

Syria Strikes Show U.S. a “Cool Customer” in Containing Gaza Crisis...for Now

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Articles & Testimony

Iran-backed groups have remained on the move since October 7, likely accounting for the increase in Israeli strike activity.

Note: For a regularly updated list of Iran-backed strikes on Iraqi and Syrian sites, see the [Militia Spotlight Strike Tracker \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis).

On 26 October, the United States carried out [air strikes \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/26/us-strikes-iran-syria/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/10/26/us-strikes-iran-syria/) on two positions outside Al-Bukamal in Eastern Syria in response to 10 separate attacks by Iranian-supported militias against U.S. forces in Syria and 13 in neighbouring Iraq that have injured at least 21 service personnel since Hamas' 7 October brutal attack in Israel, leaving over 1,000 dead and over 210 held hostage. Concurrently, the tempo of Israeli strikes in Syria has increased dramatically, including at least nine air strikes and the repeated bombing of Aleppo and Damascus airports, as well as indirect fire on positions throughout southwest Syria.

Taken together, the [dramatic increase \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis) of anti-U.S. attacks in Syria and Iraq as Israeli forces continue to mass along the Gaza frontier to launch an expected incursion indicates that an increase in fighting along Israel's northern border is increasingly likely. As Israel weighs its options while working with U.S. regional allies to get the remaining hostages out of Gaza, Washington should continue to be a very cool customer in Syria, establishing deterrence through precision strikes, all the while staying off an escalation ladder that leads to a destructive regional conflagration with Iran that could draw in U.S. allies and adversaries alike.

Spike in Iranian-Supported Attacks Against U.S. Forces

Attacks by Iranian militias against U.S. forces in Syria are not new but have been increasing in number and complexity throughout the year through the use of suicide drones. Well-reported open-source data on Iranian militia activity shows three separate rocket attacks on U.S. Syria bases in January 2023, along with the launch of three suicide drones on January 20, 2023, that injured two U.S.-partner personnel in Syria—a seeming test by Iranian-supported militias of systems they have used in recent days.

After U.S. forces shot down another drone on 14 February, an Iranian drone attack on the Rumaylan airbase on 23 March killed a U.S. contractor and wounded another and five U.S. military personnel, causing President Biden to [order deadly strikes \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3339691/us-conducts-airstrikes-in-syria-in-response-to-deadly-uav-attack/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3339691/us-conducts-airstrikes-in-syria-in-response-to-deadly-uav-attack/) against Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-backed group sites throughout Eastern Syria. For the remainder of the year, Iranian militias relied on the use of rockets, once in February, three times in March and isolated incidents in April and August of this year.

[Since 19 October \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis/\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis/), however, Iranian militia drone attacks on U.S. forces have increased in number, likely accounting for the sharp increase in U.S. personnel injured in recent days. While these incidents come in the wake of Hamas's attack, in Syria they have different implications. They follow last August's uprising by Arab tribes against Kurdish-commanded U.S. partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which Iran and its partner Russia reportedly have used to prod U.S. forces in Syria to depart. Shortly before the uprising, Russia horizontally escalated with the U.S. in eastern Syria, flying aggressively against U.S. military assets and damaging drone aircraft.

Israeli Strikes Against Iranian Militias on the Move

Israel's military action in Syria since 7 October has also increased dramatically in scope and number, matching Iranian militia attacks on U.S. forces in Syria. From the start of 2023 to 7 October, Israel reportedly carried out at least 28 air strikes in Syria, including four on the Aleppo airport and one on the country's largest in the capital, Damascus. In the last 20 days alone, Israel has launched nine air strikes in Syria, with four strikes on Aleppo airport and two on Damascus, bringing air operations there to a halt. Strikes on Syrian airports are normally in response to Iranian weapons shipments via these hubs destined for Iranian-supported militia garrisoned throughout Syria and Hezbollah in neighbouring Lebanon.

Multiple open source reports continue to indicate that Iranian-backed groups remain [on the move \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-and-hamas-attack-another-potential-iran-backed-front\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/syria-and-hamas-attack-another-potential-iran-backed-front/) towards Israel in Syria since 7 October, likely accounting for the increase in Israeli strike activity. These include at least [two reports \(https://twitter.com/Tammuz_Intel/status/1713897475554017674\)](https://twitter.com/Tammuz_Intel/status/1713897475554017674) of the movement of between 250–1000 Popular Mobilisation Front (PMF) fighters from Iraq to Syria and Lebanon via al-Bukamal, Deir Ezzor, and Homs. Most of the fighters are [reportedly Iraqi \(https://deirezzor24.net/%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b2%d9%88%d8%b124-%d8%aa%d9%83%d8%b4%d9%81-%d9%85%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%88%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%ad%d9%88%d9%84-%d9%86%d9%82%d9%84-%d8%b9%d9%86%d8%a7%d8%b5%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%86/\)](https://deirezzor24.net/%d8%af%d9%8a%d8%b1%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b2%d9%88%d8%b124-%d8%aa%d9%83%d8%b4%d9%81-%d9%85%d8%b9%d9%84%d9%88%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%aa-%d8%ad%d9%88%d9%84-%d9%86%d9%82%d9%84-%d8%b9%d9%86%d8%a7%d8%b5%d8%b1-%d9%85%d9%86/) but include Afghans and Iranians as well. Another report indicates that Lebanese Hezbollah's special operations "Radwan Unit" has arrived in the northern Dara'a province adjacent to Quneitra and the Golan frontier, reportedly with anti-armour and Iranian-made drones.

Further afield, another [report indicates \(https://twitter.com/EyeEuphrates/status/1716522851673534670\)](https://twitter.com/EyeEuphrates/status/1716522851673534670) the movement of other Lebanese Hezbollah special operations units, including [Unit 313 \(https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/10/24/9988\)](https://eyeofeuphrates.com/ar/news/2023/10/24/9988) at the T2 pumping station southwest of Deir Ezzor. To

organise these units, another report indicates that Iranian-backed militias and the Syrian Fourth Division led by Maher al-Assad, President Bashar al-Assad's brother, recently established a new special headquarters for meetings and receiving Iranian, Lebanese, and Iraqi military delegations in Deir Ezzor.

The official in charge of the Fourth Division in Deir Ezzor Governorate, Brigadier General Abdul Karim Hamada, is **reportedly (<https://twitter.com/EyeEuphrates/status/1716522828558696706>)** the direct supervisor of this headquarters, known locally as the "Hajj Fadel hostel." The report indicates Hamada is close to IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah leaders, as well as Nawaf al-Bashir, leader of the pro-Iranian and -Assad al-Bakir militia in Deir Ezzor. Last but not least, multiple reports indicate Iranian-backed groups are moving weapons depots and personnel to avoid increased Israeli strikes.

Staying a "Cool Customer" in Syria and Gaza

Despite the dramatic increase in Iranian militia activity since 18 October and Israeli strikes since the start of the Gaza crisis on 7 October, both sides are responding in precise and manageable ways. In the event of a protracted Israeli incursion into Gaza, however, and particularly at flashpoint moments such as the hours after the al-Ahli Arab Hospital explosion in Gaza, measured responses will become increasingly difficult.

The United States needs to continue to be the cool customer in this crisis, managing not only its and its allies' responses to provocations by Hamas and Iranian-supported groups, but relations between disparate regional allies such as Israel and Qatar that are trying to get hostages home as soon as possible.

In Syria specifically, Israeli strikes against Syria's two biggest, nominally al-Assad-regime controlled airports show that Washington's reported messages to al-Assad via the United Arab Emirates not to allow Iran to escalate from Syria are not sinking in, indicating al-Assad's ability to restrain Iranian behaviour without military action imposed from outside is limited at best. And that further action will likely be needed in the weeks and months to come.

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<https://en.majalla.com/node/303046/politics/syria-strikes-show-us-%E2%80%9Ccool-customer%E2%80%9D-containing-gaza-crisis-for-now>. ❖

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