

Israel air raid targets government positions as Syrian conflict intensifies

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In yet another sign of the threat of a wider war in the Middle East, the Syrian government fired anti-aircraft missiles early Friday morning at Israeli planes after Tel Aviv launched one of its deepest incursions into the conflict to date, carrying out a raid near the Syrian city of Palmyra.

Although none of the fighter jets were shot down, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) deployed its Arrow missile defense system to take down one of the Syrian missiles north of Jerusalem. Residents were awoken by air raid sirens and pieces of the Syrian missile landed in Jordan, prompting the Israeli army to issue a statement on the incident.

Israeli planes have conducted numerous strikes since 2012 on arms shipments Tel Aviv claims are being sent to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The army has tended to downplay these activities, with initial reports generally appearing in the international media.

But Friday's attack marked the deepest incursion yet. The positions hit near Palmyra were reportedly occupied by government troops and aligned Hezbollah forces who are advancing on Islamic State fighters to the east.

Israel's growing aggressiveness in its actions over Syria is bound up with its role as the closest US ally in the region. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly warned of Israel's refusal to accept an expanded role for Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, both of which backed Assad's forces in the country's civil war. As Netanyahu provocatively declared during a recent visit to Moscow, "One of the most important issues we will discuss is Iran's attempt to make an agreement with Syria. With or without Syria's agreement, Iran will attempt to establish a permanent military presence in Syria, both on land and at sea."

In an ominous warning, the Israeli Prime Minister

added, "I will tell President Putin about my extreme opposition to this plan, and about the possibility Israel will choose to attack. I hope we will be able to come to the understanding necessary to prevent as much as possible confrontations between Russian and Israeli forces."

Israel has long maintained a belligerent stance towards Tehran. With the blessing of its US ally, Tel Aviv repeatedly invoked the claim that Iran was trying to develop nuclear weapons and warned that Israeli forces could conduct a preemptive strike on the country.

Netanyahu undoubtedly feels his hand strengthened by the repeated denunciations of Iran coming from the Trump administration. The Israeli Prime Minister's meeting with Trump in Washington last month and the pair's joint press conference indicated that the US is planning to work with Israel and a coalition of Sunni Arab states to conduct stepped up provocations against Tehran.

Responding to the Israeli raid, Russia summoned Tel Aviv's ambassador to Moscow and demanded an explanation. Vowing that Israel would not back down, Netanyahu proclaimed in a statement released later yesterday, "Our policy is very consistent. When we identify attempts to transfer advanced weapons to Hezbollah—when we have the intel and the operational capability—we act to prevent it. That's how we've acted and how we will continue to act...and everyone needs to take this into account. Everyone."

The Syrian government reacted by sending letters to the UN Secretary General and the director of the UN Security Council in which it denounced the Israeli attacks as a violation of Syrian sovereignty and a breach of international law. Damascus also claimed to have shot down one Israeli plane and hit another, but

Israel denied this.

The potential for further clashes between Israeli and Syrian forces, or even with Russia, which is involved in the Syrian conflict to support the Assad regime, is heightened above all by the imminent prospect of a major escalation of the war by the Trump administration. The Pentagon is set to send a request to Defense Secretary James Mattis for a doubling of the number of troops deployed in the country, which would see the increase of US ground forces by 1,000.

American warplanes have already stepped up air strikes both in Syria and Iraq, with devastating consequences.

On Thursday, a US air strike hit a mosque in the village of Al Jina in Aleppo province, killing at least 46 civilians and wounding over 100. According to locals, there were 300 people in the mosque at the time and the death toll is likely much higher because many bodies remain unrecovered. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based group aligned with the opposition to Assad, described the bombing as a “massacre.” Concerns were also expressed that the targeting of a meeting so close to a mosque could indicate that the Pentagon has loosened the rules of engagement in Syria, in line with unconfirmed press reports earlier this week.

US Central Command confirmed it had conducted a raid in the area but refused to state its precise location, merely stating that it had been aimed at an Al Qaeda meeting. In a tacit admission that US planes bombed the mosque, Col. John Thomas, spokesman for Central Command, told the media, “We did not target a mosque, but the building that we did target—which was where the meeting took place—is about 50ft (15 metres) from a mosque that is still standing.”

Later in the day, Pentagon spokesman Jeff Davis said the air strike had likely killed a number of high level Al Qaeda operatives and was carried out by manned and unmanned aircraft. “We do not currently assess there were any civilian casualties,” he declared.

The raid was not listed among those carried out by the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, indicating that the decision to target the area was taken unilaterally by Washington.

The US and its allies continue to vastly underestimate the numbers of civilian casualties caused by their murderous air strikes. Earlier this month, the coalition

asserted that a mere 220 civilians had been killed in Syria and Iraq since raids began in 2014. This ridiculously low figure bears no relation to the genuine number of lives destroyed by US imperialism, a figure which will only rise as Trump escalates the conflict, as demonstrated by his recent granting of permission to the CIA to carry out drone assassinations without presidential oversight.

The US-incited war for regime change in Syria has now been raging for over six years and has claimed an estimated half a million lives. The Trump administration’s plans to further escalate the conflict, under the pretext of combatting ISIS, will only compound the suffering of millions who have been forced to flee their homes and vastly increase the likelihood of a direct clash between the competing powers whose militaries are deployed in the region.

One of the most dangerous conflict regions is in northern Syria around the town of Manbij, where US, Russian and Turkish forces, along with their proxies and fighters from the Syrian government, are operating within firing distance of each other. The US has aligned itself with the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in its push to oust ISIS from its de facto capital of Raqqa.

Turkey, which directly intervened in the conflict last August with the backing of its own Syrian militia, designates the SDF as a terrorist organization and is deeply opposed to Kurdish involvement in the retaking of any territory from ISIS. Russia, meanwhile, is supporting Assad’s troops to recapture as much territory for the government as possible.

The sending of hundreds more US forces to this highly-explosive region only increases the danger of the Syrian bloodbath erupting into a broader conflict, with disastrous consequences for the population of the Middle East and beyond.



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