

# Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

November 3, 2023

The Honorable Lloyd J. Austin III  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Austin:

We write to express concerns over the recent attacks on U.S. service members serving in the Middle East and the increased risk of traumatic brain injuries (TBIs). The attacks on U.S. bases by Iran proxies over the past week and the reported injuries are eerily similar to attacks we saw on Al Asad Air Base and in Erbil, Iraq, in January 2020.

The attacks in Iraq and Syria this past week have led to an estimated 20 service members with reported minor injuries. While they have all returned to duty, we understand that symptoms of TBIs can take days to surface and, as we've seen in the past, these reports may change.

After the Iranian ballistic missile attacks in Iraq in January 2020, your Department revised the number of individuals injured from 11 to over 100 service members diagnosed with TBIs over the course of one month. Earlier this year, the Pentagon said at least 23 service members had been diagnosed with TBI from the March attacks in Syria. While combat is inherently dangerous, we have now seen over two decades of TBI diagnoses in servicemembers exposed to blast injuries in CENTCOM's Area of Responsibility. The Department must proactively work to reduce the risk to service members both to protect our men and women in uniform and to preserve the capability and readiness of forward operating forces.

The attacks on our bases in Iraq and Syria over the past week were conducted using drones and lower-grade explosives, resulting in relatively minor damage. However, as we look to the future and plan to engage in great power competition against Iran, China, and Russia, we must do better to protect our service members. If drones have the ability to cause dozens of cases of TBI, Chinese and Russians with much higher yield conventional ballistic missiles will cause devastating impacts. Three years on from the Iran attack, and we are concerned that we have yet to adequately improve base force protection or personal protective equipment to mitigate these risks.

While properly diagnosing and caring for TBIs is imperative, your Department must continue to innovate ways to reduce this risk of injury on the battlefield. These injuries have a lasting impact on our service members and veterans and the status quo is no longer sufficient. How many "minor attacks" that cause potential life-long brain injuries do we allow before significant changes are made?

With that in mind, we respectfully ask for a response regarding the following questions:

1. Since the attacks in Iraq in January 2020, what have you done to reduce the risk of TBIs to service members serving in forward operating bases?

2. Were the bases and personnel involved in the recent attacks upholding the department's standards for base force protection and personal protective equipment?
3. What policy or procedural changes has the DoD made regarding base force protection or infrastructure measures and personal protective equipment requirements in forward operating positions?
4. How has the Department enforced any changes to the immediate screening or follow-on screening procedures after minor injuries occur to better identify and treat TBIs early on?

We thank you in advance for your attention to this matter and look forward to receiving your response.

Sincerely,



Ruben Gallego  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Morgan Luttrell  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS



Bill Johnson  
MEMBER OF CONGRESS