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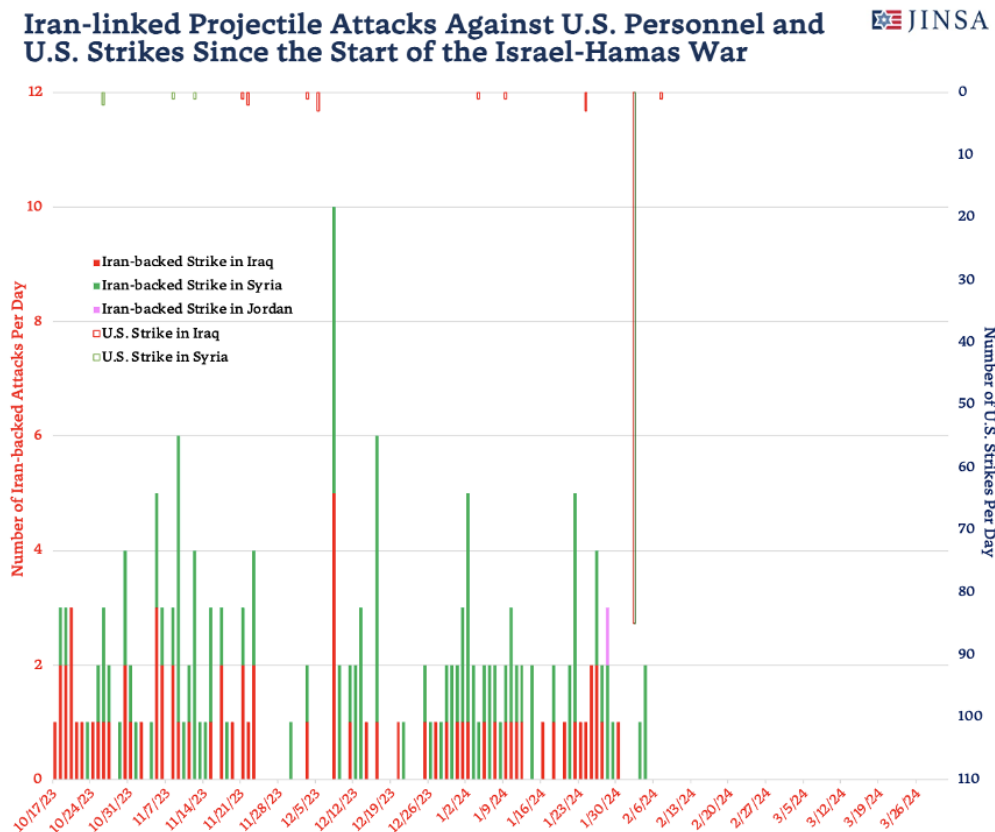National Security of America

Iran Summary
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March 2024 Summary: To view JINSA's work related to the Israel-Gaza War, click here. Iran-backed groups did not carry out any attacks on U.S. personnel in Iraq, Syria, or Jordan in March. This marks the lowest number of Iran-backed attacks against U.S. personnel in the region since Tehran's proxies restarted their attacks after Hamas's October 7, 2023 invasion of Israel. The Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, however, continued to escalate maritime attacks and disrupt international trade, conducting a record 36 such attacks in March, including the first attack to result in civilian casualties since the Houthis began their campaign. In another indication of the deepening ties between Iran, Russia, and China, *Bloomberg* reported that the Houthis promised safe passage through the Red Sea to Russia and China in exchange for political support. However, days later, the Houthis fired five ballistic missiles at a Chinese ship transiting the Red Sea, in apparent violation of their reported agreement. Iran held its first parliamentary elections since the 2022 nationwide anti-regime protests, recording record low voter turnout amid calls to boycott the elections.
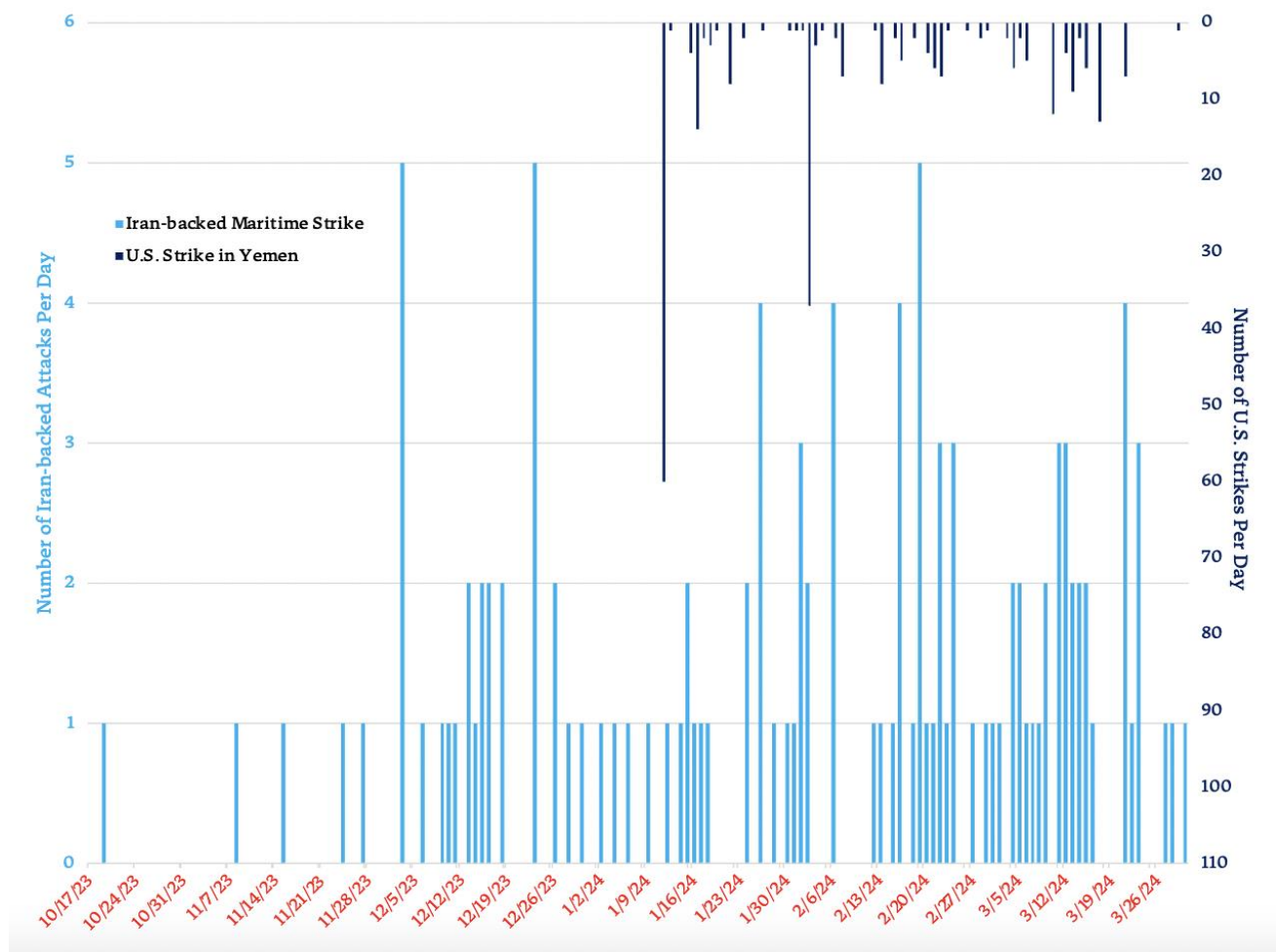
Attacks on U.S. Troops and Personnel in the Region: Since the U.S. strikes against Iran-linked targets in Syria and Iraq on February 2, Iran's proxy militias have only conducted three attacks, with no attacks during March and the latest on February 4. This marks the lowest amount of Iran-backed attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq and Syria, but follows at least 170 attacks since October 17, 2023. Click here to view JINSA's Iran Projectile Tracker.

Iran-linked Projectile Attacks Against U.S. Personnel and U.S. Strikes Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War

Maritime Aggression:
Despite the United States and other partner nations conducting at least 70 airstrikes against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen during February, the terror group conducted a record-high 36 attacks during February on vessels in nearby waters, in particular the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, disrupting international trade.

- The Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen carried out 36 maritime attacks in waters around Bab el Mandeb over the course of the month, including at least 35 projectile attacks and one incident during which Houthis aboard a vessel shot small arms fire at a commercial ship.

- On March 27, the Philippines said that Iran had freed all 18 Filipino crew members of the Greek-owned oil tanker *St. Nikolas.* Iran's Navy had seized the tanker and its crew off the coast of Oman on January 11, 2024.

- On March 26, in an interview with *Al Arabiya,* U.S. Rear Admiral Marc Miguez, the commander of the Eisenhower Carrier Group, said that the *MV Behshad*, an Iranian ship in the Gulf of Aden, had "...provided some sort of intelligence information on maritime ships," amid the Houthis' ongoing campaign of maritime attacks.

- On March 23, the Houthis launched five anti-ship ballistic missiles towards the *M/V Huang Pu,* a Panamanian-flagged, Chinese-owned, Chinese-operated oil tanker. The *M/V Huang Pu* incurred minimal damage, according to U.S. CENTCOM, and did not report any casualties.

  » The attack occurred days after a reported deal between China and the Houthis, that would allow Chinese ships safe passage through the Red Sea.

- On March 6, the Houthis carried out a missile attack against a commercial ship in the Gulf of Aden, killing at least three people and forcing the rest of the crew to abandon the vessel. The attack on the Liberian-owned, Barbados-flagged bulk carrier, *True Confidence*, marked the first civilian casualties since the Houthis began their campaign of maritime attacks.

- On March 2, a Belize-flagged, Lebanese-operated bulk carrier, *Rubymar*, sank in the Red Sea after being damaged in a Houthi missile strike on February 18. The *Rubymar* was the first ship to sink since the Houthis began their campaign of maritime attacks.

  » The carrier sank with 21,000 metric tons of ammonium phosphate sulfate fertilizer on board according to the U.S. Central Command.

  » Yemeni officials warned that the oil and fertilizer on board the ship will have a devastating impact on the environment and ecosystem in the Red Sea.

  » Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, the foreign minister of Yemen's internationally recognized government in Aden, wrote on X, "The sinking of the Rubymar is an environmental catastrophe that Yemen and the region have never experienced before."

Iran-linked Projectile Attacks Against Maritime Targets and U.S. Strikes Since the Start of the Israel-Hamas War

Other Malign Activity and Involvement in Israel-Hamas War:

European authorities raised concerns regarding the increased threat of terrorism from Iran and its proxies, and a television host at *Iran International* was stabbed outside of his London home.

- On March 29, a television host at *Iran International*, Pouria Zeraati, was stabbed outside in his home in south London, England. Iran's regime denied any involvement in the attack. However, the regime has repeatedly threatened and targeted journalists abroad, including a foiled assassination attempt against two *Iran International* journalists in 2022.

- On March 27, *The Times of Israel* reported, citing Iran's official and semi-official state media, that Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Ebrahim Raisi praised Hamas politburo leader Ismail Haniyeh for turning global opinion against Israel.

  » Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei said, "Despite the enemy's wishes, [Hamas] has turned Palestine to the world's first issue."

  » President Ebrahim Raisi said, "Today, with the fierce resistance and standing of the oppressed and powerful people of Gaza, the issue of Palestine has gone beyond the Islamic world and has become the issue of the world of humanity. The people of the

world hate the criminal Zionist regime and its main supporter, the United States, with all their heart. They love the oppressed people of Gaza."

- On March 27, Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei posted on X, that "the challenges and conflicts in the world today are media challenges. War is also a media war. Whoever has the strongest media in his hands will succeed in achieving the goals he seeks."

- On March 16, *Barron's* reported, citing a Houthi official, that the Iran-backed Houthis discussed "expanding confrontations and encircling" Israel in a meeting in Lebanon with Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Iran-backed terror factions.

- On March 15, Israel's *Channel 12* reported, citing a senior Israeli intelligence official, that Iran has been using European ports, including in Belgium, Spain, and Italy, to send weapons shipments to Hezbollah.

  » According to the report, after the IDF repeatedly struck weapons shipments in northern Syria en route to Hezbollah from Iraq, Iran began transporting weapons to Hezbollah by sea from Europe, including bombs and missiles.

- On March 12, *The Wall Street Journal* reported that European authorities were concerned about the increased threat of terror, motivated by Israel's war against Hamas, from Iran and its proxy terrorist groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas. The report cited multiple foiled terror plots, including in Austria and Bosnia last December, in Germany late last year, and in Italy on March 11.

  » On March 11, Italian police arrested three Palestinian men in central Italy, who they said had set up a cell linked to the Iran-backed Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and were planning attacks in an unspecified country.

Russia/China Ties:
According to a *Bloomberg* report, the Iran-backed Houthis promised safe passage to Russia and China in exchange for political support, another indication of the deepening ties between Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing.

- On March 21, *Bloomberg* reported that the Iran-backed Houthis told Russia and China that their ships can safely operate in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The report, which cited "several people with knowledge of the militant group's discussions," said that in exchange for safe passage, "the two countries may provide political support to the Houthis in bodies such as the United Nations Security Council."

- On March 14, *Iran International* reported that Iran tried to purchase wiper malware from Russian underground cybercrime forums, which allows hackers to irreversibly remove computer data.

- On March 12, Iran, Russia, and China began a joint naval drill in the Gulf of Oman, named the "Marine Security Belt 2024."

Nuclear:
On March 4, IAEA Chief Rafael Grossi [warned](#) the IAEA Board of Governors that the agency had "lost continuity of knowledge about [Iran's] production and inventory of centrifuges, rotors, bellows, heavy water and uranium ore concentrate."

- Grossi said, "Public statements made in Iran regarding its technical capabilities to produce nuclear weapons only increase my concerns about the correctness and completeness of Iran's safeguard declarations."
- Grossi added, "You will note that Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium continues to increase, even though the level of uranium enriched up to 60% has fallen slightly."

Domestic/Human Rights:
Iran held its first parliamentary elections since the 2022 nationwide protests, seeing record-low voter turnout amid calls to boycott the elections.

- According to Oslo-based Iran Human Rights, as of April 3, the Islamic Republic had [executed](#) 98 people in 2024.
- On March 13, *Iran International* [reported](#) that hijab enforcement agents had begun enforcing the regime's mandatory veiling law at Iran's airports.
- On March 5, Iranian authorities [razed](#) more than 30 Baha'i tombstones at a mass grave near Tehran, according to a statement from the Baha'i International Community. The statement said regime officials had "used this site to forcibly bury Baha'is for more than two years– without allowing families to be present or respecting Baha'i funeral practices."
  » More than 300,000 Baha'i people live in Iran, [representing](#) the country's largest unrecognized religious minority.
- On March 5, Norway-based Iran Human Rights (IHR) and Paris-based Together Against the Death Penalty (ECPM) [released](#) a joint report detailing the regime's "staggering" increase in executions in 2023.
  » According to the report, Iran's regime executed at least 834 people last year, the highest number since 2015, and only the second time in twenty years in which more than 8000 executions were recorded in a year.
  » ECPM's Director, Raphael Chenuil-Hazan, said. "There is an instrumentalization of the death penalty in Iran by the regime in order to fight against the protests."
- On March 3, Iran's state media [reported](#) that the regime had executed a person accused of planning to "explode the workshop complex of the Ministry of Defense in Isfahan under guidance of the intelligence officer of Mossad." The identity of the person and the date of execution were not reported.
- On March 1, Iran [held](#) its elections for parliament and its Assembly of Experts, seeing record low voter turnout amid calls to boycott the election by anti-regime activists. The elections were the country's [first](#) since the 2022 nationwide protest. Of the country's 61 million eligible voters, only 25 million cast their ballot according to official state media, although experts said that the actual turnout was likely lower.
  » The parliamentary elections decided 245 of the 290 seats, the remainder of which will be decided in later runoff elections.
  » According to the AP, 200 of the 245 parliamentarians elected were [supported](#) by hardline groups in voter guides ahead of the election, while the remaining 45 were [identified](#) as relatively moderate, conservative or independent.

Cyber: Iran-backed hackers continue to [target](#) Israel and [other](#) adversaries and [suppress](#) anti-regime sentiment at home.

- Israel saw a 43% surge in [cyberattacks](#) originating from Iran and Hezbollah in 2023, according to the annual report released by Israel's National Cyber Directorate on March 31.

- On March 19, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Michael Regan [warned](#) state governors that Iranian hackers were attempting cyberattacks against U.S. water infrastructure. Sullivan and Regan [warned](#) that "disabling cyberattacks are striking water and wastewater systems throughout the United States. These attacks have the potential to disrupt the critical lifeline of clean and safe drinking water, as well as impose significant costs on affected communities."

- On March 1, *Iran International* [reported](#) that Iran's cyber-police were shutting down social media pages that encouraged Iranians to boycott the country's March 1 elections as an act of protest against the regime.

Recent JINSA Publications on Iran:

- April 4: [Monthly Iran Projectile Tracker: March 2024,](#) Ari Cicurel

- April 4: [Syria Strike Sends Clear Message to Iran,](#) Jonathan Ruhe and Yoni Tobin

- March 27: "[The Biden Administration Has an Opportunity to Rein In Iran](#)," *The Dispatch,* Jonathan Ruhe

- March 15: [*Iran's Terror-Tied Banks Operate Across Europe*](#), Gabriel Noronha

- March 15: "[Azerbaijan, the Quiet Partner,](#)" *RealClearDefense,* Jacob Olidort and LtGen Carl "Sam" Mundy, (USMC, ret.) and Lt Gen Chris Nowland, (USAF, ret.)