

Israel bombs Syrian government positions as anti-Assad opposition forces lose ground

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Last week, Israeli fighter jets attacked major military facilities near the town of Maysaf in western Syria from Lebanese airspace with the full backing of Israel's paymasters in Washington.

The first attack killed two people and caused extensive damage, while a second killed or wounded a further seven people.

According to the British-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights—a British-based monitoring group with ties to forces opposed to the government of President Bashar al-Assad—Israeli missiles hit facilities belonging to the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) and a military base storing ground-to-ground missiles.

The SSRC is a Syrian government agency that the US and Israel claim is producing chemical weapons.

These strikes are part of a broader push by Israel to create “facts on the ground,” under conditions where Assad's regime in Syria—with Russia and Iran's backing—has been gaining the upper hand. They indicate the multiple rivalries in the region that threaten a wider conflagration in the resource-rich Middle East.

While Israel, as usual, did not confirm or deny the attacks, military intelligence chief Major General Herzl Halevi said that Israel was “dealing with threats near and far.” He added, “The threats to Israel are from armed militant groups, most of them aided and funded by Iran. They are grave threats, but not existential ones.”

Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman was more explicit. He said that Israel was determined to resist Iran's influence in the region, stating, “Everything will be done to prevent the existence of a Shiite corridor from Tehran to Damascus.”

Just a few days earlier, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Iran of trying to produce advanced, precision-guided missiles in Lebanon and Syria. He said, “Iran is busy turning Syria into a base of military entrenchment and it wants to use Syria and Lebanon as

war fronts against its declared goal to eradicate Israel. This is something Israel cannot accept.”

These strikes come exactly 10 years after Israel bombed Syria's nuclear reactor in eastern Syria and follow numerous interventions by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) in Syria's six-year-long civil war.

Israel has been a largely silent partner in the US-orchestrated campaign to topple the Assad regime. But just last month in an interview with *Ha'aretz*, Major General Amir Eshel, the outgoing chief the Israel Air Force, admitted to launching nearly 100 attacks on Syrian territory, allegedly against convoys supplying Hezbollah, over the past five years. Israel has also carried out targeted assassinations of senior Hezbollah figures.

Hezbollah, the Shia party and militant group from Lebanon that is supported by Iran, has played a key role supporting President Assad. It has sent its forces to fight the ever-shifting alliance of Islamist groups opposing him that includes Islamic State, Al Nusra, Jaish al-Fatah and Ahrar al-Sham, variously funded at different times by the CIA, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States and Turkey.

Israel, for its part, has allowed competing Islamist groups opposed to Assad to set up bases in the Golan Heights, providing them with training, intelligence and medical facilities. It has maintained regular contact with these groups, according to a 2015 report published by the UN Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF), which has itself faced repeated lethal attacks from al-Nusra and other groups.

Following an agreement between Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2015, Russia and Israel coordinated the operations of their aircraft over Syria—in order to avoid accidentally trading fire. This proved what had long been suspected: that Israel has been intervening covertly in the Syrian conflict. Netanyahu himself has acknowledged that Israel's air force has operated undisturbed in Syrian air space in

violation of Syria's sovereignty and its 1974 agreement with Syria following the October 1973 war.

While the Syrian government for its part warned of the "dangerous repercussions of this aggressive action to the security and stability of the region," it has not responded militarily as it has done on a few occasions in the past.

Instead, the Syrian Foreign Minister filed a formal complaint with the United Nations Security Council and the Secretary General, saying "The Israeli aggression has become a norm." The complaint added that Israel was seeking to provide aid and support for terrorist groups such as the al-Nusra Front and ISIS just as the Syrian army was advancing against them, and that inaction on the part of the Security Council would be "unacceptable." Just last week, the Syrian army and Shi'ite militias drove out IS fighters from Deir el-Zour, in the eastern oil-producing region of the country.

The Israeli air strikes took place as the IDF was conducting the largest military exercise in 19 years on its border with Lebanon that involved tens of thousands of soldiers and civilian evacuation drills. Commentators have described the 10-day-long exercises as a dress rehearsal for a future war with Hezbollah that would counter multiple terrorist infiltrations from southern Lebanon.

Israel's relations with Russia have soured recently following Moscow's threat to veto any UN Security Council resolution designating Hezbollah a terrorist organization. A meeting between Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin in the Black Sea resort of Sochi ended without any commitment by Putin to arrange the withdrawal of both Iran and Hezbollah from Syria and Netanyahu warning that Israel would act to protect its interests.

While Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has emphasized Russia's commitment to Israel's security interests and said the establishment of "de-escalation zones" in Syria would not harm Israel, Israel views the presence of Iranian and Hezbollah forces in Syria as a threat.

In any event, Russia is powerless to force Hezbollah's forces out of Lebanon because of Iran's support for the group as the basis for maintaining Tehran's influence in Lebanon and as a crucial pro-Assad fighting force. Although Russia has sought to limit Iran's role in Syria, to avoid antagonizing Washington, its aims—to shore up the Assad regime, preserve its only warm water port in Tartus, ensure its military and commercial contracts and loans with Syria and regional influence—are dependent on

Iran.

Last month, Netanyahu told UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, during his visit to the Middle East, that Iran was building facilities in both Syria and Lebanon to make precision-guided missiles.

Accordingly, Tel Aviv seized on a UN report released the previous day to legitimize its aerial attacks. The report claims, without citing any evidence, that Syria's attack on Khan Sheikhou in March—that provided the pretext for Washington's cruise missile strikes on a Syrian air base—was just one of at least 20 chemical weapons attacks carried out by the Syrian government from March 2013 to March 2017.

Russia is party to an agreement with Washington and Damascus in which Syria agreed to destroy or send to Russia its chemical weapons. This was agreed in exchange for former President Barack Obama withdrawing his threat to invade Syria in September 2013. Russia indicated at the time that it would not oppose an attack on Syria's chemical weapons stores if there was UN backing and proof of the use of such weapons.

Israel is seeking to use this to extend the justification under which it can attack Syria with impunity: that it has become Iran's base of operations against Israel.

As the first Israeli strikes against Syria since the July cease-fire agreed between Russia and the US in southern Syria, along the border with Israel and Jordan, they signify that Tel Aviv is determined to impose its own interests in any political settlement of Syria's civil war.

Israel opposed the agreement because it leaves pro-Assad forces, including potentially Hezbollah and Iran, in control of the border region, and also creates the template for future agreements in other parts of Syria, destroys the power of the so-called rebel groups that it has backed and leaves Assad in power.

Almost all the imperialist and regional powers have now withdrawn their demand that Assad must go as a precondition for negotiations on a peace settlement.



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