

# U.S. strikes in Syria and Iraq kill dozens of militants

WaPo

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February 3, 2024



**President Biden attends the dignified transfer of the remains of Spec. Breonna A. Moffett, Sgt. William J. Rivers and Spec. Kennedy L. Sanders on Friday at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. The soldiers, members of an Army Reserve unit based at Fort Moore, Ga., were killed Sunday in a drone strike on a U.S. outpost in Jordan. (Joshua Roberts/Reuters)**

JERUSALEM — The first round of retaliatory U.S. strikes against Iran-linked militants in Iraq and Syria killed dozens of fighters and several civilians, according to statements from Iraq government, militia groups and a local monitoring network on Saturday, as the Biden administration attempts to respond to the killing of three U.S. soldiers in a way that does not escalate regional conflict.

Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces said 16 of its fighters were killed and 25 injured in a U.S. strike on a command center in the western Iraqi province of Anbar. Washington has linked Kataib Hezbollah, an Iran-backed faction within the PMF, to the drone attack that killed the three U.S. reservists Sunday at a remote outpost in Jordan near the Syrian border.

The Iraqi government also put the death toll at 16, but said it included an unspecified number of civilians. Separately, an Iraqi provincial official said at least two civilians were killed in the Anbar province town of al-Qaim on the Syrian border, where weapons depots were targeted. The Washington Post could not independently verify the numbers.

An Iraqi government spokesman described the American airstrikes as "blatant aggression." "This aggressive strike places the security in Iraq and the region on the edge of the abyss, conflicting with efforts to establish the required stability," spokesman Basim al-Awadi said. He said the government, a strategic partner of the United States, rejected the use of Iraqi soil as a "battleground for settling scores."

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a U.K.-based monitoring network, said 18 militants were killed in strikes at 26 Iran-linked sites in Syria. The Syrian government said "a number" of military personnel and civilians were killed, but did not specify how many. The Syrian Foreign Ministry condemned the strikes, saying they "fuel conflict" in the Middle East.

The United States conducted strikes in Iraq and Syria on Friday, the apparent beginning of a long-promised retaliatory campaign against Iranian-aligned militants whom the White House blames for the killing of three U.S. soldiers in Jordan.

The overnight strikes on 85 targets, which used B-1 bombers flown from the United States, were part of what U.S. officials say would be a multiday campaign at regional targets linked to Iran.

“Our response began today. It will continue at times and places of our choosing,” President Biden said in a statement Friday. “Let all those who might seek to do us harm know this: If you harm an American, we will respond.”

U.S. officials described the operation as a carefully calibrated military response aimed at deterring further attacks on U.S. interests in the region while avoiding ramping up the cycle of regional conflict.

“The Biden administration is trying very much to strike a balance between deterrence and de-escalation,” said Abdolrasool Divsallar, an Iran specialist at the Middle East Institute. “I think the balance is there.”

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani described the strikes as another American “strategic mistake” alongside its support of Israel during its war on Hamas. They contribute to “tension and instability” in the region, he said.

Divsallar said the cost to Iran was not militarily significant because Tehran had time over the past week to evacuate personnel and equipment from sites likely to be in the crosshairs. Iran knows further retaliation could cause an “escalation loop,” he said, and both the United States and Iran have signaled they want to avoid further conflict. While Iran-linked militia groups may carry out their own retaliation, he said, they are likely to be low-intensity and largely face-saving.

The Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a PMF offshoot that includes its most hard-line factions, claimed to have carried out an attack on U.S. troops at a base in the northern city of Irbil on Saturday in response to the U.S. strikes. Kataib Hezbollah, also a member of the Islamic Resistance, announced a halt in attacks on U.S. forces after the lethal drone strike in Jordan, but other militias have said they plan to continue.

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad declined to comment on the claim of the Irbil attack. A spokesperson for Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. military coalition supporting Iraq's fight against Islamic State militants, did not respond to requests for comment.

U.S. Central Command said more than 125 precision munitions were fired at assets belonging to "militia groups and their [Iranian military] sponsors who facilitated attacks against U.S. and Coalition forces" during the attack.

Iranian proxies in the Middle East have escalated attacks on the United States and Israel since the start of the war in Gaza. Hamas and allied fighters streamed out of the enclave on Oct. 7 to kill around 1,200 people in Israeli and take 253 hostage, Israeli authorities say. Israel has responded with a military campaign that has killed more than 27,000 Palestinians, according to the Gaza Health Ministry.

The deaths of Spec. Breonna A. Moffett, 23, Sgt. William J. Rivers, 46, and Spec. Kennedy L. Sanders, 24, members of an Army Reserve unit based in Fort Moore, Ga., were the first in what the Institute for the Study of War says has been more than 170 attacks on U.S. military bases in the region, mainly in Syria and Iraq, since Oct. 7. More than 50 troops were wounded, at least one critically, in the strike on Tower 22, a key support base for the larger U.S. installation at Tanf in Syria.

The United States has launched dozens of retaliatory strikes since Oct. 7, including one in Baghdad that killed a senior commander of Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, another Iran-linked group.

Washington has also bombed Iranian-linked Houthis in Yemen, who have been attacking commercial shipping in what they say is a protest against the Gaza war.

*Salim reported from Baghdad; El Chamaa reported from Beirut. Susannah George in Dubai and Missy Ryan, Dan Lamothe, Alex Horton in Washington contributed to this report.*