

Netanyahu indicates Gaza ceasefire paves way for wider war

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Speaking on Israel's Channel 2, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered his most expansive explanation thus far for agreeing an "indefinite ceasefire" in Gaza.

Netanyahu has faced sustained criticism from within his Likud party and his coalition government for calling off military action short of his declared intention of obliterating Hamas and without consulting his security cabinet.

He has also incurred the hostility of those Israelis who felt revulsion at the brutality of the military operations whose cost they will bear in the form of higher taxes and cuts in public services. On Sunday, Netanyahu announced plans to slash government spending by 2 percent in order to finance the \$2.5 billion Gaza assault. Education funding will be hardest hit.

Opposed by both sides of the political spectrum, the prime minister has seen his support in the opinion polls fall from 63 to 38 percent in just a few weeks.

Netanyahu's remarks, formulated as a response to his right-wing critics, were a tacit admission that Israel is preparing to take its place in wider US-led war plans nominally targeting the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

In bellicose language Netanyahu said of Gaza, "I never removed the goal of toppling Hamas, and I am not doing that now... I cannot rule out the occupation of Gaza. I don't know if we will get to that. I thought the best thing is to crush them."

Cabinet members—Foreign Minister Avigdor Liberman, Economy Minister Naftali Bennett, Public Security Minister Yitzhak Aharonovitch and Communications Minister Gilad Erdan—would have been secretly pleased that they did not have to vote on the issue, he added.

Turning to the regional situation, Netanyahu identified the scope of his military ambitions, declaring, "I am preparing for a reality in the Middle East that is very problematic."

"I look around and see al-Qaida on the fence, ISIS moving toward Jordan and already in Lebanon, with Hezbollah there already, supported by Iran," he elaborated.

He identified the possibility of new diplomatic and military alliances emerging. There were, he said, "not a small number of states who see the threats around us, as threats to them as well and as a result do not see Israel as an enemy, but as a potential partner."

Netanyahu did not specify which states he was referring to, but events leading up to his about-face indicate that he acted under order from Washington and after receiving supportive assurances from Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. Indeed his comments came after US Secretary of State John Kerry, in a piece for the *New York Times*, called for a "global coalition" against Islamic extremists who are "perilously close to Israel."

The Obama administration's preparations for a wider war in Iraq and Syria to protect its geo-strategic interests in the energy-rich region and contain and isolate Iran, Russia and China requires precisely such a diplomatic cover in the form of a new "coalition of the willing."

For this reason, the US, which had initially backed the war, determined the 50-day war in Gaza had become a destabilising factor, having provoked a growing protest movement against Israeli brutality that made it impossible for the US to clothe its regional ambitions in the garb of humanitarianism.

Moreover, the Arab regimes could not be seen supporting a military campaign in Iraq and Syria at the

same time as they left the Palestinians to Israel's tender mercies.

Regionally, Israel's war on Gaza relied above all on Egypt's military dictator General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and his sponsors, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, who supported it in order to isolate and militarily weaken Hamas, which rules Gaza. Hamas is the Palestinian offshoot of Egypt's now banned Muslim Brotherhood, which is anathema to most of the Arab bourgeoisie and the Gulf monarchs—with the exception of Qatar—because as a rival capitalist party it challenges their commercial interests and political domination.

The war on Hamas was also seen as a means of isolating Iran, which, despite its recent falling out with Hamas, was obliged to make a show of support.

The Egyptian regime patrolled the Sinai border to prevent militant groups launching attacks alongside Hamas. It sealed the Rafah crossing to prevent Palestinians fleeing the Israeli military or seeking treatment in hospitals in Egypt or medical delegations and aid convoys reaching Gaza.

Above all, al-Sisi provided a crucial cover for Israel's air and ground assault by brokering a ceasefire proposal after discussion with Saudi Arabia, the Arab League and Washington that was initially rejected by Hamas. A key element of the proposal was the end of Hamas' rule in Gaza and return of the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA) to the territory after being expelled in 2007 following a coup by Hamas, the victor of elections in January 2006 in the West Bank and Gaza. Egypt insisted that it would not reopen the Rafah crossing until it was guarded by the PA, under the control of strongman Mohammed Dahlan, Israel's preferred successor to PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

While demonstrations in support of the Palestinians took place around the world, they were outlawed and suppressed in the Arab countries, including the West Bank, fueling the antipathy of the Arab masses towards their rulers. Such conditions would have made it impossible to mount a military campaign to protect US and Sunni Arab interests in Iraq against the encroachment of ISIS. Initially supported and trained by the CIA, Turkey, Jordan and Israel as a proxy force to overthrow Assad, ISIS has now captured whole swathes of Iraq and Syria, threatening Baghdad as well as the Jordanian monarchy, another US client regime.

As a result, Israel came under sustained pressure from the US, with the backing of the Arab regimes, to call a halt to the war. Saudi Arabia sent a team of ministers to Qatar to try and end its support for Hamas, while Jordan's King Abdullah brokered secret talks between Netanyahu and Abbas in Amman, their first meeting since September 2010.

Egypt again played a crucial role. Al-Sisi brokered a "peace deal" which is no different in its essentials from the July proposals, thereby sidelining Qatar and Turkey, the main sponsors of Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas' acceptance of the terms of the deal meant opposing Khaled Mershaal, its political bureau chief in Qatar, jeopardising Qatar's financial and diplomatic support. But, in the final analysis, Cairo was more important: Hamas' very existence depended upon the lifeline provided by Egypt—the Rafah crossing.

Talks are to begin in one month's time over the release of hundreds of Hamas prisoners rounded up in the West Bank following the killing of three Israeli settler youths in June, and the construction of a port and international airport in Gaza. But Netanyahu has demanded Gaza's demilitarisation and said he will not accede to the Palestinians' demands.

The US is to resume arms shipments to Israel, after the Obama administration had earlier called a halt to the delivery of new materiel to Israel without the explicit approval of the White House and State Department. This could be an occasion for the start of a massive increase in military aid for Israel from the US, in line with Netanyahu's call in his interview for increases in the defence budget. Indeed the Israel Defence Force needs a massive one-off sum of 9 billion NIS (\$2.5 billion) just to pay for the war, and an additional 11 billion NIS for its 2015 budget.



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