



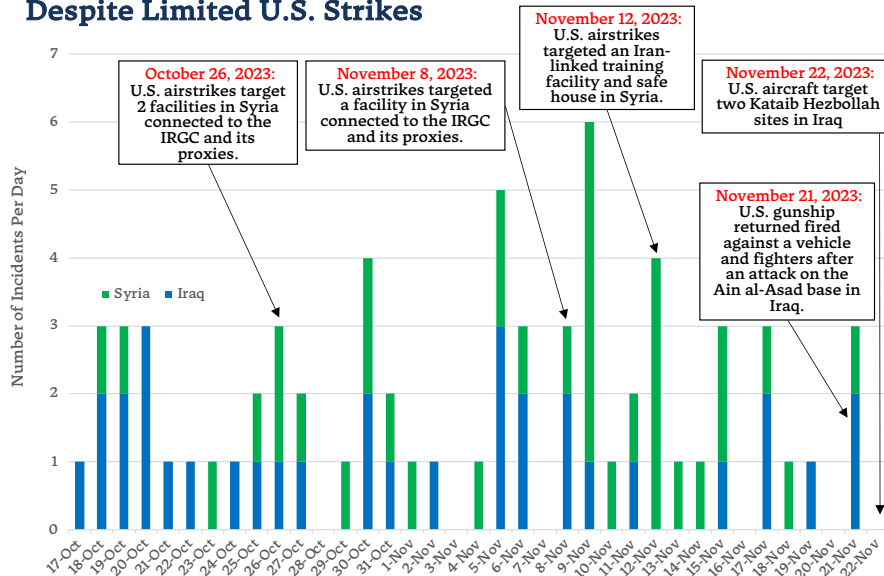
First U.S. Strikes in Iraq Amid Iran-backed Escalation

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On November 21 and 22, the United States conducted three strikes against Iran-linked forces after a close-range ballistic missile attack against the Ain al-Asad base in Iraq caused eight injuries. The first U.S. strike was a spontaneous attack by a U.S. AC-130J “Ghostrider” gunship, which returned fire and killed several of the militants who had launched the missile. Later, the United States carried out two additional strikes against deliberately selected infrastructure targets in Iraq connected to the Iran-backed groups responsible for the attack. Since groups backed by the Tehran regime began attacking U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq in the aftermath of Hamas’ savage October 7 attack on Israel, the AC-130J fire was the most immediate U.S. response to an Iran-linked attack, the first U.S. strike against Iran-backed groups in Iraq, the first known incident that was not against a deliberately selected target, and the first to have targeted the fighters directly responsible, not their infrastructure. There have now been at least 68 attacks on U.S. forces in the last five weeks—and five U.S. responses. Iran-backed groups have surpassed 150 attacks on U.S. personnel since 2021.

Thus far, U.S. responses have failed to stop further Iran-backed attacks. The United States, however, appears to be increasing the tempo of its strikes—hitting back at Iranian proxies three times in two days compared to three times over the previous four weeks. The AC-130 strike that targeted proxy fighters was also qualitatively different than those previous U.S. responses that targeted Iranian-linked infrastructure. Despite this, these three strikes, on their own, remain unlikely to deter the Iranian regime itself. To accomplish this, the United States will need to use rapid, consistent, and strong military force that holds the Iranian regime, its personnel as well as those of its proxy forces, 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.

Iran-backed Attacks Against U.S. Personnel Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War Continued Despite Limited U.S. Strikes JINSA



What Happened?

- After two close-range ballistic missiles caused [eight injuries](#) and minor infrastructure damage at the Ain al-Asad base in Iraq on November 21, a U.S. AC-130J “Ghost Rider” gunship returned fire at a vehicle traveling in a convoy through Abu Ghraib, 20 miles (30 kilometers) west of Baghdad, and killed several militants responsible, according to U.S. defense officials.
 - » This was the first use of a close-range ballistic missile against U.S. personnel since an escalation of Iran-backed attacks in Iraq and Syria began on October 17.
 - » The identity of the eight injured persons is unknown so far.
 - » This was also the first reported U.S. strike in Iraq since July 2021 and the first known spontaneous U.S. strike since the Israel-Hamas war began.
 - At a [press briefing](#) after the U.S. strike on November 21, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh suggested that there might be other U.S. responses that have not been publicly reported.
 - She noted that the Department of Defense does not “read out every single time that—how a certain system or capability takes down a drone or a rocket attack. We have had other cases where we have responded in retaliation when we were able to identify the point of origin.”
 - » The AC-130 was already in the air, enabling it to [respond](#) rapidly to the attackers, according to Singh.
 - » Iran-linked social media accounts claimed responsibility for the attack against the Ain al-Asad base.
- Overnight on November 22, the United States “conducted discrete, precision strikes against two facilities in Iraq ... in direct response to the attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces by Iran and Iran-backed groups, including the one in Iraq on November 21, which involved use of close-range ballistic missiles,” according to a U.S. Central Command [statement](#) on X.
 - » U.S. officials [said](#) that U.S. fighter jets targeted a Kataib Hezbollah operations center and a command and control node near Al Anbar and Jurf al Saqr, south of Baghdad. The U.S. strikes killed at least five Iran-backed fighters.
 - » While the U.S. AC-130J had returned fire against assailants at the Ain al-Asad base hours beforehand, these were the first U.S. strikes against deliberately selected targets in Iraq since June 2021.
 - » While previous U.S. strikes since October 17 had occurred with several days between them, these took place less than 24 hours after the AC-130J strike.

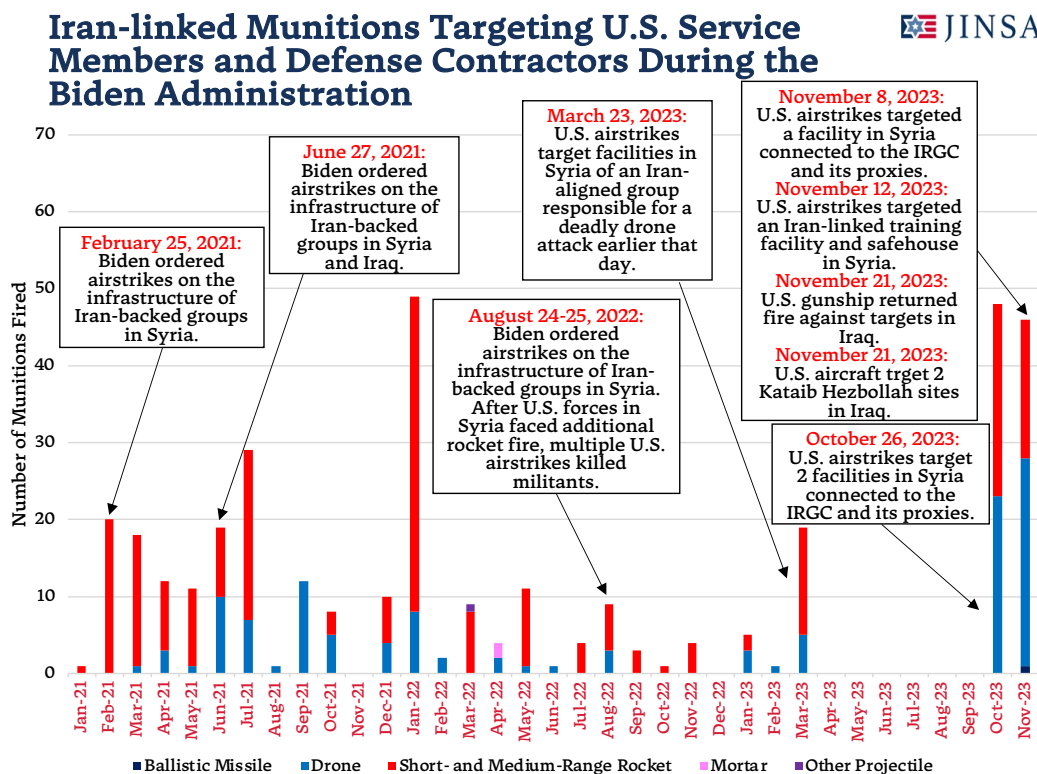
Why Is It Important?

- The U.S. strikes on November 21 and 22 indicate a more rapid response to Iran-backed attacks. They also mark the first known willingness to use force against these groups in Iraq since July 2021. The immediacy of the U.S. strikes, the short-time frame between those on November 21 and 22, the targeting of forces responsible for attacks against U.S. troops, not just their infrastructure, and the choice to target Iran-linked sites in Iraq—contrasting with recent strikes that had only been in Syria—could indicate the Biden administration has expanded the location, rapidity, and intensity of the force it is willing to use. However, targeting

Iran-linked infrastructure has not previously deterred the Iranian regime or its proxies, who have not signaled a willingness to de-escalate their attacks.

- » As indicated in this [JINSA NatSec Brief](#) after Iran-backed groups continued to target U.S. personnel, despite the previous U.S. strike on November 12, targeting Iran-linked fighters, not just facilities, coupled with the shorter time between U.S. strikes and stronger U.S. rhetoric may send a stronger deterrent message to the Iranian regime and its proxies.
- » 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.
- Following Hamas' 10/7 assault on Israel, Iran-backed groups began a wave of attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria on October 17. Since then, there have been at least 68 attacks, with 33 targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq and 35 in Syria.
 - » The attacks have [injured](#) roughly 70 U.S. personnel, at least 25 of them with traumatic brain injuries. One U.S. contractor died from cardiac arrest during an attack on October 26.
- The first U.S. response came on October 26, after 19 Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces in just 10 days—an average of 2.7 per day.
 - » U.S. F-16 aircraft struck two [weapons and ammunition storage facilities](#) in Syria.
- Between that first U.S. response, on October 26, and the second on November 8—a span of 13 days—there were another 23 attacks against U.S. forces, a slightly lower average of 1.7 per day, but still highlighting the first strike's lack of deterrent effect.
 - » Not only did the attacks continue, but according to U.S. officials who spoke with [The New York Times](#), Iran-backed groups have attached larger loads of explosives — as much as 80 lbs.—onto drones they fire at U.S. personnel.
- There were at least nine Iran-backed attacks in the three days between the November 8 and November 12 U.S. strikes—a higher average of roughly three per day. Iran's Yemeni proxy, the Houthis, also shot down a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone during this period.
 - » That the United States chose to strike Iran-linked facilities and fighters again so soon after its previous attack, suggests it might have been dissatisfied that its earlier responses had not had the desired effect of reducing Iranian-backed attacks and decided to increase the tempo of its strikes.
 - » Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin's comments after the U.S. strikes on November 12 signaled a greater willingness to use military force than the statement after the U.S. strikes on October 26, which as noted in this [JINSA NatSec Brief](#) "undermined their deterrent value by indicating a reluctance to use military force."
 - Speaking to reporters after the strikes on November 12, Austin [indicated](#) that the United States "won't ever project or predict or advertise when we're going to conduct a strike, but we will—rest assured that we will strike at a time and place of our choosing" and that "these attacks against our people must stop."
 - In comparison, Austin [hinted](#) that the United States had restrained itself during the October 26 strikes by calling them "narrowly-tailored strikes in self-defense [that] were intended solely to protect and defend U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria."

- Between the U.S. strikes on November 12 and 21, Iran-backed groups conducted at least 15 attacks, another slight decline of roughly 1.6 per day, with nine in Iraq and five in Syria.
- There has already been at least one attack each in Iraq and Syria since the U.S. strike on November 21.
- That limited U.S. strikes against infrastructure are ineffective at deterring Iran-backed attacks against U.S. forces should not be surprising—it is the same approach that the Biden administration tried and failed—to produce deterrence from 2021 to early 2023. Since 2021, Iran-backed groups have launched over 150 attacks targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria.
 - » Iran-backed groups launched nearly 90 attacks on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq between January 2021 to March 2023, while the United States has only launched four rounds of airstrikes against those groups.
 - » 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.
 - Since the U.S. last U.S. strike in June 2021, there have been at least 58 attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq.
 - » 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.



- The Biden administration appeared previously to have been reluctant to target Iran-linked groups in Iraq because of the [fragile political environment](#) there in which Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani had limited control over the Shia militias, whose support he needed to win the election last year and who now constitute an important bloc in his governing coalition.
 - » The Iraqi government [condemned](#) the U.S. strike that killed Kataib Hezbollah militants on November 22 as a “clear violation of sovereignty,” while also arguing that attacks by militias are against Iraq’s national interest.

What Should the United States Do Next?

- Since previous rounds of infrequent and limited U.S. strikes against Iran-backed groups have 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 and hold Iran directly responsible for attacks by its proxies.
- 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 (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. 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 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.