

*JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy*

## **Bombings in Iraq Despite Biden Retaliation**

*Ari Cicurel - Senior Policy Analyst*

*Iranian-backed proxies have escalated their attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq soon after President Biden launched limited airstrikes in response to earlier attacks by these same groups, showing that the administration's attempts to deter further aggression are not succeeding. Biden's use of military force against Iranian-linked militias has been too narrow and inconsistent to have the desired effect. Moreover, whatever deterrent value the U.S. reprisals might have is further undermined by administration's withdrawal of air defense assets necessary to protect against Iranian-linked attacks and negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear program. Instead, the Biden Administration should pursue more forceful retaliation against groups responsible for attacks and a comprehensive, region-wide strategy to better defend against Iranian projectiles, including missiles, rockets, drones, and mortars, including by boosting capabilities of regional partners.*

### **What Happened?**

- In the past week, Iranian-backed militias in Iraq have rapidly escalated their rocket and drone attacks against U.S. personnel, partners, and interests in Iraq and Syria.
  - On July 5, [three rockets struck](#) the base perimeter of Al Asad Air Base in Iraq with no reported injuries and U.S. Counter-Rocket, Artillery, Mortar (C-RAM) shot down a drone above the American embassy in Baghdad less than twelve hours later.
  - On July 6, a [drone armed with explosives](#) attacked the Erbil airport and the U.S. consulate in Erbil with the Pentagon claiming there was no reported injuries or structural damage.
  - On July 7, Al Assad Air Base was struck by [fourteen rockets](#) and the U.S-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) claimed to have thwarted a [drone attack](#) on Syria's Al Omar oil field, the country's largest.
  - [Initial reports](#) indicate that the C-RAMs near the U.S. embassy in Baghdad again engaged projectiles during the early hours of July 8th.

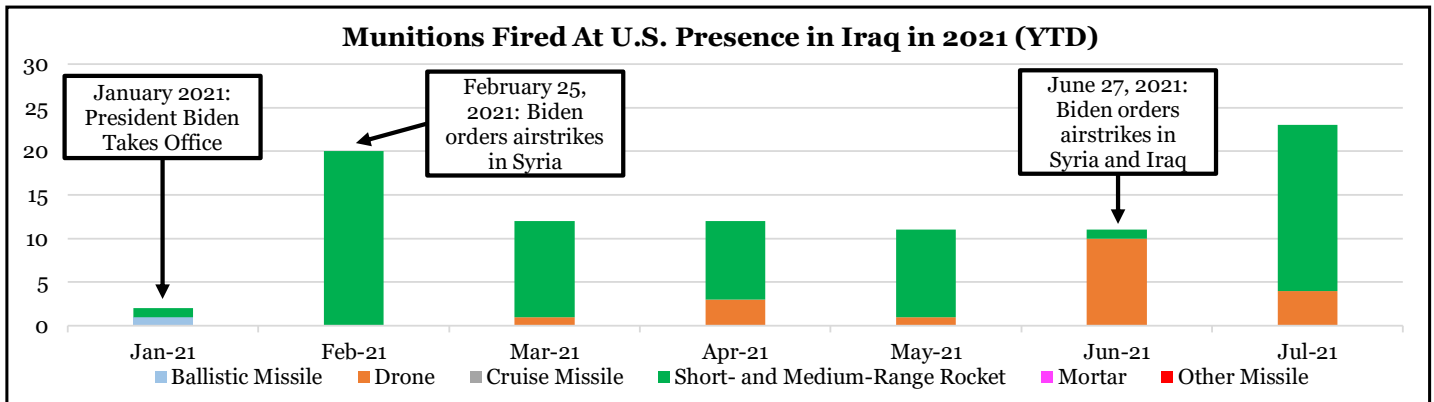
- The aggression comes shortly after President Biden ordered two airstrikes in Syria and one in Iraq on June 27 against facilities that Iranian-backed Iraqi militias used to facilitate drone attacks.
  - Biden had previously ordered airstrikes on February 25 in Iraq to degrade the capabilities of these groups and deter them from launching further aggression. However, less than a week after the U.S. airstrikes in February, Iran and its proxies attacked U.S. forces at Al Asad Air Base, Israeli-owned ships, and Saudi Arabia.
  - After Biden's airstrikes in February and June, JINSA analysis cautioned that they would have [limited deterrent value](#) and showed how Iranian-linked attacks throughout the Middle East are [on pace to far surpass previous years](#).
- Iranian proxies in Iraq and Yemen have rapidly increased the amount and frequency of drone attacks this year, according to [data compiled by JINSA](#). There have been 12 drones used in Iraq this year compared to only 1 each in 2020 and 2019.
- The persistent Iranian-backed aggression comes as the Biden administration is rapidly withdrawing military forces from the region and negotiating with Iran a possible return to the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement.
  - The Pentagon is reportedly in the process of removing eight Patriot antimissile batteries from Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, a Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system from Saudi Arabia, and hundreds of troops that operate the systems.

## Why Is It Important?

- Biden has calibrated his airstrikes to limit the risks of escalation; however, the increasing frequency of Iranian-linked attacks indicates that Tehran and its proxies are not deterred by the tit-for-tat U.S. strikes.
  - The inconsistent and limited nature of U.S. reprisals coupled with the withdrawal of U.S. air defense assets and Washington's continued nuclear negotiations with Tehran, especially against the backdrop of a now almost complete U.S. departure from Afghanistan, suggests to Iran that the Biden administration is more committed to retrenchment than stopping Iranian aggression.
  - Iran's strategy is to achieve sanctions relief through the JCPOA negotiations while simultaneously raising the costs on America's presence in the Middle East with the ultimate goal of pushing the United States out of the region.
  - If Iran's leadership sees that overall U.S. regional presence is declining, despite occasional U.S. strikes against Iranian proxies, they will conclude their strategy is effective and that further attacks will speed up U.S. withdrawal.
  - Any such Iranian perception of U.S. weakness is likely to encourage continued, and likely increased, aggression against U.S. personnel, interests, and partners.

# What Should the United States Do Next?

- To address the growing problem of Iranian-backed aggression, the Biden administration should develop a holistic regional strategy aimed at preventing, defending against, and deterring projectile attacks. As JINSA [detailed in a recent memo](#), this should include:
  - Consistent and more forceful U.S. military responses against Iranian sponsors of the groups that endanger U.S. personnel, partners, and interests
  - An international coalition to enforce the UN embargo on Iranian arms shipment;
  - Increasing military training with and between Israel and Arab partners;
  - Leaving current U.S. air defense assets in the region;
  - Facilitating the creation of a regional early warning and air defense network;
  - Joint research and development with partners to expand air defense capabilities, particularly against drones; and
  - Provisioning precision-guided munitions to regional partners, like Israel, so that they can degrade Iranian capabilities and deter escalation.



## DISCLAIMER

The findings and recommendations contained in this publication are solely those of the authors.