Israel calls up reserves, threatens to escalate attacks on Gaza

Barry Grey
8 July 2014

The Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has moved to sharply escalate its attacks on the densely populated Gaza Strip and the Islamist Hamas movement that politically controls the region.

Following Israeli air strikes Sunday night and early Monday that killed six Hamas militants and two members of a different Islamist group in Gaza, Palestinian forces there launched some 85 mortars and rockets on southern Israel.

It was the biggest single-day death toll for Hamas in two years, and in response the party took responsibility for firing mortars and rockets into Israel for the first time since open hostilities erupted nearly a month ago. A spokesman for the Health Ministry in Gaza said 15 people, including five children, were also wounded in the Israeli air strikes.

No Israelis were killed or wounded in the barrage of crude shells and rockets from Gaza.

Following a meeting of Netanyahu's security cabinet Monday, Lt. Col. Peter Lerner, a spokesman for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), said the army was deploying two infantry brigades along the border with Gaza. He further announced that the government had approved the call-up of 1,500 reservists, mainly Home Front Command and aerial defense units.

"If last week we were talking about calm being answered by calm," Colonel Lerner said, "we are now talking about preparing for an escalation."

The United States quickly sided with Israel in the deepening confrontation with the Palestinians. State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters Monday that Washington condemned the "deliberate targeting of civilians by terrorist organizations." She added, "We support Israel's right to defend itself against these attacks."

At the same time, it is believed that the Obama administration is urging Netanyahu to proceed with caution, amid immense tensions between Israel and Palestinians both in Gaza and the West Bank and within Israel itself. On Monday, protests continued by Palestinians in Arab towns within Israel, and demonstrators on the West Bank clashed with security forces of the US- and Israel-backed Palestinian Authority (PA).

The PA, which controls the West Bank and is politically dominated by the secular Al Fatah movement, is calling for calm. Hamas, for its part, called for a mass demonstration in the West Bank city of Hebron against the latest Israeli attacks.

The current round of fighting began after three Israeli teenagers were abducted near Hebron on June 12. Netanyahu immediately blamed Hamas for the youths' disappearance, without providing any evidence to back up the charge. Hamas denied responsibility.

The Israeli government, which was looking for a means of thwarting the formation of a unity administration of the PA and Hamas, launched a campaign of mass arrests of Hamas supporters on the West Bank. This prompted a renewal of mortar and rocket attacks from Gaza on southern Israeli towns and settlements, most of which were believed to have been carried out by Islamic Jihad, rather than Hamas.

On June 30, the bodies of the three Israeli youth were found, prompting national mourning in Israel. Several hundred ultraorthodox and ultranationalist Jews marched in Jerusalem last Tuesday chanting "Death to the Arabs" and attacking Palestinian passers-by. The following day, Muhammad Abu Khdeir, a 16-year-old Palestinian youth, was abducted and murdered by Israeli Jewish terrorists in East Jerusalem.

The revenge killing of the Palestinian teen set off a wave of protests by Palestinians in Jerusalem, on the

West Bank and in Arab districts within Israel. Over the weekend, Israeli authorities reported that the youth had been burned alive.

Six ultraright Israeli Jews, ages 16 to 25, were arrested Sunday. On Monday, Israeli officials said three of the six had confessed to the crime.

Last Friday, Israeli police savagely beat and arrested Tariq Abu Khdeir, the 15-year-old cousin of Muhammad, who is an American citizen and lives with his family in Tampa, Florida. He and his family were visiting relatives in Jerusalem when Muhammad was abducted and murdered.

A video showing the police pummeling the helpless teenager was widely circulated on the Internet, creating an embarrassment for both the Israeli and US governments.

The murder of Muhammad Abu Khdeir and brutal beating of his cousin have evoked shock, revulsion and sympathy within broad layers of the Israeli population. Racheli Fraenkel, the mother of 16-year-old Naftali Fraenkel, one of the murdered Israeli teenagers, issued a public call for compassion for the family of the slain Palestinian youth.

"It is difficult for me to describe how distressed we are by the outrage committed in Jerusalem—the shedding of innocent blood in defiance of all morality, of the Torah, of the foundation of the lives of our boys and of all of us in this country," she said.

Within sections of the Israeli ruling establishment, on the other hand, these developments have fueled demands for even more aggressive attacks on the Palestinian population. Netanyahu has come under fire from within his own coalition government for not responding with sufficient violence to the murder of the Israeli youths and the rocket attacks from Gaza.

On Monday, Netanyahu's foreign minister, Avigdor Lieberman of the ultranationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, called a press conference to announce he was ending his party's 20-month alliance with Netanyahu's Likud Party. Lieberman, who has been publicly calling for a ground attack on Gaza, cited his "fundamental" differences with Netanyahu over the response to Hamas as the main reason for his move. He did not, however, withdraw from the cabinet and pledged his continued support, at least for the present, for the government.

Typical of the views being put forward by factions within the Israeli state demanding war against Gaza are the statements made over the weekend by Maj. Gen. Amos Yadlin, former military intelligence chief and current director of the Institute for National Security Studies. He said Sunday, "If Hamas continues to shell our civilian population and to launch rockets, Israel should neutralize the threat through a broad military move."

He continued: "Such a move should integrate intelligence, firepower [especially aerial] and ground maneuvers to reach key points and strategic areas in the Gaza Strip."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact