

2023 Starts with Strikes on U.S. Forces in Syria

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Once again, U.S. forces in Syria have come under attack with Iran the most likely culprit. The two rockets fired at a U.S. base in northeast Syria on January 4 mark at least the 79th attack on American troops in Syria or Iraq since Biden took office in January 2021. The Biden administration has launched only three rounds of retaliatory strikes during this spate of attacks. This sporadic U.S. response has been too little and too infrequent to deter further Iranian aggression. The United States should quickly attribute blame for this latest attack and respond with strong, consistent military force against those responsible, including both the group that launched the rockets and their likely Iranian superiors.

What Happened?

- On January 4, “two rockets targeted coalition forces at Mission support Site Conoco, northeast Syria” according to a [press release](#) from U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).
 - » The attack caused no injuries or damage to the base, according to the CENTCOM statement.
 - » DEirEzzor24, a Syrian news outlet, reported that Iranian militias [fired rockets](#) from al-Mayadin at the Omar oil field where the Conoco base is located. Al-Mayadin is a known location of Iranian-backed militia operations.
 - » Members of the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces located the launch site and [discovered](#) a third unfired rocket.
- Air defenses at Ain al-Asad air base in Iraq [neutralized](#) a UAV on January 8, with the U.S.-led international military coalition claiming it was part of an “operational exercise,” while Iraqi military sources suggested it may have been hostile.

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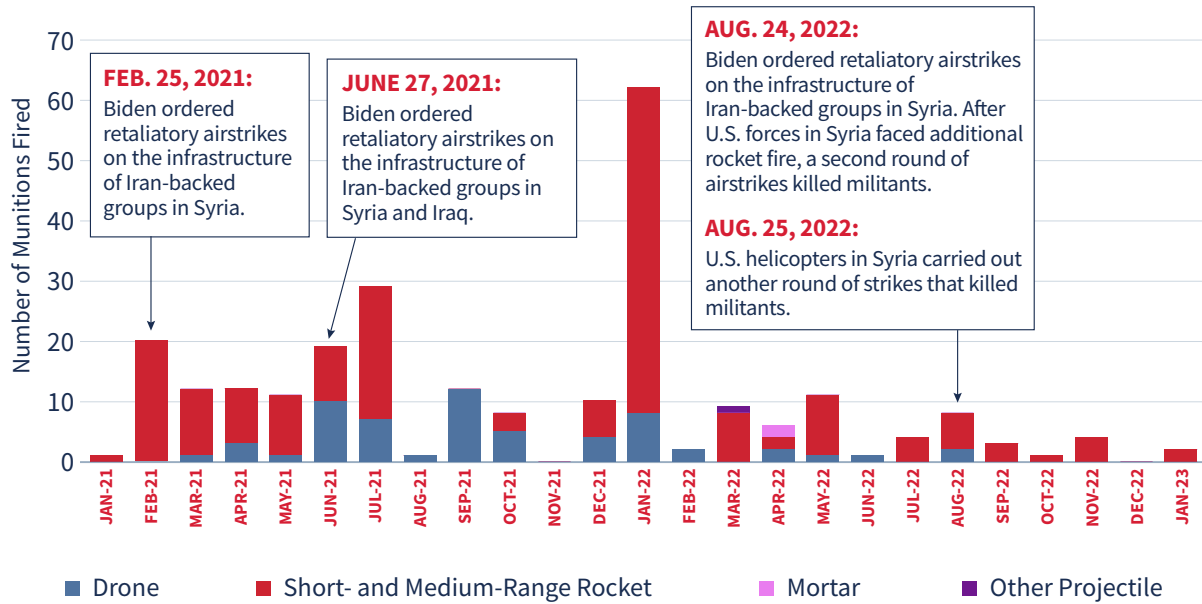
Known Strikes Against U.S. Forces in Syria Likely Linked to Iran

- 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 in Syria.
- SEP. 18** 2022 • Three rockets targeted the Green Village base in northeast Syria.
- NOV. 17** 2022 • Rockets targeted the Green Village base.
- NOV. 25** 2022 • Two rockets targeted the al-Shaddadi base.
- JAN. 4** 2023 • Two rockets targeted forces at Mission support Site Conoco.

Why Is It Important?

- Although no one has claimed responsibility for the attack on January 4, Iran and its partner militias frequently launch rockets, missiles, and UAVs at U.S. service members and partners in the Middle East. While President Biden has ordered three rounds of retaliatory U.S. airstrikes for similar Iran-backed attacks, these have been too limited, inconsistent, and avoided imposing costs directly on Iran to deter the regime from initiating further aggression.
 - » The timing of the strike may have been related to the third anniversary of the U.S. airstrike that killed Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani, the former leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force.
- Since Biden took office, Iranian-backed groups have fired over 230 projectiles, including 170 rockets and 60 UAVs, during 79 attacks on positions hosting U.S. troops or contractors in Iraq and Syria, according to JINSA's [Iran projectile tracker](#). Iran enables these militias to target Americans, partners, and interests in the Middle East by providing them weaponry, funding, and training.
 - » Iranian-backed militia launched over 170 munitions during 56 strikes against U.S. troops and contractors in Iraq.
 - » These groups launched at least 62 munitions during 23 attacks targeting U.S. troops in Syria.
- Biden has ordered retaliatory airstrikes infrequently—only three times in two years. Given that Iran's regional partners have continued to launch strikes, this muted and inconsistent U.S. response has not had a deterrent effect.
 - » On February 25, 2021, Biden [issued](#) his first known use of military force by targeting the infrastructure of Iranian-backed groups in Syria after they launched three rockets at U.S. bases in Iraq. The attack killed a non-American U.S. contractor and injured a U.S. service member.
 - » On June 27, 2021, Biden [ordered airstrikes](#) against the infrastructure of Iranian-backed groups in Iraq and Syria after attacks on U.S. troops.
 - » Despite Iranian-backed militias targeting U.S. service members on August 15, 2022 the Biden administration initially [limited retaliatory fire](#) on August 24, 2022 to striking infrastructure. It was not until Iranian-backed groups injured American troops later on August 24, 2022 that U.S. forces conducted airstrikes that day and the following day to kill militants.

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



What Should the United States Do Next?

- CENTCOM should publicly attribute blame for the January 4 attack on those who launched the rockets and anyone who enabled them, including, Iran, if it was an Iranian-backed group.
- President Biden should order consistent and forceful military action in response to attacks on U.S. troops against those responsible, including Iran.
- The Biden administration should lead an effort to develop a regional integrated air and missile defense network that includes U.S. partners, such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and potentially Saudi Arabia.