

Dozens of Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes on Gaza

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At least 26 Palestinians had been killed by late Wednesday and 71 others wounded, including 30 children, as Israeli airstrikes against the crowded and impoverished coastal enclave of Gaza continued for a second day.

The violence began early Tuesday morning with the targeted assassination of Bhaa Abu al-Ata, a commander of the Palestinian group Islamic Jihad whose Gaza home was struck by a missile that also killed his wife and wounded two of his children.

A second airstrike, for which Israeli authorities declined to claim credit, struck the home of an Islamic Jihad leader in an area of Damascus, Syria that includes a number of foreign embassies and had previously been considered off-limits for such attacks. While the missile missed its intended target, it killed his son and several others.

The reckless Israeli aggression provoked the firing of hundreds of rockets from Gaza, virtually all of which were intercepted or caused little damage and no casualties.

The targeted assassination provoked popular outrage in Gaza, with thousands gathering for Abu al-Ata's funeral, an outpouring that far eclipsed the level of support for Islamic Jihad. Support for the firing of rockets into Israel has also grown with each Israeli airstrike and artillery barrage. According to media in Gaza, Israel carried out at least 50 airstrikes and 20 artillery attacks on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Among those slain by what the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are describing as "surgical" strikes were a 54-year-old farmer, Raffat Mohammad Ayyad, and his seven-year-old son Amir, who were returning from the fields by motorcycle when they stopped to greet his older son Islam, 24, in front of their home. All three were torn to pieces by an Israeli missile.

Bodies of slain Palestinians as well as the wounded have been rushed by ambulances and taxis to the Quds and Shifa hospitals, where crowds of relatives gathered, weeping and screaming, *Middle East Eye* reported.

Among the wounded was an eight-year-old girl in critical condition who had lost consciousness. Doctors said that they were treating patients suffering serious burns on much of their bodies as well as grievous wounds and compound fractures.

The clash is the most serious since last May, when Israeli airstrikes claimed the lives of 27 Palestinians, including two pregnant women and three infants. Another 154 were wounded. Four Israeli civilians also lost their lives as a result of rockets fired from Gaza, the first such casualties since the 2014 Israeli war against Gaza, which killed some 2,300 Palestinians and wounded over 10,000, while leaving much of the occupied territory's infrastructure in ruins. Israel suffered the deaths of 67 soldiers and five civilians in the conflict.

The continuous outbreaks of violence are the inevitable byproduct of the nearly 13-year-long Israeli siege of Gaza--a massive act of collective punishment, banned under international law--that has turned the enclave into an open-air prison for its two million inhabitants. Most are deprived of the most basic essentials of everyday life, including clean water, sanitation and electricity, while more than half the population is unemployed and the majority live in poverty. Conditions have only worsened after Washington cut off all US aid to the Palestinians through its funding of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA).

Whether the present conflict escalates into another full-blown war or subsides remains to be seen. There are reports that efforts are being made between Hamas,

the Islamist movement which rules Gaza, Egyptian military intelligence and Israel to broker some kind of cease-fire.

At the same time, the Hamas leadership is loath to be seen by the Gaza population as a stooge of Israel, fearing that it will fuel opposition among a population that has protested against internal austerity measures, while demonstrating its willingness to confront the deadly consequences of resisting Israeli repression.

Last Friday, in another weekly protest of the so-called Great March of Return, another 31 Palestinians were wounded by live ammunition and rubber bullets fired by Israeli soldiers at the fence separating Gaza from Israel. Since the protests—demanding the right of Palestinians to return to the homes from which they were driven in 1948-49 and 1967 and the lifting of the illegal Israeli siege of Gaza—began in March of last year, more than 310 Palestinians have been killed and 18,500 others wounded by Israeli forces. Many of the wounded have been left permanently disabled.

The latest attack on Gaza has become a significant factor in the protracted political crisis in Israel itself, where two elections in the space of five months have failed to produce a viable government.

At a Tuesday press conference announcing the targeted assassination of Abu al-Ata, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed the Islamic Jihad commander was a “ticking time bomb,” who was preparing to carry out attacks on Israel.

Many in Israel, however, questioned the political timing of the killing, even though Netanyahu, backed by his defense and intelligence chiefs, claimed that it been determined by “operational” considerations.

An earlier missile attack attributed to Abu al-Ata had driven Netanyahu from the stage at a campaign rally in the southern port city of Ashdod on the eve of the second round of elections in September. At the time, he had responded to the humiliating incident by proposing a military response and even the postponement of the vote.

Whether or not the latest strike was deliberately timed to suit Netanyahu’s political agenda, he has made the most of it as he desperately strives to hold onto his post in order to stave off prosecution on multiple corruption charges.

The violence in Gaza has served to block the formation of a minority government by Netanyahu’s

challenger, the Blue and White party of former Israel Defense Forces Chief of Staff Benny Gantz, with the tacit support of the Palestinian Arab Joint List. While Gantz—who touted his record of killing Palestinians in the Gaza wars of 2012 and 2014—has declared his support for the targeted assassination, calling for even more of the same, the leaders of the Joint List have denounced it.

Facing the prospect of a third general election in Israel in the space of barely six months, Netanyahu is seeking a grand coalition with Gantz’s Blue and White party that would allow him to remain, at least temporarily, as prime minister and thereby ward off state prosecutors.

The two parties have almost no political, economic or military differences of substance, with the internecine disputes of Israeli politics now focused mainly on Netanyahu’s sordid maneuvers to avoid prosecution.

The political exploitation of the Gaza conflict found expression in the order to close down schools for some one million Israeli students on Tuesday, along with the shutting down of businesses and mass transit in a wide area including Tel Aviv. It was the first time that such orders had been issued since the first Persian Gulf War in 1991.

This attempt to terrorize the population is designed to deflect the immense social tensions within Israeli society outward. Among the most economically unequal advanced economies in the world, Israel has the highest poverty rate for any country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Deteriorating conditions for the broad majority of the working population has given rise to a growing wave of working class strikes and protests.



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