

Israel launches offensive against Gaza

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In its most intense attack on Gaza since the Operation Cast Lead invasion of 2008-2009, Israel carried out an intense bombardment of the Palestinian territory Wednesday, beginning with the assassination of a top Hamas leader.

Ahmed Jabari, the head of Hamas' military wing, was killed Wednesday afternoon together with another Hamas member in an Israeli missile strike on his car in Gaza City.

The assault, which has been dubbed "Pillar of Defense" by the Israeli military, continued into Wednesday night with dozens more air strikes on targets within the Gaza Strip. Israeli tanks also fired on the densely populated territory, and Israeli naval ships were reported to have shelled it from the sea.

"Big explosions were rocking Gaza, as the Israeli air force struck at selected targets just before sundown, blasting plumes of smoke and debris high above the crowded city," the Reuters news agency reported. "Panicking civilians ran for cover and the death toll mounted quickly."

By early evening, at least nine Palestinians were reported killed, including two little girls under the age of five, Gaza's health ministry reported. At least 64 more were wounded, and the toll from the bombardment was expected to grow.

Gaza's Minister of Health Dr. Mofed Al Makhalalaty held a press conference outside of the Al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City, calling for an international intervention to prevent another massacre in Gaza like the one conducted by Israel in 2008-2009. He warned that Gaza's chronic shortage of medicines and medical supplies was being exacerbated by the escalating casualties, and that if the attacks continued the hospital would not be able to cope with the casualties.

Top Israeli officials, meanwhile, issued open threats that the air strikes would continue and escalate, and that a ground invasion of Gaza was being prepared.

In advance of Wednesday's attacks, which clearly had been long in preparation, Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak warned, "If we are forced to enter Gaza once again to restore security for Israeli citizens, we will not hesitate to do so."

This threat was reiterated Wednesday by Israel's chief military spokesman Brig. Gen. Yoav Mordechai, who said, "There are preparations, and if we are required to, the option of an entry by ground is available." Additional Israeli infantry units have been deployed in the south and reserve units have been placed on stand-by for a possible ground operation.

Just days before the latest offensive, Home Front Defense Minister Avi Dichter, the former head of the Shin Bet, the intelligence agency responsible for Israel's so-called targeted assassinations, told the Israeli press, "We have no other choice; Israel must perform a reformatting of Gaza, and rearrange it, as we did in Judea and Samaria during Operation Defensive Shield."

His reference was to the savage 2002 Israeli invasion and re-occupation of nearly all of the major cities in the occupied West Bank, including Jenin, where a particularly brutal raid on a refugee camp left 52 Palestinians dead. The operation killed a total of 216 Palestinians and wounded another 416.

The attack included a protracted siege of the headquarters of Palestinian leader Yassir Arafat in Ramallah, that was broken only after a deal was reached under US pressure. Within a year, Arafat ceded the post of prime minister to Mahmoud Abbas, and died not long after under suspicious circumstances.

Dichter's statement clearly suggests an Israeli invasion of Gaza to forcibly topple Hamas and put in place a regime more fully compliant with Israeli interests.

Other statements have suggested that Israel may launch a full scale assassination campaign like the one

it conducted in 2004, when it killed a number of Hamas leaders, as well as dozens of Palestinian civilians, in air strikes against Gaza. This was suggested on Twitter by the Israeli Defense Forces, which warned, “We recommend that no Hamas operatives, whether low level or senior leaders, show their faces above ground in the days ahead.”

There is no doubt a strong political component to the renewed Israeli aggression, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu facing an election in January. The Israeli government has a long tradition of ratcheting up military confrontations and invoking security as a means of diverting public attention from social deterioration and corruption scandals within Israel itself.

Israel launched the latest offensive despite a truce that had been brokered by Egypt, largely ending an escalating confrontation that began last Saturday when Palestinian militants fired an anti-tank missile at an Israeli jeep, wounding four soldiers. The attack came after repeated incursions by Israeli tanks and bulldozers past the fence that walls Gaza’s population into what is effectively the world’s largest open-air prison, holding some 1.7 million Palestinians.

Israel retaliated with sustained and deadly air strikes on civilian neighborhoods inside Gaza. Palestinians in turn fired largely ineffective rockets into southern Israel. Between November 8 and November 13, at least six Palestinians were killed by the Israeli strikes, including three children, while another 52 were wounded, among them 12 children and six women, according to the Palestinian Center for Human Rights.

Before this latest round of violence, a total of 71 Palestinians had been killed by Israeli attacks in Gaza this year, as of November 6, and another 291 wounded. During the same period, attacks from Gaza on Israel claimed no lives, while injuring 19 Israelis.

In the last major Israeli ground assault on Gaza, Operation Cast Lead in 2008-2009, at least 1,400 Palestinians were killed, roughly half of them civilians. A total of 13 Israelis died in the operation, all but three of them soldiers.

The latest Israeli assault on Gaza—like Operation Cast Lead before it—has been carried out with the full support of Washington. Israel’s President Shimon Peres revealed that he had informed President Barack Obama of the attack in a telephone conversation just a

half hour after the assassination of Jabari, whom he described as a “mass murderer.” He used the same call to congratulate the US president on his re-election.

Meanwhile, the US State Department came down squarely in support of Israeli aggression, placing the entire blame for the escalating loss of Palestinian life on Hamas.

“There is no justification for the violence that Hamas and other terrorist organizations are employing against the people of Israel,” said State Department spokesman Mark Toner. “We call on those responsible to stop these cowardly acts immediately. We support Israel’s right to defend itself, and we encourage Israel to continue to take every effort to avoid civilian casualties.”



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