

# Syria strike caps Israel's provocations in Middle East

By Chris Marsden  
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Israel's air force helicopter strike on leading Hezbollah figures in the Syrian province of Quneitra, near the occupied Golan Heights, is the latest move in a campaign to escalate Middle East tensions. It has been accompanied by a series of provocative actions against the Palestinians and even European powers now considered to be too "pro-Palestinian."

Sunday's strike killed at least six leaders of Hezbollah, including Jihad Mugniyah, the 25-year-old son of Imad Mugniyah, who was himself killed in Damascus in 2008 by an Israeli-plotted car bomb.

The dead also included Mohammad Abu Issa, a leading commander in Syria as well as Iranian Revolutionary Guard General Mohammed Allahdadi and other fighters.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif called the attack "an act of terror" and pledged retaliation. "These martyrdoms proved the need to stick with jihad. The Zionists must await ruinous thunderbolts," said Revolutionary Guards chief General Mohammad Ali Jafari.

An Israeli source said of the possibility of retaliation by Iran or Hezbollah, "They are almost certain to respond. We are anticipating that, but I think it's a fair assumption that a major escalation is not in the interest of either side."

Over preceding days, the Israeli media was filled with bitter official denunciations of Friday's decision by the International Criminal Court to launch a preliminary investigation into possible war crimes in the Palestinian territories.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Saturday, "It's absurd of the ICC to ignore international law and agreements under which the Palestinians don't have a state and can only get one through direct negotiations with Israel. The rules of the ICC are clear: No state, no standing, no case."

The Palestinian Authority applied to join the ICC in

December and has signed the Rome treaty that led to its formation in 2002. It will join the ICC in April, but membership backdated to June last year allows for a preliminary investigation into whether Israel committed war crimes in its offensive against the Gaza Strip, during which much of the Hamas-controlled area was razed and more than 2,300 Palestinians, mostly women and children, were murdered.

Fawzi Barhoum, a spokesman for Hamas, said the group would provide "thousands of reports" of "horrible crimes" committed.

Earlier this month, Israel responded by delaying the transfer of \$127 million in taxes it collects "on behalf of the Palestinians."

It is now lobbying the 122 member-states of the ICC to cut funding for the tribunal, with Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman stating Sunday, "We will demand of our friends in Canada, in Australia and in Germany simply to stop funding it... There are a quite a few countries ... that also think there is no justification for this body's existence."

He had raised the issue with Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird that day.

Israel already enjoys the full support of Washington, with the US State Department speaking of "a tragic irony that Israel, which has withstood thousands of terrorist rockets fired at its civilians and its neighbourhoods, is now being scrutinized by the ICC".

Senator Lindsey Graham threatened that the Palestinian Authority could have millions of dollars of American aid withdrawn if it pursues a prosecution of Israel through the ICC—which he called a "bastardising of the role of the ICC" that he found "incredibly offensive".

The US supplies more than \$400 million annually to the PA.

Another person being lobbied is Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, the largest contributor to the ICC. He is

being feted as part of an ongoing and unprecedented diplomatic offensive against European powers, with even the most pro-Israeli of states such as the UK and Germany occasionally being targeted.

On Sunday, Netanyahu used Abe's visit to Israel to tell his cabinet that Israel needs to diversify its markets because "Western Europe is undergoing a wave of Islamization, anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism. These waves are washing over it and we would like to ensure that the State of Israel will have varied markets around the world."

"I emphasize eastern markets not because we want to give up on other markets but we certainly want to decrease our dependence on certain markets in Western Europe," he added.

Speaking of Europe in such terms is both unprecedented and false, especially given the utilisation of the recent attacks in Paris on *Charlie Hebdo* and the killing of four Jews at a Kosher supermarket to whip up a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment. But Netanyahu, Lieberman and Economy Minister Naftali Bennett have all made such bitter denunciations in recent weeks.

Netanyahu angered the Socialist Party government of Francois Hollande by using the *Charlie Hebdo* attack to call for French and European Jews to emigrate to Israel.

On Saturday, Lieberman summoned the French, British, Spanish and Italian ambassadors to protest against their pro-Palestinian "bias" for having formally protested Israel's announcement of the construction of an additional 1,400 illegal settlements in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and East Jerusalem.

When Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan last week accused Netanyahu of "state terrorism by massacring 2,500 people in Gaza," Lieberman put an anti-European spin on his response.

"Civilized, politically correct Europe's silence over an anti-Semitic, neighbourhood bully like Erdogan and his gang takes us back to the 1930s," he said last Wednesday.

The most hostile response was reserved for Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom, who was forced to cancel a planned trip to Israel after Netanyahu's government refused to guarantee her safety.

Sweden was the first European power to officially recognize Palestine as a state, in October. The Swedish precedent was followed by France, Britain, Ireland and Spain.

Israel refused to recognise Wallstrom's planned visit for a memorial ceremony for Raoul Wallenberg, the Swede who saved tens of thousands of Jews in

Nazi-occupied Hungary, as an official state visit and suggested she provide her own security.

A senior diplomatic official in Jerusalem said, "What were they thinking? That we'd roll out the red carpet for the Swedish foreign minister after this kind of behaviour?"

Israel also made clear that the president, prime minister and foreign minister would not be able to meet with her.

"It is unacceptable how they have been talking about us and everybody else," Wallstrom responded in an interview in *Dagens Nyheter*. "It has irritated not only us, but the Americans and everyone who has anything to do with them right now."

Israel is also in conflict with the United Nations over a report condemning the increase in "price tag" attacks on Palestinians by Israeli settlers in the West Bank.

Since 2006, 2,100 attacks have been carried out by Jewish colonists. In 2006, there were 115 attacks, rising to 399 in 2013. More than 17,000 Palestinians, 342 settlers and 37 soldiers have been injured in such attacks.

Many commentators have argued with justification that Netanyahu and his far-right allies are seeking to whip up their right-wing domestic constituency prior to the March 17 general election. But more is at stake. Israel is stoking up reaction at home to provide a social base for future aggression and war against the Palestinians and in preparation for a possible head-on confrontation with Syria, Lebanon and possibly even Iran—conducted in alliance with the US.

As has been tragically proved again and again, the Zionist state apparatus and its parties have no answer to the mounting social, demographic and economic crisis they face other than military aggression in pursuit of the creation of a "Greater Israel"—even at a cost of provoking a regional war.

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