

Israel bombs target near Damascus as Syrian war threatens to escalate

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Israel launched a series of missile strikes on targets close to Damascus International Airport late Saturday night. The strikes, which are the latest in a long line of aggressive interventions into the Syrian conflict by Tel Aviv, were reportedly aimed at destroying a weapons depot belonging to Iranian forces or the Lebanese Hezbollah militia.

The Israeli missiles, according to Syrian government news agency SANA, were aimed at the airport but were intercepted by air defences. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based group with ties to the anti-Assad opposition, reported that the target was not the airport but the nearby weapons depot.

While the Israeli government as usual refused to confirm or deny the attack, comments by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Sunday all but acknowledged Tel Aviv's involvement. "Israel is constantly working to prevent our enemies from arming themselves with advanced weaponry," declared Netanyahu following reports of the attack. "Our red lines are as sharp as ever, and our determination to enforce them is as strong as ever."

If Netanyahu's right-wing government can proceed so aggressively in Syria, it is because its provocative air strikes enjoy the full backing of Washington. The Trump administration, along with the entire political and military establishment, see Israel as a key ally in driving Iran out of Syria and preparing for war with Tehran—a war that would have catastrophic consequences for the entire Middle East and beyond.

Earlier this month, Israeli jets struck Iranian positions in the northwestern Syria city of Hama. In August, Syrian media blamed the Israeli intelligence service Mossad for the assassination of Aziz Asber, a government scientist who Israeli media alleged ran a chemical weapons development facility in Masyaf. In

early September, an Israeli army spokesman confirmed that Tel Aviv has fired over 800 missiles at Syria over the past 18 months, striking 200 targets.

In May, Israel seized on Trump's abrogation of the Iran nuclear deal to launch a series of air strikes on Iranian positions in Syria, killing at least 14 people and bringing the region to the brink of war. The two sides nearly entered all-out conflict after up to 20 projectiles were fired at Israeli positions on the Golan Heights in retaliation for the strikes, prompting the Israeli air force to respond with further missile attacks.

Tel Aviv's latest incursion comes as the danger of war between the major powers in Syria mounts sharply. Over the past two weeks, Washington and its European allies have applied concerted pressure on the Assad regime and its Russian ally, including threatening an all-out military assault if Damascus and Moscow proceed with their plan to militarily crush fighters affiliated with Al Qaida in Idlib Province. Ten days ago, the Pentagon dispatched over 100 Marines to southeastern Syria, where they conducted artillery and air strike drills to intimidate Russia.

The aggressive US military build-up, which was aimed at reinforcing a base on the Syrian-Iraqi border that has served as a training ground for anti-Assad Islamist militias, was cynically justified by Trump administration officials and the corporate media with references to the threat posed to "human rights" in Idlib. In an interview with Fox News last Wednesday, UN Ambassador Niki Haley claimed that she was concerned for Idlib's civilian population, while the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have issued warnings about the war's greatest "humanitarian" disaster.

The hypocrisy of such advocates for US imperialist violence knows no bounds. As well as being chiefly

responsible for the Syrian bloodbath through its support for Islamist rebels with the aim of bringing about regime change in Damascus, the US has been involved in some of the most horrific crimes against the civilian population in Syria and neighbouring Iraq in the current conflict. The brutal US-led offensives to reclaim the cities of Mosul and Raqqa cost the lives of tens of thousands, while leaving much of these areas in ruins.

Washington has adopted this reckless agenda because it is determined to consolidate its unchallenged control over the energy-rich and strategically-important Middle East. The American ruling elite wants at all costs to prevent Assad from regaining control over all of Syria with Russian and Iranian support, since this would lead to Washington's virtual exclusion from influencing post-war Syria and a would be a serious setback in its wider drive to contain Iran in preparation for war.

On Friday, Moscow confirmed that the Syrian government's offensive on Idlib was being postponed. Russian President Vladimir Putin is set to meet today with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in a hastily-convened summit to agree on the next steps in Idlib.

Erdogan has made clear that Ankara will not tolerate a Russian-backed offensive. Fearing that an attack on Idlib would send a large proportion of its 3 million residents streaming across the Turkish border, Erdogan ordered the sending of reinforcements to Turkish troop positions in Idlib to serve as a warning to the attackers. Turkey has a series of military checkpoints in Idlib following an agreement it struck with Iran and Russia to turn the province into a deconfliction zone.

The alliance between Russia, Iran and Turkey was always one of convenience, with each country pursuing its own, and at times contradictory, interests in the Syrian conflict. While Turkey initially sought the overthrow of Assad, Iran hoped through its intervention on the side of Damascus to expand its influence in Syria and strengthen its regional power ambitions against Saudi Arabia and Israel. Russia's intervention has focused chiefly on keeping Assad, the Kremlin's only ally in the Middle East, in power.

However, Turkey fell out with Washington, a fellow NATO ally, over the US reliance during its anti-ISIS operations on Kurdish militias associated with the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), against which Ankara has waged a counter-insurgency war for three decades.

Erdogan patched up his differences with Putin after Turkey had shot down a Russian jet in late 2015 before launching two major military offensives into northern Syria to push back Kurdish forces from the Turkish border and prevent the emergence of contiguous territory under Kurdish control.

It remains unclear whether Erdogan and Putin will reach an accommodation. According to some media reports, one scenario under consideration would involve Ankara consenting to Russian air strikes against known Al Qaida positions in Idlib, but opposing an all-out ground offensive by Syrian troops. Turkey is the main funder of Free Syrian Army units in and around Idlib and is calling for a diplomatic solution.

In the event of a major US-led military intervention, however, Turkey could once again distance itself from Russia. Ankara has appealed both to Washington and Europe for support in dealing with Idlib.

All indications suggest that US-led military action would be of a much larger attack than the missile strikes in April 2017 and April 2018. Washington has not only encouraged France and Britain to join military action but is also publicly urging Germany to join a new "coalition of the willing." As James Jeffrey, the Trump administration's new adviser for Syria, stated on Thursday during a trip to Berlin, "The best way to show political support is not in a speech, but with military solidarity."



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