

Israeli airstrikes massacre Palestinian children in Gaza

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For three days, Israel has bombarded the densely populated and impoverished coastal enclave of Gaza, targeting leaders of Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), civilians and their property in the worst flare-up since May 2021.

As of Sunday evening, Israel's "surgical" air strikes have killed at least 43 Palestinians, including Taysir al-Jabari and Khalid Mansour, senior PIJ military leaders in northern and southern Gaza. Fifteen children and four women have been killed since Friday. At least 300, more than half of them women and children, have been injured and at least 31 families made homeless. One Israeli civilian and two soldiers have been lightly wounded by shrapnel.

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF) said its aerial bombardment was a preemptive operation aimed at preventing rocket attacks planned by Palestinian Islamic Jihad against Israel. It warned that its operation could last up to a week.

The continuous outbreaks of violence—Israel has launched at least eight murderous assaults on the besieged enclave since 2005 when it "withdrew" from Gaza—flows inexorably from the 15-year-long Israeli siege of Gaza that has been aided by the butcher of Cairo, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The blockade, an act of collective punishment banned under international law, has turned the enclave into an open-air prison for its two million inhabitants. Most lack even the most basic essentials of life, clean water, sanitation and electricity, while more than half the population is unemployed and the vast majority live in appalling poverty.

At the same time as waging war on Gaza, the caretaker government under Yair Lapid, who heads an eight-party coalition that includes one of Israel's Arab parties and several Jewish parties ostensibly committed to a Palestinian state alongside Israel, gave free rein to the far right to incite violence against the Palestinians in Jerusalem.

Under the protection of armed Israeli security forces, 1,000 religious bigots, far right nationalists and settlers stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound in East Jerusalem on Sunday morning. They waved Israeli flags, prayed and chanted anti-

Muslim and anti-Arab slogans, breaching long-standing agreements with Jordan, the official custodian of the site, whereby non-Muslims are not allowed to pray within the compound or display Israeli symbols. Israeli police have allowed settlers and far right activists entry to the site on a near-daily basis.

The authorities allowed this latest provocation to go ahead as Israel's military onslaught on Gaza entered its third day, amid concerns that this would incite Palestinian protests and clashes. In May 2021, similar provocations at the al-Aqsa Mosque compound coinciding with Ramadan led to Israel's 11-day assault on Gaza that killed 256 Palestinians and extensive riots in Israel's mixed cities of Haifa, Acre, Lod and Ramla.

The latest conflict started on Monday with the storming by Israeli special forces of the Jenin refugee camp in the occupied West Bank. They fired live and rubber-coated bullets as well as tear gas at Palestinians and arrested senior Islamic Jihad leader Bassam al-Saadi, and his son-in-law, Ashraf al-Jada, at his home in Jenin. Pictures of al-Saadi being dragged across the ground accompanied by an attack dog provoked a storm of protest, amid fears for his life, from PIJ supporters. Islamic Jihad vowed revenge.

The PIJ has become the main force behind the armed resistance in Jenin and Nablus to both Israel and its subcontractor, the Palestinian Authority (PA) of President Mahmoud Abbas. During the raid, Israeli forces also shot and killed Derar Riyad al-Kafrini, a 17-year-old Palestinian youth and injured Saadi's wife as well as at least one other.

Israel claimed that PIJ was planning to launch attacks from Gaza on Israel and made full-scale preparations for an extensive operation against Islamic Jihad. It ordered a lockdown on towns and villages in southern Israel, closing roads and sending reinforcements to the area, and called up 10 reserve Border Guard battalions in case rioting erupted in Israel's predominantly Palestinian cities. It closed both the Erez and Kerem Shalom border crossings into Gaza, preventing essential commodities, including food and fuel, from entering the besieged enclave and medical patients and

the 14,000 Palestinians from Gaza with work permits in Israel from leaving. Shortly afterwards, Gaza's sole power plant announced it would close, citing a lack of fuel.

On Friday, Israel began pounding Gaza with what it said were targeted strikes to "take out" Islamic Jihad leaders and militants. The US and major European powers supported this latest war crime with nostrums about "Israel's right to defend itself" from attack, although no such attack had taken place.

Yair Lapid, Israel's caretaker prime minister until Israel's fifth elections in four years on November 1, described the PIJ as "an Iranian proxy that wants to destroy the state of Israel." His statement signals an Israeli offensive against Iran's allies in the region.

PIJ and Hamas, an affiliate of the Muslim Brotherhood that rules Gaza, are listed as "terrorist organisations" by the US and European powers. Backed by Iran, the PIJ also has supporters in Lebanon and Syria. Its leader Ziad al-Nakhalah was in Tehran for talks with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi on Friday, the day Israel launched its bombardment on Gaza.

Al-Nakhalah pledged that the group would launch revenge attacks, including targeting Tel Aviv and other cities. But Islamic Jihad's rockets, launched only after Israel's onslaught, had little impact. Most of its 400 rockets were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome missile defence system or fell on empty ground. One house was damaged.

Major-General Hossein Salami, the head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, said Saturday the Palestinians are "not alone" in their fight against Israel, declaring, "We are with you on this path until the end, and let Palestine and the Palestinians know that they are not alone." He added that Israel "will pay another heavy price for the recent crime."

Hamas, despite its bitter opposition to its rival, said it supported Islamic Jihad's response to Israel's bombardment. However, it took no action against Israel, as it tried to prevent the conflict erupting into a full-scale war. It also stood aside during Israel's two-day assault on Gaza in November 2019 that assassinated PIJ's southern military leader Bahaa Abu el-Atta and his wife.

Israel's government, under Naftali Bennett and now under Lapid, has in contrast to that of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu sought to bolster Hamas at the expense of the Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority as a means of dividing the Palestinians. Israel has lifted a few of the restrictions on Gaza, increasing its power supply and ability to carry out reconstruction work. It has granted work permits to 20,000 Gaza residents that enable them to cross into Israel daily to work for wages that are some 10 times the rate paid in Gaza, where the unemployment rate tops 50 percent.

Lapid's government has reportedly agreed to an Egypt-

brokered ceasefire between Israel and Islamic Jihad set to take effect at 8 p.m. Sunday, with pledges from Israel to alleviate Gaza's fuel shortage in return for a crackdown on PIJ by Hamas. It remains to be seen whether it will take effect or hold.

Lapid is fighting a bitterly contested election against two rivals for the premiership. The first is Netanyahu, who, despite fighting criminal charges of bribery, corruption and breach of trust in three separate cases, is currently predicted to receive the largest number of votes for his coalition. This is more likely if his far-right religious allies, Itamar Ben Gvir's Jewish Power and Bezael Smotrich's Religious Zionism party, agree on a merger for electoral purposes as they did ahead of last year's election. The second is Defence Minister Benny Gantz, the former army chief. Lapid, who has never held a security post, is thus anxious to bolster his militarist credentials.

His efforts to terrorise the Palestinians and give succour to the fascistic far right seek to deflect the immense social tensions within Israeli society outward as the elections—unusually—focus on the rising cost of living and the increasing poverty. One of the most unequal societies in the advanced world, Israel has the highest poverty rate for any country in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The coalition government, in power for just a year, has widened the already vast socioeconomic gaps in Israeli society, offering tax breaks to the wealthy, raising prices on basic household goods and promoting agricultural reforms that would devastate farmers, while failing to curb the soaring cost of housing. As elsewhere, deteriorating conditions for most Israeli workers and their families have led to a growing number of working class strikes and protests.



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