



Iran-Backed Attacks Risk Escalating Israel- Hammas Conflict

Ari Cicurel
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

Amid the Israel-Gaza war, terrorist attacks in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen on October 18-23 targeted or came near U.S. forces in the Middle East. The concurrent Iran-backed attacks against U.S. forces and Israel strongly indicate the Iranian regime is seeking to gauge and erode U.S. willingness to continue supporting Israel's self-defense and deter further U.S. deployments to the region or military action to support Israel and prevent Iran from escalating the conflict. The United States should bolster its military and diplomatic support for Israel and use consistent, strong military force against any group that endangers U.S. service members.

What Happened?

- Two Iran-backed groups claimed to have conducted [separate attacks](#) on October 18 against the Ain al-Asad and al Harir bases in Iraq, which host U.S. service members. Troops sustained minor injuries in the attacks, which were the first attacks by any Iran-backed groups against American troops since March.
- On October 19, attacks emanating in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen endangered or were in proximity to U.S. service members.
 - » Two of the drones targeting al-Tanf, Syria, where U.S. troops are deployed, were reportedly shot down, while the third struck the facility. The attack [resulted](#) in the death of one U.S. contractor from a cardiac episode as well as caused some damage and minor injuries. U.S. officials have not attributed responsibility for the attack, but Iran-backed militia have a history of striking U.S. forces in Syria with drones.
 - » There was also an unconfirmed attack against the [Conoco gas field](#) in eastern Syria, which also hosts U.S. service members.
 - » Later on October 19, Iran-backed Houthis launched [four missiles and fifteen drones](#) that the U.S. Navy Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS *Carney* [intercepted](#). It is possible that they were aimed at the USS *Carney*, but Pentagon Press Secretary Brigadier General Pat Ryder said they were “launched from Yemen heading north along the Red Sea, potentially towards targets in Israel.”
- On October 20, 21, and 22 the Ain al-Asad Air Base came under [fire](#) again from drones and [rockets](#), and rockets also [hit](#) a base that hosts U.S. service members near Baghdad International Airport on October 20.
- On October 23, the Pentagon [confirmed](#) that U.S. forces at al-Tanf neutralized two one-way attack drones.
- These attacks came amid the Israel-Gaza war, which began with a heinous attack on October 7 by the Iran-backed terrorist group Hamas. Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), another Iran-backed terrorist group in Gaza, have launched over 7,000 rockets, missiles, and drones at Israel since the war began.

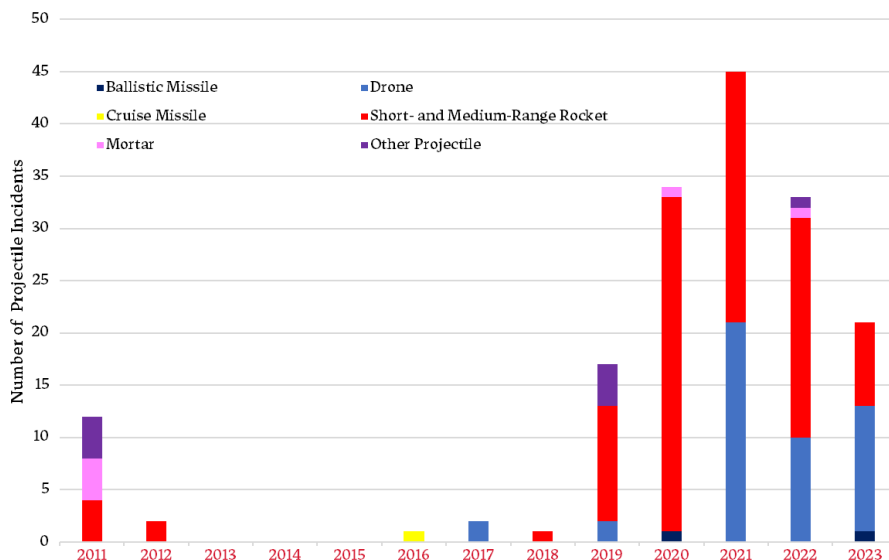
- » Lebanese Hezbollah, Iran’s most capable proxy force, has allowed Palestinian terrorists to attack Israel from southern Lebanon and itself launched rockets and missiles at Israel, including dozens on October 19 amid the other attacks from Iran-backed groups.
- In response to the attacks, U.S. Secretary 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 another unspecified location in the CENTCOM area of responsibility;
 - » 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.”

Why Is It Important?

- The attacks against U.S. service members in Iraq and Syria alongside the Houthi missile attack indicate that Iran is trying to gauge U.S. support for Israel and its willingness to use force against threats to the Jewish state and U.S. troops in the region. The proximity of these attacks to one another combined with their shared patron, the Iranian regime, indicates a strong likelihood that Iranian officials are coordinating the attacks with their proxies. 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.
 - » Given the rapid pledges and steps to [support](#) Israel by President Biden, officials in his administration, and members of Congress, as well as the president’s explicit warnings to Tehran not to escalate, any perceived weakening of these promises and threats would shatter U.S. credibility in the eyes of Tehran and contribute directly to raising the risks of the major regionwide war that the United States is directly seeking to prevent.
 - » 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.
- As detailed in JINSA’s regular [morning updates](#) on Israel’s Operation Swords of Iron, these attacks come in the wake of threats from Iranian regime officials and leaders of their proxy militias to broaden the Israel-Gaza war by attacking U.S. forces and Israel—thereby sharpening the chances of further escalation, absent any serious U.S. response.
 - » Based on muqawama (resistance) militia-affiliated news outlets and other posts that Amir al-Laabi, Hamdi Malik, and Michael Knights reviewed, they [argue](#) that “the unified nature of the latest muqawama statements and actions strongly suggests that they have received an orchestrating directive from the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force]” to prepare for a regional war.

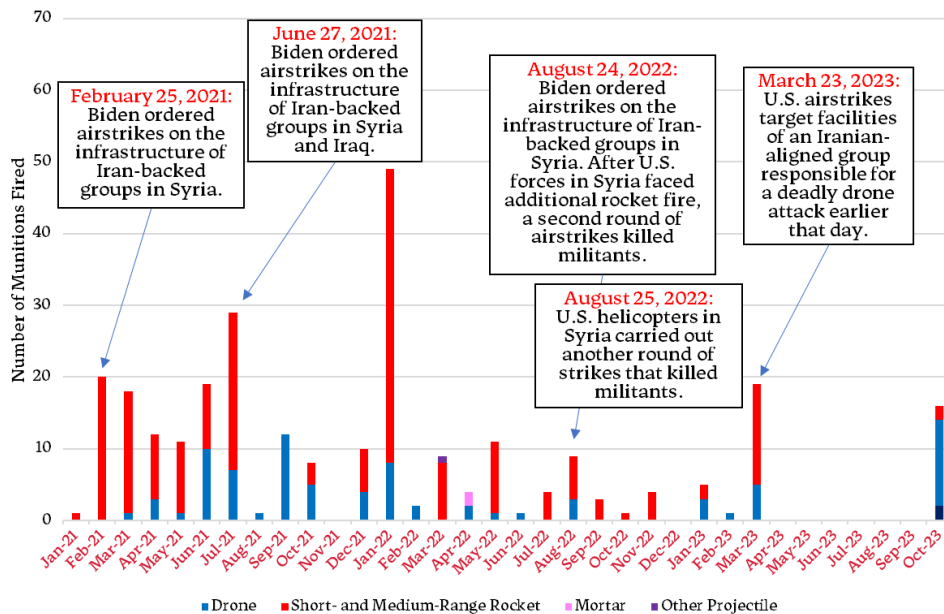
- » Hezbollah had called for October 18 to be a global “[day of rage against the enemy](#)” in response to an attack against the al-Ahli hospital, which it blamed on Israel, despite Israeli officials releasing clear evidence that the rockets originated from Gaza.
 - » On October 17, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei [threatened](#) Israel if it continued to strike targets in Gaza, announcing on Iranian television that “if the crimes of the Zionist regime continue, Muslims and resistance forces will become impatient, and no one can stop them.”
 - » On October 16, *Reuters* [reported](#) that Iran’s Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said that “preemptive action” may unfold soon and that “leaders of the Resistance will not allow the Zionist regime to take any action in Gaza. ... All options are open and we cannot be indifferent to the war crimes committed against the people of Gaza.”
 - » Ahmad “Abu Hussein” al-Hamidawi, the head of the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah militia in Iraq, [said](#), “our missiles, drones, and special forces are ready to direct qualitative strikes at the American enemy in its bases and disrupt its interests if it intervenes in this battle.” He also threatened to launch missiles at Israel.
 - » Deputy information secretary of the Iran-aligned Houthis in Yemen Nasreddin Amer [said](#), “the possibility of our direct participation in support of the resistance depends on developments there, and we are closely monitoring the situation there and are in constant contact with the resistance.”
- Iran’s willingness to test new U.S. redlines against escalation stems in no small part from the consistent lack of U.S. responses for Iran-backed attacks on U.S. service members in the Middle East.
 - » As [JINSA’s Iran Projectile Tracker](#) shows, 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. Iran-backed groups have launched at least ninety attacks on U.S. service members in Iraq and Syria since President Biden took office.

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



- » 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 groups 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 then has not established long-term deterrence.

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



- The limited costs that the United States has imposed on Iran-aligned 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](#)

What Should the United States Do Next?

- 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.
 - » The U.S. stockpile of U.S.-owned weaponry in Israel, called War Reserve Stockpile Ammunition-Israel (WRSA-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.
 - The United States should replenish WRSA-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.
- President Biden should further buttress the recent deployments of U.S. military assets to the region and underscore his warnings to Iran and Hezbollah not to escalate by deploying additional Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers that can help protect U.S. troops and partners from Iran-backed attacks. 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.
 - » U.S. strikes should target the fighters, not only the facilities, involved in attacks on Americans.