

# Israel responds to Middle East unrest with provocations

**Jean Shaoul**  
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On Wednesday, a bomb exploded at a stop by the main bus station in Jerusalem, killing a 59 year old British woman and wounding at least 24 other people. The first major incident in Jerusalem in three years, it has prompted international condemnation and a predictably belligerent response from Israel, raising the threat of another Israeli military operation against the Palestinians.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. The Palestinian Authority condemned it, while Hamas said it wanted to restore the ceasefire, saying, “We stress that our constant position in the government is to protect stability and to work in order to restore the conditions on ground that used to be dominant in previous weeks”.

Only Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees praised the attack, indicating Hamas’ inability to rein in dissident groups.

Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s prime minister, postponed his planned visit to Moscow to hold an emergency cabinet meeting. He said certain elements had been “trying to test our resolve and the fortitude of our people. They will learn that the government, the IDF [Israel Defence Force] and the Israeli public have an iron will to defend the state and its citizens”.

Threatening retaliatory action, he added, “We will act vigorously, responsibly and prudently in order to maintain the quiet and the security that have prevailed here over the past two years”.

Ehud Barak, the defence minister, likewise indicated that Israel would attack Hamas in Gaza. He issued a statement, saying, “We will not tolerate attacks on Israeli civilians, neither in the southern communities nor in Jerusalem”.

In reality the bomb is providing no more than a pretext for escalating Israeli action against Gaza that was already underway. Even before the bombing, Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom said in a radio interview that “we may have to consider a return” to a second

Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. He added, “I say this despite the fact that I know such a thing would, of course, bring the region to a far more combustible situation”.

The next day, Israeli warplanes mounted airstrikes on the tunnels used to evade Israel’s economic blockade along the border of Gaza and Egypt, and hit a power transformer, causing blackouts in the area. Gaza militants launched rockets into Ashdod and Sderot, but there were no reports of injuries.

The bomb came after Israeli raids on Gaza. Last week, an Israeli airstrike killed two Hamas members following sporadic rocket firing from Gaza, provoking a 15-minute firing of rockets by Hamas onto Israel’s southern cities on Saturday. This was the first time that Hamas had claimed responsibility for an attack on Israel and broken the relative calm of the last two years since an informal ceasefire following Israel’s murderous assault on Gaza in 2008-09.

Israel launched eight airstrikes on Monday, injuring at least five people, including a woman and two children. On Tuesday and Wednesday, further attacks killed three Palestinian youths playing football, including a 10-year-old boy, and a 60-year-old man, all from one family, and injured 10 people, in response to the firing of rockets from Gaza on Israel’s southern cities. Later the same day, an air strike killed four militants from Islamic Jihad in a car in Gaza, Israel claimed were preparing to launch rockets, bringing the total killed to eight.

Tensions between Israel and the Palestinians have risen in recent weeks, with Israel’s scornful repudiation of peace negotiations. Israel has announced that further settlement construction will go ahead in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. This has gone alongside numerous demolitions, evictions and arrests, while frequent violent settler attacks on Palestinians and their farms have gone unpunished. This sparked a revenge killing earlier this

month, when an Israeli settler family was knifed in their beds.

In Gaza, the Palestinians have become increasingly restive against the Hamas government. Like its Fatah counterpart in the West Bank, it rules by decree backed up by its thuggish security forces in the interests of the tiny and extremely wealthy elite. It brooks no opposition to its own brand of militant Islam, imposes censorship and imprisons journalists.

In the last two months, both governments suppressed and banned demonstrations in support of the revolutionary movements in Egypt and Tunisia. For the PA, Cairo, along with Tel Aviv and Washington, has been its most consistent backer. Both the PA and Hamas are equally fearful of the spread of revolutionary contagion.

While in February, Abbas announced elections to forestall the spread of the mass movements that have toppled Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak, Hamas refused to take part. It won the parliamentary elections in January 2006, and in June 2007 launched a pre-emptive coup against Abbas's party, Fatah, which had under Washington's tutelage been planning its overthrow. Like Fatah, it has repeatedly opposed fresh elections.

In the last two weeks there have been demonstrations in both the West Bank and Gaza, with young Palestinians calling for "revolution till we end the division [between Fatah and Hamas]" and elections in both parts of Palestine.

After initially sending out his police forces to beat up demonstrators, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas allowed them to set up tents in the main cities in the West Bank. When more than 100,000 people went out onto the streets throughout the Gaza Strip, Hamas responded by sponsoring its own counter demonstration and attacking and beating up those calling for unity. At least one student was killed and 20 were injured.

In the next few days, it unleashed its thugs and undercover agents, attacking anti-Hamas demonstrators and journalists, arresting hundreds, many of whom were abused or tortured. The Hamas regime appears divided, with Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh warning against a violent response by security forces while Hamas military commanders are seeking to forcibly close down the demonstrations.

The *Economist* suggested that Hamas' resort to firing rockets on Saturday is an attempt "to deflect attention from its own woes" and remind Gazans "who their real enemy was". Protestors have called off their

demonstrations for the time being and Haniyeh has invited Abbas to Gaza.

Another of Israel's provocative operations was the seizure of the container ship Victoria in international waters. The German-owned and French operated Victoria was bound for Alexandria from Turkey and the Syrian port of Latakia, where the two Iranian frigates had recently docked after their passage through the Suez Canal. Israel claimed the Victoria was carrying weapons to Gaza from Iran.

Israel's increasingly provocative stance against Hamas—which is backed by Iran—Hezbollah, Syria and Iran has to be seen in the context of its increasing regional and international isolation. The overthrow of its chief regional ally, Hosni Mubarak, raised fears that it could no longer rely on Cairo to contain Hamas, even though the new regime promised to honour all treaties, while unrest is also growing against Jordan's King Abdullah.

In this last week, Israel's press carried a brief report that its armed forces were preparing for the possibility that Syria might create a provocation along the northern border to divert attention from the growing unrest against the Assad regime. In reality, the boot is on the other foot: it is Israel that has been making military preparations for an intervention should it believe its interests to be in danger.

In January, Hezbollah, another Iranian ally, ousted the pro-Washington government of Saad Hariri, sparking bellicose warnings and threats from Israel, who said that it would not tolerate the new government. Silvan Shalom, Israel's vice prime minister, said that that it was, in effect, "an Iranian government on Israel's northern border".

Israel's bellicosity is also determined by domestic considerations, with a restive population who face rising prices, poverty and social inequality. For Israel, warmongering is a tried and tested policy of divide and rule to forestall a political challenge from the working class.



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