



Iran-backed Escalation Against U.S. Forces Persists Despite 3rd Round of U.S. Strikes

Ari Cicurel
Assistant Director of Foreign Policy

On November 12, the United States conducted its third round of airstrikes against Iran-linked targets in Syria since October 17, when Iran-backed groups began attacking U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria against the backdrop of the Israel-Hamas war. In the twenty-three days since, there have been at least 52 attacks on U.S. forces, 56 American injuries, and one related casualty.

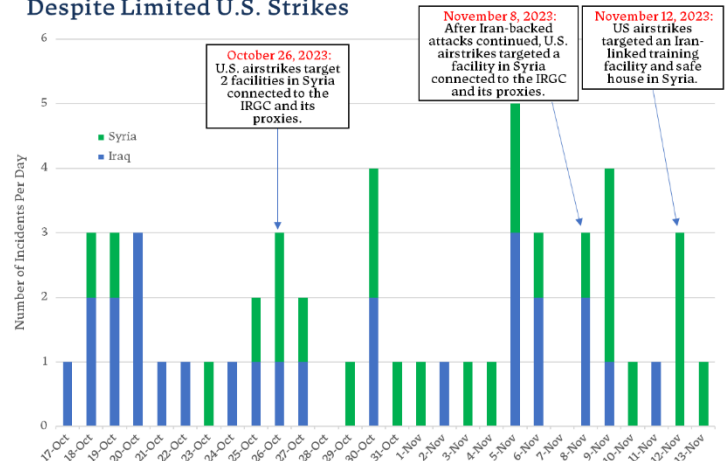
Faced with this escalation, the Biden administration had been relying on the same approach it used when dealing with similar attacks before October 7. Its two prior airstrikes (on October 26 and November 8) fit a pattern of infrequent and limited U.S. strikes coupled with rhetoric that was more conciliatory than bellicose. That approach failed to deter the Iranian regime. They already launched further attacks shortly after both the U.S. strike on November 8 and 12. While the latest U.S. strikes—targeting a training facility and safe house and killing several Iran-linked fighters—could signal the Biden administration’s willingness to target the personnel of those responsible for attacking U.S. forces, not only their infrastructure, four Iran-backed attacks against U.S. personnel shortly afterward indicates that these groups remain undeterred.

To deter the Iranian regime and its affiliated groups the United States will need to use 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?

- Since the Iran-backed attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria began on October 17, the United States has responded three times, with airstrikes on October 26, November 8, and November 12.
 - » After the November 8 U.S. strikes, Iran-backed groups attacked U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria six times in three days.
- On November 12, the United States conducted its third round of strikes against two Iran-linked facilities in Syria.
 - » According to a [statement](#) from U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, the targets were “a training facility and a safe house near the cities of Abu Kamal and Mayadin, respectively.”
 - » A senior U.S. defense official [told](#) Jennifer Griffin of Fox News that six to seven

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



Iranian proxy fighters were killed during the strikes, and there were two hours of secondary explosions at one of the locations, indicating the destruction of a large amount of weaponry.

- » The Department of Defense [reportedly](#) assessed that the safe house functioned as a headquarters for Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated groups.
- » Austin also [told](#) reporters at a news conference in Seoul that “these attacks must stop, and if they don’t stop, then we won’t hesitate to do what’s necessary, again, to protect the troops.”
- After the U.S. strikes on November 12, Iran-backed groups [conducted](#) four attacks in Syria that day and on November 13, including launching:
 - » Multiple rockets at the U.S. Mission Support Site Euphrates on November 12;
 - » A one-way attack drone at the U.S. Green Village facility near the al-Omar oil field on November 12;
 - » The U.S. facility at Shadadi with another one-way attack drone on November 12; and
 - » Multiple drones against the U.S.-led coalition Rumalyn Landing Zone base on November 13.

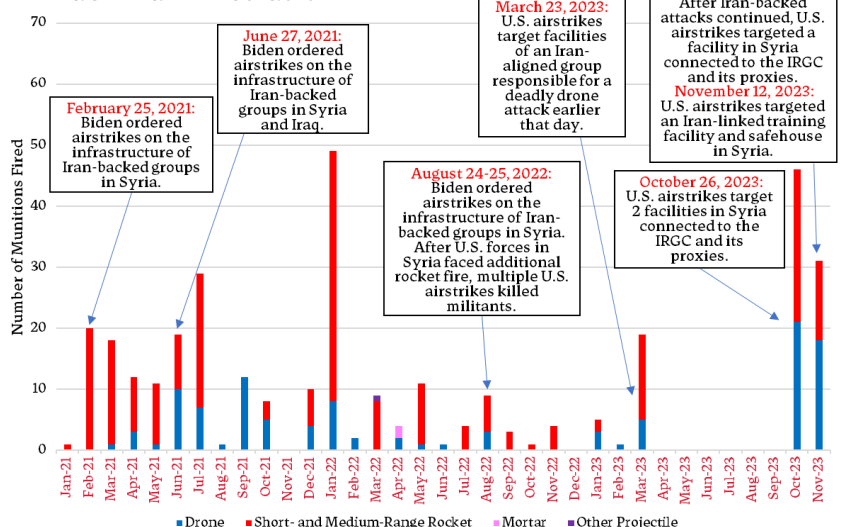
Why Is It Important?

- The continued strikes against U.S. personnel after U.S. airstrikes on Iran-linked facilities indicate that the Iranian regime and its proxies remain undeterred by recent U.S. strikes. Multiple U.S. airstrikes against two Iran-linked sites—a training facility and a safe house—that early reports indicate killed six or seven individuals could signal that the Biden administration is more willing to target the personnel responsible for attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria, not just their infrastructure. However, there is not yet an indication that the Iranian regime or its proxies have signaled a willingness to de-escalate their attacks.
 - » 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, but the attacks on November 12 and 13 signal a clear willingness on their part to continue striking U.S. personnel.
 - » 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.
- Iran-backed groups began attacking U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria on October 17. Since then, there have been 52 total attacks, including:
 - » 26 attacks targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq;
 - » 26 attacks against U.S. personnel in Syria; and
 - » 56 U.S. personnel [injured](#).
- 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 almost two 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 22 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.

- » The continuation of daily, increasingly dangerous strikes against U.S. personnel indicates that Iran does not believe the United States has the will to use sufficient military force to deter or prevent its aggression.
- » 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 six Iran-backed attacks in the three days between the November 8 and November 12 U.S. strikes—a slightly higher average of two 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.”
 - Given the attacks after the U.S. strike on November 12, additional, stronger U.S. strikes will be necessary to enforce deterrence against the Iranian regime and its proxies.
- 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 with, from 2021 to early 2023.

- » 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.

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



- » 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.

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.