

Threat of Middle East war on hair-trigger as Israel kills Hamas official in Lebanon, US lifts ban on weapons sales to Saudi Arabia

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The danger of a region-wide war in the Middle East continues to loom large, provoked by the aggressive actions of Israel and its American imperialist ally. On Friday, the Israel Defence Forces carried out the targeted killing of a Hamas official deep inside Lebanon, while a Reuters report revealed that Washington will lift a three-year ban on the sale of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia.

The Israeli strike on a car killed Samer al-Hajj and two civilians near the Lebanese town of Sidon. *Al Jazeera's* Assed Baig, reporting from southern Lebanon, commented:

Sidon is roughly just over 50km [31 miles] from Lebanon's southern border and around 40km [25 miles] from the capital, Beirut, and what it shows is that Israel is going deeper into Lebanon.

The killing of yet another senior Hamas official makes a mockery of the far-right Netanyahu government's claim to be interested in negotiating a ceasefire with Hamas, not to mention the posturing by its imperialist backers in favour of a ceasefire. It comes less than two weeks after the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, underscoring Israel's deliberate policy of systematically wiping out the leadership of the organisation with which it is supposedly negotiating.

No condemnation of Israel's assassinations has been forthcoming from Washington or the European imperialist capitals. However, they have repeatedly threatened Iran with consequences should it retaliate following Israel's provocative act of aggression, which killed Haniyeh while he was attending the inauguration of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian.

This silence on the Israeli regime's crimes is in keeping with US imperialism's unstinting support for the genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. The Zionist regime

continues to bombard the enclave on a daily basis, killing another two journalists Friday.

The IDF also announced a major new offensive in Khan Younis Friday. According to the United Nations Agency for Palestinian Refugees, some 70,000 people were ordered to flee by the IDF. But with Gaza's civilian infrastructure in ruins and aid limited to starvation levels by Israel, these desperate people have nowhere to go.

Underlining Washington's complicity in Israel's war crimes, the State Department confirmed that no sanctions will be placed on the Netzah Yehuda unit within the IDF, which has become notorious due to the gross violations of human rights perpetrated by its overwhelmingly far-right members in the West Bank. One of the most well known cases in which the unit was implicated was the 2022 killing of an 80-year-old Palestinian with American citizenship, who was handcuffed and gagged by Netzah Yehuda members before being left to die in a car park.

Meanwhile, video evidence has emerged confirming that a group of Israeli soldiers carried out the gang rape of a Palestinian prisoner in the infamous Sde Teiman facility. Of the 10 soldiers arrested over the incident, five have already been released.

Responding to the video, far-right Finance Minister Bezalil Smotrich demanded a "criminal investigation" to determine who recorded the video, which he said had caused "tremendous damage to Israel in the world." The systematic use of torture and horrific abuse of prisoners was documented in a report released this week titled "Welcome to hell" by the Israeli rights group B'Tselem.

Amid this ongoing barbarism, Washington issued a joint declaration with Egypt and Qatar, which have served as mediators in previous rounds of talks, calling for the recommencing of ceasefire negotiations on August 15 in Cairo. Netanyahu indicated that an Israeli delegation will travel to the Egyptian capital.

Its recent public statements notwithstanding, Washington

is the most provocative actor pushing the entire Middle East towards a catastrophic conflict. Its support for the genocide has been from the outset bound up with long-standing plans for war with Iran, which American imperialism views as essential to consolidate its hegemony over the energy-rich and strategically important region. It seized on Haniyeh's assassination to legitimise the sending of additional warships and fighter jets to the region.

The Biden administration confirmed Friday that it will release \$3.5 billion for Israel to purchase US-made weapons from the \$14.1 billion in supplementary funding approved by Congress in April. Washington's announcement that it plans to resume the sale of offensive weaponry to the absolutist monarchical regime in Riyadh as soon as next week marks another step in the preparation for all-out war with Iran.

Long a regional rival of Tehran, Saudi Arabia has been cultivated by successive US administrations as an ally of Israel in a US-led anti-Iranian alliance. Last year, concerns were raised in US foreign policy circles when China brokered an agreement between Riyadh and Tehran aimed at easing tensions after the regional rivals had backed opposing sides in the wars in Yemen and Syria.

Washington views the war preparations with Iran as intimately connected to the other fronts of the global conflict in which it is engaged with the aim of subjugating its rivals in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. This rapidly escalating third world war is rooted in crisis-ridden capitalism, which is driving the major powers to engage in a new re-partition of the globe to secure their economic and geostrategic interests. In Ukraine, NATO is emerging ever more clearly as a direct party to the conflict, as shown this past week with the use of NATO military equipment by the far-right Kiev regime to launch an attack on Russian territory.

Responding to a report that Russian military personnel were in Iran to receive training on short-range Fath-360 ballistic missiles, a White House National Security Council spokesman menaced Tehran with the warning that the US and NATO "are prepared to deliver a swift and severe response if Iran were to move forward with such transfers." Reuters reported that the two countries signed an agreement for the Iranian-made missiles, which have a range of 125 kilometres, last December.

Recognising how close the region is to all-out war, Iran's bourgeois-clerical regime is reportedly divided over how to respond to Haniyeh's assassination. Although the targeted killing was a humiliation for the Iranian authorities that virtually compels them to respond, Pezeshkian is reportedly trying to convince the Iranian Revolutionary Guard corps not to launch a direct strike on Israel for fear that it could trigger war. Britain's *Daily Telegraph* reported that

Pezeshkian would prefer instead to strike Mossad spy bases in neighbouring Azerbaijan or Iraq. Leading IRGC officials are in favour of striking military facilities in Tel Aviv and other Israeli cities in alliance with Hezbollah.

According to Iran's Tasneem news agency, IRGC Deputy Commander Ali Fadavi declared:

The supreme leader's orders regarding the harsh punishment of Israel and revenge for the blood of martyr Ismail Haniyeh are clear and explicit ... and they will be implemented in the best possible way.

Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has the power to determine Iran's response, including by overruling Pezeshkian.

Regardless of the immediate intentions of the regime in Tehran, tensions in the region are already so high that any action could plunge the Middle East into a bloodbath. A precedent was set in April for direct attacks against each other by Israel and Tehran. After Israel bombed Iran's Damascus consulate, killing seven senior IRGC members, Iran reacted by launching hundreds of drones towards Israel. It provided several hours notice of the attack, prompting the US and its regional allies to mobilise to intercept most of the attacking aircraft.

The urgent task of preventing all-out war in the Middle East falls to the international working class. The mass opposition expressed to Israel's imperialist-backed genocide of the Palestinians in protests around the world over the past 10 months must be developed into a conscious movement to stop imperialist war by taking up the fight for socialism.



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