Israeli airstrike in Beirut, as wider Middle East war looms

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Israel yesterday evening carried out a provocative strike inside a heavily built-up area of the Lebanese capital of Beirut targeting Mushin Shukr, a top military commander of the Iranian-aligned Hezbollah militia. While the Israeli regime claims its "targeted" strike killed Shukr, sources close to Hezbollah have told the media that he survived.

In separate late news, Israel carried out the assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in an airstrike in Tehran this morning. The killing not only sabotages any prospect of a ceasefire deal in Gaza but makes clear that the Zionist regime, backed by Washington, is determined to transform its genocidal war into a region-wide conflict.

To justify its attack in Beirut, Israel seized on the killing of 12 children from the Druze community in a missile strike on Saturday in the occupied Golan Heights. For all of Israel's bellicose, but unsubstantiated denunciations of Hezbollah, the circumstances remain unclear. Hezbollah has emphatically denied responsibility for Saturday's missile strike.

The Israeli strike demolished at least five stories of an apartment block in a heavily populated suburb of southern Beirut. According to the Lebanese state-run newsagency NAA, three missiles fired from a drone struck the building, covering the surrounding streets in rubble and debris.

Lebanon's Health Ministry reported that three people have been killed and 74 wounded in the strike. With the search for victims continuing, it said that the casualties to date included a woman and two children, a girl and a boy. It is unclear whether any of the surrounding buildings, which included the Bahman Hospital, were damaged.

The Israeli decision to attempt the assassination of a top Hezbollah commander is calculated to set off a wider conflict in Lebanon, making a mockery of Israeli claims that it is not seeking war with Hezbollah. Shukr is a senior adviser to Hezbollah leader chief Hassan Nasrallah and a member of Hezbollah's top military council.

The extreme right wing of the fascistic Israeli regime has been braying for all-out war with Hezbollah for months. In late May, Israel's Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich called for the military to invade and seize control of southern Lebanon to create a buffer zone to prevent Hezbollah attacks on northern Israel.

In response, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir declared that it was not enough to create a buffer zone, demanding instead that the Israeli military should storm Lebanon and "destroy Hezbollah in its entirety." The following month Ben-Gvir visited northern Israel, where Hezbollah rockets had triggered fires and declared: "They're burning [us] here. All Hezbollah strongholds should be burned, they should be destroyed. War!"

US imperialism gave Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu the green light for war against Hezbollah during his visit to Washington last week where he addressed a joint session of Congress in bellicose language and received bipartisan backing. He cut short his trip following Saturday's attack on the Golan Heights to return to Israel, where he met with military and intelligence chiefs and vowed that Hezbollah would "pay a heavy price for it, a price it has not paid before."

On Sunday, the Israeli warplanes bombed weapons depots and infrastructure belonging to Hezbollah in the Bekaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, in Shabriha and Burj al-Shemali near the southern city of Tyre, and the villages of Kfar Kila, Rab el-Thalathine, Khiam and

Tayr Harfa.

On Monday night, the Israeli military carried out another series of strikes in southern Lebanon and southern Syria. The attacks in southern Lebanon included drone, artillery and airstrikes on some 10 sites of the Lebanese Hezbollah group in seven different areas.

While these strikes represented a significant escalation of the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel that has been underway since October 7, yesterday evening's attack in Beirut was calculated to provoke Hezbollah's retaliation and further enflame tensions throughout the Middle East.

The strike has provoked a wave of protests. Lebanese Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib denounced the strike on Beirut and said that he would file a complaint with the United Nations. The Iranian Embassy in Lebanon condemned the Israeli strike on Beirut, calling it "cowardly and sinful Israeli aggression." In April, Israel carried out a provocative strike on the Iranian embassy in Damascus, Syria, killing two senior generals of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp and at least five other people, threatening to trigger a region-wide war with Iran.

CNN reported that the US had been informed of the Beirut strike in advance. US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with his Israeli counterpart Yoav Gallant by phone on Monday. While the official read-out paid lip service to the need for a diplomatic solution to the conflict with Hezbollah, Austin gave his "unwavering commitment to Israel's security and right of self-defense," effectively giving Israel carte blanche for the attack.

The decision to target Mushin Shukr was not accidental. The US State Department put a $5 million bounty on his head after branding him a "Specially Designated Global Terrorist" in 2019. It claimed that he "played a central role in the October 23, 1983 bombing of the US Marine Corps Barracks in Beirut." Four years earlier the US Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Shukr and two other Hezbollah leaders.

In the wake of yesterday's strike, US Vice President Kamala Harris, the presumptive Democratic presidential candidate, rapidly and emphatically declared her support for Israel, saying: "I unequivocally support Israel's right to remain secure and to defend the security of Israel." To emphasise the point, she added that, in particular, "it has the right to defend itself against the terrorist organisation, which is exactly what Hezbollah is."

In the name of Israel's so-called right to self-defense, US imperialism and its allies have backed Israel's genocidal war in Gaza diplomatically, financially and militarily to the hilt and justified its atrocities. While Israel declares that Hezbollah has "crossed all the red lines" in its alleged killing of children in the Golan Heights, the Israeli military slaughters Palestinian children every day in Gaza. The official death toll of men, women and children in Gaza is over 40,000 since October 7, while an estimate in the highly respected *Lancet* medical journal puts that figure far higher at 186,000.

Now Washington is backing an Israeli war that threatens to plunge the Middle East into a far more devastating conflict that would lay waste to the region. Despite its nominal calls for a diplomatic solution, US imperialism, like the Zionist regime, regards the conflict in Gaza as one element of a far broader war against Iranian-aligned groups throughout the region and against Iran itself, which it regards as the chief obstacle to securing its domination in the energy-rich Middle East.

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