

# Deadly Attack on US Troops in Jordan Marks Major Escalation

by [Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Jan 29, 2024

*Also published in Al Majalla*

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Andrew J. Tabler \(/experts/andrew-j-tabler\)](/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross Senior Fellow in the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant, and Director of the Institute's Junior Research Program.



Articles & Testimony

## **Biden now has a hard choice to make: push Israel into a Gaza ceasefire or risk sustained Iran-backed escalation in the region.**

**T**he 28 January attack by an Iranian-backed militia against American forces stationed at Tower 22 in northeast Jordan, which killed three US service personnel and injured over 30 more, marks a major escalation in the ongoing Gaza crisis. The Islamic Resistance in Iraq—the umbrella group of Iranian-supported Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria—immediately claimed the attack. The statement—directly naming the Israeli offensive in Gaza as its reason—indicates that Iran and its proxies are attempting to force US President Biden into making a hard choice: pushing Israel into a ceasefire in Gaza or risking a sustained Iranian escalation in Iraq and Syria designed to drive US forces out of both countries.

Iranian militia attacks against US forces in Iraq and Syria are hardly new, with the Islamic Resistance in Iraq now claiming 178 attacks, nearly identical figures to those [catalogued by my Washington Institute colleagues \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-anti-us-strikes-iraq-and-syria-during-gaza-crisis) over the last few months. Throughout the Gaza conflict, Iranian-backed militias have used an array of rocket and drone attacks against US bases in Iraq and Syria.

In reading Iranian intentions, rocket attacks were seen as more worrisome, as their lack of guidance systems increased the chance of unintended lethality, which in turn could lead to a strong US military response the militias were not ready for. Drones are more precise, allowing the militias to carry out attacks on US troops with less risk of unintended escalation. The 28 January attacks changed this dynamic in a critical place at a critical moment in the US debate concerning the presence of US troops in Iraq and Syria.

First, its lethal payload was enough to kill three and injure scores more, showing the Islamic Resistance in Iraq's clear intent to kill—not just harass—Americans.

Second, the fact the attack happened on Jordanian soil shows the militias are expanding the range of their activities to the Hashemite Kingdom—whose population and government are stuck between supporting the US in Syria and Iraq and being a peace partner with Israel while also vehemently opposing its Gaza offensive.

Third, the attacks come right on the heels of reports of what has been a months-long policy discussion in the Biden Administration about the future deployments of US forces in Syria and Iraq.

US forces are in Syria based on a request by the Iraqi government in 2014 that legally allowed its forces to re-enter Iraq and enter Syria—which the Obama Administration refused to do in response to the Syrian uprising—to degrade and defeat the Islamic State (IS). Since IS's defeat in Syria in 2019, US forces have remained in both countries as part of the coalition to keep IS suppressed, while the political reasons for its rise remained unresolved due to the lack of a viable political settlement to the Syrian war.

Until recently, US policymakers argued that Iraqi politicians wanted US forces there to counterbalance Iran, which, along with its militias, tolerated US forces as it made its own fight against IS and Sunni extremism more manageable. While Iranian militias had launched a number of attacks in the first nine months of 2023 on US forces in Iraq and Syria—including a lethal drone attack that killed a US contractor in March—the Biden administration confidently thought that Iran was deterred, that the status quo was manageable and that the US could finally pivot to Asia as Barak Obama had wished 15 years ago.

The Gaza War changed all that. Tehran and its proxies are attacking the US in Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea, and Hezbollah and Israel are cautiously exchanging attacks along the Lebanon-Israel frontier.

In attacking Tower 22 in northeast Jordan and causing multiple casualties, Iranian-backed militias seem to be forcing the Biden administration to make a tough choice. It needs to weigh its support for Israel's military campaign in Gaza and risk daily attacks in Iraq and Syria during Biden's 2024 election redo with former President Donald Trump, or push Israel into a ceasefire and stop an escalation in the Middle East that Tehran calculates neither President Biden nor the American public has the stomach for.

It's a very risky bet, however, and one that is likely to backfire sooner, if not later. There is one thing that the American people hate more than endless wars, and that is running out of a country with its tail between its legs. President Biden remembers well that his public approval numbers plummeted during the disastrous US withdrawal from Afghanistan, from around 60% to where they now hover at 40%.

The attack's lethality may cause more stories to surface that Biden aides are pushing Netanyahu to accept the current ceasefire offer, increasing pressure on Biden in his Democratic Party to make a hard choice. But it also will likely build pressure on Biden to respond much more forcefully against Iranian-backed proxies in the region, which his predecessor, Donald Trump, did in the killing of IRGC al Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani. Trump's response to Iranian aggression in the region—albeit while Iran's nuclear programme expanded—will now likely be used to show that President Biden's attempts to contain Iran in the region have failed and that a new, more forceful approach is now necessary to preserve the position of the US and its allies in the Middle East and beyond.

*Andrew Tabler is the Martin J. Gross Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and former director for Syria on the National Security Council. This article was originally published [on Al Majalla's website](https://en.majalla.com/node/309456/politics/deadly-attack-us-troops-jordan-marks-major-escalation)*

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