

Israeli offensive in Gaza kills, wounds hundreds

Chris Marsden
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The ongoing Israeli military offensive in Gaza has so far claimed more than 70 Palestinian lives and wounded more than 250 in some of the bloodiest conflict since the start of the present intifada.

The pretext for the offensive is to end the attacks on Jewish settlements using crude, homemade—and generally ineffectual—“Kassam” rockets, mounted by the Islamic fundamentalist group Hamas—one of which killed two children last week in the border town of Sderot. But the scale of the Israeli Defence Force’s intervention belies such claims. Rather, the Likud government is intent on destroying what remains of the economic, social and political superstructure in the strip, prior to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon’s supposed “unilateral withdrawal” from Gaza due to take place next year.

Should the withdrawal from Gaza ever materialise, Sharon intends to leave behind a captive population of more than 1 million not only with no ability to defend themselves from the IDF forces surrounding them but with scarcely any means of subsistence. And in all likelihood, the bloodshed will not be confined to Gaza. At any point, the larger Palestinian population in the occupied West Bank can also be attacked—using a similarly spurious pretext as that employed to justify the attack on Gaza.

Hundreds of IDF troops have been operating in northern Gaza since September 29. But the offensive, cynically code-named “Days of Penitence,” officially began on October 1, when 200 Israeli tanks and armoured bulldozers massed on the border with the Gaza Strip. It had been approved the previous evening by Sharon’s security cabinet. At the meeting, defence minister and key Sharon rival, Binyamin Netanyahu, insisted that the IDF should smash Gaza’s power and water infrastructure.

Two Israeli rockets were fired at the Jabaliya refugee camp, home to around 100,000 people, killing 5 Palestinians and wounding 17 others. The fighting left 28 Palestinians dead and 139 wounded—the highest single day of Palestinian fatalities in 30 months of the present intifada. In one incident, Israeli soldiers shot and killed Raed Abu Wadi, 36, a deaf and mute man, as he stood on his balcony. The IDF claimed he was armed and had run at soldiers.

The IDF has also reoccupied the towns of Beit Lahiya and Beit Hanoun and taken control of a 9-square-kilometre area along the Gaza border.

At least seven Palestinians, mostly militants but including a 13-year-old boy, were killed on October 3, while another 13-year-old boy died of wounds sustained earlier.

IDF forces continued to strike on October 4, mostly from the air.

Doctors in Gaza say they have pulled fléchettes from dead and

wounded Palestinians that they believe came from Israeli tank shells. An emergency meeting of Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Yasser Arafat’s cabinet over the weekend denounced “world silence in the face of the magnitude of crimes committed” by Israel, which they said included the use of “inhumane and illegal weapons, such as fragmentation bombs.”

Palestinian Minister for Negotiations Saeb Erekat said that he fears all of Gaza will soon be reoccupied. “Sharon’s objective is to destroy the Palestinian Authority and the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organisation], and to reoccupy the Gaza Strip in order to turn it into one vast prison,” he said.

To make things worse, bulldozers as usual have been systematically destroying Palestinian homes, roads and power lines. On October 3, for example, scores of tanks and bulldozers entered the Tel Al-Zatar area northeast of Jabaliya, where they destroyed not only houses but also a number of factories and an infant pre-school. Jaber Abu Oukal, head of the kindergarten, said 400 children ages 3 to 5 attended the kindergarten. “Now they have no place to go,” he said.

An IDF spokesman declared ominously that gunmen were using groups of stone-throwing children for cover. “That’s why we don’t wait anymore. When we see a group of children gathering, we fire warning shots to disperse them.”

About 15,000 people living in the area have now been without water and electricity for days, and sick people have been unable to reach hospitals or get access to medicine.

Three Israeli civilians and two soldiers have been killed in the fighting.

Since the operation began, the international press has been prohibited from entering Gaza and the Israeli press has shown only those images allowed by the IDF. But the *Guardian*’s Chris McGreal has been able to report from Jabaliya, in an October 4 article. He writes of the response of Gaza residents:

“In the mourning tents dotted every few blocks through Jabaliya there is also anger at the death of innocents. Most of those killed in the past five days are gunmen but the dead include about 15 civilians, among them a 13-year-old boy shot in the head on Saturday.

“Israel accuses Hamas of endangering civilians by attacking from the cover of residential streets, which Hamas says it does because that is where the tanks are, and of using civilians as human shields.

“The Israelis do too. When soldiers commandeer Palestinian flats as sniper posts, they frequently pack entire families into the back rooms, in the belief that it will discourage Hamas from blowing up the building. And it does.”

McGreal quotes the director general of its health ministry, Abdel Barkawi, explaining, “There are 30,000 people trapped by the Israeli

army. They have no electricity, because the first thing the army did was smash the transformers.... Many don't have water, because they rely on electric motors to draw it out of the ground. The Israeli bulldozers are ripping up the sewage pipes."

Israeli officials have declared that the operation will be "open-ended," and Israel's army chief, Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, has stated, "We will continue this operation as long as we need. The troops are ready to continue, not in terms of days, but weeks."

The chairman of the Israeli parliament's defence committee, Yuval Steinitz, has said he is urging Sharon to seize the entire Gaza Strip, modelled on the army's reoccupation of the West Bank two years ago known as Operation Defensive Shield. Sharon has said that Operation Days of Penitence will not end swiftly, but will "have to expand."

Arafat's cabinet is correct in pointing out that the IDF operation has barely elicited even a formal word of criticism from the major powers. The Bush administration in the United States continues to give tacit backing to Sharon's efforts to crush the Palestinians militarily. US government spokesmen have merely urged Israel to avoid civilian casualties, while reiterating Washington's familiar refrain that Israel "has the right to defend itself."

It took several days for France, Russia and Britain to express their "concern." And even then, Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw included references to Israel's "right to defend itself against terrorism," urged the Palestinian Authority "to fulfill its Roadmap commitments on security" and called for "both sides" to "work to put a stop to bloodshed and violence" in his appeal for Israel to show "restraint."

For its part, the United Nations has also put on its usual demonstration of sanctimony combined with a feigned impartiality. In a statement, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called on Israel to halt military operations that "have led to the deaths of scores of Palestinians, among them many civilians, including children," but added that the Palestinian Authority must also "to take action to halt the firing of rockets against Israeli targets," as if the two issues were of equal weight.

An emergency meeting of the UN Security Council was convened yesterday, October 4, at the request of Algeria, which currently holds a rotating spot on the 15-member body. But Israel could count on the US to thwart what it called a "one-sided resolution."

For its part, the Arab bourgeoisie throughout the Middle East continues its policy of leaving Israel free to carry out its crimes. On October 3, a meeting of the Arab League merely called on Annan and the UN to prepare a report on the Israeli "crimes" against the Palestinian people and asked governments and relief agencies to send humanitarian aid.

The near silence of the western powers and of the Arab regimes along with the toothless nature of the UN's response to Operation "Days of Penitence" underscore the impotence and failure of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian bourgeoisie's efforts to secure a settlement with Israel by acceding to Washington's demands to accept the partition of Palestine in return for the creation of a supposed "homeland" on parts of the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

First under the 1993 Oslo Accords and now under the US-sponsored "Road Map," successive Israeli governments have been allowed to continue settlement construction while worsening the suppression and deprivation of the captive Palestinians. Now Sharon is moving rapidly towards the permanent annexation to Israel of the majority of the West Bank, as well as East Jerusalem, behind a fortified wall that will leave the Palestinians in conditions worse than a South African bantustan.

Today, it is apparent to the vast majority of Palestinians that they have been cruelly betrayed and abandoned. One indication of this is a statement issued by the Palestinian Writers' Association directly accusing the Arab governments of suppressing all forms of solidarity with the Palestinians. "The Arab masses are being intimidated and prevented from expressing their support for the Palestinians," the statement said. "The Arab governments, on the orders of the US, have also stopped financial aid to our people in order to starve us and force us to surrender."

It is this that has forced Arafat and the PA to decry the "world's silence" in the face of Israel's crimes. And others within the PA have gone further still. Bassam Abu Sharif, a member of the Palestine National Council and a close aide to Arafat, warned the European Union, the UN and Russia that they were on the verge of losing all credibility in the Middle East by simply "issuing bashful statements repeatedly condemning Israel's war crimes.... The Israeli army is perpetrating unprecedented crimes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip because of the failure of the UN and the Quartet to take practical and deterrent measures."

Saeb Erekat complained in more guarded tones that "the international response did not rise to the anticipated minimum level of expectations." But he was forced to single out the Arab regimes for failing to denounce the Israeli operation. "The Arab world is in a state of schism. We have become a nation that is unable to influence anything," he said.

Yet no matter how much they may complain, no section of the Arab bourgeoisie, whether grouped around Arafat or his opponents such as Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia, offers an alternative course. All sides continue to hold out illusions that the democratic and social aspirations of the Palestinian masses can be realised within the framework on an imperialist-driven settlement—providing only that sufficient political and moral pressure is brought to bear on the US and Israel.

As Foreign Minister Nabil Shaath stressed to the BBC, "The only strategy that I see working is a strategy of getting back to the peace process" via the "roadmap plan."



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