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## *Washington escalates Mideast war threat with strikes on Iraq, Syria*

A wave of US airstrikes against targets in Iraq and Syria Sunday linked to elements branded by Washington as Iranian “proxies” has sharply escalated the threat of a direct military confrontation between the US and Iran.



**The headquarters of Kata'ib Hezbollah lies in ruins after US air attacks. (AP Photo)**

Targeted in Sunday's attacks were bases of Kata'ib Hezbollah, an Iraqi Shia militia that the Trump administration has blamed for a series of mortar and rocket attacks on bases in Iraq where US troops are stationed. These attacks allegedly culminated Friday in the launching of 30 Katyusha rockets against an army base near the northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk in which one US private contractor was killed and four US military personnel were wounded.

Iraqi Prime Minister Abdel Abdul Mahdi and the country's President Barham Salih both condemned the US attack, which they said had been carried out without any coordination with Baghdad.

A statement by Abdul Mahdi's office said, "The prime minister described the American attack on the Iraqi armed forces as an unacceptable vicious assault that will have dangerous consequences." The statement described the US action as "a violation of Iraqi sovereignty and a dangerous escalation that threatens the security of Iraq and the region." Abdul Mahdi reported that US Secretary of Defense Mark Esper had notified him only half an hour before the US attacks. He said he had asked him to call off the raids and had attempted to warn the militia, part of the Popular Mobilization Forces which Baghdad regards as part of its armed forces.

President Salih similarly said he had been notified shortly before the attacks by a US diplomatic official and had unsuccessfully called for them to be aborted. He described the strikes as "unacceptable" and in violation of security agreements between the US and Iraq. Both officials are facing imminent ouster as a result of three-month-old protests that have shaken the country, while leaving at least 460 people dead and some 25,000 wounded. This popular upheaval has been provoked by the conditions of social inequality and mass misery that are the legacy of the 2003 criminal US invasion and occupation of Iraq that claimed over one million lives and reduced to rubble what had been one of the most advanced societies in the Middle East. The corrupt ruling oligarchy brought to power by the US and its sectarian divide-and-rule strategy is widely hated, with mass resistance to the ruling Shia sectarian parties concentrated in the predominantly Shia south of Iraq that they have purported to represent.

The protests saw a further escalation over the weekend after demonstrators demanding jobs forced their way into Iraq's southern Nasiriya oilfield, where they were joined by workers in shutting down the key facility.

Iraq's ruling establishment justifiably fears that the escalating US aggression will turn a country that is still reeling from decades of US sanctions, war and occupation into a principal battlefield in a new and even more violent confrontation between US imperialism and Iran.

Israel, which has claimed responsibility for a series of airstrikes against what it claims are Iranian-linked targets in Syria and Iraq, enthusiastically welcomed the US bombing raids, with its Foreign Minister Yisrael Katz calling them "a turning point in the regional

response to Iran and its proxies.” With its crisis-ridden government facing its third election in less than a year and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confronting criminal indictments for corruption, Israel’s ruling establishment is seeking to divert mounting social tensions outward in the form of military violence.

While the Pentagon described the US attacks as “precision defensive strikes” and “successful,” Defense Secretary Esper warned after briefing US President Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida that Washington could take “additional action.”

The US maintains a garrison of more than 5,000 US troops in Iraq. While US forces were for the most part withdrawn in 2011, they were redeployed following the 2014 overrunning of roughly one-third of the country by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an off-shoot of Al Qaeda that had originated under the US occupation in Iraq and had been sent into Syria in the war for regime change against the government of President Bashar al-Assad.

Kata’ib Hizbullah was one of the Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias that played the decisive role in blocking the advance of ISIS on Baghdad after the disintegration of US trained Iraqi government forces. It also sent forces into Syria to fight ISIS and Al Qaeda-linked militias there. While Washington claims that it is keeping troops in Iraq—as in Syria—to assure the “enduring” defeat of ISIS, whose grip has already been shattered, their real purpose in both countries is to counter Iranian influence and prepare for war against Iran.

Ironically, after bombing Iraq, the Pentagon issued a statement demanding that Iran and its “proxy forces” end “their attacks on US and coalition forces, and respect Iraq’s sovereignty.” For its part, Tehran has denied any responsibility for attacks on bases where US forces are deployed in Iraq.

Three of Sunday’s US airstrikes were carried out against targets inside Iraq, and two against facilities linked to Kata’ib Hizbullah in Syria. The most intense attacks were launched against bases established by the militia on the border that were designed to prevent the infiltration of ISIS fighters.

In light of last week’s warning by Trump to the Syrian government and Russia to halt an offensive against Al Qaeda-linked forces in the northwestern Syrian province of Idlib, the attack on the Iranian-backed militia’s positions in Syria may well signal Washington’s shift back to a strategy of direct support for Al Qaeda and ISIS elements in the continuation of the regime change war against Assad.

The US airstrikes are the first such attacks on forces in Iraq that enjoy support from Iran since the Obama administration ordered the troop withdrawal in 2011, not to mention the first since the aggressive buildup of US forces in the region against Iran that began in May of this year, when the US dispatched an aircraft carrier strike group along with a B-52-led bomber task force to the Persian Gulf region in response to an alleged Iranian “threat.”

The US buildup, which has seen thousands more troops deployed to the region since, came one year after the Trump administration unilaterally and illegally abrogated the 2015 nuclear agreement between Tehran and the P5+1 countries: United Nations Security Council members the US, Britain, France, Russia and China, plus Germany.

Washington then launched a “maximum pressure” campaign of economic sanctions tantamount to an act of war with the aim of driving Iranian oil exports down to zero, cutting off the country’s global financial links and provoking a social and economic crisis that would bring down Iran’s government.

The social misery inflicted by these measures, combined with the policies imposed by Iran’s bourgeois-clerical rulers, provoked mass upheavals last month, which the government proved capable of quelling with considerable force.

Now Washington appears to be embarking on a considerably more aggressive and reckless course, leading to a spiral of retaliation and counter-retaliation that threatens to ignite a conflagration that could engulf the entire region and beyond. Already by Sunday night, there were reports that a compound housing US personnel near Baghdad had come under mortar fire.

The global dangers posed by the US military escalation against Iran were made clear last week with the first-ever joint naval exercises conducted by Iran, Russia and China in the Gulf of Oman, along the strategic waterway through which 20 percent of the world’s internationally traded oil passes, the vast bulk of it destined for Asian markets, China chief among them. Beijing cannot accept US imperialism’s securing a vice-like grip over the Persian Gulf and its energy exports.

A military confrontation between the US and Iran could rapidly spiral into a global war drawing in all the major nuclear powers. As 2019 draws to a close, the most urgent question confronting the international working class remains that of forging out of the social upheavals erupting on every continent a new mass anti-war movement directed against the capitalist system, the source of militarism and war.