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www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

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By Bill Van Auken

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Israel launches airstrikes against Iraq, Syria and Lebanon

Israel over the last three days has carried out air strikes against targets in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, all of them launched on the pretext of countering a supposed Iranian threat.

Those struck in the attacks included Shia militia members in Iraq, members of the Lebanese Hezbollah Shia militia in Syria, a heavily populated civilian neighborhood in Lebanon's capital, Beirut, and, on early Monday, the pro-Syrian Palestinian faction, the Patriotic Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command, in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley.

The Israeli media has reported that the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is also considering the launching of attacks against the Houthis in northern Yemen. The monarchical dictatorships of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with which Tel Aviv is seeking to form a US-backed, anti-Iranian axis, have been waging a near-genocidal war against Yemen for more than four years. The Israeli military is reportedly already providing intelligence to the Saudi and UAE forces.

The weekend's attacks came in rapid succession. An airstrike on the village of Aqraba, southeast of Damascus, late Saturday night reportedly killed one Iranian and two members of the Hezbollah military. A spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed that the target was a "killer drone facility" and that it had been struck in a preemptive attack to forestall what Israel claimed—with no evidence—was a planned Iranian drone attack.

While for the most part Israel has refused to either confirm or deny the hundreds of attacks it has carried out against Syria in recent years, Netanyahu openly celebrated the airstrike, declaring, “I reiterate: Iran has no immunity anywhere. Our forces operate in every sector against the Iranian aggression.” Quoting from the Talmud, he added, “If someone rises up to kill you, kill him first.”

In the early morning hours Sunday, Israel carried out a drone attack on the southern suburbs of Beirut. One drone flying at low altitude was brought down by youth throwing rocks. A second drone, loaded with explosives, blew up outside a residential building that houses a Hezbollah media center, causing significant damage, but no casualties.

The attack on Beirut represented a major escalation. While Israeli warplanes have routinely violated Lebanese airspace, military action has been rare since the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War, and there had been no attacks on the Lebanese capital.

The website Debka.com, which has close links to Israeli intelligence, claimed that the strike was a botched attempt to assassinate Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian major general and commander of the Quds Force, which is responsible for extra-territorial operations of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

And on Sunday, there was a drone attack on the Iraqi town of Qaim, which killed a commander of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), the Shia militias that played the major role in defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Iraq, along with eight others.

Israel has not acknowledged an attack on Iraq since 1981, when Israeli warplanes carried out the bombing of the Osirak nuclear power plant built by the government of Saddam Hussein near Baghdad.

While the IDF has not explicitly confirmed the latest strikes on Iraq, Netanyahu indicated that the IDF has been given a free hand to carry out attacks throughout the region. “We’re acting not only if required, we’re acting in very many theaters against a state that seeks to annihilate us,” he said. “I’ve given the security forces the order and the operational freedom to do what is necessary in order to disrupt these plots by Iran.”

Lebanon’s President Michel Aoun said that the attack on Beirut amounted to a declaration of war, adding, “We are a people seeking peace not war and we do not tolerate anyone threatening us in this way.”

Similarly, Iraq's President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi on Monday called the Israeli strike there an "attack on Iraqi sovereignty."

The Fatah Coalition, the second-largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament, which represents the PMU militias, called the attack "a declaration of war on Iraq and its people" and demanded the immediate withdrawal of the 5,000 US troops deployed in the country. The Iraqi Shia militias have reported that the Israeli strike was a "blatant attack with air cover over the area from American planes, in addition to a large balloon to monitor the area near the site of the incident."

This is only the latest in a series of attacks on targets in Iraq. Last month, the *New York Times* quoted US officials who spoke not for attribution as saying that Israel was responsible for attacks that began on July 19 with a strike north of Baghdad. One of the US sources said that Tel Aviv was "pushing the limits," and that the Israeli military actions risked "getting the United States military removed from Iraq."

The July attack has been followed by an August 12 strike against a PMU ammunition depot south of the Iraqi capital and an August 20 attack on an arms storage facility near Iraq's Balad Air Base, 50 miles north of Baghdad.

There is little question that Israel could only carry out its attacks with the tacit approval of Washington, which controls Iraqi airspace. At the same time, it appears that there are divisions within the US state between elements of the military which fear that the Israeli strikes could provoke attacks on US forces in Iraq and make the continued American military presence there untenable and those within the Trump administration pursuing a "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, regardless of the consequences.

This campaign has escalated steadily since May of last year when the Trump administration ripped up the nuclear accord signed between Tehran and the major powers in 2015, re-imposing and escalating a regime of economic sanctions that amount to an act of war. In May of this year, Washington dispatched an aircraft carrier battle group, an air strike group led by nuclear-capable B-52 bombers and additional US troops to the region, supposedly in response to threats from Iran. Then in June, Trump revealed that he had come within 10 minutes of ordering airstrikes on Iran in response to the shooting down of a US spy drone by an Iranian missile.

In the wake of the recent Israeli attacks, both US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Vice President Mike Pence have issued statements defending Israel's "right to defend itself."

Netanyahu has ordered these acts of Israeli aggression across the Middle East in the final stages of a re-election campaign in which polls show his Likud bloc in a dead heat with the main opposition bloc, Blue and White, led by Benny Gantz, the former chief of staff of the Israel Defense Forces. Neither faction will gain enough seats to secure a majority in the Knesset.

Following elections held on April 9, Netanyahu proved incapable of forging a governing coalition with his former far-right nationalist and ultra-Orthodox partners. With his government gripped by crises stemming from the protracted Israeli attempt to militarily suppress the Palestinian people as well as the deepening of social inequality within Israel itself, Netanyahu is also facing indictment on corruption charges.

He is attempting to consolidate the support of his right-wing Zionist base by invoking the supposed threat from Iran and his aggressive military response, as well as his close alliance with US President Donald Trump.

Gantz and the Blue and White bloc have tried to attack Netanyahu from the right, calling him “weak” in terms of meting out violence against the Palestinian populations in Gaza and the West Bank.

In the latest in the series of “March of Return” protests on the border between the Gaza Strip and Israel, 122 Palestinians were wounded last Friday, 50 of them by live fire. Twenty-six of the wounded were hospitalized, according to the Gaza Health Ministry, including five in serious condition.

Meanwhile, Israeli warplanes have carried out multiple strikes in response to three rockets fired into Israel, two of which were intercepted and a third which fell into a field causing no casualties or damage.

In an act of collective punishment, Israel has cut fuel allowed into Gaza in half, forcing the shutdown of one of the three turbines at Gaza’s only power plant. As a result, power has been cut to the population, with rolling blackouts consisting of an eight-hour on, eight-hour-off schedule. Further cuts are inevitable.

In the occupied West Bank, Israeli security forces have responded to an explosion that killed a 17-year-old girl from a Zionist settlement by staging a massive dragnet, while the government has announced that it will retaliate by expanding the illegal settlement in Dolev with another 300 housing units.

The toxic mix of US imperialism's drive to assert its hegemony over the Middle East by military means and the relentless aggression and crisis of its principal regional ally, Israel, threatens to ignite a region-wide war with potentially catastrophic consequences for the entire world.

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