Joint US–Saudi attack on Iraq widens front of the imperialist war in Middle East

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The joint US-Saudi strikes last week against the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF)—an umbrella of Iran-aligned militias formally integrated into Iraq's security forces—mark a significant escalation in the criminal US-Israeli war of aggression against Iran and its regional allies.

What Washington called "precision strikes" were an open extension of the war into Iraq, carried out with the participation of Saudi Arabia that can no longer be concealed behind the fiction of "defensive measures".

Press reports last May revealed that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had carried out secret strikes against Iran earlier in the war, apparently in retaliation for attacks conducted against them. The Gulf monarchies have been active belligerents from the outset, while posturing as bystanders.

Saudi Arabia claimed the strikes on PMF facilities were in retaliation for drone attacks on its oil installations allegedly launched from Iraq. They targeted "multiple terrorist logistics and weapons sites", killing at least 20 fighters and injuring dozens more in attacks across seven provinces. This was one of the largest escalations in recent weeks: a deliberate attempt to break the PMF and reassert US control over Iraq.

Trump claimed the operation was co-ordinated with Baghdad and denounced the militias as "a cancer on the world". The Iraqi National Security Council, chaired by Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi, contradicted him, stating the strikes came while Baghdad was engaged in diplomatic channels to address Saudi and American concerns.

Al-Zaidi denounced the strikes as "an unacceptable aggression", while Iraq's president described them as "a flagrant violation of Iraq's sovereignty" and "a targeting of its official security institutions". Al-Zaidi cancelled a visit planned for Thursday to Riyadh where he was due to meet de facto ruler Mohammed bin Salman.

Washington's assault on Iraqi sovereignty and political independence

The US–Saudi strikes follow al?Zaidi's visit to the White House, where he announced a September 30 deadline to "restrict weapons to state control"—the date when Washington plans to withdraw its combat forces from Iraq, leaving only the Erbil base providing a forward operating hub for Syria, leverage over the Kurdistan Regional Government and continuous surveillance of Iran.

The PMF—an umbrella of roughly 67-armed factions with 238,000 registered fighters and $3.5 billion in annual state funding incorporated into Iraqi state law—has fractured under pressure. Some units have agreed to disarm. But the core formations aligned with Iran, above all Kataib Hezbollah and Harakat Hezbollah al?Nujaba, have refused. The US–Saudi attack was a blunt ultimatum: dismantle or be destroyed. It coincides with intensified US corporate manoeuvring, including Chevron's bid for an expanded role in Iraq's energy sector and other American firms' pursuit of gas, power, and export contracts.

Washington has already demonstrated its willingness to use financial warfare to reshape Iraq's political landscape. Last April, the US froze a $500 million transfer of Iraq's own oil revenues—described in Baghdad as the "nuclear option"—threatening to collapse Iraq's cash?based economy when oil income has plummeted following the closure of Hormuz. The actions was aimed at securing a prime minister who would distance Iraq from Iran.

The US accused Iraqi banks of funnelling dollars to Tehran, undermining sanctions. Iran?aligned militias responded with attacks on US interests inside Iraq, in retaliation for the US?Israeli war on Iran. Trump then threatened to withdraw support entirely if Nuri al?Maliki—a former prime minister whose alignment with Iran deepened during his tenure—returned as prime minister. Days later, Iraq's parliament approved Ali al?Zaidi, a 41?year?old former banker and political novice, as prime minister.

Saudi escalation across the region: Yemen and the Red Sea

Saudi defence ministry spokesman Major General Turki al-Malki claimed that the strikes were a limited reaction to specific attacks, saying, "The kingdom confirms that it is not seeking escalation but that it will respond to any aggression".

Yet Riyadh is simultaneously reopening its war with Yemen's Houthis, collapsing the fragile 2022 truce.

On July 20 the Houthis declared a blockade against Saudi oil tankers in the Red Sea and later hit "sensitive" oil transport sites inside Saudi Arabia linking eastern province oilfields to a Red Sea export hub. They also claimed responsibility for the drone attack on Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq crude-processing facility, the kingdom's largest, that Riyadh attributed to Iraqi militias aligned with Iran. Another attack forced Saudi Aramco to shut down its 400,000-barrel-per-day Jazan refinery.

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This followed Saudi attacks on Sanaa International Airport after the Houthis reopened it to direct flights from Iran. The Saudis forced a flight from Iran carrying Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commanders, military advisers and missile- and drone-related equipment into Yemen to divert to the Red ?Sea port city of Hodeidah.

The Houthis stated that the blockade only applies to Saudi Arabia and would end when Saudi Arabia lifts its blockade on Yemen. With the economic situation in Yemen dire as a result of the war—food prices have risen by 20 to 30 percent in recent months, while the closure of Hormuz has disrupted oil shipments from Iran, some of which come free—the Houthis are applying pressure on the Saudis to secure a new financial deal. They want an end to restrictions on Sanaa airport and a share of the revenue from oil fields controlled by Yemen's internationally recognized government.

Riyadh responded by escalating militarily and politically. After Saudi defence minister Prince Khalid bin Salman met Trump and Vice President JD Vance on Wednesday, Saudi Arabia convened a meeting of military representatives from 43 nations to promote a "maritime defence coalition" to secure Red Sea trade routes from Iran-aligned forces.

With the Strait of Hormuz closed, the Red Sea has become even more vital: around 10 to 14 percent of total global maritime trade, including roughly 4.1 to 4.2 million barrels of crude oil and petroleum products per day, passes through the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandab strait and the Gulf of Aden. The war has reduced shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, driving down daily vessel traffic from pre-war levels of over 70–75 ships down to roughly 28 to 31 vessels.

Saudi Arabia's GDP shrank by almost 5 percent year-on-year in the second quarter, the worst quarterly decline since the Covid-19 pandemic, with oil sector activity collapsing by almost 25 percent. Non-oil activity expanded only by 0.6 per cent during the second quarter, compared with a 2.9 per cent expansion in the previous quarter.

Riyadh is scrambling to stabilise its position, with the Saudi Defence Ministry announcing that 14 states including Turkey, Pakistan, Egypt, Sudan and Djibouti had endorsed its proposal for a maritime defence coalition, to be headquartered in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia has also asked the US and major European powers to join.

Reports suggest that Saudi Arabia may be preparing for a major ground offensive in central Yemen, indicating the way that the US?Israeli war on Iran is metastasising across the region, drawing in Gulf monarchies, reshaping Iraq's internal balance of forces and threatening a new phase of large?scale conflict from the Red Sea to the Tigris.

Nuclear deal and defence agreement: cementing the US-Saudi-Israeli axis against Iran

Alongside these military operations, Washington is seeking to construct a long?term US-Saudi strategic bloc anchored in nuclear cooperation and advanced weapons transfers that will bind Saudi Arabia to the US?Israeli axis, marginalise competing powers, and construct a durable regional bloc for confrontation with Iran.

Washington signed a "peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement" with Riyadh, which would allow Saudi Arabia to build nuclear reactors using US technology and, critically, to enrich its own vast uranium reserves without accepting the International Atomic Energy Agency's full verification regime. In a region where Iran and the UAE operate reactors but import their fuel under strict oversight, US?sanctioned Saudi enrichment would trigger a cascade of nuclear ambitions across Turkey, Egypt, and other prospective regional powers, as well as the renegotiation of the UAE's agreement with the US.

The US Department of Energy described the deal as the foundation for a "long?term, multi?billion?dollar partnership." Tens of billions will flow to US corporations for the construction and development of the kingdom's civilian nuclear programme, sidelining France, Germany, South Korea, and China—despite Riyadh's 2022 memorandum for developing a nuclear program with Beijing. The nuclear agreement is the economic?industrial element of efforts to consolidate a US?dominated regional order.

Negotiations deliberately excluded any discussion of Saudi Arabia joining the Abraham Accords or normalising relations with Israel—moves deeply unpopular domestically, even as Riyadh is complicit in the US?Israeli genocide in Gaza. Instead, the nuclear deal lays the groundwork for a US–Saudi defence alliance that would include F?35 sales and advanced military technology, binding Riyadh more tightly to Washington's war strategy.

These issues were already under discussion last November when bin Salman met Trump at the White House. Trump designated Saudi Arabia a "major non?NATO ally," signed a strategic defence agreement, and reportedly reached a deal for a fleet of F?35 fighter jets. The nuclear accord formalises this military bloc.

Israel has opposed the agreement because it threatens its nuclear monopoly and its qualitative military edge. Trump's subsequent Truth Social post claimed the deal would prohibit enrichment and require Saudi normalisation with Israel—a claim Netanyahu hailed as a victory. But it is highly unlikely Trump will sabotage a deal that delivers enormous profits to US corporations and locks Saudi Arabia into Washington's war coalition to placate Israeli objections.

The strikes against the PMF in Iraq, the maritime coalition, the renewed Saudi offensive in Yemen, and the nuclear accord are bound up with US imperialism's efforts to entrench its domination over the Middle East, subordinating the Gulf monarchies to Washington's command and integrating Saudi Arabia into the US?Israeli axis for the confrontation with Iran.

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