

## U.S. ESCALATION LIKELY AFTER TROOP DEATHS IN JORDAN

### Bottom Line Up Front:

- The Sunday drone attack by Iran-backed militias that killed three U.S. military personnel at a base in Jordan, near the Syrian and Iraqi borders, affirms that the Israel-Hamas war has become a regional conflict.
- The Iran-aligned militias responsible for the attack might have been emboldened by the start of U.S.-Iraq talks on limiting the U.S. military presence in the country, or merely see this as the latest in a string of tit-for-tat escalatory actions with U.S. forces.
- The U.S. deaths, the first deaths caused by the nearly 160 attacks pro-Iranian militias have conducted since they began their campaign against U.S. forces on October 17, is certain to prompt U.S. escalation.
- The Jordan attack will broaden the U.S. debate over its level of involvement in the Israel-Hamas conflict and embolden those U.S. leaders calling for U.S. retaliation against targets inside Iran itself.

**Early yesterday morning, an armed drone attack on a U.S. base in northeastern Jordan – described in press reports as “Tower 22” - located close to the border with Syria and with Iraq, killed three U.S. military personnel and injured as many as 34 more.** In a statement, President Joseph Biden attributed the attack to Iran-backed militias that have conducted nearly 160 attacks on U.S. bases in Iraq and Syria since October 17, saying: “...we know it was carried out by radical Iran-backed militant groups operating in Syria and Iraq.” U.S. officials did not specify which group they suspected of carrying out the assault, but two Iraqi groups – [Kata’ib Hezbollah](#) and the [Nujaba Movement](#) – have reportedly been responsible for most of the attacks on U.S. forces to date. Both groups, although Iraq-based, operate in Syria as well as Iraq, and several previous U.S. retaliatory strikes have targeted command centers, storage facilities, and commanders of the two. President Biden’s statement left little doubt that U.S. forces in the region will carry out extensive retaliatory strikes in response, saying: “And have no doubt – we will hold all those responsible to account at a time and in a manner our choosing.” At the same time, the deaths will affirm for many experts and U.S. officials that U.S. efforts to keep the Israel-Hamas war contained have been unsuccessful. The perception that the U.S. was already being drawn more deeply into a regional conflict was fueled by escalating U.S.-led strikes against the missile and drone-launching capacity of the Houthi movement in Yemen. The strikes have failed, to date, to prevent the Houthis from continuing to [attack commercial shipping](#) in the Red Sea.

The attack on the base inside Jordan came days after U.S. officials announced it had begun formal talks with Iraqi leaders about limiting the U.S. military mission in the country, which now includes deployment of 2,500 U.S. military personnel advising Iraq government forces in preventing a resurgence by [the Islamic State \(IS\)](#). That group continues to operate in some remote areas of northern and western Iraq. The 900 U.S. forces based in eastern Syria similarly perform an anti-IS mission. The U.S. personnel at the base struck in Jordan provides logistical support for the U.S. forces in both theaters. Others of the nearly 3,000 U.S. forces in Jordan train and assist Jordanian government forces and man air and missile defense and other weaponry involved in U.S. efforts to preserve the security of the Persian Gulf and broader region. Aligned with Iran’s broader strategic agenda, the [Iran-backed militias](#) in Iraq and Syria have long sought to cause U.S. leaders to withdraw from both Iraq and Syria. Some observers argue that the U.S. announcement of discussions to limit its Iraq presence might have emboldened the Iran-aligned groups, sensing they are succeeding in their anti-U.S. campaign to conduct the Sunday drone assault.

Others have argued that the anti-IS mission in both Iraq and Syria has been largely accomplished and that U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria were doing little more than serving as a ripe target for Iran-aligned attacks. Countering that view, some U.S. strategists argued that U.S. forces are still needed to prevent an IS resurgence as well as to help contain Iran's regional influence and should remain, or at least not fuel the perception they were being withdrawn "under fire." Some argued the forces should even be reinforced, considering the ongoing Iran-backed attacks on U.S. bases in order to provide additional resources for retaliatory strikes and other deterrent actions.

The U.S. deaths in Jordan are certain to spark a wider debate about U.S. strategy toward the Israel-Hamas conflict and its expansion throughout the region. A debate had already been expanding, including in the form of a mid-January letter to the President by several U.S. Senators from both parties, asserting the U.S. was already essentially "at war" with the Houthi movement and that U.S. strikes on Houthi targets require congressional authorization. An expansive U.S. retaliatory strike against Iran-aligned militias in Iraq and Syria – the most likely option for U.S. officials to exercise, at least for now – is sure to produce calls in Congress and other parts of the U.S. foreign policy establishment to insist that President Biden explain to the American public that the U.S. is essentially at war in the Middle East. It is also noteworthy that, on the same day as the drone attack in Jordan, Iran's [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) seized an oil tanker in the Persian Gulf, an action sure to embolden Tehran's critics in Washington.

The larger question that will emerge from the attack in Jordan is whether the United States should confront Iran directly, as the sponsor of the Iraqi, Syrian, and Yemeni movements attacking U.S. forces and interests directly. Iran is also the main sponsor of Hamas, which conducted the October 7 attack along with the smaller Iranian proxy Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah, the most powerful of Iran's regional allies, has been in a low-grade conflict with Israel across the [Lebanon-Israel frontier](#) since the October 7 Hamas attack. Since mid-October, many in Congress and in the expert community have been arguing that deterring Iran's allies – and depriving them of their capabilities – requires attacking targets inside Iran itself, such as missile and armed drone production facilities. Still, the considerations that have always produced caution in Washington on the question of armed conflict with Iran will be front and center in a broader debate over how to respond to the Jordan base attack. Any military strike on Iran could ignite protracted warfare with Tehran, which has developed sophisticated capabilities that are sure to produce additional U.S. combat casualties. A U.S. attack on Iran could well cause Israel-Hezbollah skirmishing to escalate into [full-blown war](#), with devastating consequences for Israeli and Lebanese civilians. Some argue that a direct U.S. conflict with Tehran could bring Russia, an increasingly close ally of Iran, into battle on Iran's behalf, if for no other reason than to protect the supply of sophisticated [armed drones](#) Moscow is obtaining from Iran. On the other hand, Russia has sustained vast losses in a faltering war effort in Ukraine and would be inclined toward caution about sparking conflict with Washington. China has also cultivated Iran as an ally in its campaign to undermine U.S. global influence, but Beijing is far from inclined to defend Iran militarily in a conflict. All-out U.S. warfare with Iran might still be unlikely despite the Jordan base attack, but the diplomatic pathways to halt or reverse the trend toward an Iran-U.S. war appear absent.

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