

Israel to keep troops in Gaza following ceasefire announcement

David Walsh
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A tense truce presently exists in the Gaza Strip after Israel's declaration of a unilateral ceasefire Saturday night and Hamas' announcement of a one-week ceasefire twelve hours later. An undisclosed number of Israeli troops still remain in Gaza however, and Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has made clear there was no commitment, nor any timetable for a withdrawal. Nor is there any Israeli commitment to opening Gaza's borders and ending the devastating blockade.

While some Israeli tanks and armored vehicles withdrew from areas in southern and northern Gaza, Olmert said that Israel reserved "the right to react and renew its military actions" if the Palestinians continued firing rockets into southern Israel.

For their part, Hamas and other Palestinian resistance groups announced a temporary ceasefire and stressed their demand for "the withdrawal of the enemy forces from the Gaza Strip within a week, along with the opening of all the crossings for the entry of humanitarian aid, food and other necessities for our people in the Gaza Strip."

The truce may well be only a pause in the violence.

The Bush administration brokered the ceasefire, with a Friday meeting in Washington between US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni playing a critical role. The memorandum of understanding signed by Livni involves promises by the US promising to deploy technical, intelligence and military assets across the Middle East and to enlist NATO and US-allied Arab regimes to help prevent arms getting into Gaza, particularly from Iran.

The agreement is highly ominous. While the *Wall Street Journal* notes that the memorandum "doesn't call for the US to employ its own troops in the Palestinian territories," it adds that "US officials compared the scope of the agreement to the Proliferation Security Initiative, a Bush administration program that focuses on interdicting ships and airplanes believed to be trafficking equipment used in developing nuclear weapons and long-range missiles."

Washington is thus promising to seize Iranian or Syrian ships or airplanes on the pretext that they may be carrying arms to Hamas. The US-Israeli agreement contains the seeds of a new and wider war.

US officials indicated that "the memorandum will remain in effect after Barack Obama is inaugurated next week. Rice said she has been briefing the Obama transition team on the memorandum's implications." (*Journal*)

State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack drove home the point, noting that the agreement "commits the United States," adding that Rice

had discussions with incoming Secretary of State Hillary Clinton concerning the issue.

"I think it's safe to assume that we wouldn't have moved forward if we hadn't done some careful consultations prior to signing this with the incoming [Obama] folks," McCormack told the media.

The timing of the Israeli ceasefire and the US-Israeli deal coincides with the eve of the inauguration. It seems clear that the Israelis intended to halt the assault on Gaza, at least temporarily, before Obama took up residence in the White House. It is also clear that the plans being worked out between Israel, the US, Egypt and the European Union to strangle Palestinian resistance and undermine the Hamas government in Gaza have the full support of the incoming US administration.

Olmert also issued a clear threat to Iran and Syria in his ceasefire announcement, declaring that the military operation "proved again the power of Israel and improved its deterrence against those who threaten it." One of the motives of the brutal offensive was to send a message to Iran in particular, which Israeli officials continually refer to as Hamas's sponsor.

The international diplomatic effort as a whole is aimed at further isolating and disarming the Gazan population and toppling the Hamas administration, installing in its stead the US-backed and Fatah-led Palestinian Authority. This, however, seems an unlikely outcome given the widespread hatred and disgust among Gazans for the Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas. The PA acted throughout the onslaught as the stooge of the Israelis and Americans, violently suppressing demonstrations and protests in the West Bank against the Israeli offensive in Gaza.

European Union officials also play their role in this cynical game. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the British, Italian and Spanish prime ministers Gordon Brown, Silvio Berlusconi and Jose Luis Zapatero and Czech premier Mirek Topolánek met with Egyptian officials first on Sunday and then traveled to Jerusalem for a summit with Olmert.

The European politicians spilled crocodile tears over the deaths of hundreds of Gazan children, without indicting Israel as the guilty party, and spoke strongly in defense of "Israel's right to protect its citizens from Hamas rockets." (Reuters)

According to press commentary, the EU-Israeli summit and related diplomatic maneuvers are concentrated on developing effective means of preventing Hamas from "re-arming," while nothing is being said about opening Gaza's borders. The blockade and suffocation of Gaza will continue, with US and European support. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and

the other Arab states also play their part in this dirty business.

With much of Gaza flattened by Israeli bombs and artillery shells, residents came out of shelters and other hiding places Sunday to look at the massive destruction. According to Gaza municipal authorities, approximately 20,000 residential and government buildings were damaged and another 4,000 entirely destroyed. Some 50 of the UN's 220 schools, clinics and warehouses were shelled or otherwise attacked by the Israelis.

The Palestinian death toll presently stands at more than 1,300, but that is expected to rise. Medics pulled at least 100 bodies, including those of several children, from the rubble Sunday in the Al Tuffah area, Jabal Al Rayyis, Al Kashif, Al Atatra, Al Qarm, Al Zeitoun and Jabaliya. An official of the Palestinian Ministry of Health added that dozens of residents were still missing and presumed dead. The search through the rubble will continue for several days.

According to Hamas medical authorities, the dead include 418 children, 110 women, 120 men over 50, 16 paramedics, 4 reporters and five foreigners.

Foreign journalists, prevented from entering Gaza since the fighting began three weeks ago, got their first glimpse of the carnage Sunday. Correspondent Paul Wood told the BBC "that in the town of Beit Lahiya he saw the first real destruction-streets churned up by Israeli heavy armour, overturned cars, a lake of raw sewage in the street and a mosque left as a charred ruin."

A *Newsweek* reporter noted that the "situation was the most dramatic in Gaza City, which Western journalists reached for the first time today... Today the Beach Road opened, and journalists arrived in Gaza City to find scenes of what John Ging, the local head of the UN Relief and Works Agency, described in an interview as 'destruction on an unimaginable scale.'"

"Parts of the densely populated city looked like Grozny [the capital of Chechnya bombed by Russian forces] on a bad day; one neighborhood, eastern Jabaliya, had nearly every building reduced to a pile of rubble, roofs flattened to the ground-at least 50 of them in close proximity along several blocks. Even relatively untouched neighborhoods had signs of heavy machine gun fire tattooed up and down the walls, with the occasional gaping hole from a tank shell or rocket."

Israeli atrocities continued up to the declaration of the ceasefire and beyond. In the hours after the declaration of a truce, Israeli troops shot dead an eight-year-old girl in the northern town of Beit Hanoun and a 20-year-old man near the southern town of Khan Yunis.

On January 15, the Israeli air force bombed and set ablaze the Al-Quds hospital in a southwestern district of Gaza City, where some 500 people were sheltering. According to Al Jazeera, hospital officials said the fire was sparked by a "phosphorus shell." Two hospitals east of the city were also hit by shells Thursday.

The Israelis continued their policy of targeting Palestinian leaders until the final days of the current round of fighting, assassinating Hamas's interior minister, Said Siam, on Thursday. The death prompted a mass rally at his funeral on Friday.

On Friday an Israeli strike hit the home of a Palestinian doctor, Izzeldin Abuelaish, who had been giving reports to Israeli television on conditions

in Gaza over the past three weeks, and killed three of his daughters and a niece. The news program went on the air as the doctor was attempting to save the girls' lives.

Also on Friday, a mother and five of her children were killed by an Israeli tank shell in the al-Bureij refugee camp in the central Gaza Strip, witnesses and

medics said. The children were reportedly aged 7 to 12 and the mother was 30 years old.

On Saturday, two brothers, five and seven, were killed in a tank attack on a UN school in Beit Lahiya. Their mother lost both her legs in the attack and subsequently died. The boys and their mother had been sheltering from repeated Israeli air strikes over the northern Gaza Strip.

Britain's *Daily Mirror* reported: "[P]ictures clearly showed a marked UN vehicle outside the building while terrified locals sprinted for cover as a hail of fire rained down, seriously injuring 13 others."

John Ging of the UN Relief and Works Agency commented: "These two little boys are as innocent, indisputably, as they are dead. The question now being asked is: Is this and the killing of all other innocent civilians in Gaza a war crime?"

Another UNRWA spokesman, Christopher Gunness, told reporters: "Gaza is unique in the annals of contemporary suffering in that it is a conflict with a fence around it. There is nowhere safe to flee."

Gunness said the UN would call for a war crimes investigation.

According to Palestinian sources, bombings of UN facilities have killed nearly 50 people in Israel's three-week long offensive in the Gaza Strip.

A UN official, cited in the *Sydney Morning Herald* January 19, claimed that Israel deliberately blocked the building up of vital food supplies before the launch of its war against Hamas. The UN's chief humanitarian coordinator in Israel, former Australian diplomat Maxwell Gaylard, accused the Zionist regime of failing to honor its promise to open its border with Gaza during several months of truce from June 19 last year.

"The Israelis would not let us facilitate a regular and sufficient flow of supplies into the Strip." For four or five months, according to Gaylard, "up to even 19 December, less of our supplies and spare parts and items of equipment... got in than before the 19th of June."

This policy, both a provocation against Hamas and part of a plan to make certain that supplies ran out once the fighting began, is further evidence that the murderous Israeli assault, far from an act of 'self-defense' in response to rocket attacks in December, was planned well in advance.



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