

Israeli military escalates assault on Gaza City

Bill Van Auken
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With the death toll in Gaza rapidly approaching 1,000, and with nearly 4,500 others wounded, roughly half of them civilians, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) are poised to launch a murderous assault on the most heavily populated urban neighborhoods of Gaza City.

Reporters from Al Jazeera, one of the only international networks reporting from inside Gaza, said that heavy fighting had broken out Tuesday in the Tal al-Hawa neighborhood in the south of Gaza City, while clashes were also reported in Beit Lahiya in the north and Kham Younis in the east. The impoverished urban area remains encircled by Israeli tanks, while warships sail off its coast and F-16 fighter planes carry out continuous bombardments.

In the southern city of Rafah, on the Egyptian border, Israeli jets have carried out intensive bombing, including with US-supplied "bunker-buster" bombs designed to destroy underground tunnels that have provided an alternative lifeline for the Palestinian population under conditions of the Israeli economic blockade of the territory.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians were forced to flee the town, and now armor and bulldozers are being used to demolish their homes.

"A large part of Rafah has been completely reduced to rubble...it has been described as hell on earth by some of the witnesses we have met," Ayman Mohyeldin, Al Jazeera's correspondent in Gaza reported.

Meanwhile, Amira Hass, a reporter for the Israeli daily *Haaretz*, reported that significant numbers of Palestinians in farming areas in Gaza remain trapped in their homes surrounded by Israeli forces that have taken up positions there. "IDF troops surrounding the enclaves shoot at anyone who tries to leave," she reported, and those compelled to remain inside, including the wounded, sick and elderly, are running out of food, water and medicine.

On Tuesday night, as air strikes intensified, two Palestinian children were reported killed in the bombing of a house east of the town Jabaliya in the northern Gaza Strip.

A senior Israeli military official told the *Times* of London that "Israeli troops in Gaza had been ordered to engage with maximum force over the past 24 hours." Israeli reservists have been poured into the territory to take over areas already occupied and free up regular forces for the intensified assault.

The so-called "third phase" of the Israeli onslaught is now being set into motion, according to well-known Israeli commentator Alex Fishman of the *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper. "The Israel Defence Forces will enter, with great force, with tens of thousands of soldiers, into the heart of the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip," he wrote Monday. "There will no longer be strikes at the margins from the ground and destruction from the air. Now we are talking about armoured divisions that will not leave a single stone standing on their way into the refugee camps and into the heart of one of the most crowded cities on Earth."

In other words, the greatest bloodshed is still to come.

International condemnation of the Israeli offensive has continued to mount. On Monday, the United Nations Human Rights Council approved a resolution charging Israel with grave human rights violations and calling for the formation of a fact-finding mission. The resolution passed by a

vote of 33-1—with 13 Western countries abstaining.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued a statement Tuesday warning that the 18-day-old Israeli assault on Gaza was having a "devastating" effect on children living in the territory, 311 of whom have been killed, according to medical authorities.

"Children have also experienced serious difficulties in accessing humanitarian aid. The emotional and psychological effects of these events on an entire generation of children will be severe," the UN panel states. It called upon Israel to stop its violations of international law, including "the targeting of children in situations of armed conflict and direct attacks on objects protected under international law, including places that generally have a significant presence of children, such as schools and hospitals."

Christer Zettergren, the secretary-general of the Swedish Red Cross, an organization that normally avoids direct criticism of parties to armed conflicts, charged Tuesday that the Israeli forces had attacked seven ambulances operated by the Red Crescent in Gaza last week. He described the shelling of the emergency medical crews as "very deliberate."

And the chief European Union aid official Tuesday condemned Israel for violations of international law and the use of "totally disproportionate" force in attacking Gaza.

"One simple fact, acknowledged and denounced by established experts in the field, is that Israel is not respecting international humanitarian law," EU Aid Commissioner Louis Michel told the Belgian newspaper *La Libre Belgique*. "The first obligation is that an occupying power must preserve the lives of the population, protect them, feed them and care for them. That is manifestly not the case here.... I can't accept it."

Israeli officials, however, showed no sign of bowing to such criticism. They have enjoyed relative impunity in conducting the murderous operation against Gaza largely because of the open support of Washington and the tacit acceptance of the major European powers.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert vowed to strike Gaza with an "iron fist."

"We will continue for as much time as is necessary in order to remove this threat," he said Monday. "We cannot be soft. It is us or them.... We will continue striking with all our might, with all our power, until there is quiet."

Israeli military commander General Gabi Ashkenazi told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee that Israeli troops had inflicted major damage on Hamas in Gaza, but "we still have work to do."

And Mark Regev, the Israeli government spokesman, asserted that Hamas was enduring "serious punishment" and Israel was "advancing towards the endgame."

What precisely that "endgame" consists of is far from evident. Indeed, the lack of any apparent strategic objectives in the Gaza operation has created increasing disquiet among Israel's erstwhile supporters.

Thus, Anthony Cordesman, the chief military analyst for the US establishment think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies, wrote on January 9: "The growing human tragedy in Gaza is steadily raising more serious questions as to whether the kind of tactical gains that Israel now reports are worth the suffering involved."

Citing the massive destruction and humanitarian catastrophe as "a

legacy of greatly increased suffering for the 1.5 million people who will survive the current conflict," and pointing to the mounting outrage against Israel and the US throughout the Arab and Muslim world, Cordesman continues:

"This raises a question that every Israeli and its supporters now needs to ask. What is the strategic purpose behind the present fighting?... Has Israel somehow blundered into a steadily escalating war without a clear strategic goal or at least one it can credibly achieve? Will Israel end in empowering an enemy in political terms that it defeated in tactical terms? Will Israel's actions seriously damage the US position in the region, any hope of peace, as well as moderate Arab regimes and voices in the process? To be blunt, the answer so far seems to be yes....

"If Israel has a credible ceasefire plan that could really secure Gaza, it is not apparent. If Israel has a plan that could credibly destroy and replace Hamas, it is not apparent. If Israel has any plan to help the Gazans and move them back towards peace, it is not apparent. If Israel has any plan to use US or other friendly influence productively, it not apparent."

Cordesman concludes that the Israeli leadership have "disgraced themselves and damaged their country and their friends."

Indeed, as the massacre in Gaza continues to unfold and deepen, it has become increasingly apparent that the aim of Israel's military operation is not to halt the largely ineffectual Hamas rocket attacks, which have in any case continued. Nor, as Cordesman makes clear, is it harnessed to any coherent or realistic political strategy for changing the political status quo in the region.

There is the irrational conception, shared by the leading elements within the US political establishment, that somehow by killing and wounding thousands of Palestinian civilians Israel will succeed in turning the population against Hamas and secure greater support for a pro-Israeli regime in the occupied territories.

In Washington, this is supplemented with the ideological thesis that in attacking Hamas, Israel is waging a war against "extremism" and "terrorism" as well as Iranian influence, and that its action will strengthen "moderates" and US interests. In reality, the war has aroused massive popular hostility throughout the Middle East, not only against Israel but even more so against the so-called "moderates"—i.e., the motley collection of police states and royal families backed by US imperialism in the region.

There is also the idea, repeated frequently in the Israeli press, that the war on Gaza was a necessary means of refurbishing the reputation of the IDF after the humiliating defeat it suffered in its invasion of southern Lebanon in the summer of 2006. According to this argument, unleashing massive military force against a largely defenseless and imprisoned population will reaffirm Israeli military prowess against any potential foe.

There is in all of these arguments a striking level of irrationality and moral degeneration that increasingly characterizes the political atmosphere inside Israel.

This is taking increasingly demented and dangerous forms, not only in the slaughter in Gaza, but within Israel itself.

Thus, just as the IDF was ordered to dramatically intensify the assault on Gaza, on Monday Israel's Elections Committee voted to ban the United Arab List and Balad, from participating in the February 10 elections. The parties, both of which have members in the Knesset and which enjoy support from Palestinian citizens of Israel, were deemed unfit to run for office because they had supposedly violated Israeli constitutional proscriptions against challenging Israel's existence as a Jewish state. The grounds for this charge was the participation of the parties' leaders in the mass demonstrations by Palestinians inside Israel against the war on Gaza.

The Kadima and Labor parties, which make up the ruling coalition government, voted in favor of the ban, which was proposed by the extreme right-wing Beitenu and National Union parties, both of which stand for the removal of Israel's Arab population.

Ironically, the last party to be subjected to such a ban was the Kach party of ultra-rightist Meir Kahane, whose advocacy of the "transfer" of the Israeli Palestinians—now 20 percent of the population—was deemed racist. Today, this same policy is being increasingly accepted in one form or another by much of the Israeli political establishment.

Beitenu leader Avigdor Lieberman, who led the fight to ban the two parties, delivered a speech Tuesday at Bar-Ilan University suggesting that the solution to the Israel's problem in Gaza lies in a nuclear strike.

"We must continue to fight Hamas just like the United States did with the Japanese in World War II," he said. "Then too, the occupation of the country was unnecessary." The surrender of Japan in 1945 followed the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

While the media has reported overwhelming popular support for the war in Israel, this is another manifestation of the political blind alley confronting the entire Zionist project. What dominates is the sharp turn to the right by the entire political establishment and the intimidation and demoralization of those elements who had previously criticized Israeli aggression.

Within this environment, there are expressions of growing disquiet and opposition.

"Israel has created an image of itself as a madman that has lost it," commented *Haaretz* reporter Yossi Melman.

And, in an article entitled "For the sake of the children," two Israeli writers, Etgar Keret and Shira Geffen, issued an impassioned plea for a halt to IDF operations that are killing the children of Gaza.

The two commented: "Just a few years ago, any surgical strike that killed innocent neighbors stirred a public debate. This past week, hundreds of civilians were killed in Air Force strikes and no hint of doubt emerged. It appears as though the consensus slowly crawled in a direction that enables us to accept, relatively easily, all those things that a few years ago we were not able to digest. The big question is why: Has the threat to our existence grown so much, or perhaps we just became more frustrated and indifferent?"

Underlying the explosive eruption of Israeli militarism in Gaza are profound contradictions of a social, economic, political and demographic character that are threatening to blow apart Israeli society itself. Ultimately, a solution to the present crisis lies only in the development of the class struggle and in the uniting of Israeli and Palestinian working people based on a common perspective of socialist internationalism.



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