

US talks ceasefire as Israel intensifies Gaza slaughter

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US Secretary of State John Kerry shuttled between Egypt, Israel and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority Wednesday promoting a ceasefire proposal that amounts to an unconditional surrender by Gaza's Palestinian population.

Amid reports that the Hamas leadership had rejected such conditions, there were strong indications that the US diplomatic gambit represented little more than window dressing for a sharp escalation of the Israeli slaughter in Gaza.

The Israeli onslaught on the narrow, densely populated and impoverished Palestinian territory is now entering its seventeenth day, with the ground invasion beginning its second week. The death toll in Gaza rose toward 700 Wednesday night, with more than 4,500 wounded.

The United Nations reported Wednesday that fully three-quarters of those killed have been civilians, and that over the previous two days one child had been killed in Gaza every hour. With many believed to be buried beneath the rubble in neighborhoods razed by Israeli fire, the casualty figures are certain to rise.

This may well be only the beginning, however. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's security cabinet met Wednesday night to discuss both the ceasefire maneuvers and the next phase of the Israeli military onslaught.

In advance of the security cabinet meeting, one of its members, Finance Minister Yair Lapid, told Israel's Channel 2 television that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would have to "achieve its objectives" before the Netanyahu government would enter into any ceasefire. He added that, in addition to destroying tunnels used by the Palestinian resistance and eliminating its ability to fire rockets at Israel, the IDF would carry out a campaign to wipe out the Hamas political and military leadership. "We see them as legitimate targets," he said, laying out the rationale for a program of mass assassinations.

An indication of what is being prepared was provided by the web site Debkafile, which has close ties to Israeli military and intelligence circles. IDF commanders,

according to its report, had said on Wednesday that "the time had come for a decisive war move." This would take the form of "a large-scale assault on the bunker complex housing Hamas' top military command and infrastructure." Tank units, the commanders reportedly added, "could undertake the opening moves for the next, critical stage of the Israeli operation at no more than hours' notice."

Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, speaking to troops of the Golani Brigade on the Gaza border, gave the same basic message, telling the soldiers they needed "to be ready for more important steps in Gaza and the units that are now on standby need to prepare to go in."

Such an offensive would bring Israeli tanks and troops into the center of Gaza City, where many tens of thousands of civilians have fled to escape intense shelling, bombing and missile strikes in the south, east and north of the Gaza Strip.

With thousands more forced to flee their homes every day, there is no place for civilians to go to save their lives. The IDF has already declared a three kilometer buffer zone on the Israeli border a "no go" area, effectively turning 44 percent of Gaza into a free-fire zone.

Schools and hospitals, where many of the more than 140,000 displaced Palestinians have sought refuge, have been subjected to bombardment. An Israeli air strike leveled the Wafa hospital in the east of Gaza City Wednesday after some 97 patients and staff were forced to flee the facility. Palestinian health officials said that more than 25 medical facilities have been struck.

Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal delivered a televised speech in Doha Wednesday night declaring the movement's readiness to enter into a "humanitarian ceasefire," but rejecting the unconditional surrender terms dictated by Israel, the US and the Egyptian regime of military strongman Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi and accepted by the subservient Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas.

The Turkish government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdo?an, which had earlier sought to broker an alternative to the US-Israeli-Egyptian ceasefire proposal, reportedly attempted on Wednesday to pressure Hamas to accept the

deal, claiming the Palestinians' demands could be negotiated later.

The Palestinian ambassador to Turkey, Nabil Maarouf, told the *Hürriyet Daily News* Wednesday: "All the groups in Gaza refused, because they want to guarantee something before the ceasefire. They want the Rafah border [with Egypt] to be opened, the release of prisoners from the Gilat Shalit deal who were arrested again by the Israelis, free access to the port, and they want to build an airport [in Gaza] so that people can go and come without complications at the borders. The main aim of these is guaranteeing a new life to the Palestinians in Gaza."

"There is no real breakthrough and many are still insisting on a ceasefire that would be later followed by negotiations," said the Hamas leader Mashaal. He added, "We cannot accept any proposal that does not include the lifting of the siege on Gazans," referring to the land, air and sea blockade of Gaza maintained by both the Israeli and Egyptian regimes for the last seven years, condemning the population to intense poverty and more than 50 percent unemployment in what amounts to the largest open-air prison in the world.

Mashaal also rejected the demands made by Israel, Washington and the European Union that any negotiations following a ceasefire be directed at the complete disarmament of the Gaza Strip, leaving it completely defenseless in the face of the Israeli military machine. "No one can disarm the resistance," he said in the speech.

The United Nations provided an understatement of the obvious on Wednesday, with Navi Pillay, the UN's top human rights official, declaring in relation to Israel's actions, "There seems to be a strong possibility that international law has been violated in a manner that could amount to war crimes."

This assessment was delivered to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, which subsequently passed a resolution calling for an independent investigation into Israel's actions. Representatives of 29 countries voted for the investigation, while 17, including a number of EU states, abstained. The sole "no" vote was cast by the United States, which finances the Israeli war machine and is deeply implicated in its crimes.

Israeli officials reacted with a mixture of rage and contempt for the UN vote. Justice Minister Tzipi Livni posted a response on her Facebook page: "Get lost." She described the deaths of civilians as "regrettable," but put them down to Hamas telling people to stay in their homes after Israel had demanded that they evacuate them. "That is what happens," she said.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's office issued a statement condemning the proposed investigation as a "travesty" and repeating the standard Israeli alibi that the slaughter of

civilians in Gaza is all a matter of Hamas using them as "human shields."

It dismissed the proposed investigation by comparing it to the Goldstone report issued following an investigation into Israel's 2009 Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, which killed over 1,400 Palestinians. That report described the war as "a deliberately disproportionate attack designed to punish, humiliate and terrorize a civilian population, radically diminish its local economic capacity both to work and to provide for itself, and to force upon it an ever-increasing sense of dependency and vulnerability."

Following a relentless Israeli pressure campaign, the head of the investigation, the former South African judge Richard Goldstone, issued a cringing retraction, while the other three members of the fact-finding mission defended its conclusions.

Despite the vituperative bluster from Tel Aviv, the Netanyahu government has clearly been shaken by the results of Operation Protective Edge, as it has dubbed its blitzkrieg against Gaza. The Palestinian resistance has been more intense than anticipated, claiming the lives of at least 32 Israeli soldiers—more than triple the Israeli casualties suffered in Operation Cast Lead.

And Palestinian rocket fire, which included a hit within close proximity of the runways of Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport, has led the US Federal Aviation Administration to impose what has now become a 48-hour moratorium on US flights to Israel. A number of European airlines have followed suit.

The decision, clearly influenced by the downing of the Malaysian Airlines passenger jet flying over a war zone in Ukraine, was bitterly denounced by the Israeli regime. Israel's transport minister, Yisrael Katz, accused the FAA of having "given a prize to terror."

The web site Debkafile, however, cited military sources as saying the rocket strike had "exposed a hidden side of the war on Israel." It was a further indication that despite the denunciations of the Palestinian rocket attacks as indiscriminate, "Most of the nearly 2,000 rockets fired over the last 16 days did not miss Israel's urban centers by chance." Instead, it said, "Hamas was focusing on strategic targets, such as Israeli Air Force bases ..."



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