

# Israel stoking conflict in Iraq, Iran, Syria and the Occupied Territories

**Chris Marsden****25 June 2014**

Monday's air strikes by Israel on a regional military headquarters and eight other targets inside Syria were mounted on the pretext of the death of a teenager in a cross-border attack.

All the attacks were on targets bordering or near the Golan Heights, the area captured from Syria and occupied by Israel during the 1967 "Six Day" Arab-Israeli war and illegally annexed by Israel in 1981.

An earlier attack by forces on the Syrian side of the border hit a civilian vehicle in the Golan Heights, killing the boy and wounding two others. It was the first fatal attack on the Israeli-Syrian border since civil war was fomented by the United States and its allies in the Gulf States and Turkey three years ago.

There was no indication that the attack on civilian contractors was conducted by Syrian troops. There is every possibility that it was the work of western-backed Syrian opposition forces—either on their own initiative or working to a script provided by Israel.

The Israeli government of President Binyamin Netanyahu has a policy of blaming all mortar shells, rockets and small arms fire on the regime of Bashar al-Assad and has used this as an excuse for previous air attacks on Syria.

The boy killed, Mohammed Karaka, 14, had accompanied his truck driver father to work. In a display of naked cynicism, Netanyahu, who has the blood of countless Palestinians on his hands, told journalists that he had told the boy's father, "Our enemies don't differentiate between Jews and non-Jews, adults and children."

It is clear that Israel wanted some justification for stepping up aggression against Syria. In an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press," Sunday, Netanyahu gave a frank insight into the politically criminal thinking of the Israeli ruling elite when he urged the United States to pit Sunni insurgents in Syria and Iraq against Iran, rather than

working with Tehran to defeat them.

Netanyahu spoke after US and Iranian negotiators had met on the sidelines of talks on Iran's nuclear program in Vienna. Amid speculation of a possible alliance between Iran and the US against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and with some voices urging an accommodation with Assad, Netanyahu was asked whether US air strikes against ISIS in Iraq would strengthen Iran.

He replied that both the radical Shi'ites allied to Iran, and radical Sunnis, led by Al Qaeda and ISIS, were enemies of the US. "When your enemies are fighting each other, don't strengthen either one of them," he urged. Instead, the US should "take the actions that you deem necessary to counter the ISIS takeover of Iraq," but must not "allow Iran to dominate Iraq the way it dominated Lebanon and Syria. So you actually have to work on both sides. As I say, you try to weaken both."

The worst outcome would be that Iran "would come out with nuclear weapons capability," he added. "That would be a tragic mistake. It will make everything else pale in comparison.... That should be prevented at all cost."

In the same vein, during a press conference following Monday's military attack, Netanyahu said in conflicts like Syria, it is best for Israel to sit back and let its enemies weaken each other. "This is a fault line between civilisation and savagery," he said.

The latest offensive against Syria comes after almost two weeks of an Israeli military operation in the occupied West Bank targeting Hamas—a key ally of Iran. In this case the pretext was the alleged kidnapping of three teenage boys while they were hitchhiking near Bethlehem on June 12.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) "Operation Brother's Keeper" has included military incursions into the cities of Hebron, Nablus and Ramallah and the building of new checkpoints and barbed wire barriers. There have been mass arrests of more than 361 Palestinians, mostly

members of Hamas, including the re-arrest of 51 Palestinian prisoners freed as part of a 2011 prisoner swap with Hamas for Israel soldier, Gilad Shalit. Six Palestinians, including a 14-year-old boy for whom Netanyahu shed no crocodile tears, have been killed.

On Sunday, Deputy Defense Minister Danny Danon (Likud) said he was in favour of a “wide-reaching operation against the civilian population” of Gaza and the West Bank, including cutting off electricity supplies.

Amnesty International denounced the operation as a form of collective punishment, illegal under the Fourth Geneva Conventions Article 33 and a war crime. Eleven Israeli human rights groups have written to Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon and Public Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovich arguing that the army’s actions “raise serious concerns of unwarranted infringement on basic rights and collective punishment.”

The Palestinian Authority (PA) led by President Mahmoud Abbas has formally denounced the arrests and other measures, but is working directly with the IDF. Abbas, who leads Fatah, Hamas’s main rival, declared earlier, “We are coordinating with [Israel] in order to return those youths...”

Once again Israel’s real motive is an attempt to re-ignite conflicts in the Middle East that it hopes will undermine Iran and strengthen its own hand in dealings with Washington.

The offensive in the Occupied Territories is being carried out following a reconciliation agreement between Fatah and Hamas announced in April. This was meant to bring an end to the conflict that first erupted in 2007 that divided the Fatah-controlled West Bank from the Gaza strip, led by Hamas.

Israel’s response to the agreement was bitterly hostile, and it suspended ongoing peace negotiations with the PA. US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki declared supportively, “It’s hard to see how Israel can be expected to negotiate with a government that does not believe in its right to exist.”

At the start of this month, an interim unity government was sworn in. Netanyahu told his ministers he would now hold the Palestinian Authority responsible for any attacks originating from the Gaza Strip and would act to prevent Palestinian elections taking place in 2015, which included the participation of Hamas.

He has been as good as his word. Netanyahu’s foreign-policy adviser, Dore Gold, said the abduction of the teenagers proved “the school of thought in the West that Hamas was moderating” was wrong. After Hamas

acquiesced to the unity government, “there was a sense in Israel that the quiet of 2012 and 2013 was coming to an end.”

On Monday, UN political affairs chief, Jeffrey Feltman, urged Israel to exercise restraint “in carrying out the security operations in strict compliance with international law.”

“The situation on the ground is very bad,” he warned, during a closed session of the UN Security Council. “I fear we might get to the point of a third intifada.”

The US blocked a draft statement on the alleged kidnapping of the Israeli youths, suggesting amendments that were rejected by Russia’s UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin because Washington wanted no condemnation of Israel.

Israel’s UN Ambassador Ron Prosor said in a statement, “Some nations behave as if Israel should roll out the welcome mat for Hamas.” But yesterday, Israel said it was scaling back its military operation. With the holy month of Ramadan starting Saturday, members of Netanyahu’s security cabinet had reportedly raised fears that otherwise events could “escalate out of control.”

In a further attempt to ratchet up tensions, Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has threatened to expel UN Middle East peace envoy Robert Serry from Israel, after charging that he had offered to help transfer \$20 million from Qatar to the PA to resolve a pay crisis for employees of the Hamas-led government in Gaza. According to reports, Abbas refused to sanction the funds being transferred, stating that he would “only be able to be of assistance if [this was] acceptable to all stakeholders, including Israel.”

For his part, Serry has denied any role in the transfer, saying that the matter never even came up when he visited Qatar on a pre-planned visit two weeks ago.

It appears that the envoy was targeted for expressing concern over Israel’s brutal collective punishment in the West Bank and for urging Tel Aviv to act “in compliance with international law and respect for the lives, dignity and livelihoods of Palestinians.”



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