

US and Israel escalate covert war against Iran and its allies

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In the past weeks, the US and Israel have carried out a series of strikes on Iranian targets in Syria and elsewhere, setting the stage for a dangerous escalation of conflict in the Middle East.

On Tuesday, Israel launched its 24th reported strike on Syria this year, hitting Aleppo's international airport, damaging the runway and putting the airport out of action. Warehouses belonging to Iran-linked militias and other compounds were also hit. Syrian state media said that air defences had intercepted Israeli missiles, downing several. This was the second attack within a week on civilian airports. On September 1, Israel struck Damascus airport, months after a previous attack, as well as Aleppo's runway forcing an Iranian plane attempting to land to turn away.

State media also reported Israeli air strikes from the west, near the coastal city of Latakia, that according to the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights damaged an arms depot storing Iranian-made ground-to-ground missiles in Masyaf and whose production was overseen by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Masyaf has been the target of previous strikes, one of which injured 14 civilians. Other strikes on Damascus and Tartous killed three Syrian soldiers, according to reports.

Israel's strikes generally go unimpeded by Russia's air defence system in Syria, although occasionally provoking protests from Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The *New York Times* reported that last year Syrian President Bashar al-Assad prohibited Iranian forces attacking Israel from Syrian soil, a ban that has been in effect for three years, to limit tensions between the two countries.

Israel's strikes are aimed at disrupting Iran's ability to fly in weapons to its allies in Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, with the US providing intelligence and military support for Israel. The attacks on Masyaf come after Russia's removal of its S-300 anti-aircraft missiles from

Syria to a Russian port near Crimea, according to Israeli satellite images, to bolster air defences against Ukraine. The more advanced S-400 battery remains in Syria.

On Wednesday, Ram Ben Barak, the chair of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, threatened regarding the hit on Aleppo international airport, "The attack meant that certain planes would not be able to land, and that a message was relayed to Assad: If planes whose purpose is to encourage terrorism land, Syria's transport capacity will be harmed."

Syria's Foreign Ministry said that Israel's repeated airstrikes on civilian infrastructure constituted war crimes for which Israel should be held to account.

The latest airstrikes come amid three days of US airstrikes, authorised by President Joe Biden, on the Ayyash depot in the eastern province of Deir el-Zor on August 24. While the US claimed there were no casualties, a local website reported that IRGC-backed Afghan Fatimeyoun Brigades control the Ayyash complex and that 10 militia members were killed and at least three others wounded.

The US said that the strikes were in response to rocket and drone attacks on three US-led coalition bases in Syria launched by groups linked to the IRGC in Iraq: the attack on the al-Tanf garrison on Syria's southern border with Iraq and Jordan launched from Iraq, the second on the Mission Support Green Village, east of the Euphrates River in rural Deir el-Zor, which provides "protection" for its Kurdish allies, and the third on the Mission Support Site Conoco in northeast Syria on August 15. These strikes follow the US bombing in June of facilities in Iraq and Syria Washington claimed were being used by Iranian-backed militias to attack the US and its proxies in Syria.

The US has since early 2016 stationed troops at al-Tanf, situated close to the strategically important main Baghdad-Damascus highway, and the Green Village, supposedly to counter the threat from Islamic state. This is defiance of

Syria which views the base as a gross infringement of its sovereignty. Some 900 US troops are stationed in Syria, as well as US contractors.

The US and its regional allies have set up a network of unmanned drones aimed at gathering intelligence information and curtailing Iran's activities in Middle Eastern waters. The US Navy's Task Force 59 has been operating 23-foot Saildrone Explorer drones in the Red Sea with cameras that can take 360-degree photos, while Task Force 153 patrols the Gulf of Aden, as the Pentagon diverts some of its forces to the Far East.

The Pentagon aims to have 100 naval drones in operation by next summer with additional countries joining the taskforce, possibly including Kuwait and Israel. This has led to two incidents in the last two weeks, where the US claimed that Iranian forces had attempted to seize drones.

The uptick in US and Israeli attacks on Iranian targets comes as Washington declared that Iran's latest proposed changes to the text aimed at restoring the 2015 nuclear deal, unilaterally abandoned by the Trump administration in 2018, were "not constructive." Tehran, desperate to get rid of the ever-tightening sanctions that have wrecked its economy, had largely withdrawn its preconditions for a deal, including that the US withdraw its designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organisation.

The US and its European allies are using their tried and tested ally, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), to criticise and bully Iran over its nuclear programme, pushing through a resolution in June censuring Iran over its supposed lack of cooperation with the IAEA. Director Rafael Grossi said that if this didn't change over the next three or four weeks, "this would be a fatal blow" to reviving the nuclear deal, which the Europeans had backed but now appears to have been ditched by the Biden administration and the European Union (EU) under pressure from Washington.

Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi has warned that any attempt to restore the nuclear deal would require UN inspectors to end their investigations, stating that, "Without resolving safeguards issues, talking about an agreement would be meaningless."

Iran's clergy-led bourgeois nationalist regime has always maintained that its nuclear programme is solely for civilian purposes. The major powers, the IAEA and the CIA, have all admitted that there has been no evidence of Iran having any type of nuclear weapons programme since 2003, as the current CIA Director and former deputy Secretary of State William Burns acknowledged in his

autobiography.

The nuclear issue has long been a smokescreen. For more than 25 years, former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, aligned with the most anti-Iran political factions in Washington, has claimed that Tehran was just a year away from producing a nuclear bomb.

The Biden administration had initially hoped to use the renewal of the 2015 nuclear deal as a means of detaching Iran from Russia and China and opening up additional energy supplies to Europe. In the event, under Raisi, who hails from Iran's conservative faction opposed to the 2015 deal, Tehran has sought to take advantage of the Russia-Ukraine war and western sanctions on Russia to stress Iran's importance as a transport hub connecting China and Central Asia with Europe and Russia with India, in a bid to make it independent of the fate of the talks in Vienna, while keeping all options open.

It has signed an agreement with Baghdad to build a railway line between Shalamcheh and Basra, a vital link in its efforts to create a trade and transport corridor from the Gulf to Syria, Lebanon and the Mediterranean via Iraq.

China is considering transport projects linking Syria's Mediterranean port of Tartus in the north with Iraq and a North-South highway and the establishment of a Free Trade Zone in Latakia, 100 km north of Russia's naval base in Tartus. Beijing is also investing heavily in Iraq where Tehran wields considerable political and economic influence, financing \$10.5 billion worth of energy and infrastructure projects, while working as a primary or subcontractors at 15 oilfields in southern Iraq.

Iran is trying to secure China's support via its Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) flagship project of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor to develop its Makran coast close to Pakistan's new Gwadar port and build ports and an oil export terminal in the Gulf of Oman, outside the Persian Gulf and the narrow Strait of Hormuz. The US role in policing the Gulf threatens not only Tehran but also Beijing's vital energy supplies.



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