

# War threat escalates as Israel strikes Syrian army targets

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In a dramatic escalation of US and NATO provocations against Russia, Israel launched multiple strikes on Syrian army targets near Damascus early Wednesday morning, killing one soldier and wounding five more.

The attack brought a rare and sharp denunciation from Russia. It confirms the warning issued by the *World Socialist Web Site* in its statement “US-NATO escalate war threats against Russia: Are you ready for World War Three?” that irrespective of Washington’s plans or expectations, “The unleashing of a war with Russia would within weeks—if not days—drag in Iran, Israel, China and Taiwan.”

Syria’s news agency SANA reported that some of the strikes came from fighter jets flying over southeast Lebanon and others from surface-to-surface missiles fired from the Golan Heights, which Israel has illegally occupied and annexed since capturing the territory during the 1967 war with its Arab neighbours. Syrian air defences had brought down some of the missiles, but the Israeli attack had caused serious damage to civilian buildings in Qudsaya city, northwest of Damascus.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) claimed it had attacked targets in Syria, including a radar facility and anti-tank batteries, in response to an earlier anti-aircraft missile fired Tuesday into northern Israel that exploded in the air without causing any injuries or damage. While the rocket had not been intercepted by Israeli air defences, it activated warning sirens in Umm al-Fahm, a Palestinian city in northern Israel.

The Syrian-launched rocket followed a series of strikes launched over the last 10 days by the IDF against targets in the Damascus area that Israel claims are Iranian weapons dumps or military outposts belonging to Hezbollah.

Israel has launched hundreds of airstrikes on Syria, attacking government positions as well as fighters and facilities belonging to Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iranian

forces. According to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Israel had struck at least 29 targets in Syria in 2021, down from 39 strikes in 2020 which it said was highest since 2011. Israeli attacks had killed 130 people, including five civilians. Nearly half of those killed were affiliated with Iranian-backed militias.

Last December, IDF jets overflying the Mediterranean Sea launched one of Israel’s biggest attacks, hitting shipping containers at Syria’s main commercial port Latakia, igniting a massive blaze. While Israel claimed its targets were arms shipments to Hezbollah and Iranian militias, Syrian fire officials in Latakia said the containers held spare auto parts and oil. It followed another attack on the port earlier in December. According to the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Warring Parties in Syria, Syrian air defences did not engage with Israeli planes because a Russian air force plane was landing at the nearby Khmeimim airbase, implying some degree of collusion between Moscow and Tel Aviv.

Collaboration between the two countries has been close since Syria called for Russian support against the Islamist militias in 2015, with Israel’s former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu paying frequent visits to Moscow. Last October, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and President Vladimir Putin reportedly discussed security coordination in Syria at Russia’s Black Sea resort Sochi, with an Israeli minister who attended the meeting hinting that Putin had agreed to let Israel operate freely against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria. As a result, Israel has been able to bomb Syria without fear of any response from Russian planes.

This thaw has ended with the ramping up of US and NATO’s war threats against Russia. US Lieutenant General Erik Kurilla, nominated to take over Central Command that oversees Middle East operations, told the Senate Armed services Committee, the Russia-Ukraine conflict could spill into Syria. Damascus, which signed an

agreement with Moscow in 2015 granting it free use of its airbase at Khmeimim, recently extended Russia's lease on its naval base at Tartus, Moscow's only naval base in the Mediterranean Sea. Last Friday, Russian naval ships arrived at Tartus to take part in large-scale drills.

In mid-January, Syrian and Russian fighter planes and early warning and control aircraft began joint patrols of the airspace along Syria's borders, including the Golan Heights that have witnessed frequent Israeli air strikes. Moscow said these patrols would now be a regular occurrence.

In a further instance of deteriorating relations, Russia refused an Israeli demand earlier this month to resolve an electromagnetic interference from its Khmeimim air base in Syria on the GPS of planes landing in Tel Aviv's international airport. Moscow said that its air defence systems at Khmeimim were installed for the express purpose of protecting its soldiers in the region.

Moscow has also asked for Belarus to send 200 soldiers to Syria. They would not be involved in any fighting and would remain outside the conflict zones to help Russian troops provide humanitarian aid. Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko has denied reports that he intends to send troops to Syria.

In a sharp break with its previous practice, Moscow responded angrily to Israel's latest airstrikes. Alexander Yefimov, Russia's ambassador to Syria, told *Novosti* that Russia views the Israeli retaliatory strike as "illegal."

"Russia strongly condemns the Israeli raids on Syria, and calls for an end to them," he said. "We inform West Jerusalem of this position constantly and at various levels." Israeli strikes on Syria are "absolutely illegal in terms of international law," and "leave human casualties, cause tangible material damage, violate Syria's sovereignty, pose a threat to international civil aviation, and in general increase tension in the already escalating military-political situation."

Israel's air strikes also signal an end to the tentative deal the US cut with Russia easing the political pressure on Syria. Under the arrangement, if approved by the Security Council, the United Nations was to hold fewer meetings on Syria's chemical weapons and speed up sessions on humanitarian relief.

Israel, which is home to many immigrants from both Russia and Ukraine, had sought to balance between Moscow and Kiev as the conflict escalated. It has largely remained silent in the war of words between the US and its European allies and Russia, as a war would have a disastrous impact on Israel's economy, reliant as it is on

Ukraine as a source of cheap labour for its high-tech industries.

Speaking with American news outlet Axios last week, Foreign Secretary Yair Lapid said that Israeli officials, who have been involved in behind-the-scenes de-escalation efforts, "don't see a violent confrontation soon." He added, "We have a duty to act with caution about the Russia-Ukraine crisis that no other country has." His comments infuriated his Ukrainian counterpart, despite Ukrainian President Vladimir Zelensky denying that Russia was on the point of invading his country.

Israel's airstrikes against Damascus therefore can only be understood as the result of orders from Washington to up the ante against Russia.

Israel's strikes against Damascus come as Bennett's government faces multiple domestic crises. A right-wing National Unity government in all but name, buttressed by the corporatist trade unions, it was put in place last June under guidance by the incoming Biden administration to replace Netanyahu's Likud-led coalition, a fervent supporter of former president Donald Trump, following the fourth inconclusive election in two years.

It confronts an increasingly angry Israeli working class, who have lost loved ones in the pandemic as the government lifts all restrictions aimed at limiting the spread of the virus to keep the profits rolling in even as workers lose their livelihoods and see wages eroded by rising prices. This domestic crisis feeds into the war fever generated over Ukraine, encouraging Jerusalem to seek a way of buttressing its position, as it has so often before, through a fresh and more dangerous turn to militarism.



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