

Israel mounts savage air bombardment on Gaza

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Israel Defense Forces launched a massive aerial attack on 100 sites in Gaza in the early hours of Friday morning, injuring at least four people in the southern city of Rafah. Hours later, strikes were still pummeling the town of Khan Younis.

According to Palestinian witnesses, IDF planes bombed security facilities belonging to Hamas, the bourgeois Islamist group that has controlled the Gaza Strip since winning the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006, as well as 30 sites held by Islamic Jihad, causing significant damage.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the strikes in retaliation for two rockets that set off air raid sirens across Tel Aviv, Israel's most populous city. Israel's Iron Dome defence system intercepted one of the missiles, while another landed in open space, causing no damage or injuries.

Hamas denied any responsibility for the rockets launched against Tel Aviv. It pointed out that the attack took place at the very time when its negotiators were meeting with Egyptian mediators, supported by the United Nations and Qatar, to try to reach an accommodation with Israel to ameliorate the terrible conditions in Gaza due to the crippling 12-year-long blockade by Israel, imposed with the active support of Egypt and President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah-led Palestinian Authority.

Such is the determination for negotiations to succeed that Palestinians stopped the night-time protests that were part of the Great March of Return movement, as well as Friday protests at one of the five gathering points demonstrators have used since 30 March 2018.

Hamas reportedly made these concessions in response to Israeli demands, transmitted by Egypt, calling for the "stopping the coarse tools" used by Palestinians after Israel again halted Qatari aid to Gaza. The talks follow the breakdown of an earlier agreement brokered by Egypt in November, following Israel's raid on Gaza that triggered renewed fighting. Israel repeatedly broke the agreement, which allowed Qatari payments to Israel for fuel and power as well aid into Gaza.

Netanyahu explained at Monday's Likud faction meeting that it was better for Israel to serve as the conduit for aid rather than the PA. "Now that we are supervising, we know it's going to humanitarian causes," he said. Whoever "is against a Palestinian state should be for" transferring funds to Gaza because maintaining a separation between the PA in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza helps prevent the establishment of a Palestinian state.

A spokesperson for Gaza's interior ministry insisted the rocket fire went "against the national consensus" and promised to take action against the perpetrators.

Two other Palestinian groups, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Resistance Committees, likewise denied responsibility. Daoud Shihab of Islamic Jihad told the Palestinian news agency Quds Network, "These accusations are mere lies by the Israeli occupation. Our movement and its military wing the Al-Quds Brigades did not fire any rockets."

IDF spokesperson Brigadier-General Ronen Manelis admitted they did not know who had fired the rockets.

In the wake of the Israeli air raids, the Palestinians have called off their Friday protests along the Gaza-Israel fence entirely, the first time the marches have been stopped since they were launched nearly a year ago.

Netanyahu, for his part, is determined to prevent a large protest planned for 30 March. This date marks one year since the start of the demonstrations demanding the Palestinians' right of return to their homes from which they were driven out in 1948-49 and 1967 and the lifting of the illegal siege that has left much of Gaza without power, sanitation, clean water and basic commodities.

Israel's massive aerial assault on Gaza takes place in the run-up to elections on April 9, with Netanyahu, who has been indicted on multiple charges of corruption, fighting for his political life.

His strategy is based on an escalated far-right orientation, including the cultivation of neo-fascist forces both within Israel and internationally, that is shifting official Israeli politics to the right.

He has brokered a merger between the fascist Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power) party and the more established right-wing party of religious Zionists, Jewish Home. This is aimed at securing sufficient support from the ultra-nationalist and religious parties to form another Likud-led coalition under his leadership. In so doing, he has legitimized an organization that traces its roots to the long-outlawed Kach party of Meir Kahane, which the United States declared a terrorist organization.

Otzma Yehudit, like Jewish Home, encourages violence against Palestinians, calls for the expulsion of Arabs from Israel and the occupied territories, and advocates a ban on intermarriage or sex between Jews and Arabs. This fascistic outfit could, following its electoral alliance with Jewish Home, win seats in the Knesset and become part of the next government.

The two leaders that head the Otzma Yehudit list and could win parliamentary seats—Michael Ben Ari and Itamar Ben Gvir—are cofounders of a group implicated in a 2014 arson attack on a school for Jewish and Arab children in Jerusalem. Ben Ari was denied a visa to the US in 2012 as a member of a terrorist organization. Ben Gvir has acknowledged having a picture in his home of Baruch Goldstein, the Kahane supporter who murdered 29 Palestinians at a mosque in Hebron in 1994.

While Israel's Elections Committee has allowed these Jewish supremacists to run in the elections, it has barred the Arab nationalist Balad Party along with Dr Ofer Cassif, the sole Jewish candidate on the combined Arab list of Communist Hadash and Ta'al, headed by Ahmed Tibi. They have appealed to the High Court to overturn the decision.

At the same time, Netanyahu has forged alliances with far-right and neo-fascist forces and leaders around the world, including Viktor Orban of Hungary, Matteo Salvini of Italy, Sebastian Kurz of Austria, Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and, above all, Donald Trump in the US.

Accompanying this turn, Netanyahu is whipping up virulent nationalism against the Palestinians, Iran and its regional allies, Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon, prompting Israel's mainstream parties to compete over who is the most ardent defender of Israel's security.

Netanyahu's bourgeois political rivals competed with each other to demonstrate an even more bloodthirsty attitude toward the Palestinians. Education Minister Naftali Bennett of Hayamin Hehadash demanded that Netanyahu draw up plans for the assassination of Hamas leaders. "I call on Netanyahu to order that the IDF present the cabinet a plan to defeat Hamas."

Benny Gantz, the former general who heads the Kahol Lavan party demanded that the Israeli military take

"significant and harsh" measures to "renew its deterrence."

Similar statements were issued by other leading Israeli politicians. While competing with Netanyahu, all of them like him, aim to deflect social tensions within Israel outwards.

Israel is among the most economically unequal advanced economies in the world and has the highest poverty rate of any country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). It has seen a growing wave of working class strikes and demonstrations, including a mass protest of thousands of people demanding an investigation into the fatal police shooting of Yehuda Biadga, a mentally unstable Ethiopian-Israeli.

Netanyahu has responded to the weekly Palestinian protests along the Gaza-Israel fence with the utmost brutality. The IDF has killed at least 267 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip since March 30 last year and injured 29,000 more. Many of them are disabled for life. The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry that investigated Israel's actions in Gaza during the protests stated that they "may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity." A further 60 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, while Israel has lost just two soldiers.

The authorities have continually escalated tensions around Al-Aqsa Mosque in East Jerusalem, the third holiest site in Islam, over the last month, sparking repeated protests and demonstrations. On Tuesday, Israeli police sealed off the entrances to Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, following an alleged firebombing of a police station on the site that in fact was caused by children playing with fireworks, leading to scuffles between Palestinian worshippers and the police, injuring at least 10 Palestinians and leading to several arrests.



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