

Iran Is Attacking the U.S., So Why Aren't We Striking Back? | Opinion
Ari Cicurel & Blaise Misztal - Newsweek

The United States is not quite done with war in the Middle East. In fact, coalition troops in Syria regularly fall under attack by Iranian-backed forces. Yet the U.S. rarely responds militarily to such strikes. That stands in stark contrast to Israel's frequent attacks on Iranian groups in Syria, and their infrequent response.



A U.S. soldier stands next to an armored personnel carrier as a convoy patrols the area near the town of Tal Hamis, Syria, on Jan. 26. © DELIL SOULEIMAN/AFP via Getty Images

In a recent example, two rockets [targeted coalition forces](#) at Mission Support Site Conoco in northeast Syria on Jan. 4. Although no group claimed responsibility, Iran and its partner militias frequently launch munitions from the area where these projectiles [reportedly originated](#).

Then on Jan. 20, [three drones](#) targeted the U.S. garrison at Al-Tanf, Syria, a frequent focus of Iranian-backed attacks. In that incident, two drones were shot down while the third injured two members the U.S. partner force, the Syrian Free Army.

The U.S. reply has been a baffling near-silence on the battlefield.

These are not isolated incidents. In the two years since President Biden took office, there have been 80 attacks on U.S. troops or contractors in Iraq and Syria, with Iranian-backed groups firing over 230 projectiles, including 170 rockets and 60 drones, according to JINSA's [Iran projectile tracker](#), which we compile. Of these, 56 attacks, involving 170 munitions, took place in Iraq. Iranian-linked groups fired at least 65 munitions over 24 attacks targeting the small force of roughly 900 U.S. troops in Syria.

Yet, the Biden administration has launched only three rounds of retaliatory airstrikes on Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria. Biden ordered his first use of military force on Feb. 25, 2021, after a non-American U.S. contractor was killed and a U.S. service member was injured in Iraq.

Biden again [authorized airstrikes](#) on June 27, 2021, after drone attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq. The Biden administration began its most recent round of strikes nine days after an Aug. 15, 2022, attack on U.S. service members in Syria. After the Iranian-backed groups immediately responded, injuring U.S. forces, the United States carried out another round of reprisals.

Most often, these U.S. retaliations have been minimally damaging, targeting infrastructure belonging to Iranian-backed groups. And never has the Biden administration gone after the Iranians responsible for arming the Syrian and Iraqi militias.

The United States is, as a military spokesman said, [calibrating airstrikes](#) "to limit the risk of escalation and minimize the risk of casualties," fearing more, or more lethal, strikes would trigger an escalation with Iran.

In reality, it has been the sporadic and limited U.S. response that has led to further aggression. After each U.S. airstrike, Iranian-backed groups have [resumed attacking American troops](#). Iranian-backed militias conducted at least 14 attacks on American troops and contractors in the three months after each of Biden's first two airstrikes.

Compare all of this to how Israel deals with Iran. For the last eight years, Israel has conducted the "campaign between wars" in Syria, aiming to [degrade and disrupt](#) Iranian military entrenchment on its northern border.

Israeli airstrikes have repeatedly targeted Iranian forces, militias, and supplies in Syria with the specific goal of preventing the transfer of precision-guided munitions to Lebanese Hezbollah.

In the last two years—the same period during which U.S. forces were attacked 80 times and responded only thrice—Israel conducted at least 88 strikes in Syria and suffered only three attacks coming from Syria, according to data JINSA has compiled.

More recently, Israel [adopted](#) the "Octopus Doctrine" under former Prime Minister [Naftali Bennett](#), inflicting costs directly against the head of the octopus—Iran—instead of only its tentacles—the militias.

Fearing a full-scale war with the superior Israeli force, Iran's Syrian partners have not wanted retaliatory attacks against Israel launched from their territory. Instead, members of Iran's elite Quds Force, Lebanese Hezbollah, and Iran's other proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen [reportedly](#) agreed in 2021 to start responding to Israeli strikes by targeting a softer and, less responsive adversary: U.S. forces in Syria, particularly at al-Tanf where the Jan. 20 drone strike took place.

To thwart Iran's playbook, the United States needs a policy modeled on Israel's operations. It should exercise more consistent force against those who attack Americans and develop better means of protecting troops.

.S. Central Command should rapidly and publicly attribute blame for attacks. President Biden should direct CENTCOM to use consistent and forceful military action to preempt and retaliate after attacks on U.S. troops by targeting those responsible, including Iran.

As the contrast between attacks on American troops by Iran and on Iran by Israel have revealed, Tehran's aggression will continue without consistent and forceful [U.S. military](#) action. Unnecessary restraint has not altered Iran's calculus. It is time for the Biden administration to step up the pressure on the regime by striking back.

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**** The views expressed in this article are the writers' own.*