Israel steps up aggression against Gaza

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For more than a week, Israel mounted frequent aerial attacks on Gaza's defenceless population, killing at least 25 and wounding dozens more.

Most of the casualties were civilians, and many of those injured were children. The dead included senior leaders from Hamas's military wing and four militants from the Islamic Jihad group, killed in targeted assassinations.

The incessant aerial strikes through last weekend, which Israel said were aimed at militants, Hamas training camps, smuggling tunnels and weapons workshops, caused widespread destruction. They were the worst since Israel's assault on Gaza in 2008-2009. Since January 2009, there has been an informal ceasefire, and rocket attacks from Gazan militants had all but stopped.

Tensions started to escalate in March, however, due to Israel's repudiation of peace negotiations and resumption of settlement construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Violent settler attacks on Palestinians sparked the revenge killing of an Israeli settler family, with Israel launching retaliatory air strikes that killed two Hamas members. Hamas admitted responsibility for 15 minutes of rocket fire from Gaza, its first break of its informal two-year ceasefire. A bus bomb in Jerusalem that killed one was met with numerous air strikes that month.

The Qassem rockets and mortars fired into Israel have had little impact, landing for the most part in empty fields. Last week, a number of rockets were intercepted and blown to pieces mid-air by Israel's Iron Dome rocket interceptors, the first time they have been brought into use. Since mid-March, Israel has launched a number of deadly attacks and fought gun battles on the border, killing at least 10 people.

Israel's provocations prompted further rockets from Gaza, one of which hit an Israeli school bus that wounded the driver and a 16-year-old boy. This was a reprisal for Israel's attacks that killed three Hamas military leaders on April 1, which Hamas said violated an earlier ceasefire. Sami Abu Zuhri, a Hamas spokesman, said that the people who fired the missile were unaware that the target was a school bus.

Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu said the bus attack had "crossed the line…. Whoever tries to hurt and murder children, his blood will be on his own head."

He authorised a wide air, artillery and tank assault on targets in Gaza.

The resulting carnage was so great that on Saturday, Hamas, which rules Gaza, declared a state of emergency. On Sunday, Hamas took the unprecedented step of broadcasting in Hebrew to the Israeli public to call for an end to the violence. Ghazi Hamad, the deputy foreign minister, said in an interview on *Israel Radio*, "We are interested in calm but want the Israeli military to stop its operations".

Ismail Haniyeh, Gaza's prime minister, also contacted Robert Serry, the United Nation's special envoy for the Middle East, Egyptian intelligence officials, and two European countries in an effort to pressure Israel to stop attacking Gaza.

On Sunday, the Arab League condemned the attacks and called for a UN Security Council meeting to discuss the crisis and impose a no-fly zone over Gaza. The UN and European Union have made a pro-forma call on both sides to cease the attacks.

Israel initially dismissed these appeals. Speaking at the start of a weekly cabinet meeting, Netanyahu said that Israel would respond even more ferociously if cross-border attacks continued. "Our policy is clear, if the attacks continue on Israel's citizens and soldiers, the response will be much harsher."

A ministerial committee authorised the army "to continue to act against those responsible for terrorism." Ehud Barak, the defence minister, cancelled a planned visit to Washington.

While Israel continued its attacks, by Monday it appeared to have pulled back from a major escalation, after Serry arranged a ceasefire. Netanyahu said, "We intend to restore the quiet," but threatened, "If Hamas intensifies its attacks...our response will be much more severe."

Israel's cabinet is bitterly divided even in the face of such a temporary cessation of hostilities. Avigdor Lieberman, the foreign minister and leader of the far-right party Israel Beiteinu, on which Netanyahu's shaky coalition depends, opposed a ceasefire. He called instead for Israel to topple the Hamas government. Lieberman told *Israel Radio* that a ceasefire would contradict Israel's national interests since Hamas would use it to smuggle more weapons into Gaza. Vice Prime Minister Silvan Shalom of Likud likewise said in an *Army Radio* interview that he wanted to expand the military operation in Gaza.

These elements believe that Israel has carte blanche to do whatever it likes against Gaza thanks to US backing, particularly after Judge Richard Goldstone, who chaired a UN Human Rights Council inquiry into Operation Cast Lead, repudiated the findings of his own report. Goldstone wrote an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post*, absolving Israel of criminal intent and instead castigated Hamas for intentionally targeting a civilian population with its rockets on Israel.

Israel's provocations against Gaza follow bellicose warnings against Iran, which it accuses of arming Israel's enemies, Hamas and Hezbollah in Lebanon, after Tehran sent two frigates through the Suez Canal to the Syrian port of Latakia last month.

Later, Israel seized a German-owned ship in international waters bound for Alexandria from Turkey and the Syrian port of Latakia, where the two Iranian frigates had recently docked. Israel claimed The Victoria was carrying weapons to Gaza from Iran.

On April 5, a missile attack on a car by an Apache helicopter near Port Sudan's airport in Sudan killed two people. Initial reports suggested that the two men were arms dealers. It was similar to another attack on a convoy of suspected arms smuggled through Sudan in 2009 that killed scores of people and which was widely believed to have been carried out by Israel.

The Sudanese authorities have now identified the remnants of the rockets as having come from Israel. Sudan said that the helicopter had come in from the Red Sea, scrambled Sudan's radar systems and followed Port Sudan airport flight paths. Sudan says that one of the two killed was a Sudanese citizen who had no links to Islamists or the government, and it was not clear why his car was targeted.

An Israeli military official told *Time* magazine that Israel was behind the attack, commenting, "It's not our first time there", implying that it had carried out the 2009 attack. Israel has long held that Sudan is an important route for smuggling arms from Iran into Egypt and ultimately Gaza, via tunnels under the border. Khartoum for its part has accused Tel Aviv of trying to scupper Sudan's bid to get the US to remove it from its list of terrorist sponsors and normalise its relations with Washington.