

Israeli attack on Syria heightens danger of wider Mideast war

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Casualties from Israeli air strikes on military sites in Syria, carried out Saturday, reportedly included Iranian personnel working in conjunction with the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu made clear that his government deliberately targeted Iranian personnel in the attacks.

He gave as justification for the air strikes the destruction of an Iranian unmanned aerial vehicle that had allegedly invaded Israeli airspace from Syria.

In response to the Israeli strikes, the Syrian army brought down an Israeli F-16 jet after firing more than 20 anti-aircraft missiles. The pilots bailed out.

Israel attacked 12 of the country's main air defence sites, which the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) described as "Iranian targets." The IDF said it had inflicted huge damage in the "most significant attack" against Syria since the 1982 Lebanon war and the first to claim Iranian lives.

IDF sources said the Iranian military has for some time been using the Tiyas (T4) Airbase near Palmyra "for the purpose of transferring weaponry to be used against Israel."

Indicating that this will not be the last such attack, the *Jerusalem Post* reported Sunday that the IDF was "preparing for war in the North." It wrote that witnesses "reported seeing a convoy of missile defense batteries heading north near the Israeli-Arab city of Baqa el-Garbiyeh. Other witnesses posted photos of several trucks carrying the batteries on central highways in northern Israel."

Iran has denied all of the allegations made by Israel. Foreign Ministry spokesman Bahram Qasemi stated, "Reports of downing an Iranian drone flying over Israel and also Iran's involvement in attacking an Israeli jet are so ridiculous."

Israel's actions were given full support by the Trump administration and could have proceeded only after

discussions with Washington. On Saturday, Pentagon spokesman Adrian Rankine-Galloway claimed that the US Department of Defense "did not participate in this military operation," but added, "We share the concerns of many throughout the region that Iran's destabilizing activities threaten international peace and security, and we seek greater international resolve in countering Iran's malign activities."

US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert denounced "Iran's calculated escalation of threat and its ambition to project its power and dominance, [which] places all the people of the region—from Yemen to Lebanon—at risk."

On Sunday, the White House declared support for "our staunch ally, Israel" and its right "to defend itself from the Iranian-backed Syrian and militia forces in southern Syria."

Israel's actions are always calculated based upon its political and military alliance with the US. Former ambassador to Washington and now Netanyahu's deputy minister in charge of public diplomacy, Michael Oren, wrote on CNN on the topic "How to restore US credibility in the Middle East." This task, he said, centred on convincing "Arab diplomats, ministers, journalists and businessmen from Egypt, Jordan and the Gulf States" that they were wrong in believing "that America was secretly allied with Iran..."

This meant repudiating the Iranian nuclear deal and other initiatives associated with the presidency of Barack Obama that have "created a credibility deficit" for the US and strengthened "destabilizing actors, first among them Iran," but also Russia, which "has returned as a regional power."

Extending this theme, Education Minister Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Home party, who is a member of Netanyahu's security cabinet, said Sunday that Israel had so far "only used the tip of our capabilities." Israel was

fighting “an Iranian octopus sending its tentacles to squeeze us in Lebanon, Syria, Gaza,” he added. The key to opposing it was to create an international coalition against Tehran.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster are this week visiting Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon to discuss Trump’s Middle East strategy. The US has spent months consolidating an anti-Iranian alliance with the Gulf states and Egypt and wants to prevent a drift by Turkey into an alliance with Iran and Russia.

Tillerson’s visit to Lebanon is of significance, given that there is good reason to believe that the next action against Iran could be mounted against Hezbollah. Israel’s usual justification for action in Syria, including 100 attacks on alleged weapons convoys since 2012, is to cite fears that Iran is seeking to create a land corridor to Hezbollah forces in Lebanon.

On Friday, the US imposed additional sanctions on business figures and firms it accused of connections to Hezbollah, including five Lebanese nationals and one Iraqi.

The stridently anti-Iranian Baria Alamuddin wrote in *Arab News* that Israel is interested in preventing recent Syrian status-of-forces agreements “that allow Iranian proxies to base themselves just 5km away from the occupied Golan Heights” and “Lebanon’s recent agreement with a French-Italian-Russian consortium for offshore oil exploration in areas claimed by Israel.”

There are indications that Russia decided to allow Israel’s attack on Iranian forces in Syria to curb Tehran’s regional ambitions. This was the conclusion of Gabriel Ben-Dor, a Middle East specialist at the University of Haifa, who told the *Jerusalem Post*, “The Russians found Iran useful as allies in the fighting, but don’t want to see them as a huge regional power controlling Syria.”

When asked whether Russia would take a stand against Israel, Naftali Bennett said he would not go into details, but added, “I will just say that the bottom line is both militarily and diplomatically, we have full freedom to act.”

Russia’s Foreign Ministry expressed public concern at any escalation of the conflict between Syria and Israel, as did Putin in a phone conversation with Netanyahu. But ten days earlier, the two met face-to-face to discuss Iran’s infiltration into Syria, according to Israeli accounts. Israel regularly informs Moscow in advance of most of the strikes it carries out near Russian forces, noted Israel’s business journal, *Globes*.

“We agreed coordination between our armies would continue,” Netanyahu said following his conversation with Putin.

Whatever the manoeuvres between Moscow and Tel Aviv, however, Israel’s escalating conflict with Damascus is a dangerous new stage in the Syrian war that threatens a wider conflagration in the Middle East.

As Amos Harel wrote in *Haaretz*, “Israel and Iran are now, for the first time, engaged in a full-frontal confrontation on Syrian territory... Even if the current round ends quickly, in the longer term the strategic situation has changed.”

Days earlier, on Thursday, more than 100 Syrian government fighters were killed in a massive attack by US forces in the eastern province of Deir Ezzor. The casualties included Russian military advisers, according to multiple reports.

Meanwhile, there are no signs of a resolution of the conflict between Turkey and the US over Ankara’s invasion of the Kurdish enclave of Afrin and its on-going offensive against Kurdish forces allied with Washington, which threatens to pit two NATO allies against one another.

Responding to the shooting down of a Turkish military helicopter Saturday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared that Kurdish forces would “pay the price.” The day before, the Turkish military announced that it was constructing a fifth military post near Syria’s northwest region of Idlib under a deal reached with Moscow to reduce fighting between pro-Syrian government forces and Islamist insurgents.

The US is determined to prevent any further strengthening of Russia’s position at all costs.

On Saturday, the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein, advanced a possible basis for escalated military action against Russia and its Syrian ally. Declaring that 230 civilians were killed in the past week by a government offensive backed by Russian air strikes, he warned that these actions might constitute war crimes. Al-Hussein claimed to have video footage proving that “toxic agents” may have been released in the wake of at least one attack on the city of Saraqeb.



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