Israel mounts air attacks on Gaza and Lebanon

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The Israeli government has dramatically escalated its offensive against the Palestinians, with war planes mounting attacks on the Gaza Strip and in Lebanon. Both attacks were carried out on the pretext of responding to rockets fired by Palestinian militant groups.

The attacks on Gaza, which began on the evening of Wednesday, December 28, came after a declaration by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's cabinet imposing a buffer zone in the north of the strip. The order creating a buffer area 2.5 kilometres (1.5 miles) deep, covering territory formerly containing Jewish settlements, came into effect at 18:00 hours and within minutes shelling began.

The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) dropped leaflets over northern Gaza reproducing a map of the "security zone," stating that it will be enforced "until further notice" and instructing people to keep out of the area.

Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert gave an interview in which he responded to accusations that Sharon's Gaza disengagement plan had been a mistake. He stressed that it had in fact provided for a more flexible military response. In chilling terms he declared, "The prime minister has no limitations. No one is stopping him. No one is blocking him. He's not afraid of 'what they will say.'"

"When we were deep in Gaza," he continued, "there was shelling and terror and we couldn't carry out operations like Blue Skies because the Jewish population was in the heart of the Arab population."

December 28 also saw an Israeli air strike against the base of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command led by Ahmed Jibril and situated in the al-Naima area, south of Beirut. Two Palestinian militants were wounded in the attack. The Israeli government has accused the PFLP-GC of responsibility for a total of nine rockets fired from Lebanese territory directed at Israeli border towns. The PFLP-GC has denied responsibility.

The hard-line stance of the Israeli government is in part motivated by efforts to win support in the general election to be held next month.

Sharon is contesting for the support of Likud voters, from which he split to form his new party Kadima, and which is now led by his arch rival Binyamin Netanyahu. Likud's power base is amongst the settlers and more extreme right-wing forces who have accused Sharon of a betrayal because of his Gaza pullout. He believes that his reputation as a military strong man is also his best weapon against a challenge from the Labour Party under its new leader Amir Peretz, who is attacking the government on its social and economic policies.

The attack on Gaza precedes elections to the Palestinian Authority and follows an earlier provocation where the government threatened to deny the vote to Palestinian residents in east Jerusalem. The impact of both is to destabilise Al Fateh, headed by Mahmoud Abbas, by forcing direct conflict with militant groups such as Hamas. A fragile truce exists within Al Fateh to enable a united list to be presented against Hamas in the elections, following a threatened split by a faction supportive of jailed militant Marwan Barghouti and critical of Abbas's subservience to Israel.

On December 27 Abbas met with several militant groups and appealed for an end to rocket attacks, but this was rejected by Islamic Jihad—blamed for the majority of attacks—as well as the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade and others. They have pointed out that it is Israel that has escalated the conflict in recent weeks with raids on the West Bank and air strikes on Gaza.

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The militant groups have denounced the imposition of a buffer zone as tantamount to reoccupation.

The attack on the PFLP-GC camp in Lebanon has equally ominous ramifications. The small group is pro-Syrian and action against it is therefore also a direct threat to Damascus.

This is emphasised by the statements made by Israeli army personnel. General Udi Adam, the IDF commander in Israel's northern region, declared, "The Palestinian groups are responsible for Katyusha rocketing of [the town of] Kiryat Shmona, but I would not be surprised if Hezbollah had given them the green light."

He continued, "We hold the Lebanese government responsible for the operations against Israel from its territory, and our raid must be understood as a warning."

When asked on Israeli army radio whether Israel would also bomb Syrian targets as it has done previously when rockets have been fired by groups supportive of Damascus, Adam said, "I won't answer that.... We reserve the right to retaliate any way we see fit."

Such threats against Syria are not only for domestic consumption. They come amidst a sustained campaign against Damascus being led by the United States, focussing on alleged Syrian involvement in the murder of Lebanese ex-prime minister Rafik Hariri in a bomb attack in February.

A United Nations investigation into Hariri's killing, led by German magistrate Detlev Mehlis, reported this month and again pointed the finger at Syrian involvement without offering any evidence. The report was delivered on the same day that a bomb attack in Beirut killed journalist and MP Gibran Tueni, which was again blamed on Syria. Damascus has denied responsibility for the bombing and condemned it.

Sharon understands that threats against Syria will be warmly received by the Bush administration. They follow earlier reports that Israel has planned a military strike on Iranian uranium enrichment plants if it does not comply with US demands that it end its alleged attempt to acquire nuclear weapons. A report in the *Sunday Times* on December 11 claims that the Israeli operation might involve a combined air and ground assault using special forces units and long-range F-15I fighters.

The Bush administration has so far limited itself to demands for Iran to be referred to the UN Security Council for breaching the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but has not ruled out "the military option."

Israel sees itself as the main beneficiary of the ongoing attempt by the US to secure its hegemony over the Middle East. This has already seen the elimination of Iraq as a military challenger to Tel Aviv. Sharon would also welcome any move against Tehran and Damascus and is more than willing to offer its services as a provocateur and military surrogate.

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