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Israel launches aerial strikes on Lebanon escalating covert war against Iran

Israel has launched a series of air strikes on Lebanon in a marked escalation of hostilities in response to the launching of a handful of rockets by militant groups in the south of the country.

It is the first time that Israel has admitted conducting air strikes against Lebanon since 2014, although its fighter planes have for years breached Lebanese airspace on an almost daily basis as it prosecutes its covert war on Iran and its allies, including Lebanon's Hezbollah group, in Syria.

The strikes come in the wake of mounting tensions between Israel and Iran following the drone attack, which Washington, London and Tel Aviv have attributed to Iran, on the oil tanker MV Mercer Street. The tanker is operated by an Israeli-owned shipping company and was sailing in international waters off the coast of Oman.



F-16I Soufa Multirole Fighter in flight (Wikimedia Commons/Israeli Air Force)

That attack, which killed the ship's Romanian captain and British security officer, was likely in response to the long-running, covert offensive by Israel's naval, air, security, intelligence and cyber forces against Iran. While the United States and Britain said they would work with their allies to respond to the attack, Israel said it reserved the right to act alone if necessary.

Tensions rose further when several ships were delayed in the Gulf of Oman last Monday, after one of them appeared to hit a mine at sea. Later, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations agency reported the end of a "potential hijack" of one of the ships by armed attackers, in a sequence of events that are far from clear.

On Wednesday, Israel launched 92 rounds of artillery fire against targets in south Lebanon, reportedly hitting an open area near the town of Mahmoudiya in the Marjayoun district and causing a fire in a nearby village.

This assault was in response to what the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said were three rockets fired into Israel by Palestinian militants in the area earlier that day, without identifying the Palestinian group it held responsible. One of the rockets was intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome defence system, with two rockets landing inside Israel, sparking fires near Kiryat Shmona. It marked the sixth such incident in the last three months, including three sets of rockets fired at Israel from Lebanon during Israel's 11-day war on Gaza in May and a further three since then, after reported Israeli airstrikes on Syria, meaning that there were more incidents on Israel's northern border than on its border with Gaza.

While the IDF attributed all of them to Palestinian militants in southern Lebanon, not Hezbollah, it stressed that Hezbollah was probably aware of their plans.

On Wednesday night, Israel's fighter jets launched strikes against sites and infrastructure the IDF claimed were used for rocket launches. A spokesman said that Israel held the Lebanese government responsible for shelling from its territories and warned against more attacks. Defence Minister Benny Gantz told Ynet that Israel was prepared to attack Iran, saying both "Israel and the international community must act to curb Iran's actions." He described Israel's strikes as "warning shots... It's obvious we are capable of doing a lot more, and we hope we won't be dragged into it."

On Friday, Hezbollah, the bourgeois-clerical group backed by Iran, fired 19 missiles into uninhabited areas in northern Israel. Three fell within Lebanon, while 10 of the remaining 16 were intercepted by the Iron Dome. No casualties were reported.

Hezbollah released a video of its fighters launching the rockets, making it the first time since Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006 that Hezbollah publicly took responsibility for rocket fire on Israel. It said the rocket fire was in response to Israeli aggression, indicating the killing of a Hezbollah member who had crossed into northern Israel at a protest during the assault on Gaza and the wounding of another in Syria by an airstrike attributed to Israel, as well as the previous day's aerial attacks.

An IDF spokesman said Israel had responded with further artillery and aerial strikes in a third day of cross-border attacks by "striking the rocket launch sites in Lebanon" and open areas "in order not to escalate the situation," justifying it with the claim that Iran had fired into open areas in the Golan Heights instead of populated ones. Israel's TV Channel 12 cited an unsourced report as saying that the Israeli defence establishment had warned there could soon be several days of fighting, although Gantz urged Israelis not to cancel their vacation plans in the Galilee region.

Ned Price, spokesperson for the US State Department, confirmed Washington's unconditional defence of Israel's belligerence, telling reporters, "Israel has the right to defend itself against such attacks." He indirectly acknowledged Washington's prior knowledge if not approval of the attack, saying the US would remain engaged with its "Israeli and Lebanese counterparts, as well as with the Lebanese Armed Forces." He

called on the Lebanese government “urgently to prevent such attacks and bring the area under its control,” a clear instruction to the army to rein in Hezbollah.

On Saturday, Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah said that his group was not seeking to escalate the conflict. “What happened over the past few days was a dangerous development, something that has not happened for 15 years,” he said, warning that Hezbollah would expand its range to “the Galilee or parts of the Lebanese Golan that Israel has occupied,” if Israel continued its airstrikes.

Israel’s aggressive action against the Palestinian militant groups and Hezbollah is bound up with its broader hostility to Iran, which indicated its collaboration with its allies by giving the secretary-general of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Ziad al-Nakhalah, the head of Hamas’ Political Bureau Ismail Haniyeh, and the deputy secretary-general of Hezbollah Naim Qassem front-row seats, in front of the European Union’s delegate, at President Ebrahim Raisi’s inauguration in Tehran on Thursday.

The following day, Raisi met with Qassem, Haniyeh and other leading officials from Iran’s regional allies, while on Saturday Hossein Salami, who heads the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, met with Qassem.

Israel’s airstrikes seek to undermine the position of Tehran’s allies in Lebanon, which is reeling under an economic and social firestorm exacerbated by the pandemic and the devastation caused by last year’s blast at Beirut port. The Sunni and Christian political elite backed by Washington and Paris have tried and failed for the past year to form a government that meets the approval of President Aoun, his Christian Patriotic Free movement and Hezbollah, which with its allies has the largest bloc in Lebanon’s parliament. The successful formation of such a government under their latest candidate Najib Mikati would serve to ramp up the pressure on Iran, forcing further concessions from Tehran if not the outright ending of the Vienna talks aimed at reinstating some version of the 2015 nuclear accords.

At the very least, Israel sought to estimate the extent of the Palestinian militants’ independence from Hezbollah, which had rejected any responsibility for the attacks, and of Hezbollah’s support within southern Lebanon, its long-time stronghold. Druze villagers in Chouaya located Hezbollah’s rocket launcher and vented their anger.

Aoun said that Israel's overnight air strikes showed an escalation in its "aggressive intent" towards his country. They not only constituted a direct threat to the security and stability of southern Lebanon but violated UN Security Council resolutions. The Lebanese army said it had detained the "four people who launched the rockets and seized the launcher used in the operation," but Druze leaders supported Hezbollah, saying it had the right to act against Israel.

On Saturday, Israeli aircraft bombed Hamas sites in Gaza in response to incendiary balloons launched from the besieged Palestinian enclave.

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