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By Bill Van Auken
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US launches airstrikes in retaliation for Iraq missile attack

Pentagon officials announced late Thursday that US and British warplanes had launched airstrikes against multiple targets in Iraq in retaliation for a missile attack the day before on a military base north of Baghdad that killed two US troops and one British medic while wounding over a dozen other “coalition” troops. The number of Iraqi casualties from the attack was not initially reported.

According to a US official who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity, the targets for the US bombing raids were sites associated with the Kataib Hezbollah militia, one of the largest components of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), the coalition of largely Shia-based militia groups. Baghdad designated the PMF as part of Iraq’s armed forces after the militias played the predominant role in defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which had routed government troops and overrun a third of the country in 2014.

“Let me be clear: The United States will not tolerate attacks against our people, our interests or our allies,” Defense Secretary Mark Esper told a Pentagon press conference. “All options are on the table as we work with our partners to bring the perpetrators to justice.”

The missile attack on Wednesday saw 18 Soviet-era Katyusha rockets rain down on Camp Taji, north of Baghdad. The attack and the US-led retaliation could reignite military conflict with Iran, threatening to drag the Middle East and the world into war.

Esper told reporters Thursday that US President Donald Trump had given the military authorization to “do what we need to do,” while claiming that the US military was focusing on Shia militia groups in Iraq which it believes were responsible for the attack.

There is widespread speculation in the media that the US will refrain from a direct attack on Iran under conditions of the mounting crisis over the coronavirus pandemic and the collapse of financial markets in the US and worldwide. Meanwhile, the Trump administration is attempting to salvage a crumbling agreement providing for a US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The administration, however, may still seize on the missile attack in Iraq as a pretext for launching a major military action for the very purpose of shifting public attention from the increasingly catastrophic consequences of its criminal incompetence and indifference in the face of the pandemic.

There were no initial reports of Iraqi casualties resulting from Thursday night’s air raids. Previously, however, warplanes struck positions held by Iraqi Shia militia groups near the Syrian-Iraqi border town of Albu Kamal, reportedly killing at least 26 people. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported the casualties and said that US warplanes had carried out the raid. The US Central Command, which oversees American military operations throughout the region, however, claimed that none of its planes had carried out operations in the area. Israel has also conducted continuous bombing raids in Syria over the past nine years.

Iraqi Shia militias have been deployed to Syria to join with government troops in combating the US-backed Al Qaeda-linked militias that have served as Washington’s proxy ground forces in a war for “regime change” aimed at toppling the government of President Bashar al-Assad. The town of Albu Kamal, bombed on Wednesday night, sits astride a strategic land route linking Iran—the Assad government’s closest regional ally—through Iraq and into Syria.

Wednesday’s attack on the base north of Baghdad came after over 20 others launched against US-linked facilities, including the American embassy in Baghdad, over the past several months.

The Pentagon also charged the Kataib Hezbollah militia with responsibility for an attack late last December that killed a US military contractor in northern Iraq. It retaliated with air strikes in western Iraq that killed at least 25 fighters, which in turn provoked angry demonstrations in Baghdad and the storming of the US Embassy.

This was followed by the January 3 US drone missile assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani, one of Iran's most senior officials, after he arrived at Baghdad's international airport aboard a commercial flight and passed through Iraqi customs with his diplomatic passport.

Killed in the same drone strike were Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the chief of the Kataib Hezbollah militia and deputy leader of the Popular Mobilization Forces, along with several other Iraqis and Iranians.

Initially, Trump administration officials claimed that the strike was carried out to preempt imminent attacks being prepared by Suleimani against US forces in the Middle East. This phony pretext was later dropped, with Trump claiming that he needed no such justification and that the attack was justified as an act of vengeance for attacks on US troops by the Iraqi resistance to the American occupation. It has since become clear that Suleimani was targeted because he was carrying out a diplomatic mission to Iraq as part of an attempt to defuse tensions with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and break up Washington's anti-Iranian axis with the Gulf oil monarchies and Israel.

Wednesday's missile attack on Camp Taji was carried out on what would have been Suleimani's 63rd birthday. Not only the Iranian government, but Shia-based militias in the Middle East and beyond have vowed to take revenge on the US for the assassination. Shia militias in Iraq have made similar statements about avenging the killing of the PMF leader al-Muhandis.

Iran's immediate response to the killing of Suleimani was a ballistic missile attack on the al-Asad Airbase in Iraq, which left some 110 US troops with traumatic brain injuries. In the aftermath of this strike, both Washington and Tehran appeared to draw back from the spiral of attacks and counter-attacks that threatened to unleash all-out war.

The renewed clashes come in the midst of a continuing crisis of the Iraqi government, which has been besieged by mass protests against social inequality, joblessness and rampant corruption within the state apparatus that was forged by the US invasion of 2003 and the subsequent American occupation.

Iraq's Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi has proven unable to form a new government, as demanded by the mass protests. Meanwhile, the Iraqi parliament is confronting Washington's open defiance of its demand made last January, in the wake of the Suleimani assassination, that the 6,000 US troops remaining in Iraq be withdrawn.

Instead, the Pentagon has indicated that it intends to deploy US Patriot missile batteries in Iraq to counter any possible new threat from Iranian ballistic missiles. US Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, the head of CENTCOM, told the House Armed Service Committee on Tuesday that the Pentagon was “in the process of bringing air defense systems, ballistic missile defense systems, into Iraq in particular, to protect ourselves against another potential Iranian attack.”

Last month, Iraq’s caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi addressed a letter to US Defense Secretary Esper warning that any deployment of Patriot missile batteries would be in defiance of the Iraqi government and would inflame popular opposition by signaling that the US has no intention of withdrawing its troops.

For its part, Tehran opposes the Patriot deployment as an attempt to secure US troops in Iraq for the purpose of freeing the Pentagon’s hand to carry out a war of aggression against Iran by reducing the threat of retaliation.

There is little likelihood that Tehran ordered Wednesday’s rocket strike against the US-led occupation forces in Iraq. The country has been plunged into a deepening crisis by the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit it harder than any other country with the exceptions of China and Italy. The devastating “maximum pressure” campaign by Washington to drive the country’s oil exports down to zero and cut it off from the world market has denied it essential medical supplies. The Iranian government has issued an appeal to the International Monetary Fund for \$5 billion in emergency funding to deal with the outbreak. It is hardly likely, under these conditions, to launch a military confrontation with the US.

Even as the world, and the United States itself, reels from the consequences of the pandemic and the failure of capitalist governments to either prepare for or adequately respond to its devastating effects, Washington continues to pursue its predatory interests in the Middle East and across the planet. The renewed violence in Iraq makes it clear that the threat of US imperialism dragging humanity into a catastrophic regional and even world war continues unabated.

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