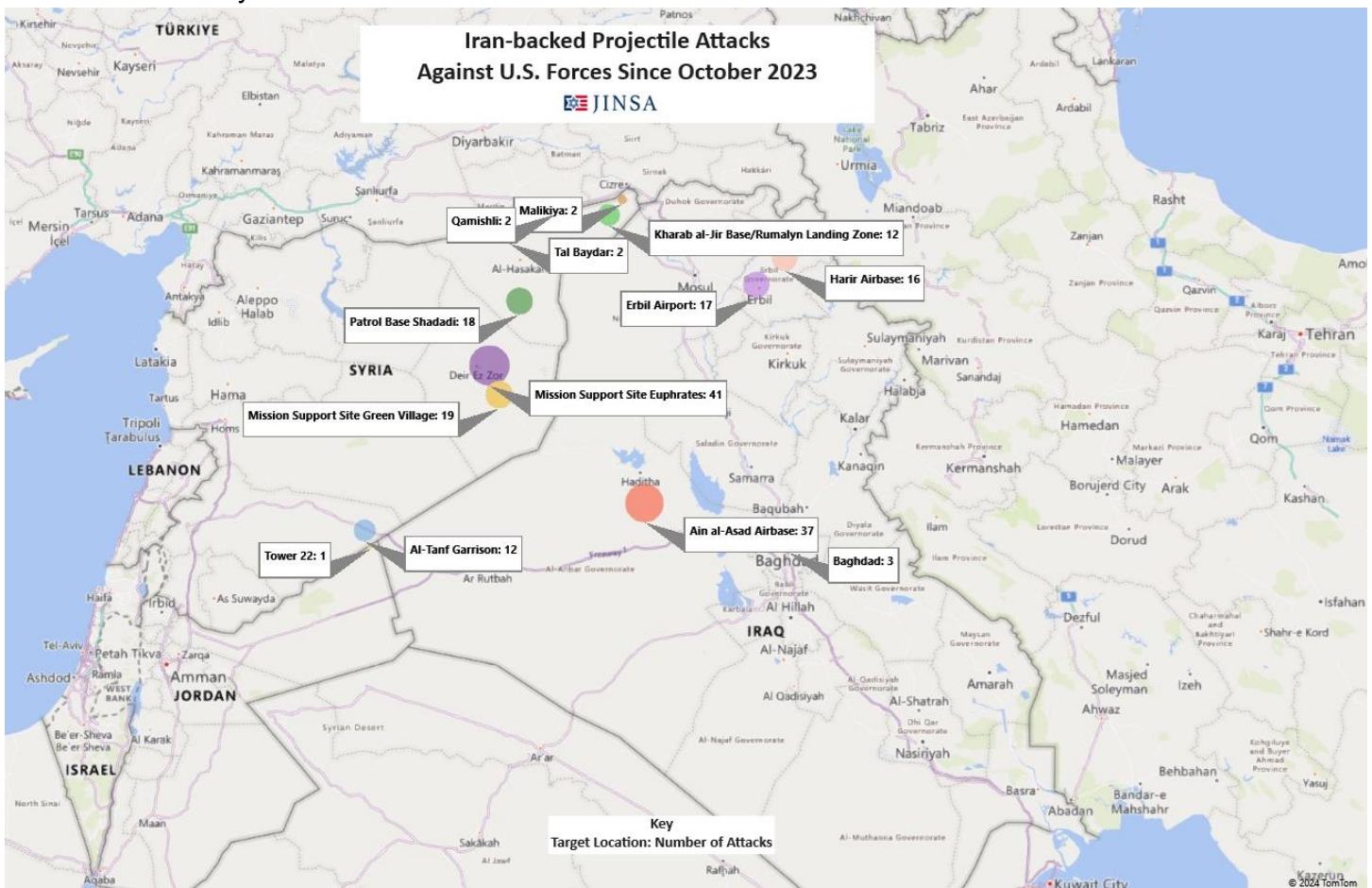
- » Rather than a massive attack into Lebanon, Israel responded to the Majdal Shams attack by targeting Shukr. Feeling compelled to retaliate, but with Israel's strike falling short of its red line, Tehran might have greenlit the recent attacks on U.S. forces while stopping short of the "full scale" attacks it reportedly threatened.
- » In 2021, Iran's Syrian partners did not want attacks against Israel launched from their territory, fearing an Israeli retaliation. Instead, members of Iran's elite Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran's other proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen agreed to retaliate to Israeli strikes by attacking U.S. forces in Syria, according to [The New York Times](#). The Iranian-linked groups determined that the U.S. responses would be less forceful than Israel's.
- On the other hand, the attacks in July were likely an attempt by Iran-backed militia to show their continued disapproval with the U.S. military presence in Iraq.
  - » Similar to attacks on April 21 and 22, the Iran-backed militia may have launched the attacks on July 16 as an attempt to demonstrate their disapproval of a high-level trip of Iraqi military officials to Washington to negotiate the continued presence of U.S. troops in Iraq.



- The United States had managed to establish limited deterrence against Iran-backed attacks on its troops with strikes in late January and early February that imposed significantly higher costs than any previous U.S. attacks.
  - » After a January 28 drone strike by an Iranian proxy killed three U.S. soldiers in Jordan, the United States launched [125 airstrikes](#) on February 2 that hit 85 targets at seven locations in Iraq and Syria and killed approximately 40 people.
  - » A U.S. airstrike on February 7 killed a [Kataib Hezbollah commander](#) responsible for attacks against U.S. troops.
  - » These U.S. strikes led to a nearly five-month pause in Iran-backed attacks on U.S. troops.
    - Starting on February 4, there was an 86-day pause in Iran-backed attacks on U.S. troops, then attacks on April 21 and 22, followed by a 78-day pause that ended with the July 16 attack.
- However, the resumption of attacks against U.S. troops indicates that the deterrence the United States established in February has now worn off. Iran's proxies retained the capacity

and capability to conduct operations in Iraq and Syria and were lying low to gauge U.S. intent after heightened U.S. airstrikes on February 2-7 against Iran-aligned targets in Iraq and Syria.

- » Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria have launched at least 182 attacks on U.S. forces since October 17, 2023, according to [JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker](#).
  - The presence of the Houthi UAV expert in Iraq who was killed by a U.S. strike on July 30 reinforces the close ties between Iranian proxies and their ability to share tactics, techniques, and procedures learned from the hundreds of attacks they have launched since October 2023. The Houthis have conducted over 290 attacks in the maritime domain since November 2023, which included launching at least 295 UAVs.
- » The United States has launched only 16 rounds of strikes against Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria involving at least 147 strikes but has not launched any strikes since February 7.



## 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 Iranian and 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.