

Israeli strike in Syria threatens wider war

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In the wake of last Sunday's Israeli air strike inside Syria's Golan Heights, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have moved armor, troops and elements of the "Iron Dome" anti-missile system up to Israel's northern borders in anticipation of retaliatory military action. The IDF blocked the Galilee Highway south of the border with Lebanon, and Lebanon has reported increased overflights by Israeli jets from the border area up to the capital of Beirut.

Sunday's missile strike near the village of Mazari' al-Amal in Syria's Quneitra Province claimed the lives of Iranian Revolutionary Guards general Mohammed Ali Allahdadi and six senior officers of the Lebanese Shia militia, Hezbollah. Among the dead were Jihad Mughniyeh, the 25-year-old son of former Hezbollah military commander Imad Mughniyeh, who was assassinated by Israel in Damascus in 2008, as well as top officers in Hezbollah's Raduan Force, considered its most elite unit.

Tehran has vowed to hit back at Israel in response to the air strike. The Revolutionary Guards commander, Major General Ali Jafari, declared at a funeral held for Allahdadi, "The Zionists should await destructive thunderbolts." Thousands of Iranians accompanied the slain general's casket in a funeral procession in Tehran, chanting "Death to Israel" and burning two Israeli flags.

While Hezbollah has not issued a specific threat of retaliation, Lebanese sources indicated that the movement would have to respond, although they said it was not likely to seek an escalation of the conflict.

Nonetheless, Lebanon's *Daily Star* reported Wednesday that the tensions provoked by the Israeli air strike have "revived fears of a new Lebanese-Israeli war." The last such war, in 2006, killed at least 1,200 Lebanese, the vast majority of them civilians, and left much of the country in ruins.

Tel Aviv has yet to officially acknowledge its attack.

However, in an apparent attempt to dial down the confrontation with Iran and Hezbollah, an Israeli security official, speaking to the media on condition of anonymity, claimed that the IDF had not known the Iranian general had been traveling in the convoy that it struck inside Syria.

"We thought we were hitting an enemy field unit that was on its way to carry out an attack on us at the frontier fence," the security official said. "We went on the alert, we spotted the vehicle, identified it as an enemy vehicle and took the shot," he said. "We saw this as a limited tactical operation."

This justification, which may well have been made at Washington's demand in an attempt to defuse a confrontation that could derail upcoming nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 Western powers, is hardly credible.

While the official stated that the air strike was carried out by an Israeli helicopter, both Lebanese and United Nations peacekeeping forces reported that pilotless drones were seen heading to the scene of the attack and then returning to Israel afterward.

The attack has all the earmarks of an assassination strike. While in the past, Israel has justified bombings inside Syria on the grounds that they were attacking convoys transporting arms to Hezbollah, those hit on Sunday were clearly not engaged in such activity. Nor were they even remotely within striking distance of the Israeli border.

Some, both in Israel and in Lebanon, have linked the strike to elections scheduled for March, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seeking to reverse his declining popularity by provoking a new military confrontation in the region. Also possible is an Israeli provocation designed to upend the moves toward negotiated settlement on the Iranian nuclear program.

What is clearly involved, however, is the Israeli regime's determination to bolster the Islamist "rebels"

that are fighting Syrian government forces. The Iranian-Hezbollah contingent was in the Golan Heights as part of an effort by Damascus to wrest the area from the control of the al-Nusra Front, Syria's Al Qaeda affiliate.

The Israeli daily *Haaretz* Wednesday acknowledged the extensive alliance between Israel—which regularly attempts to discredit Hamas and all forms of Palestinian resistance to occupation by equating them with Al Qaeda—and al-Nusra.

“Israel is suspected of providing assistance to the Nusra Front, which is on the list of terror organizations, and is also thought to be getting help in return from that group,” the Israeli daily reported. “Specifically, according to reports on rebel websites, anti-Assad fighters in the Syrian Golan Heights provide ongoing intelligence information to Israel, and also receive help from the latter in the form of weapons and military training. One website even said that Israel is establishing the counterpart in the Syrian Golan of Israel's old militia ally in Lebanon, the South Lebanon Army, and that the new entity relies on support from the rebels.”

The South Lebanon Army was a quisling force funded, supplied and armed by Israel, which helped it to control a “security zone” in southern Lebanon from the 1980s until 2000, when it collapsed in the face of a Hezbollah offensive and a popular uprising following Israel's unilateral withdrawal from the zone.

Tel Aviv appears to be attempting to field the same kind of force inside the Syrian-controlled section of the Golan Heights, using the Al Qaeda-linked forces as its proxies. Israel seized most of the Golan Heights in its 1967 and 1973 wars and effectively annexed the occupied territory in 1981. Syria has continued to demand a full Israeli withdrawal and the return of the territory.

The *Haaretz* article confirms numerous reports that have documented Israel's aid to al-Nusra, including the provision of arms and supplies and the transfer of wounded Islamist fighters to Israeli hospitals to be treated and then sent back into the fighting in Syria.

The episode has exposed once again the glaring contradictions and hypocrisy that pervade the US-led “war on terrorism” in Iraq and Syria, with Washington's closest ally in the region, Israel, openly backing al-Nusra, the Al Qaeda-affiliated militia that

has been attacked by US warplanes.

As for the government of President Bashar al-Assad, on the very day of the missile strike in Quneitra, its minister of information told Lebanon's Al-Manar television, “What Israel has to realize is that the cost of preserving regional stability is far less than the cost of letting things get out of hand.”

In other words, the overriding aim of the bourgeois regime in Damascus is to cling to power at whatever price, including by offering itself as a guarantor of the security of Israel's elastic borders. As its actions show, however, the Zionist regime has no interest in such stability, but is rather driven by its own internal contradictions to continuous military provocations and aggression against the peoples of both occupied Palestine and the entire region.



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