

Israel masses troops on Gaza border as bombardment intensifies

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Israeli warplanes carried out hundreds of air strikes against the densely populated Gaza Strip Thursday as Israel mobilized troops on the Palestinian territory's border.

Shortly before 10 p.m. Israeli time, a spokesman for the Israeli Defense Forces announced that its planes had hit 70 targets in Gaza in the space of just the previous hour. Towering plumes of black smoke hung over Gaza City and other areas of the 25-mile long territory in which 1.7 million Palestinians are held captive between the borders of Israel to the south and east, Egypt to the west and the Mediterranean Sea.

Residents of Gaza City reported huge explosions causing the largest buildings there to shake and leaving children and families crying in fear. In addition to the aerial bombardment, Gaza has been shelled by Israeli gunboats off its shores and tanks lined up on its borders. Buildings struck by Israeli missiles and bombs were reduced to smoking craters, with neighboring houses severely damaged.

On Thursday night, the official death toll in Gaza was raised to 19. Gaza's health ministry reported that three people, including two boys, ages 14 and 16, were killed in the bombing of a house in the northern Gazan village of Beit Hanoun. Six others, including three children, were injured in the attack.

Earlier on Thursday, it was reported that Hanin Tafish, a ten-month-old baby who had been severely injured in the bombardment that took place on Wednesday, had died from her wounds. Close to 200 Palestinians had been wounded by Thursday night. The vast majority of the casualties are civilians, including over a dozen young children.

Rockets fired by Palestinian resistance groups struck an apartment building in the southern Israeli town of Kiryat Malachi killing three Israelis Thursday.

Two other Palestinian missiles struck near Israel's commercial capital of Tel Aviv, some 50 miles to the north of Gaza. Both landed harmlessly, one in the sea and another in a barren field. It marked the first time that the city, whose metropolitan area has a population of over three million, had been targeted with missiles since the first Persian Gulf war

in 1991.

In a further escalation of the violence initiated Wednesday with Israel's "targeted killing" of a senior Hamas leader, an Israeli soldier and a Palestinian resistance fighter died Thursday in a shootout on the border of the Gaza Strip. The clash began after the Palestinian cut through the fence surrounding Gaza and went into southern Israel.

Israeli leaders ratcheted up the threats against Gaza on Thursday. Defense Minister Ehud Barak, in a televised statement, vowed that Israel would wreak vengeance on Gaza for the attempted missile strike on Tel Aviv. "This escalation will exact a price that the other side will have to pay," Barak warned. He added: "We're determined to return the situation [in the South] to its previous, quiet state, and will do that with whatever is demanded to accomplish that. This is just the beginning."

Similarly, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed that his government is "prepared to take whatever action is necessary to defend our people." Attempting to justify the terror that the Israeli forces are inflicting on the Palestinian population and the growing number of civilian casualties, Netanyahu hypocritically claimed that what is involved are "surgical strikes," and that those resisting Israeli occupation and aggression bear the blame because they "hide behind Palestinian civilians."

The threats that the offensive against Gaza is "just the beginning" and that the Israeli state is prepared to take "whatever action is necessary" raised the specter of a repeat of the ground invasion of Gaza carried out in December 2008-January 2009 that claimed the lives of over 1,400 Palestinians and left the impoverished territory's infrastructure in ruins.

Israeli infantry battalions have been mobilized on the border and convoys of trucks carrying tanks and armored vehicles have been seen making their way to the border. Barak announced that the IDF has been given the green light for calling up 30,000 reservists, and all military leaves have been cancelled. Thursday also saw an angry funeral for Ahmed Jaabari, the head of the military wing of Hamas, the

Islamist movement that rules in Gaza. The assassination of Jaabari and his bodyguard in a missile attack by an Israeli warplane on Wednesday was the act that initiated the escalating violence.

While Israeli officials have claimed that this state murder was justified by the need to protect Israel's population in the south against rocket attacks from Gaza, facts that have begun to emerge make clear that the killing was unprovoked and calculated to instigate a new round of violence.

The plan developed by Israel's secret service agency, Shin Bet, was adopted by Netanyahu's nine-member inner cabinet at a meeting held on Monday. As Reuters reports, when the assassination was ordered, the previous rocket attacks, provoked by Israeli military incursions into Gaza and shootings of civilians, "seemed to be abating."

After the decision was taken to kill Jaabari, "the first act of deception was played out: Benny Begin, a member of the forum, went on Israeli radio to say the current round of violence appeared to be over.

Hamas apparently bought the message."

This, however, appears to have been only the most visible part of the Israeli deception. At the time he was assassinated, Jaabari was engaged in back-door negotiations with the Israelis on a more permanent truce agreement, according to the individual who played the role of intermediary in these dealings.

Gershon Baskin, co-chair of the Israel Palestine Center for Research and Information, played a key role in negotiating the prisoner exchange that led to the release of the captured Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit. In an article written Thursday, he revealed that he had been playing a similar role in negotiating a long-term ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas when the assassination was carried out. Jaabari was the leading figure on the Hamas side of these indirect talks.

"Yesterday morning," Baskin wrote on Thursday, "hours before Israel assassinated Ahmed Jaabari, my counterpart in Hamas presented the draft [ceasefire agreement] to Jaabari and other Hamas leaders." Jaabari, he said, had been instructed to "check reactions to it in Gaza," presumably what he was doing when his car was struck by an Israeli missile Wednesday. "Jaabari is dead, and so is the chance for a mutually beneficial long-term ceasefire understanding," Baskin wrote.

Baskin and others have pointed to the crass political motivations for such a provocation. Facing an election in January, Netanyahu no doubt calculates that provoking a war on the Palestinians in Gaza serves as a useful distraction from growing social conflicts within Israel itself. In the immediate aftermath of Wednesday's attack, the so-called "opposition" parties in Israel have rallied around the government, suspending their campaigns.

There may be other more far-ranging calculations, however. Israel has been pressing Washington for many months for a military assault on Iran, using that country's nuclear program as a pretext. Tel Aviv has also made repeated threats of carrying out unilateral military action.

The assault on Gaza may well be a preparation for such an attack, designed, on the one hand, to neutralize the nearest potential military adversary, and, on the other, to test the reaction of governments in the region and internationally to another naked act of Israeli aggression.

So far, this test has shown that the Obama administration is unswerving in its unconditional support of Israeli crimes against the Palestinians. Asked about Washington's attitude to the threat of another Israeli ground invasion of Gaza, Obama's deputy national security adviser, Ben Rhodes, affirmed Israel's "right of self-defense" and stated, "ultimately, it's up to the Israeli government to make determinations about how they're going to carry out their military objectives."

As for the United Nations, the Security Council met briefly on the crisis in Gaza but took no action, and Washington can be counted on to use its veto to block any interference as Israel prepares another bloodbath.

Finally, there are the Arab states, particularly the new Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, which Israel has long depended upon to maintain its siege of Gaza. Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi has recalled Egypt's ambassador to Israel, but has not broken off relations with the Zionist state. He likewise called Obama, but it was reported that instead of convincing the US president to restrain Israel, Obama demanded that Morsi rein in Hamas.

Egypt has announced that it is sending a delegation headed by Prime Minister Hesham Kandil to Gaza on Friday, and Israel has guaranteed its safety. The visit is not expected to halt the Israeli offensive.



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