

Israeli bombing of Syria threatens wider war

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Israeli air strikes conducted against Syria on Sunday constitute a provocative and criminal act of military aggression that poses the threat of widening the ongoing war in Iraq and Syria across the region.

The Syrian government accused Israel of sending warplanes to bomb targets near the Damascus international airport as well as the Dimas area near the Lebanese border.

State-owned Al Ikhbariya television charged “the Israeli enemy committed a heinous attack by targeting two peaceful areas in the Damascus countryside.” It said that there were no casualties in the air strikes.

The Syrian foreign ministry called upon the United Nations Security Council to condemn the attacks and to impose immediate sanctions against Israel, actions which Washington, with its veto power on the council, is certain to block.

The government of President Bashar al-Assad charged that the Israeli strikes represented direct support for the Islamist militias in Syria such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Al Qaeda-affiliated Al Nusra Front.

“Syria calls for imposing deterrent measures against Israel, which didn’t hide its pro-terrorism policies and its premeditated intentions against Syria,” the ministry’s letter to the UN stated.

Israel, following its standard policy, refused to comment on “foreign reports,” neither confirming nor denying the attacks. The bombing raids represented at least the eighth time that Israeli warplanes have struck inside Syrian territory since the Western-backed war for regime change began in 2011.

These attacks have been justified by Israeli officials in the name of destroying missiles and other weaponry supposedly bound for Hezbollah, the Shia-based movement in Lebanon, or in retaliation for shells fired across the disputed Syrian-Israeli border in the Golan Heights. While this fire has generally come from the

Islamist anti-government militias, Israel has invariably directed its own fire at government troops.

Israel occupied Syria’s Golan Heights in the 1967 Middle East war, and in 1981 illegally annexed the area.

There have been varying accounts of what the Israeli strikes were targeting. Pro-Israeli and Syrian “rebel” sources have claimed that it was Iranian missiles and other weaponry destined for Hezbollah. Lebanese television, however, said that one of the facilities struck was a Syrian intelligence facility that was being used by Iran.

Syrian state media said that the strikes were aimed at Russian anti-aircraft weaponry. Tel Aviv had previously warned that it would prevent Syria from deploying Russia’s advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missile system. While Moscow agreed to sell the systems to Syria in 2007, earlier this year it announced that it was canceling further delivery of the weapons.

The DEBKA web site, which has close ties to the Israeli military intelligence complex, cited “Middle East military and intelligence sources” as describing the raids as “Israel’s first overt military clash with Russia in the course of the more than three-year Syrian war.”

“Those sources assert that the strikes demolished components of Russian SA-25 or other types of top-line anti-air missile systems that Moscow had destined for Syria and” Hezbollah, the report stated. “Russian transport planes are said to have shipped these consignments in the last few days to the military section of Damascus international airport.”

The Russian government sharply condemned the attacks, denouncing Israel’s “aggressive action” in a letter to the United Nations and insisting that such attacks should not be reported.

“Moscow is deeply worried by this dangerous development, the circumstances of which demand an

explanation,” Russian foreign ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said.

Iran’s and Syria’s foreign ministers met in Tehran Monday and publicly denounced the attacks. “This move is [aimed at] boosting the morale of terrorist groups which are suffering very serious blows from the resistance of the Syrian and Iraqi people,” Iran’s Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said.

He warned that the entire Middle East is confronting a “big regional and global crisis.”

Syria’s Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallem charged that Israel was attempting to offset defeats on the ground suffered by the Western-backed “rebels.”

Israel is clearly banking on the ongoing conflict within Syria preventing Damascus from striking back over the attacks. It nonetheless has placed its forces on Israel’s borders with Syria and Lebanon on a state of alert.

In a comment published in the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, Amos Harel wrote that the latest raid was “exceptional from at least three aspects: It is done after Hezbollah had made effort to define new game rules opposite Israel in the northern front, it takes place after the international community had changed its order of priorities in relation to the war in Syria (from toppling Assad first to defeating his opponents from ISIS now) and this is the first time that Israel seemingly acts in Syria since Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu declared his intention to go for elections.”

Syrian officials have charged that Netanyahu launched the attack in part to boost his prospects for reelection in the vote scheduled for March.

The Syrian and Iranian charges that Israel is actively seeking to aid the ISIS and Al Nusra Front forces inside Syria have received substantiation from the United Nations, which made public reports issued by the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), which patrols the cease-fire line in the Golan Heights, indicating continuous Israeli contact with and aid to the so-called rebels.

A report issued by UNDOF in June 2014, for example, cited 59 incidents at a Syrian-Israeli crossing point known as Position 85 in which the UN forces “observed armed members of the opposition transferring 89 wounded persons from the Bravo [Syrian] side across the ceasefire line to IDF and IDF on the Alpha [Israeli] side handing over 19 treated and

2 deceased individuals to the armed members of the opposition on the Bravo side.”

Nor is the contact limited to medical aid. The report added that “on one occasion, UNDOF observed IDF on the Alpha side handing over two boxes to armed members of the opposition on the Bravo side.”

Israel’s i24news web site cited records from the country’s Ministry of Health revealing that at least 1,000 Syrians have been treated at four hospitals in the north of Israel, many of them fighters.

The news network added that last month Israel’s Druze minority carried out a public protest against the country’s aid to ISIS and the Al Nusra Front fighters, which are viewed as a mortal threat to Druze communities in both Syria and Lebanon.

The Israeli action could have other motives as well. Tel Aviv is strongly opposed to the negotiations to reach a nuclear settlement with Iran and can only be further agitated over the fact that US and Iranian warplanes are simultaneously attacking the Islamist forces inside Syria. The latest intervention may well be aimed at provoking a conflict that could disrupt any rapprochement between Washington and Tehran.

It is certain that the raids have been watched closely by the Pentagon, serving as a means of gauging Syria’s air defense systems in advance of any move to impose a much-debated no-fly buffer zone in northern Syria on the Turkish border.



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