

Israel expands deadly air strikes on Gaza

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Israel on Monday carried out air strikes on Gaza for the fourth successive day, bringing the Palestinian death toll to at least 22. More than 26 have been wounded, including several youths, since the attacks began last Friday.

The cross-border violence has seen the heaviest exchange of fire since Israel's assault on Gaza in the winter of 2008-09.

The latest fighting started Friday when Israeli drones hit a car in Gaza city carrying Zohair al-Qaisi, secretary general of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), and Mahmoud al-Hannani, his military escort. The air strike followed the firing of a few rockets by Gazan militants into southern Israel that caused neither injury nor damage.

The Israeli military authorities justified their assassination of Qaisi and Hannani with the claim that Qaisi "was among the leaders who planned, funded and directed" the three cross-border attacks into Eilat from Egypt's Sinai that killed eight Israelis and wounded 25 soldiers last August. The PRC has always denied any involvement in the attacks.

Qaisi became the PRC leader after Israel killed his predecessor and five other PRC members in an aerial attack on Gaza following the Sinai incident in August.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) also claimed that the two men were "planning a combined terror attack that was to take place via Sinai in the coming days." Defence Minister Ehud Barak said, "the Israeli army will hit anyone planning to attack Israeli citizens."

Israel's targeted killings prompted militants, including the PRC and Islamic Jihad, to renounce the fragile ceasefire that Hamas, the political party that rules Gaza, has maintained with Israel. They fired more than a hundred rockets. While most fell on open areas, a few reached Israel's southern towns and cities over the weekend, including Beersheba, injuring four Israelis.

Israeli aircraft then attacked what it said were training camps, weapons manufacturing plants and rocket launching sites across the Gaza Strip. Among those killed were five members of the al-Quds Brigades, the military wing of Islamic Jihad.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that air strikes would continue indefinitely, saying, "We have a clear policy: we will hit anyone who plans to harm us, who prepares to harm us, or who harms us."

Indicating a major escalation, the chief Israeli military spokesman, Brigadier General Yoav Mordechai, told Army Radio said that Israel was prepared for a ground offensive if necessary, and that Benny Gantz, the IDF chief of staff, had postponed his trip to Washington this week because of the fighting.

Washington came down firmly in support of Israel, ignoring the one-sided nature of the attacks. US State Department spokesperson Victoria Nuland said that the Obama administration condemned "in the strongest terms" the rockets fired from Gaza.

The UN and the European Union issued no condemnation of Israel, simply expressing concern and appealing for calm. The Arab League called the Israeli air strikes "a massacre," but did nothing.

There is no question that the Israeli attacks were planned in advance and were designed to provoke Palestinian militants to retaliate, in part to test the effectiveness of the recently deployed Iron Dome system designed to provide a shield against rocket fire. With three batteries positioned in the cities of Ashdod, Ashkelon and Beersheba—although not in the slum town of S'derot, which has borne the brunt of the rocket attacks—all the rockets fired into major towns and cities were intercepted successfully.

Israel's attacks on the PRC and Islamic Jihad in Gaza follow Hamas' abandonment of its more militant posture toward Israel and its willingness to form a national unity government with Mahmoud Abbas'

Fatah faction, endorse the Western-backed opposition movement in Syria, and abandon its patrons in Damascus and Tehran in favour of the monarchies in Riyadh and Qatar.

Under conditions where Hamas faces rising discontent within Gaza, it sees realignment with the US and its Arab allies as a better means of securing its interests against the threat of a revolt by the Palestinian masses. But for Hamas to become acceptable to Washington and Tel Aviv, it will at the very least have to recognise Israel's "right to exist" and crack down on the PRC and Islamic Jihad, in the same way that Abbas cracked down on Palestinian militants, including Hamas, on Israel's behalf. If not, Gaza faces further military assaults by Israel.

A significant political factor in Netanyahu's belligerency is Washington's unwillingness to sanction an Israeli attack on Iran at this point. President Barack Obama, who won the presidency in large measure due to his supposed opposition to George W. Bush's militarism, is mindful, in an election year, of the unpopularity of further wars among the American people.

At a White House press conference last Tuesday at the end of Netanyahu's visit to Washington, Obama warned that any "premature" action by Israel would have "consequences" for the US as well, and that a "careful, thoughtful, sober approach" was needed, even though the military option remained "on the table." Likewise, while he sought regime-change in Damascus, he ruled out unilateral US intervention against Syria.

According to a report in Britain's *Sunday Times*, Obama insisted that any attack on Iran be postponed until after the US elections in November, possibly until next spring. While Netanyahu agreed to delay a strike, he wanted to know until when. The newspaper's Washington source added that the president "might visit in the summer to reassure the Israelis that the US commitment to defend Israel is unshakable, and thus thwart a possible autumn attack."

Aside from Obama's narrow electoral calculations, other officials, both civilian and military, have made clear their concerns over an Israeli military strike. Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Michael Mullen, Defence Secretary Leon Panetta, and, more recently, the current Joint Chiefs chairman, Gen. Martin Dempsey, have all warned that such an attack

would be "destabilizing" and unlikely to achieve Israel's "long-term objectives."

An attack on Iran's nuclear sites is no more popular among the Israeli people. Recent polls have shown only 19 percent are in favour of Israel acting without Washington's backing. Only 42 percent are in favour, even with Washington's support.

Held back by Washington with regard to Iran, there is a growing danger that Netanyahu's right-wing coalition, wracked with divisions and corruption scandals and facing increasing social discontent on the domestic front, will launch a provocation against the Palestinian people. Israel's ruling elite has long used war as a means of dealing with internal dissent.

Last summer saw the largest-ever demonstrations calling for an end to social inequality, a demand that the government has done little to address. The Histadrut labour federation has been forced to call a number of strikes in an attempt to stifle the growing militancy in the working class.

A recent report by the International Monetary Fund noted that Israeli wages had stagnated for more than a decade when inflation is taken into account. The IMF report said poverty was more prevalent in Israel than in other members of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), which Israel joined in September 2010.



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