

Threat of wider war in Middle East rises as Israel assassinates Hamas deputy leader in Beirut

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Israel's far-right government carried out the assassination of Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut, the Lebanese capital, on Tuesday. This brazen act of aggression increases the danger of an escalation of the Israeli onslaught on Gaza into a region-wide war, for which US imperialism and its European imperialist allies have long been preparing.

Al-Arouri, reportedly Hamas' closest link with Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iran, was targeted in a suspected drone strike on an apartment building where he was meeting secretly with other senior Hamas officials in the southern Beirut suburb of Dahiyeh. Among the seven casualties were two commanders of the Qasem Brigades, Hamas' armed wing, Samir Findi and Azzam al-Aqraa. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh announced that the assassination meant a halt to negotiations with Israel over the release of the hostages remaining in Gaza.

Following the common practice in its long list of previous assassinations, Israel did not officially claim responsibility for the strike. An unnamed US Defence Department official speaking to the *Washington Post* said Israel was responsible for the assassination. The US State Department confirmed that a planned trip by Secretary of State Anthony Blinken to Israel later this week will be delayed until the beginning of next week, underscoring that Washington intends to determine Israel's next steps in the conflict.

Responding to the assassination, Hezbollah reportedly fired missiles towards Israel's northern border late Tuesday. Two Israeli soldiers were lightly injured.

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah stated in an August 2023 speech that any Israeli assassination on Lebanese territory would result in a "decisive response" to prevent Lebanon from becoming "a new killing field for Israel." A statement from the militant group following al-Arouri's

killing vowed that it would not "pass without response or punishment."

Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati also denounced the targeted killing of al-Arouri, accusing Israel of dragging Lebanon into a "new phase of conflict." In 2006, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) launched a massive invasion of southern Lebanon, triggering a month-long war in which Israel carried out barbaric war crimes against the civilian population. In 1982, supported by the Christian fascist Falange, Israel directed the bloody massacre of over 3,000 Palestinian refugees in the Sabra neighbourhood of Beirut and the Shatila refugee camp. Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon claimed the lives of some 18,000 people.

Israel's extra-judicial killing of al-Arouri, a violation of international law, provides yet another example of the Zionist regime's utter criminality. Since 7 October, it has flattened hospitals and schools, deliberately targeted journalists and medical workers, and used food, water, and fuel as weapons of war. All of these policies are part of a genocide against the 2.3 million Palestinians living in Gaza.

This fascistic policy was underscored again in comments calling for the "voluntary emigration," i.e., ethnic cleansing, of Gaza's residents, by far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir earlier this week. Speaking at his Jewish Power's weekly faction meeting, Ben-Gvir stated that the war provides an "opportunity to concentrate on encouraging the migration of the residents of Gaza." He added that a "correct, just, moral and humane solution" would include the return of Israeli settlements to Gaza, which were abandoned in 2005.

Al-Arouri's assassination was timed to prove Israel's readiness to escalate and broaden the war. In Gaza, the

IDF's savage bombardment continues, with over 200 Palestinians killed over the preceding 24 hours, according to figures released Tuesday by the Gaza Health Ministry. Strikes and fighting on the ground persisted in Khan Younis, where hundreds of thousands of civilians remain trapped. Rafah, the southernmost city in Gaza, where over 1 million people are now crammed, was also hit. The ongoing bloodshed underlines how Israel is persisting with its genocidal policy even as it modestly reduces the number of troops deployed in the north of the Gaza Strip.

In Khan Younis, the IDF bombed the al-Amal Hospital, which is used by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society for its training programmes. The strike killed five people, including a five-day-old baby. World Health Organisation head Tedros Ghebreyesus criticised the bombing, saying, "Today's bombings are unconscionable. Gaza's health system is already on its knees, with health and aid workers continuously stymied in their efforts to save lives due to the hostilities." Some 14,000 people are sheltering in and around the hospital.

In the West Bank, an Israeli raid Monday night in the small town of Azzun resulted in the deaths of four Palestinian militants and the arrest of seven. Over 320 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers or settlers in the West Bank since 7 October.

The provocative escalation of the war represented by Israel's assassination of al-Arouri plays into the hands of the far-right Netanyahu government, which is increasingly unpopular domestically. Its failure to secure the release of over 120 hostages still in Gaza has fuelled popular anger. On Monday, Netanyahu suffered a significant setback when Israel's Supreme Court overturned a judicial reform law that would have altered Israel's constitutional basic laws to weaken judicial oversight over the government. The authoritarian reform, imposed by Netanyahu's right-wing Likud and his fascist allies, triggered mass protests for a year prior to Hamas' 7 October attacks.

Fully confident of American imperialism's unrestrained support, demonstrated with the steady supply of high-powered weaponry for its Gaza onslaught, Israel has repeatedly struck targets in Lebanon and Syria since launching its genocide on the Palestinians. Last week, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant asserted that Israel was engaged in a "multi-front war" covering Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The assassination of al-Arouri in Beirut came just eight days after the targeted killing in Syria December 25 of Brigadier General Seyed Razi Mousavi, a senior commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.

US imperialism has made preparations to wage a wider regional war, whose main target would be Iran. Over the past three decades, it has waged one war after another, from Iraq, to Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, in the Middle East and Central Asia as it seeks to offset its economic decline by deploying its military might. Washington sees Israel's onslaught as an opportunity to consolidate its hegemony over the energy-rich Middle East by defeating its major geostrategic rivals, China and Russia.

The Biden administration has ramped up the deployment of naval and air power to the region, most recently under the guise of protecting the flow of trade through the Red Sea following a series of attacks on merchant ships by the Houthis in Yemen. US troops are also deployed in significant numbers in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Syria, and Iraq.

On Sunday, US helicopters associated with the Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier strike group fired on and sunk three boats used by Houthi militants in the Red Sea. A fourth boat fled the scene. The carrier strike group has operated in the Persian Gulf since the Hamas-led uprising against Israel on 7 October. A second carrier strike group led by the Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier is due to be withdrawn from the eastern Mediterranean this week. A UN Security Council meeting to discuss mounting tensions in the Red Sea is expected to take place Wednesday.

As the smouldering conflicts across the Middle East threaten to ignite in a broader conflagration, the necessity of the independent political mobilisation of the working class against imperialist war is posed with renewed urgency. The mass protests involving millions of workers and young people that swept the world in the last months of 2023 against Israel's genocide demonstrated that mass opposition to war exists and is growing. But this opposition must be armed with a clear orientation to the international working class and socialist programme. It must fight to link the struggle against imperialist war with the strikes involving workers in all the major imperialist countries over the past year for improvements to wages and conditions.



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