

Deadly Iranian-linked Drone Attack in Syria NatSec Brief

Ari Cicurel
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

An Iranian-linked drone attack in Syria killed an American contractor and wounded six other Americans on March 23. Later that day, the United States conducted airstrikes against facilities of the Iranian-backed militia responsible for the attack, reportedly killing eight fighters. This was only the fourth Biden administration response to any of the roughly seventy-eight attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria since the start of 2021. Importantly, it was also the strongest and swiftest.

Nevertheless, the U.S. response was not sufficient to deter further Iranian attacks. The next day, March 24, Iranian proxies retaliated against U.S. forces near the al-Omar oil field in northern Syria, with no casualties immediately reported. This appears to be a test to see if the March 23 airstrikes represent a new, more muscular U.S. policy or a one-off event.

It will have to be the former to deter further Iranian-linked attacks and significantly degrade their ability to conduct further aggression. While U.S. strikes have been calibrated to minimize the risks of escalation, specifically targeting Iranian-aligned fighters or even their Iranian commanders, not merely their facilities, will be key to reaching this level of deterrence. The Biden administration urgently must adopt a much more robust policy of consistent and comprehensive military pressure that, similar to Israeli operations, inflicts direct costs on Iran and not just its proxies, while also working to improve regional air defenses.

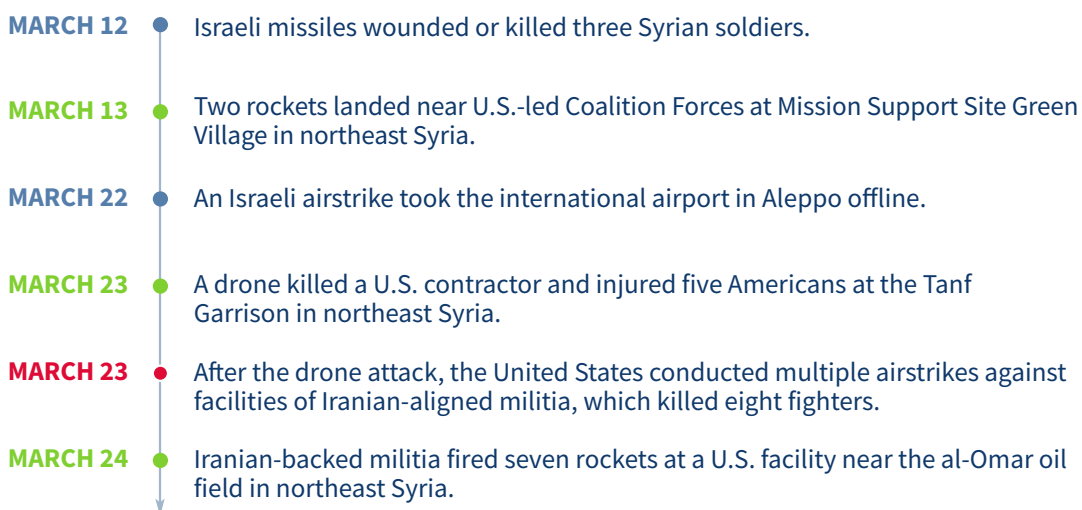
What Happened?

- On March 23, a self-destructing Iranian-linked drone killed a U.S. contractor and injured five service members and one additional contractor at the Tanf Garrison in Hasakah, northeast Syria, according to a [statement](#) from the Department of Defense.
 - » Reportedly, the [main air defenses](#) at the Tanf Garrison were “not fully operational” at the time of the attack, although it is not clear at this time why that is the case and if the attackers were aware of this vulnerability before the strike.
- Afterward, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin, upon the direction of President Joe Biden, ordered F-15E fighter jets to [strike](#) a munition warehouse, a control building, and an intelligence-collection site affiliated

with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The multiple U.S. airstrikes killed eight Iranian-aligned fighters in eastern Syria, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Right.

- » Austin explained in the Defense Department statement that the U.S. strikes were in response to the attack earlier that day as well as a recent series of IRGC-backed strikes on U.S. forces. The Department of Defense statement also noted that the strikes were “intended to limit the risk of escalation and minimize casualties.”
 - On March 13, [two rockets](#) had landed near U.S.-led Coalition Forces at Mission Support Site Green Village in northeast Syria. That attack did not wound or kill any troops. In [testimony](#) before the Senate Armed Services Committee later that week, Kurilla indicated that an Iranian-aligned militia launched the rockets and that “they are undeterred.”
- » Commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) General Michael “Erik” Kurilla indicated in a [statement](#) released on March 24 that U.S. forces “are postured for scalable options in the face of any additional Iranian attacks.”
- » On March 24, Iranian proxies fired [seven rockets](#) at a U.S. facility near the al-Omar oil field in northern Syria. There are no indications of casualties from this attack.
- The Iranian-backed attacks on March 13 and 23 against U.S. forces in Syria followed shortly after likely Israeli airstrikes on Iranian-aligned targets in Syria.
 - » On March 12, airstrikes likely by Israel [reportedly](#) targeted a weapons depot in Syria for Iran-backed militia, linked to what may be an underground facility for producing surface-to-surface missiles. The attacked allegedly wounded or killed three military personnel.
 - » On March 22, an Israeli airstrike put the international airport in Aleppo [out of service](#).

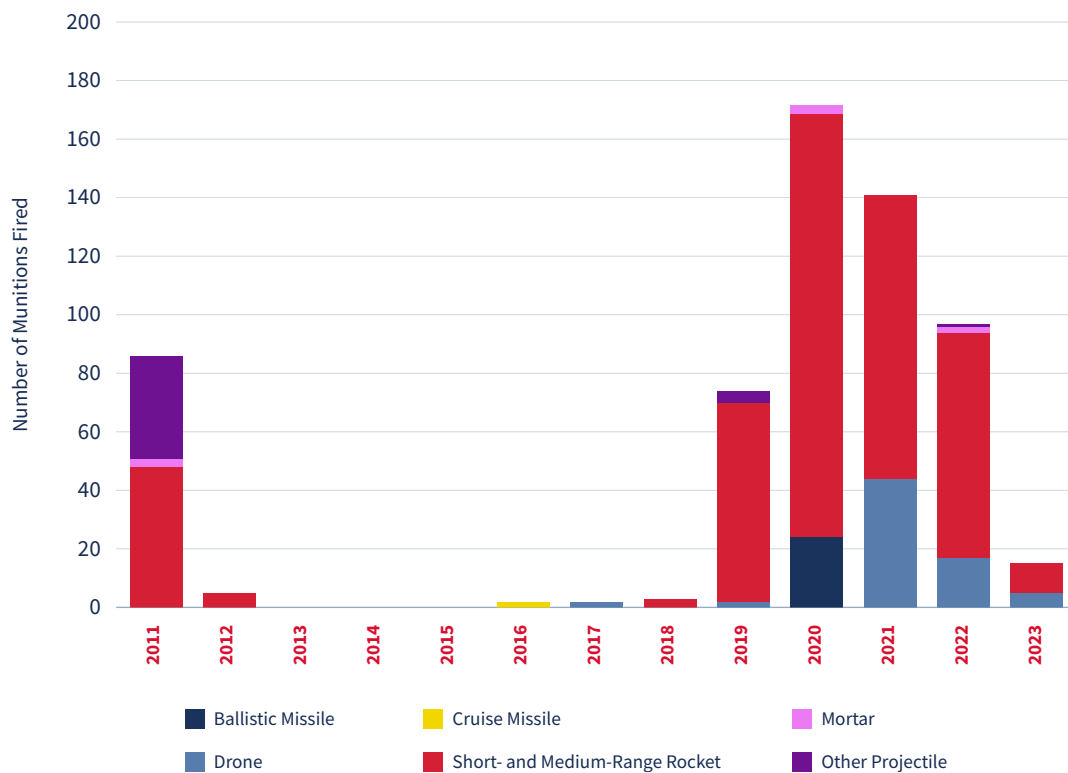
Timeline of Strikes in Syria During March 2023



Why Is It Important?

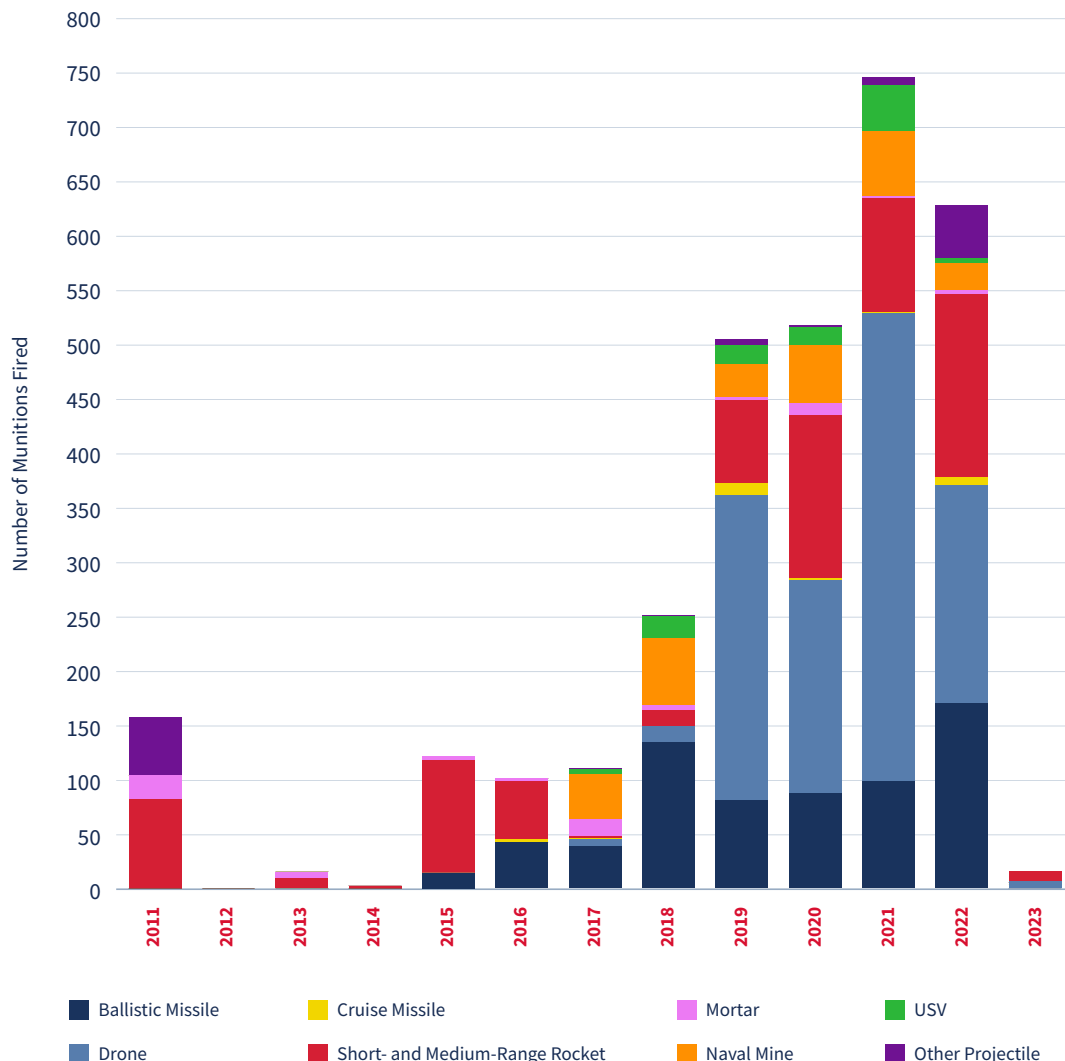
- Iran and its proxies have increasingly targeted U.S. service members in the Middle East, rarely triggering U.S. retaliation. While the swift, deadly U.S. airstrikes after the March 23 attack sent a stronger signal to the Iranian regime and its proxies, the rocket attacks on American troops on March 24 indicates that these groups remain undeterred. U.S. use of military force against these adversaries has been too inconsistent to deter them or significantly degrade their capabilities.
- Iran and its proxies launch routine attacks on U.S. service members and positions.
 - » As JINSA’s [Iran Projectile Tracker](#) shows, this trend began in 2019 with over seventy munitions fired at American service members and positions and peaked in 2020 at over 170 munitions.
 - » During the entire Trump administration, Iran and its proxies only conducted fifty-four attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, which consisted of them firing 268 projectiles.
 - » General Kurilla [testified](#) on March 23, that there have been seventy-eight attacks on U.S. troops since January 2021 when the Biden administration began. In that time, **Iran’s proxies have fired nearly 250 projectiles**, already nearly reaching the total during the entire Trump administration.

Iranian-linked Projectiles Targeting U.S. Forces and Positions Since 2011 By Weapon Type



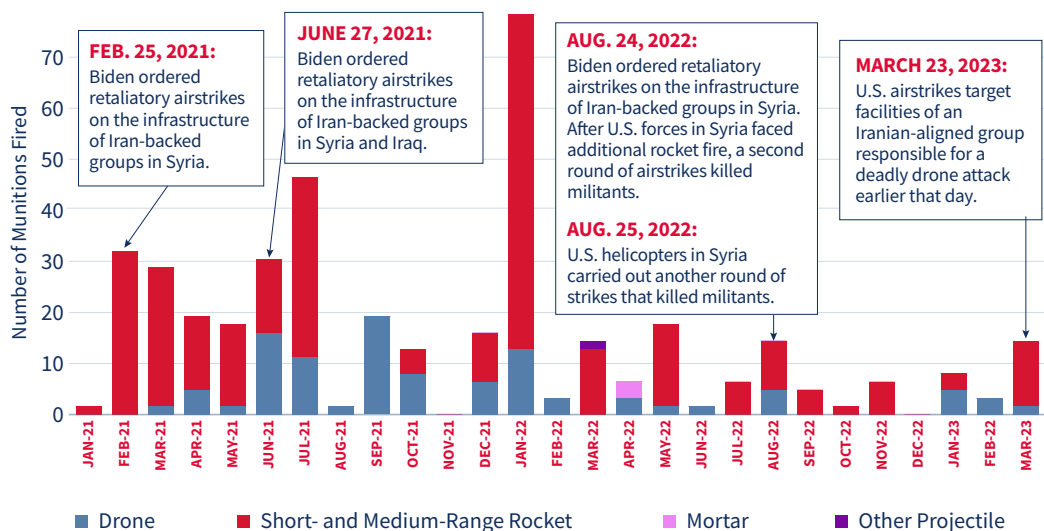
- The increased attacks on U.S. troops are part of a widespread escalation by Iranian-backed militia. According to JINSA’s [Iran Projectile Tracker](#), the number of munitions that Iran and its proxies launched **peaked in 2021 at 747 projectiles being fired, a forty-four percent increase over 2020, including at least 430 drones, which was also a record**. Iran and its proxies fired **629 projectiles in 2022**, including over 200 drones, at U.S. service members, partners, and interests.
- » The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ (IRGC) proliferation of weaponry to proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza enables Iranian-aligned militias to bombard U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq as well as America’s regional partners like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel.
- » The trend toward increased projectile strikes began in 2018 and 2019. Iranian-backed groups fired over 250 projectiles in 2018 and over 500 in both 2020 and 2021, compared to no more than 120 between 2015-2017.

Iranian-linked Munitions Launched Per Year Against U.S. Personnel, Partners, and Interests in the Middle East 2011-Present



- Before the U.S. airstrike on March 23, Biden had ordered airstrikes against Iran infrequently, with only three prior rounds of strikes in two years. Prior to the March 23 airstrike, President Biden had not ordered a strike against Iranian-aligned groups since an extended exchange of airstrikes on August 24 and 25. Since then, Iranian-backed groups have fired eighteen rockets and drones at U.S. troops and facilities in Iraq and Syria. Given that Iran’s regional partners have continued to launch strikes after each prior round of U.S. airstrikes, the 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 rocket 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 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.
- » Unlike in the previous cases, the U.S. airstrikes on March 23 were not initially limited to avoid killing militants, with eight Iranian-aligned individuals reportedly being killed in the operation.

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

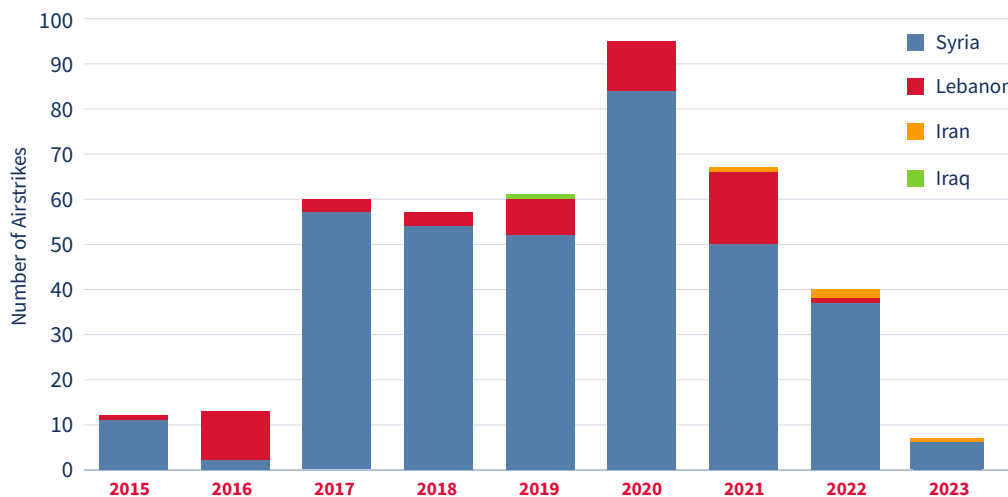


- The limited costs that the United States has imposed on Iranian-aligned aggressors has not only emboldened their attacks but also made American troops and positions favorable targets compared to Israel. Unlike the United States, Israel has [repeatedly and preemptively degraded](#) Iran’s ability to develop, manufacture, and proliferate these weapons, including by attacking both the IRGC’s proxy militias throughout the region and Iranian targets directly.

- » **Since Israel started its “Campaign Between the Wars” in 2015, it has conducted over 400 airstrikes** to degrade Iran’s proliferation and development of weaponry, including 350 in Syria, over fifty in Lebanon, four in Iran, and one in Iraq, according to data compiled by JINSA.
- » Beginning under former Prime Minister Naftali Bennett Israel [adopted](#) what it calls an “Octopus Doctrine” to impose direct costs on Iran—the head of the octopus—for its aggression, and not just the regime’s proxy militias—the tentacles.
- » Seeking to avoid a conflict with Israel, Iran’s Syrian partners have not wanted attacks against Israel launched from their territory. Instead, members of Iran’s elite Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran’s other proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen agreed in 2021 to retaliate after 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.

Location of Israeli “Campaign Between the Wars” Airstrikes

 JINSA



- While Iranian-designed projectiles—particularly drones—have posed the most immediate threat to U.S. service members, interests, and Middle East partners for several years, they now endanger Ukraine and the West’s vital interest to see Russia’s military defeat and Ukrainian victory.
- » Iran is directly engaged in Russia’s unlawful war against Ukraine by [providing Moscow](#) with reconnaissance and armed attack drones, like the Shahed-136, that have devastated Ukrainian critical infrastructure and civilians.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Modeled in part on Israel’s “Campaign Between the Wars” and “Octopus Doctrine,” CENTCOM should launch consistent and preemptive strikes against weapons convoys, storage facilities, and launch sites that Iran or its proxies use in attacks on American troops, as well as hold Iran directly responsible for the aggression it enables by funding, arming, and directing militias.
 - » U.S. strikes should target the fighters, not only the facilities, involved in attacks on Americans.
- With America’s immediate national security priority being the defeat of Russian forces in Ukraine and Kyiv’s victory in the conflict, the Biden administration should clearly signal to Iran that it is prepared to use tools beyond sanctions and diplomacy, including military force and covert action, to disrupt and impose major costs on Iran’s lethal support to Russia and brazen challenge to vital U.S. interests.
- The Biden administration should lead an effort to develop a regional integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) network that includes U.S. partners, such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, and potentially Saudi Arabia.