



Seventh U.S. Strike Amid Over 100 Iran-backed Attacks in Iraq and Syria

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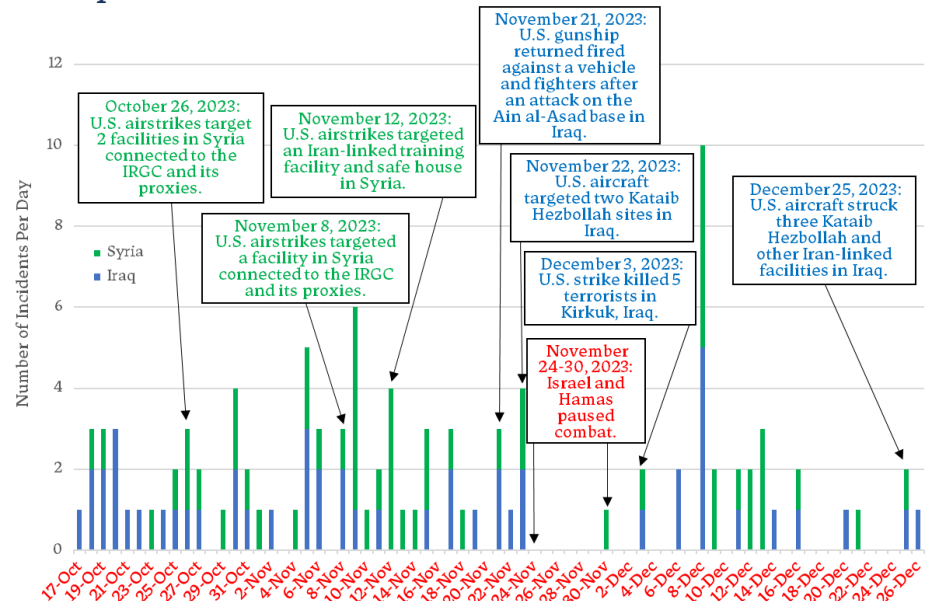
Following two Iran-backed attacks that critically injured a U.S. service member and wounded two other U.S. personnel, U.S. airstrikes on December 25 hit three Iran-linked facilities in Iraq. There have now been at least 105 attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria and seven U.S. airstrikes since October 7, exceeding the nearly 90 attacks against U.S. personnel and five U.S. responses during the previous two-and-half years of the Biden administration.

While the rate of Iran-backed attacks against U.S. personnel has dropped in the last two weeks, it is not because the Iranian regime has been deterred by U.S. strikes. Instead, Iranian aggression has shifted primarily to the Red Sea, where the Houthis have increased attacks on ships, while continuing in Iraq and Syria. To deter Iran, it will not be enough for the United States to keep doing what it has been: responding faster, hitting more targets, and being more willing to kill Iran-linked proxy fighters while avoiding targeting Iranian regime fighters and proclaiming that it is not interested in escalation. To stop Iranian attacks, the United States will need to use force directly against Iranian regime targets—as Israel has done by, for example, killing Iranian Brig. Gen. Seyed Razi Mousavi on December 25 in Syria—as well as surge air defense assets to the Middle East that can better protect U.S. personnel and regional partners.

What Happened?

- On December 25, Iran-backed groups [launched](#) a one-way attack drone at the Erbil Airbase in Iraq, critically injuring one U.S. service member and wounding two U.S. personnel.
 - That day, Iran-backed groups also claimed to target U.S. forces at the Green Village facility in Syria.
- Later on December 25, U.S. aircraft “conducted necessary and proportionate strikes” against three Kataib Hezbollah and other Iran-linked drone facilities in Iraq “intended to disrupt and degrade capabilities of the Iran-aligned militia groups,” according to a [statement](#) from U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin.
 - Secretary Austin’s statement further noted that “[w]hile we do not seek to escalate conflict in the region, we are committed

Iran-backed Attacks Against U.S. Personnel in Iraq and Syria Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War JINSA



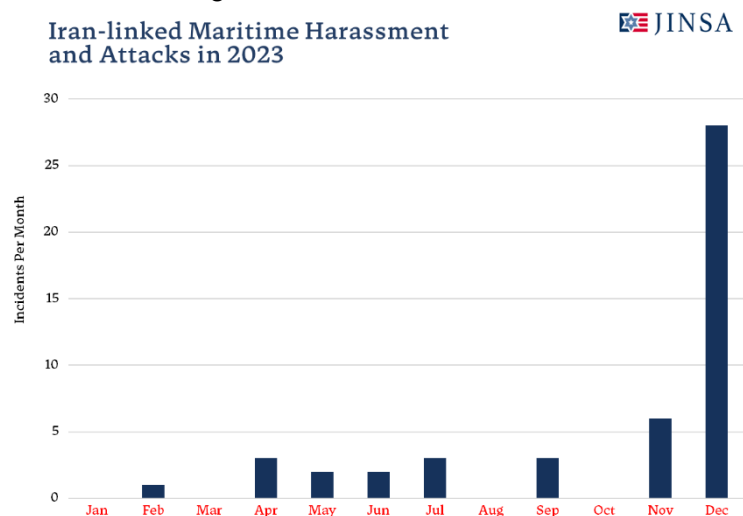
and fully prepared to take further necessary measures to protect our people and our facilities.”

- » U.S. Central Command [assessed](#) the strikes destroyed the target sites and most likely killed multiple militants.
- » Two [Iraqi officials](#) said that the U.S. struck a Kataib Hezbollah headquarters in the Iraqi city of Hilla south of Baghdad.
- » The Iraqi government [claimed](#) that the U.S. strikes killed one Iraqi serviceman and wounded 18 other people.
- On December 26, multiple rockets were [fired](#) at the U.S.-led coalition base in al-Shaddadi, Syria.
- Following Hamas’s 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 105 attacks, with 50 targeting U.S. personnel in Iraq and 55 in Syria, exceeding the nearly 90 attacks against U.S. personnel during the two-and-a-half years of the Biden administration before the war began.
 - » The attacks have [injured](#) at least 73 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.

Why Is It Important?

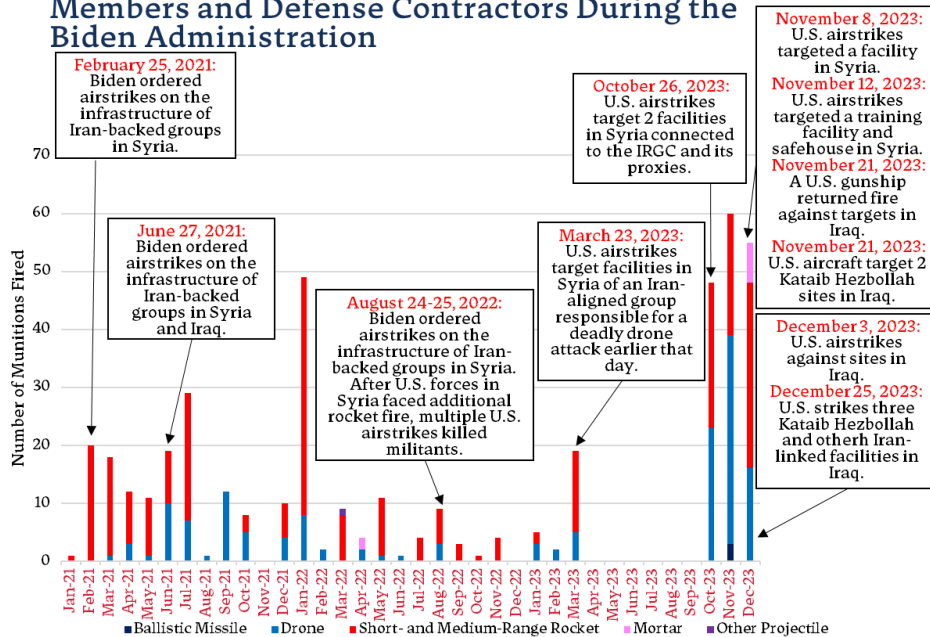
- While the rate of Iran-backed attacks against U.S. personnel has dropped in recent weeks, the sporadic U.S. airstrikes against Tehran’s proxies have not deterred these attacks from occurring, particularly since the United States has signaled a reticence to respond with a stronger force.
 - » Overall Iran-backed aggression has remained high, with Tehran increasingly turning to the Houthis, its affiliate force in Yemen, to target Israel, Israeli-linked ships, and disrupt freedom of navigation through the Red Sea and other Middle Eastern waters.
 - » Detering the Iranian regime or its proxies from launching these attacks will require stronger U.S. military force that holds Tehran directly accountable for the aggression it enables.
 - » In contrast to U.S. efforts to date, Israel has targeted Islamic Republic of Iran officials and assets to degrade the regime’s ability to proliferate weaponry and deter it from striking Israel.
- As Iran-backed attacks have continued, U.S. strikes have moved from Syria to Iraq, and have become more likely to target terrorist forces, not just infrastructure. The rate of Iran-linked fire has declined, but U.S. strikes have so far failed to deter attacks on U.S. personnel.
 - » 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.
- » 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.
- » Following U.S. strikes on November 22 against two sites in Iraq affiliated with the Iran-backed Kataib Hezbollah, there were five strikes against U.S. personnel on November 22 and 23.
- » Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria agreed to abide by the pause in combat between Israel and Hamas, despite not being a party to that deal, with the exception of a single strike in Syria on November 30, the final day of the pause.
- » After the pause ended on the morning of December 1, Iran-backed groups did not target U.S. forces until December 3. That day, the United States [conducted](#) a "self-defense strike" against a drone staging site that posed an "imminent threat" near Kirkuk, Iraq, according to a U.S. official. The U.S. strike killed five terrorists.
- » The period between the U.S. strikes on December 3 and 25 was the longest gap in U.S. strikes, but it also featured the fewest average number of attacks per day. Iran-backed groups conducted 28 attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria, at a rate of .78 per day, including 10 attacks on December 8 alone that triggered no known use of U.S. military force.
- Even as the rate of Iran-backed attacks in Iraq and Syria has declined, the Iranian regime simultaneously shifted the emphasis of its regional aggression to the Red Sea and surrounding waterways, where the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen conducted 28 incidents of naval aggression in December.
 - » Since the Israel-Hamas war began, Iran and the Houthis have conducted at least 34 incidents of naval aggression, including [firing](#) roughly 100 missiles and drones at commercial vessels.
 - » The Houthis’ aggression led BP and five important shipping companies, French CMA CGM, Danish Maersk, German Hapag-Lloyd, Hong Kong-based OOCL, and the Italian-Swiss-owned Mediterranean Shipping Company, the world’s largest shipping company, to [suspend](#) their travel through the Red Sea.



- Maersk announced it would [resume](#) shipping through the Red Sea in the wake of the announcement of, Operation Prosperity Guardian, a U.S.-led [multinational task force](#) to protect shipping in the critical waterway. However, the potential for the Houthis and their Iranian regime benefactors to cause long-term disruptions to shipping through Middle Eastern waterways could have disastrous effects for Egypt’s economy and the price of global commodities.
- However, Secretary Austin’s statement that the United States does not wish to escalate against Iran-backed groups—even as he simultaneously indicated a willingness to take further measures—signaled a reticence to use stronger military force to deter the Iranian regime or its proxies from launching attacks.
 - » The Iranian regime will continue to exert escalation dominance over the United States so long as U.S. officials publicly signal that the Biden administration does not want to escalate its use of military force despite the barrage of attacks that Iran-backed groups have conducted against its personnel.
- In contrast to U.S. strikes that have targeted the Iranian regime’s proxies, Israel has directly targeted the Islamic Republic of Iran officials and assets, including Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which trains, funds, arms, and directs Tehran’s proxies abroad.
 - » On December 25, an Israeli [airstrike](#) in Syria reportedly killed Iranian Brig. Gen. Seyed Razi Mousavi, who coordinated between the Iranian and Syrian militaries and who Israel believed was responsible for supplying weaponry to the Iranian regime’s proxies, including Hezbollah.
 - » On December 26, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [indicated](#) that Israel is “in a multi-front war and are coming under attack from seven theatres: Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Judea and Samaria (West Bank), Iraq, Yemen and Iran. We have already responded and taken action in six of these theatres.”
- 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 at least 194 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.
 - » 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 between March 24 and October 17, even the more forceful U.S. airstrikes did not establish long-term deterrence, considering the large, sudden escalation against U.S. personnel.

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



- 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 in 2022 and who now constitute an important bloc in his governing coalition.
 - » The Iraqi government [condemned](#) the U.S. strikes on December 25, calling them a "an unacceptable violation of Iraqi sovereignty" and a "clear hostile act."
 - » The Iraqi government similarly [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 use stronger, faster, and more frequent 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 United States should stop signaling a reluctance to respond to Iran-backed attacks with force and should update its messaging around these attacks to better reflect its a willingness to launch more destructive and deadly strikes if necessary.
- 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 against the

Iranian regime and its proxies by rapidly resupplying Israel with critical munitions and air defense assets, replenishing the U.S. stockpile of American weaponry in Israel that Israel can draw from in an emergency, and providing 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.
- Either through the new Operation Prosperity Guardian task force or separately, the United States should work with partner nations to conduct strikes against Houthi fighters responsible for conducting maritime attacks.