



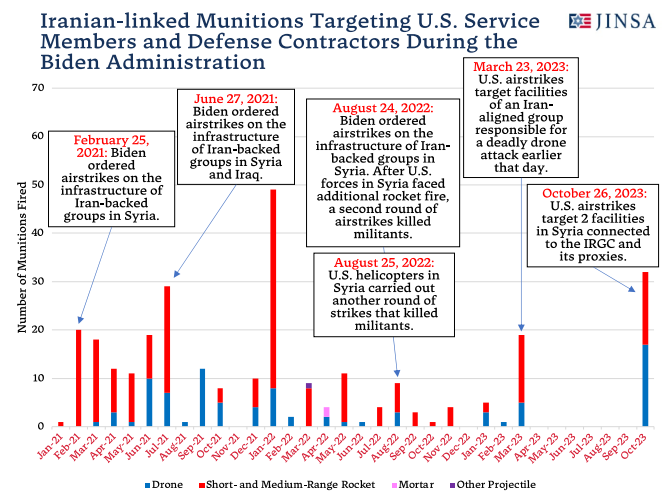
United States Undermines Deterrent Value of Its Strikes Against Iran-linked Targets

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Overnight on October 26, the United States conducted its first airstrikes against Iran-linked targets since the start of the Israel-Gaza war on October 7. The U.S. airstrikes were clearly intended to build deterrence against the Iranian regime and its proxies amid an Iran-backed escalation against U.S. forces in the Middle East. Yet, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's statement after the airstrikes and reporting that the Biden administration only launched the strikes after learning of an American fatality undermined their deterrent value by indicating a reluctance to use military force. Regardless of the cost that the recent U.S. airstrike imposed, deterring Tehran and its proxy groups will require consistent and strong military force that holds the Iranian regime directly accountable for the aggression it enables alongside a surge of air defense assets to the Middle East that can better protect U.S. personnel and regional partners.

What Happened?

- Overnight on October 26, the United States “conducted self-defense strikes on two facilities in eastern Syria used by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and affiliated groups,” in response to the spate of Iran-backed attacks against U.S. military forces that began on October 17, according to a [statement](#) from Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.
 - Per U.S. officials, two U.S. F-16 aircraft struck [weapons and ammunition storage facilities](#) in Syria, marking the 5th round of strikes against Iran-backed forces. The United States did not coordinate with Israel about the strikes.
 - A Senior U.S. military official also reportedly [claimed](#) that the United States “know[s] that there were people on the target at various points during the day ... we know that they were not civilians.”
 - According to officials who spoke with [Politico](#), the targets in in Syria, near Abu Kamal, were chosen because the sites were connected to the IRGC but had no civilian connection. The strikes took place in Syria because the United States does not request permission to launch airstrikes in that country, whereas Iraq would require that.
- Over the past week, Iran-backed groups have launched a spate of at least [nineteen](#) attacks on U.S. forces, including multiple attacks in Iraq at facilities in [Ain al-Asad](#), [al-Harir](#), [Erbil](#), and [Baghdad](#) and in Syria at facilities in [al-Tanf](#), [Kharab al-Jir](#), and possibly [al-Shadadi](#), as discussed in this earlier [JINSA NatSec Brief](#).



- » The [attacks](#) killed one U.S. citizen contractor as a result of a cardiac episode and injured twenty-one U.S. personnel.
- » On October 27, after the U.S. airstrikes overnight, Iran-backed groups attacked the Green Village facility near the al-Omar oil field in Syria, where U.S. personnel are located, and targeted the Ain al-Asad base with a drone, according to unconfirmed reports from Iranian [news sources](#).
- According to senior Biden administration officials who spoke with [Politico](#), President Biden initially chose not to launch airstrikes after the first attacks against U.S. troops on October 17, and instead directed officials to launch a public messaging campaign intended to deter further Iran-backed attacks. However, once news emerged that an American contractor died as a result of cardiac arrest brought about by the attack, the Biden administration felt that stronger military action was necessary.
- In response to the Iran-backed [escalation](#) against U.S. personnel, President Biden had warned on October 25 that “if [Iran continues] to move against these troops, we will respond.”
 - » At an October 26 press briefing, Coordinator for Strategic Communications at the National Security Council John Kirby [announced](#) that President Biden said, “there was a direct message relayed” to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warning Iran against further attacks on U.S. forces in the region.
 - However, Khamenei may not have directly received or Iranian senior leaders fully internalized the president’s message. Mohammad Jamshidi, a top aide to Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, [said](#) on October 26 that “the US messages were neither directed to the leader of the Islamic Revolution nor were they anything but requests from the Iranian side. If Biden thinks he has warned Iran, he should ask his team to show him the text of the messages.”
 - » Austin’s [statement](#) after the U.S. airstrikes further reinforced the deterrent redline the administration intended to set with the attacks: “Iran wants to hide its hand and deny its role in these attacks against our forces. We will not let them. If attacks by Iran’s proxies against U.S. forces continue, we will not hesitate to take further necessary measures to protect our people.”
- However, Austin also [described](#) the U.S. strikes as “precision” and “narrowly-tailored strikes in self-defense [that] were intended solely to protect and defend U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria.”
- A U.S. official after the airstrikes told journalists during a [background briefing](#) that “Iran is the center of gravity for what we’re seeing. Iran, through the IRGC, arms, funds, trains, equips, supports and directs a variety of militia groups across the region. So yes, there is a direct tie between the militia groups and all the front organizations that claim responsibility for attacks against U.S. personnel. But the core point here is that Iranian fingerprints are all over this. Iran would seek to hide behind some deniable plausibility, and we are holding them accountable by targeting infrastructure associated with the IRGC.”

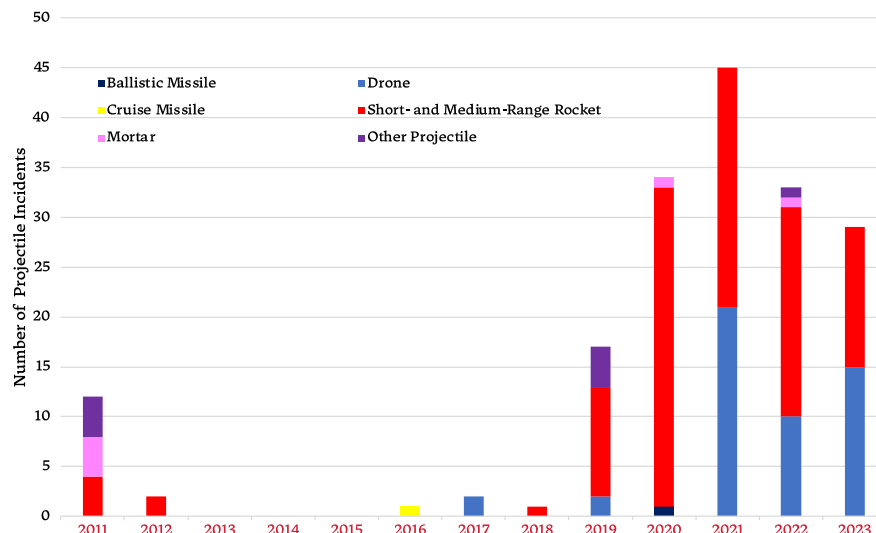
Why Is It Important?

- The recent U.S. airstrikes are intended to restore deterrence against Iran-backed efforts to gauge and undermine the administration’s willingness to uphold its recent threats against Iran and Hezbollah broadening the Israel-Hamas conflict. Yet the accompanying statement from Secretary Austin, by indicating the administration’s reluctance to use further force, undermines the redlines set out by him and the president. Building deterrence will require

consistent military force and stronger, clearer deterrent language from the Biden administration, considering that previous infrequent and limited airstrikes have not deterred the Iranian regime or its proxies.

- Although Secretary Austin’s statement echoed the redline that President Biden had set, it also hinted that the United States has restrained itself which could be an attempt to signal to the Iranian regime and proxy leaders that future U.S. airstrikes can reach more valuable targets and that U.S. decision-makers have limited its attacks to avoid escalation.
- If the *Politico* reporting is true, the administration’s decision-making calculus for choosing to launch airstrikes only after learning that an American died has set a redline not at zero tolerance for Iran-backed attacks as President Biden and Secretary Austin’s recent public statements would indicate but at the much lower bar of only using military force when an American dies.
- While the extent of the damage and casualties that the recent U.S. strikes caused remains unclear, previous U.S. strikes had been limited to avoid escalation and failed to deter further attacks.
 - » Iran-backed groups have launched over 100 attacks on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq since 2021, while the United States has only launched five rounds of airstrikes against those groups.

Iranian-linked Projectile Incidents Targeting U.S. Service Members, Partners, and Interests In Iraq and Syria Since 2011 JINSA



- » The regime’s willingness to attack U.S. personnel stems in part from the limited and inconsistent use of U.S. military force against Iran-linked threats.
 - 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 since March, even the more forceful U.S. airstrikes did not establish long-term deterrence, considering the large, sudden escalation against U.S. personnel over the past week.
- By signaling its proxies' preparedness to deploy their formidable "[ring of fire](#)" against U.S. forces in the Middle East and Israel, Tehran seeks to warn the Biden administration against boosting its support for Israel by raising costs on the U.S. military presence in the region.
 - » Such a conflict would be costly, unpredictable, and likely would escalate quickly into a multi-front war in which Hezbollah's arsenal of as many as [150,000 rockets and missiles](#) and Iran's advanced ballistic missiles and drones could potentially overwhelm Israeli air defenses far beyond anything Hamas has ever accomplished.
- The limited costs that the United States has imposed on Iran-aligned groups in Syria and Iraq has not only emboldened their attacks but also made American troops and positions favorable targets compared to Israel.
 - » 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.
 - » Iran-linked groups have a history of targeting U.S. forces in Syria in response to Israeli airstrikes. Starting in 2021, Iran's Syrian partners had not wanted attacks against Israel to be 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.
- In response to the attacks, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin gave several [orders](#) on October 21 to increase [preparedness](#) in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of operations, which covers the Middle East, including:
 - » Redeploying the USS *Dwight D. Eisenhower* Carrier Strike Group, which had been deployed to the Eastern Mediterranean along with the USS *Gerald R. Ford* Carrier Strike Group due to the Israel-Gaza war, to the Arabian Gulf;
 - » Activating Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battalions and Patriot batteries in the region "to increase force protection for U.S. forces"; and
 - » Placing additional troops on "prepare to deploy orders...to increase their readiness and ability to quickly respond as required."
 - » The United States is also [providing](#) Israel with two Iron Dome short-range air defense batteries that the U.S. Army had acquired in addition to the Tamir interceptors for the Iron Dome that the United States has already delivered.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Since previous rounds of infrequent and limited U.S. strikes against Iran-backed groups has not deterred them or the regime in Tehran that funds, arms, and directs them, establishing deterrence will require the United States to exert consistent and strong 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. President Biden should also adopt a policy modeled in part on Israel’s “Campaign Between the Wars” and “Octopus Doctrine,” of holding the Iranian regime directly responsible for the aggression it enables.
- The Pentagon should further buttress the recent deployments of U.S. military assets to the region by deploying additional *Arleigh Burke*-class guided-missile destroyers that can help protect U.S. troops and partners from Iran-backed attacks.
- As JINSA recently documented in a list of [recommendations](#) for the Biden administration and Congress to support Israel, the United States should reinforce deterrence, replenish the U.S. stockpile of American weaponry in Israel that Israel can draw from in an emergency, and provide Israel with the diplomatic support it will need to defend itself. This support will give Israel access to the large number of weapons it will need for the ongoing fight in Gaza, and to help deter and prepare for the potential war with Iran and Hezbollah.
 - » The Biden administration and Congress should work to quickly replenish Israel’s stocks of air defense interceptors and other critical weaponry it needs so that Israel can better protect itself and deter further aggression by denying the ability of Iran-backed groups to conduct successful strikes.
 - » The U.S. stockpile of U.S.-owned weaponry in Israel, called War Reserve Stockpile Ammunition-Israel (WRS-A-I) has become [depleted and obsolete](#), preventing it from serving its strategic purpose of providing Israel with access to weaponry it would need in an emergency. Deterring the Iranian regime and its proxies from escalating to a multifront war requires them to fear that the United States and Israel — both together and independently — have sufficient capacity to conduct a long, high-intensity war.
 - The United States should replenish WRS-A-I with much-needed precision-guided munitions (PGMs), chiefly Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) tailkits and GBU-39 and GBU-53/B small diameter bombs, and potentially other much-needed weapons.
 - » During each [conflict](#) that Israel fights, international pressure mounts to force it to end it prematurely, along with spurious accusations that Israel violates the law of armed conflict (LOAC). U.S. officials should publicly make clear, especially at the United Nations, that Israel complies with LOAC and strongly support its right to defend itself from threats.