

Israel's Arab allies fear repercussions of the escalating war with Iran

Jean Shaoul
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The launching of drone strikes on the cities of Isfahan and Tabriz and targets in southern Syria confirm that Israel's shadow conflict with Iran is on the brink of open war.

The strikes follow Iran's first ever direct attack on Israel last Saturday, when more than 300 drones and missiles were fired in direct response to Tel Aviv's April 1 attack on the Damascus consulate that killed seven top-level Iranian military officers, including two generals.

Iranian officials had earlier vowed that any strike by Israel would be met with overwhelming force, with Iranian Maj. Gen. Ahmad Haghtalab warning that "the hands are on the trigger" to retaliate against Israel's nuclear sites.

Isfahan province is the location of Iranian military infrastructure including an airbase and nuclear facilities. Iran said Israel had "only made a failed and humiliating attempt to fly quadcopters [drones] and the quadcopters have also been shot down." Tehran has intimated that it had no plans for retaliation.

Israel's fascistic National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir had demanded a "crushing response" to Iran's missile and drone attack and castigated the limited strikes insisted on by Israel's paymaster in Washington as "weak."

But tensions are clearly continuing to escalate. And the Arab regimes are watching these developments with acute concern. They have played a crucial role in supporting Israel's genocidal war against the Palestinians in Gaza, with Saudi Arabia making sure an oil embargo was off the table and keeping the door open to normalisation with Israel. Jordan even played a direct role in defending Israel by scrambling fighter jets to shoot down many Iranian drones Saturday.

Earlier this week, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Ministry asked everyone involved "to exercise maximum restraint and to protect the region and its people from the dangers of war." Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, Jordan and Turkey issued similar statements. Only northern Yemen, whose de facto Houthi government is close to Iran, and Lebanon, home to Hezbollah, the armed group backed by Iran, remained silent.

They are all aware that despite their determination to forge a "security alliance" with Tel Aviv—and thereby with Washington—against Iran to maintain their grip on power, the region's workers, youth and rural poor bitterly resent their rulers' support for Israel's genocidal war and their own impoverished conditions amid the rampant corruption of the ruling kleptocracies. It was for this reason that Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt refused to take part in the US naval coalition against Houthi attacks in support of the Palestinians on Red Sea maritime traffic, which have led to the diversion of shipping along the longer route around Africa.

April's attack on Iran's embassy was the culmination of a series of

Israeli assaults and strikes on Iranian facilities and personnel in Syria designed to provoke a response that could be used as a *casus belli* for a full-scale war against Tehran. It came as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's fascist government had become a pariah in the eyes of the masses around the world and while it was facing increasing domestic opposition for his refusal to agree a ceasefire to secure the release of the hostages in Gaza. He calculated that a strike on Iran would deflect these pressures and possibly draw the US directly into the conflict.

The imperialist powers effectively endorsed Israel's action, with US ambassador to the UN Robert Wood declaring that "terrorist leaders and elements were allegedly present at this facility." The US, France and the UK also vetoed a resolution drafted by Russia in the UN Security Council condemning Israel's attack and told Iran not to strike Israel.

Iran's action had been a carefully calculated response designed to show its ability to hit Israel without causing civilian casualties. It launched 170 cheap drones, compared to 30 cruise missiles and 120 ballistic missiles, after giving 72 hours' warning of its attack, providing the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), the US, UK and France as well as Israel's neighbours ample opportunity to shoot down the ordnance—aimed at Israel's base at Nevatim, from which the country launched the Damascus attack, and its intelligence centre in Mount Hermon.

As a result, just a few landed, causing damage to a C-130 transport aircraft and empty storage facilities and critically injuring a seven-year-old Bedouin girl, a resident of one of several unrecognised Bedouin villages in Israel's Negev desert.

But Tehran's message was nevertheless clear: It has the capacity to launch a major attack on Israel that the IDF was only able to deflect at a cost of more than \$1 billion to Israel alone, and with the additional and extremely expensive support of its allies.

Major-General Mohammad Bagheri, Iran's military chief, told state TV that a "much larger" response awaits Israel "if it retaliates against Iran." He had earlier warned Washington that any backing of Israeli retaliation would be met with an attack on US bases in the Gulf and Iraq. Iran's Defence Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani also warned its Arab neighbours, "Whichever country opens its soil and airspace to Israel for a potential attack on Iran, it will receive our decisive response."

Tehran's threat places both Jordan and Saudi Arabia, whose territories lie under the flight path from Israel to Iran, in the line of fire. Israeli officials boasted that Jordan was the first Arab state that had actively interceded to support Israel. Jordan also allowed the US and "other countries' warplanes" to use its airspace to intercept the

Iranian missiles.

On Monday, the *Wall Street Journal* reported, citing Saudi, US, and Egyptian officials, that in fact several Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), had passed on intelligence about Iran's plans to attack Israel, opened their airspace to Israel's allies and provided radar tracking.

This had been organised by Washington, which has been trying for years to organise a military alliance in the region against Iran, culminating in the 2020 Abraham Accords and the incorporation of Israel into US Central Command in 2021, making it easier to share intelligence and provide early warning across countries, with the US operations centre in Qatar coordinating the response.

The *Journal* also implied that other countries, as well as Jordan, had "supplied their own forces to help." However, the full role played by Saudi Arabia and "other key Arab governments" is being kept quiet due to concerns that support for Israel could bring them into direct and at this point premature conflict with Iran, inflame public opinion at home and possibly provoke an open rupture of Washington's anti-Iran coalition. The oil-exporting Arab regimes also fear their oil installations could become targets in a wider war that could cripple their economies. The Gulf states have therefore all been at pains to state publicly that they will not allow US air and naval bases on their territory, home to nearly 40,000 US troops, to be used to launch attacks on Iran.

The US must tread carefully to avoid undermining its long-term goal of creating a NATO-like alliance in the Middle East against Iran. And while the Gulf states are wary of Iran, they are also distrustful of the US and aware of its waning influence in the region.

Jordan, where more than half of the population is of Palestinian origin, has witnessed weeks of protests outside the Israeli Embassy in Amman, with the Jordanian authorities clamping down on solidarity with Gaza and even banning symbols like the Palestinian flag and keffiyehs at demonstrations. It has sought to justify its interception of Iranian missiles in the name of "protecting Jordanian airspace."

Also exacerbating tensions within Jordan are reports earlier this month that Iraqi resistance faction Kataib Hezbollah, allied with Iran, had expressed its readiness to arm 12,000 fighters in Jordan, "to form a unified force to defend our Palestinian brothers."

Saudi Arabia, whose resumption of diplomatic relations with Iran in March 2023—brokered by China—ended attacks by the Houthis with whom it is negotiating an end of the war in Yemen, urged caution to prevent a regional war.

As the Gulf states' mistrust of Washington has grown, they have increasingly turned to China to provide an alternative and counterweight to US demands, particularly after the 2011 Arab Spring when US President Barack Obama failed to prevent the overthrow of longstanding Egyptian dictator President Hosni Mubarak.

China was then launching its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative leveraging its economic heft throughout Asia and Africa. Its rapid economic growth has also increased its own reliance on the Middle East for energy, while exports of consumer goods to the region have surged. Total trade between China and the whole of the Middle East and North Africa reached \$505 billion in 2022, nearly doubling in 10 years, while trade between China and the Gulf states alone increased three-fold. Following President Xi Jinping's visit to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, the kingdom signed 35 memorandums of understanding with Chinese firms, including with tech giant Huawei for cloud computing and building high-tech complexes.

China has also been able to exploit the growing opposition to Israel

and its US-backed aggression in the Middle East to bolster its political influence in the region. It too is seeking to prevent the escalating Israel-Iran conflict erupting into open war, appealing for calm and pressing for the Gulf states to do likewise. Beijing knows that it is the ultimate target in any war against Iran, with whom it signed a 25-year \$400 billion investment and cooperation treaty in 2021.

The Biden administration sees Tel Aviv's "multi-front war" across "seven theatres: Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Judea and Samaria [the occupied West Bank], Iraq, Yemen and Iran," as described by Defence Minister Yoav Gallant, as the means to consolidate its grip of the resource-rich Middle East by eliminating China and its ally Russia's influence in the region.

These contending economic interests are at the heart of the escalating threat of war in the region. They confirm that a regional conflict cannot be prevented by appeals to China by the advocates of a "multi-polar world" to provide a counterweight to the US, or even to become a replacement hegemon in the Middle East and internationally.

The pleas from the semi-feudal Arab regimes for "caution" and "restraint" testify above all to their fears of an explosion from below. They point to the fundamental "polarity" between all factions of the bourgeoisie and the working class on which the struggle against war must be based.

Ending mass murder in Gaza and preventing an open war between Israel and Iran that would draw in the entire region, as a second arena of the US/NATO-led war against Russia in Ukraine ultimately targeting China, demands a global movement of the working class and youth against capitalism and for socialism.

The millions of people demonstrating week after week in mass protests in support of the Palestinians and against war must make a conscious political turn to the factories and workplaces to urge strikes and boycotts of arms companies, docks and airports, to stop the transport of any items to Israel with a military use.

They must raise the demand for a political general strike linking the struggle against war to the defence of jobs, essential services and democratic rights being destroyed by governments internationally. This is the perspective fought for by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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