

US strikes Iraqi targets from aircraft carrier in Persian Gulf

By Bill Van Auken
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For the first time in nearly two-and-a-half years, US warplanes conducted an airstrike against Iraqi targets from an aircraft carrier deployed in the Persian Gulf. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet reported that the attacks were carried out by two F/A-18F Super Hornets flying off the deck of the USS Nimitz.

The Pentagon's Central Command reported an airstrike against a supposed hideout of remnants of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) in the area of Kirkuk, Iraq. While it did not attribute the attack to the carrier-based aircraft, it was carried out on the same day that the Navy reported its operation.

The USS Nimitz-led carrier strike group passed through the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most strategic chokepoints, and into the Persian Gulf on September 18, substantially escalating the US military presence in the tense region.

While ISIS was the ostensible target of the latest airstrike, the military operation constitutes an implicit threat against Iran, the principal target of US militarism in the region.

The US military buildup has been accompanied by a threat of US retaliation against Iranian-aligned Shia militias in Iraq, as well as Washington's ratcheting up of a "maximum pressure" sanctions regime against Iran that is tantamount to a state of war, serving to drive ever larger segments of the Iranian population into poverty and cripple the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has threatened the Iraqi government that Washington will close down its embassy in Baghdad as a prelude to US military attacks aimed at "liquidating" Shia militia elements charged with responsibility for attacks on US facilities in the country.

According to Iraqi Kurdish news agencies, the US

ambassador to Iraq, Matthew Tueller, has already fled the embassy, taking refuge in Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Preparations are also reportedly underway for evacuating the rest of the embassy staff.

These extreme measures are being justified as a response to a series of Katyusha rocket attacks on the Green Zone, the heavily fortified district of Baghdad where the US Embassy as well as other diplomatic and government facilities are located. According to US officials, the Green Zone has been targeted with rockets or mortar fire 19 times in the last month. None of these attacks have claimed any casualties or inflicted any damage on the embassy. Convoys supplying US and allied facilities have also been attacked roughly two dozen times.

In a tragic incident on Monday, a Katyusha rocket apparently aimed at US troops deployed at the Baghdad airport fell short of its target, hitting a nearby house and killing three children and two women.

The American embassy in Baghdad is the largest and most expensive such US facility in the world, sprawling over 104 square acres, occupying nearly as much space as Vatican City. It opened in 2009, six years after the launching of the US war of aggression that claimed the lives of roughly one million Iraqis and devastated the country. It was built to house an apparatus that would continue the neo-colonial domination of the oil-rich country in the interests of US imperialism. These plans have been thwarted to a large extent by Iran's close relations with and influence over Baghdad.

Today the embassy is defended by an advanced C-RAM rocket and mortar defense system installed earlier this year. This was combined with the deployment of Patriot missile batteries to protect US

military installations, where some 5,000 US troops remain. The Iraqi government had opposed the deployments, fearing the Patriots could be used to facilitate a US war on Iran by forestalling Iranian retaliation.

The missile and mortar attacks have unfolded in the wake of the criminal US drone assassination strike at Baghdad's international airport in January that claimed the lives of both Qassem Soleimani, one of Iran's top government officials, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, one of the senior leaders of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). The predominantly Shia militias that comprise the PMF played the predominant role in the ground fighting against ISIS, which overran Iraq in 2014, routing US-trained security forces. By a vote of the Iraqi parliament, the PMF was incorporated into the country's armed forces as kind of a national guard.

After the January assassination strike, the Iraqi parliament voted for a resolution demanding the withdrawal of all US and other foreign troops from the country. Washington has defied the motion, threatening Iraq with sweeping economic sanctions if it attempts to force out US forces.

While Iran as well as the main Shia parties and militia groups have called for a halt to the rocket attacks on the Green Zone, the continuing attacks are believed to be the work of groups seeking revenge for the murder of Soleimani and al-Muhandis. Iran had vowed retaliation but limited its action to one round of missile strikes at US military bases in Iraq that claimed no lives.

Iraqi24, a Baghdad news website, reported that US Secretary of State Pompeo had threatened Iraqi President Barham Salih in a telephone conversation that Washington's closure of its Baghdad embassy would be followed by US military action. "The decision to close the embassy in Baghdad is in President Trump's hands and is ready. ...," the site quotes Pompeo as saying. "If our forces withdraw and the embassy is closed in this way, we will liquidate all those who have been proven to have been involved in these attacks."

Pompeo was said to have specifically named Kata'ib Hezbollah, which al-Muhandis led before his assassination, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. Both are among the largest components of the PMF and have been active in fighting ISIS as well as the Al Qaeda-linked

forces that were backed by the CIA in its bid to oust the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria.

According to the *Kurdistan 24* website, Pompeo specifically linked his threats of military action in Iraq to Trump's concerns about the US November election.

This threat underscores the danger that the Trump administration may be preparing an "October surprise" in the form of military action aimed at shocking the electorate and potentially creating the conditions for the imposition of the kind of coup d'état election and martial law repression that the US president has threatened.

Military action against the Iraqi Shia militias has the potential of spiraling rapidly into a region-wide and even global conflict. As it escalates its threats in Iraq, the Trump administration has arrogantly claimed the right to invoke the "snapback" of sanctions that were suspended under the terms of the 2015 nuclear agreement between Teheran and the major powers that Washington itself unilaterally repudiated in 2018. These include a ban on the export of conventional arms to Iran, which is set to expire in mid-October.

With both China and Russia having established close ties to Iran and interest in selling the country weapons, Washington's bid to enforce the expired ban could involve attempts to seize Russian or Chinese vessels on the high seas, raising the threat of a direct conflict between the major nuclear powers.

Such a use of military force in pursuit of the global strategic interests of US imperialism, as well as Donald Trump's own political interests, would likely come with not merely the acquiescence, but the outright support of his ostensible Democratic Party opponents, who have repeatedly criticized his administration from the right for being too "soft" on Russia and China.

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