

Iraq condemns US-UK strikes that killed soldiers, police and civilian

By Bill Van Auken
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The Iraqi government and military together with various Iraqi political parties roundly condemned US-British airstrikes carried out early Friday morning against some five separate locations, killing three Iraqi regular army soldiers, two policemen and a civilian worker. Another four soldiers, two policemen, five militiamen and one civilian were wounded, some of them critically. The death toll is expected to rise as rescue workers dig through the rubble.

The Pentagon launched the bombing raids in retaliation for a rocket attack Wednesday that killed two US and one British military personnel at Camp Taji, a base north of Baghdad. Washington blamed the attack on Kataib Hezbollah, one of the largest components of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), comprised of predominantly Shia militias, which has been incorporated by the Baghdad government into the country's armed forces. Kataib Hezbollah has not claimed responsibility for the attack, and Washington has offered no evidence of its responsibility for firing 18 rockets that struck the base.

Within hours of the rocket attack, warplanes struck a Kataib Hezbollah position in eastern Syria's Deir Ezzor province near a strategic border crossing with Iraq, killing some two dozen of its fighters.

Iraq's military described Friday's US-British airstrikes as "treacherous" and a "targeted aggression." It warned that the attacks threatened an "escalation and deterioration of the security situation in the country, and exposes everyone to more risks and threats."

The country's President Barham Salih called the bombing raids a "violation of national sovereignty" that could "slide Iraq into anarchy and chaos." He added, "The repeated violations the state is being subjected to are a dangerous and deliberate weakening of its abilities especially at a time when Iraq faces unprecedented challenges on political, economic, financial, security and health fronts."

The Iraqi Foreign Ministry convened an emergency meeting of its top officials and summoned the US and British ambassadors to answer for the act of "American aggression." It said it would raise formal complaints before

the United Nations Security Council.

Meanwhile, the Fatah Alliance, one of the most powerful blocs in the Iraqi Parliament, issued a statement stressing that there was no other answer to the attacks outside of forcing the withdrawal of the nearly 6,000 US troops deployed on Iraqi soil.

The Iraqi Parliament voted overwhelmingly in support of a resolution calling for the immediate expulsion of all foreign forces from the country in the wake of the January 3 US drone assassination of Gen. Qassem Suleimani, one of Iran's top government officials, after he landed at Baghdad's international airport for a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul Mahdi on attempts to defuse rising regional tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Also killed in the attack was Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the leader of Kataib Hezbollah and deputy commander of the entire Popular Mobilization Forces, along with several other Iraqis and Iranians.

This criminal assassination brought the region and the world to the brink of a catastrophic war. Iran responded five days later with missile strikes on two US bases housing American troops in Iraq. While there were no fatalities resulting from the strikes, some 110 soldiers were left with traumatic brain injuries.

The retaliations and counter-retaliations now unfolding in Iraq threaten again to trigger such a war.

Iran Friday rejected US attempts to hold it responsible for Wednesday's rocket attack that killed the US and British soldiers.

"The United States cannot blame others ... for the consequences of its illegal presence in Iraq and the nation's reaction to the assassination and killing of Iraqi commanders and fighters," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said. "Instead of dangerous actions and baseless accusations, Mr. Trump should reconsider the presence and behavior of his troops in the area."

While the Pentagon, as always, described its bombing raids as "precision" and "proportionate," one of the targets hit by US bombs was an unfinished civilian airport under

construction outside of the Shia holy city of Karbala, 60 miles southwest of Baghdad.

The Imam Hussein Holy Shrine, which oversees the airport's construction in an agreement with several Iraqi companies, stressed that "this airport is completely civilian" and condemned "this unjustified and blatant assault." Iraqi television news channels broadcast footage from the scene, showing a building with its windows blown out with signs over the door reading "Karbala International Airport" and "Site Offices." The one known fatality from the raid was a cook for the civilian workforce.

Speaking in Washington on Friday, Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie Jr., the chief of US Central Command which oversees US military operations throughout the region, dismissed the Iraqi protests with all the arrogance and contempt of a colonial occupier.

"We consulted them [Iraq] in the wake of the attack," he said. "They knew the response was coming." As for the soldiers, police and the civilians killed and wounded in the strikes, he said, "it's probably not a good idea to position yourself with Kataib Hezbollah in the wake of a strike that killed Americans and coalition members."

"I don't know whether the Iraqis are happy or unhappy," the general said. And for him, as the commander of what now unquestionably constitutes an occupying imperialist army, the matter is one of complete indifference.

While the US troops now deployed in Iraq were sent in as part "Operation Inherent Resolve," with the ostensible mission of driving back the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Sunni Islamist militia that overran a third of Iraq's territory in 2014, routing the US-trained Iraqi security forces, McKenzie and other Pentagon officials have made it clear that they now see the Iraqi Shia militias that played the decisive role in defeating ISIS on the ground, rather than ISIS itself, as the main enemy.

Significantly, the US government and media have paid nowhere near as much attention to two US Marine Raiders killed in a March 8 firefight with ISIS members in a cave complex near Iraq's northern city of Makhmour than they have to the two who died in the rocket attack on Camp Taji.

This shift is part of a region-wide US military buildup against Iran, which has seen Washington backing Turkey in the defense of Al Qaeda-linked militias in Syria's Idlib province, bringing the NATO member country to the brink of war with nuclear-armed Russia.

General McKenzie told reporters on Friday that the Pentagon will continue to maintain two aircraft carrier strike groups in the Persian Gulf region, led by the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and the USS Harry S. Truman. The CENTCOM commander said that it was the first time that two such strike groups had been deployed near the Persian Gulf since 2012.

While Trump has repeatedly spoken about withdrawing US troops from Washington's "endless wars," the reality is that there are now 90,000 US personnel operating in the areas covered by CENTCOM, 10,000 more than before the assassination of Suleimani in January.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday, General McKenzie suggested that Iran was more likely to take aggressive action because of the extreme crisis confronting the country. The effects of an explosive growth of the coronavirus pandemic and the plummeting of oil prices have been made all the more devastating by Washington's maintenance of a "maximum pressure" sanctions regime tantamount to a state of war.

"As the maximum pressure campaign against Iran continues, they are unable to respond really economically or diplomatically, the two channels that we're using to apply pressure on them," McKenzie told the Senate panel. "As they seek to find a way to respond, the only way that's left is the military component."

The CENTCOM commander followed up these remarks on Friday by declaring, "We never have to wait to be struck. If we believe an attack is imminent ... I and my commanders have full authority [to strike]."

The implications are clear. US imperialism is continuing its buildup for a war of aggression against Iran aimed at eliminating a key regional rival for hegemony over the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. It feels emboldened by the deepening economic and health crisis plaguing Iran. Such a war would far eclipse the carnage wrought by two decades of imperialist aggression and occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq, while threatening to drag in all of the major powers, including nuclear-armed Russia and China.

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