

Israel denounces Iran nuclear deal after new missile strikes on Syria

By Bill Van Auken
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Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a bellicose speech Monday repeatedly denouncing the government of Iran for allegedly lying before, during and after the negotiation of the 2015 nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Netanyahu's speech came on the heels of missile strikes Sunday night against two military bases inside Syria, which reportedly killed as many as 18 Iranian military advisers as well as a number of other people.

Together, the developments point toward an increasingly dangerous slide toward a wider war in the Middle East, with the Israeli regime working in collaboration with sections of the Trump administration in a bid to provoke a direct military confrontation between Washington and Tehran.

Netanyahu delivered his speech first in English, and only second in Hebrew, signaling that his target audience was not the population of Israel, but rather Washington. The theatrical televised address was delivered in front of a large PowerPoint presentation featuring the phrase "Iran Lied."

There is no doubt that the speech had been coordinated in advance with the Trump administration. Netanyahu had met with Trump's new secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, at the Israeli military headquarters in Tel Aviv on Sunday and he held a phone conversation with Trump before he appeared in front of the cameras on Monday. Both discussions centered on Iran.

Pompeo traveled to Israel from a NATO foreign ministers meeting in Brussels and a stop in Saudi Arabia. In all three places, he focused his remarks on denunciations and threats against Iran.

"I'm sure he [Trump] will do the right thing for the United States, for Israel, and for the peace of the world," Netanyahu said in his speech on Monday.

The tone and atmospherics of Netanyahu's appearance recalled nothing so much as his ludicrous appearance before the United Nations General Assembly in 2012 in front of a cartoon of a bomb with its fuse burning to illustrate bogus claims of Iran's supposedly imminent development of nuclear warheads.

In addition to the PowerPoint, the stage was filled with a bookshelf holding a number of files and a bin that the prime minister said was filled with CDs, all of which, he insisted were "incriminating" documents ostensibly stolen by Israeli spies. They constituted, he claimed, "new and conclusive" proof of Iran's deception of the world regarding its nuclear program. In reality, Netanyahu did not provide a single new fact.

"The boy who can't stop crying wolf is at it again," Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif commented in a tweet on Netanyahu's speech.

Speaking at a press conference in the White House Rose Garden shortly after Netanyahu's speech, Trump said it confirmed that he had been "100 percent right" about the Iran nuclear deal.

"We'll see what happens, I'm not telling you what I'm doing," he added, affirming that "we'll make a decision" either on or before May 12, the deadline for the White House to renew the waiver of unilateral US sanctions against Iran that were lifted as part of the nuclear agreement.

Trump repeated his claim that under the agreement the US had given Iran "\$150 billion and \$1.8 billion in cash...and we got nothing." The \$150 billion is an invention concocted by the American political right as the figure for Iranian overseas assets that were unfrozen under the nuclear deal. The real figure is estimated at between \$25 billion and \$50 billion. The \$1.8 billion is slightly more than the amount the US was required to return to Iran for an arms deal that was never fulfilled.

The fixation of the American president on money that went to Iran reflects broader concerns within the American ruling oligarchy that the agreement's prospective opening of the Iranian market will benefit capitalist interests in Europe, China and Russia, rather than those of US-based banks and corporations.

The flurry of contacts between Washington and Tel Aviv since the weekend appear to signal the failure of the recent back-to-back visits to the American capital by French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor

Angela Merkel to convince Trump to renew the US sanctions waiver and forestall the collapse of the Iranian nuclear deal—an outcome that will almost certainly accelerate the drive to a major war in the region.

The office of Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May issued a statement indicating that she and her French and German counterparts had reaffirmed their support for the deal in separate phone calls on Sunday. Moscow, meanwhile, issued a statement recording a similar conversation between Macron and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The European powers view the apparent determination of the Trump administration to blow up the JCPOA and head down a path of military confrontation with Iran with increasing trepidation. It is not merely the prospect of losing out on potentially lucrative trade and investment deals—few of which have actually been consummated since the deal was signed in 2015—but also the prospect of Europe bearing the brunt of the blowback from such a war, both in terms of regional destabilization and a new exodus of refugees.

Events in Syria, meanwhile, are escalating on a daily basis the likelihood of a new and even more catastrophic war in the Middle East.

At least two dozen people were reportedly killed Sunday night as a result of Israeli missile strikes on two Syrian military bases near the cities of Hama and Aleppo. According to reports, the dead included between 11 and 18 Iranian military advisers. Iran has sent military personnel into Syria to support the government of President Bashar al-Assad against Islamist militias armed and funded by the CIA and Washington's European and regional allies in a war for regime change.

The massive character of the strikes, which apparently targeted stockpiles of surface-to-surface missiles and other armaments with bunker-buster bombs, was reflected in the explosions registering as an earthquake of 2.6 magnitude near Hama.

Israel, as is its normal operating procedure, refused to comment on the attacks, while Syria initially attributed the strikes to the US and France, which, along with the UK, targeted the country with cruise missiles on April 14, using the pretext of a chemical weapons attack that has since been exposed as a fabrication. While Iranian officials initially acknowledged that some of the country's personnel had been killed in the strikes, Tehran later denied that this was the case.

The caution on the part of Damascus and Tehran reflects the concern that the rapidly unfolding events are pushing the region into a major new war. Iran had already issued statements vowing to retaliate for an Israeli strike early last month against a Syrian air base that killed Iranian personnel.

Tel Aviv, however, is observing no such constraints. The Israeli missiles struck only hours after Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman delivered a speech at the *Jerusalem Post*'s annual conference in New York City, in which he said Tel Aviv would “maintain freedom of operation in all of Syria” and would oppose any Iranian military presence there at all costs.

The Israeli Knesset, meanwhile, approved legislation Monday allowing the prime minister to declare war in “extreme situations” with the sole approval of the defense minister.

For its part, the US is escalating its own intervention in Syria, with reported air strikes Sunday by American warplanes against Syrian government forces attempting to extend their control from the provincial capital of Deir Ezzor province into neighboring villages close to the country's major oil and gas fields.

Trump's pledge to bring US troops “home” notwithstanding, the Pentagon has sent reinforcements to the more than 2,000 American special operations troops deployed in the country. Together with a proxy ground force consisting primarily of the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, these troops have been used to carve out a US protectorate comprising approximately a third of Syria's territory, including the country's main energy reserves.

US attacks on Syrian government forces, which are backed by Russia, combined with Israel's threats to retaliate against any use of Russian S-300 air defense systems, which Moscow has pledged to provide to Damascus, pose the threat of the Syrian conflict escalating into a catastrophic war involving the world's major nuclear powers.

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