

Israel threatens Iran, continues air strikes against Gaza

Jean Shaoul
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Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has insisted that Israel would take action against Iran even if Washington objected.

Speaking to the Knesset last Wednesday, Netanyahu said that a key aim of his talks with US President Barack Obama had been to have Israel's right to launch a military operation against Iran if it sees fit, acknowledged.

"This position was positively received in the United States, I would even say in the most profound way," he said. "I believe that the first goal I set, to strengthen the recognition of Israel's right to defend itself, I think that goal was achieved."

"Israel has never left its fate in the hands of others, not even in the hands of our best friends," he added.

He linked Iran to the ongoing attacks on Gaza by the Israel Defence Forces, claiming that the rocket attacks on Israel were carried out at the instigation of Iran. Netanyahu equated Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon with Iran. Israel would not allow Iran to use Gaza as a terrorist base, he said. Iran bore primary responsibility for the rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip: "Gaza is Iran."

Netanyahu threatened further attacks on Gaza, The previous day, he had warned that a truce negotiated by Egypt would be short-lived if rocket fire on Israel resumed. In reality, it is Israel that has continued air strikes against Gaza in defiance of the ceasefire agreed March 13 with Hamas, the ruling group in Gaza, and Islamic Jihad, attacking a funeral procession east of Gaza City and bombing militants' facilities in northern and southern Gaza.

Israel claimed that that its attacks on Gaza were in response to a mortar and six rockets that landed in southern Israel on Tuesday morning that were intercepted by Israel's missile defence shield and

injured no one. The authorities ramped up the tension and ordered the closure of schools on Thursday in Beersheba and other southern cities, after reopening them on Wednesday following a three day closure.

On Sunday, Israeli troops wounded a six-year-old Palestinian boy in the thigh when they opened fire east of the town of Rafah, in southern Gaza.

According to an Egyptian intelligence official, Cairo had brokered a "comprehensive and mutual" truce that included a pledge from Israel to "stop assassinations."

Egypt had also tried—unsuccessfully—to get the Palestinians to withdraw from Sinai, and stop using it as a base from which to attack Israel. Israel cannot target Palestinian bases on Egyptian territory without breaking the 1979 Camp David Accords.

Cairo reportedly promised to increase the supply of fuel and electricity to Gaza, which remains blockaded by Egypt despite the ouster of Hosni Mubarak more than a year ago, if Hamas reined in the militants.

The ceasefire was aimed at preventing Israel's most sustained attack on Gaza since Israel's 2008-09 assault from escalating into an all out war. The conflict started on March 9 when Israeli drones targeted Zuhair al-Qaisi, the leader of the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) and his military escort. Israel claimed that he had masterminded the attacks launched from Egypt's Sinai desert that killed eight civilians and was planning another terrorist attack.

The assassinations provoked Palestinian militants from the PRC and Islamic Jihad into firing a barrage of rockets onto Israel's southern towns that caused little damage and injured five people. Israeli citizens were never in serious danger as the newly installed Iron Dome batteries, supplied by Washington at a cost of \$200 million, successfully intercepted most of the

missiles aimed at major population centres.

Israel responded with helicopter gunships and aerial attacks that killed 25 Palestinians, including six civilians, some of them young boys, and injured 80 people, mainly civilians.

Few commentators in Israel or the region expect the deal to last. According to Israel, there was no signed document, guarantees or promises that it would stop assassinating Palestinian militants. Benny Gantz, the army Chief of Staff, said that the only commitment Israel gave was that “If the terrorists maintain the calm, we will do the same; if they fire, we will hit him. Everything depends on them.”

In a further indication of Israel’s aggressive intentions, the state petitioned the High Court of Justice to postpone evacuation of the largest outpost in the West Bank, Migron, until the end of 2015.

A petition by the State Prosecutor's Office states that a new settlement will be built two kilometers away. Settlers will continue to enjoy free housing on stolen Palestinian land, while the original illegal outpost remains intact. The operation, a precedent effectively nullifying international agreements to remove illegal settlements, will cost an estimated NIS 200 million (\$53.2 million), or NIS 4 million (\$1.06 million) per family, according to Peace Now.

Netanyahu’s warmongering follows Hamas’ abandonment of its more militant posture toward Israel and its open alignment with its original patrons, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the dominant political party. It has agreed to form a national unity government with Mahmoud Abbas’ Fatah faction, endorse the Western backed opposition movement in Syria and switch allegiance from its backers in Damascus and Tehran for the monarchies in Saudi Arabia and Qatar. It has abandoned its attacks on Israel and remained on the sidelines during the latest escalation in fighting.

While Egypt’s military junta, which controls foreign policy, initially made some cosmetic gestures towards easing the blockade on Gaza, it has essentially continued Mubarak’s policy of policing Gaza on Tel Aviv’s behalf. But this support for Israel has led to friction with the dominant political forces, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party and its Salafist allies in Egypt’s recently elected parliament. The Brotherhood has acceded to the Obama administration’s demands to rein in Hamas, the

Palestinian offshoot of the Islamist group, so as not to disrupt its relations with Washington, arousing the anger of the Egyptian people and fomenting further unrest.

Last week, in a largely symbolic gesture aimed at defusing popular anger, the Islamist-dominated parliament voted unanimously to expel Tel Aviv’s ambassador in Cairo, recall Egypt’s ambassador in Israel, halt gas exports to Israel and revise Egypt’s nuclear power policy in the light of Israel’s nuclear arsenal.



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