

Israel rejects ceasefire calls and escalates attacks in Gaza

Peter Symonds
2 January 2009

The murderous Israeli air assault on Gaza continued unabated for a sixth day yesterday. According to Palestinian emergency services, at least 420 people have been killed and more than 2,100 injured including women and children. The UN estimates that at least a quarter of those killed have been civilians.

In a further escalation of the attacks, two Israeli war planes fired rockets into the home of senior Hamas leader Nizar Rayan in the Jabaliya refugee camp, killing at least 12 people including Rayan, two of his wives and four of his children. The strike levelled the four-storey apartment block in which Rayan lived and badly damaged surrounding buildings.

Despite Israeli denials that it is seeking "regime change", the assassination of Rayan is part of a broad air war targetting every aspect of the Hamas administration in Gaza. The education and transportation ministries have been virtually destroyed and parliament building was also hit yesterday, according to Palestinian security officials. The justice ministry was struck for the first time, a medical source told Agence France Presse.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared yesterday that "we will deal with Hamas and terror with an iron fist". While the Israeli military insists that the air strikes are aimed at destroying Hamas's military capacity, nothing is off limits. A military spokesman declared that the government buildings were "a critical component of the terrorist groups' infrastructure in Gaza". On Wednesday, after the Tel Al-Hawa mosque had been reduced to rubble, Israeli officials claimed that it had been used to store weapons.

At the Shifa hospital, a dentist told the *New York Times* that his friend, Ehab Madhoud, has just died. Madhoud, a doctor, had been responding to an emergency in the Jabalya refugee camp when his ambulance was hit by a missile. "I can't understand why Israel would hit an ambulance," the dentist said. Among the injured in intensive care was also an eight-year-old boy with severe brain damage and broken limbs. He had been hit during an Israeli strike that killed his two sisters aged five and 12.

The Israeli military announced Wednesday that its warplanes had flown 500 bombing missions. Hundreds more combat sorties were carried out by helicopter gunships and surveillance aircraft, both manned and unmanned. The spokesman declared that 95 percent of the targets had been hit and no major targets remained standing. The

aim now, he claimed, was to hunt down missile launchers and fighters one by one.

The Israeli army is also poised to enter Gaza with tanks, armoured vehicles and artillery massed on the border. The call up of reservists has been extended to more than 9,000. Military spokeswoman Major Avital Leibovich told the media: "The infantry, the artillery and other forces are ready. They're around the Gaza Strip, waiting for any calls to go inside."

Israel insists the offensive is to prevent homemade rockets being fired into southern Israel. But the claim is no more believable than the assertion that the 2006 war in Lebanon was launched in response to the capture of two Israeli soldiers. The assault on Gaza is aimed at terrorising the population and bringing the Hamas administration to its knees in the same way that the Lebanon war was meant to cripple Hezbollah. As a senior Israeli military official bluntly told the *New York Times*, the purpose is "making Hamas lose their will or lose their weapons."

The Israeli government on Wednesday flatly rejected calls by French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner for a 48-hour ceasefire for humanitarian purposes. Israeli foreign minister Tzipi Livni, who left for a brief visit to France yesterday, issued a statement declaring: "There is no humanitarian crisis in the [Gaza] Strip, and therefore there is no need for a humanitarian truce." Israel, she said, was supplying "comprehensive humanitarian aid".

Livni's denial of any humanitarian crisis provoked outrage among relief officials, who pointed out that the limited supplies of food and medicine flowing into Gaza were completely inadequate. Israel has sealed its borders with Gaza and maintained an economic blockade of the densely populated and impoverished area for more than a year.

World Food Program director Christine van Nieuwenhuyse said she was furious at Livni's remarks, saying that WFP inventories in Gaza showed a 30 percent shortage of basic dry goods such as flour. There was a much greater shortfall of "ready-to-eat" food which was greatly needed because of the acute lack of power and gas for cooking.

UN head of humanitarian operations John Holmes described the situation in Gaza as "alarming". He pointed out that 55 trucks of food and medical supplies reached Gaza through the Kerem Shalom crossing from Israel on Tuesday and about 60 trucks on Wednesday, as compared to 475 truckloads a day in May 2007 before Hamas took

control in Gaza.

UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) commissioner Karen Abu Zayd said that her agency needed 100 trucks of flour a day to meet the needs of refugees. She said that UNRWA had not distributed any food for two weeks because of shortages and the Israeli air strikes so "I think that means that 20,000 people a day have been without food that they expect."

"People are doing pretty badly. Everyone we know is sharing whatever they have, not just with their families but with their neighbours. We haven't seen widespread hunger. We do see for the first time... people going through rubbish dumps looking for things, people begging, which is quite a new phenomenon as well," she told the Associated Press.

Yesterday's *Telegraph* explained: "Almost all food shops in Gaza have closed through lack of supplies and the few functioning bakeries are surrounded by long queues of customers on the rare occasions when they open. Power has been out in central Gaza City since Israel launched operation Cast Lead and other towns in the strip have suffered numerous lengthy power cuts. Mains water is not available to hundreds of thousands of people and there is a very real threat of a health crisis caused by the total collapse of Gaza's elderly and overwhelmed sewage system."

The one-sided war being waged against the population of Gaza has provoked horror and protests throughout the Middle East and internationally. In Israel itself, despite the militarist clamour being whipped up, a poll in *Ha'aretz* found that support for the war was far from universal. Some 20 percent backing calls for a ceasefire, and, while 52 percent supported the air war, only 19 percent favoured a ground offensive.

The Israeli government is dependent on the tacit political support of the Bush administration in particular to fend off mounting pressure for a ceasefire. The US and Britain effectively stymied a move by Arab countries yesterday in the UN Security Council for a draft resolution condemning "the excessive, disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force by Israel" and calling for an immediate end to hostilities.

US Ambassador to the UN Zalmay Khalilzad dismissed the resolution as "not balanced" and "not acceptable to the United States". By insisting that Hamas must prevent the firing of rockets into southern Israel as the precondition of any ceasefire, the Bush administration intends to drag out any discussion in the UN indefinitely to allow Israel to achieve its strategic aims in Gaza. All of the hypocritical statements about Israel's "right to self defence", which are repeated by the European powers, ignore the provocative actions of the Israeli military, including the killing of six Palestinians in November.

Israel is also able to rely on the cowardice and duplicity of Arab leaders, who, while posturing against the attacks on Gaza, have blamed Hamas for the conflict. At a summit of foreign ministers on Wednesday, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal criticised Palestinians for not uniting behind Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. "We are telling our Palestinian brothers that your Arab nation cannot extend a real helping hand if you don't extend your own hands

to each other with love," he said.

The conservative Abbas has been the instrument used by the US and Israel to undermine Hamas ever since the Islamist organisation won Palestinian elections in 2006. The Saudi appeal for "unity" is thus simply an attempt to further isolate Hamas, in line with the efforts of the Egyptian regime which has collaborated in sealing its own border with Gaza and strengthening the Israeli economic blockade.

What exactly the Israeli government is seeking to achieve in its onslaught on Gaza is by no means clear. The military, which plays a major role within the Israeli political establishment, is clearly seeking to revive its stature after its humiliating withdrawal from Lebanon in 2006. Livni, who is due to lead the Kadima Party in elections scheduled for next month, is using the opportunity to fend off criticisms from Benjamin Netanyahu of the right-wing Likud Party who has been calling for a more aggressive policy towards Hamas.

The Israeli offensive in Gaza is, however, bound up with broader Israeli and US strategic interests throughout the Middle East. Condemnations of Hamas are laced with broader accusations against Iran for supporting Hamas and the dangers of Iran's alleged nuclear weapons programs. Israeli ambassador to the US, Sallay Meridor, this week denounced Iran as "an octopus" with "proxies in the region and beyond the region". "What you see in Gaza is made in Iran—it's funded in Iran, the terrorists are trained in Iran, it's supplied in Iran," he said.

Reflecting right-wing layers of the US political establishment, former US ambassador to the UN, John Bolton also focussed on Iran during an interview with Fox News. He warned of "a multi-front war here, not just in the Gaza Strip, but potentially by Hezbollah, the terrorist group in Lebanon attacking Israel from the north as it did in the summer of 2006. And indeed, the continuing Iranian quest for nuclear power. So while our focus obviously is on Gaza right now, this could turn out to be a much larger conflict."

Such comments suggest that, among the most militarist layers in the US and Israel, the war on Gaza is simply regarded as setting the stage for further military operations throughout the region.



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