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Israel pounds Gaza, stoking fears of invasion

Just days after being sworn into Israel's new parliament following the victory of his far-right bloc in last month's elections, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu authorised a massive aerial assault on Gaza's defenceless population, targeting at least 150 sites over the weekend.

In addition, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the most powerful military force in the region, used artillery fire to shell 200 sites in the tiny Palestinian enclave, including residential buildings, mosques, shops and media institutions, in a campaign that is set to continue for days.

According to Gaza's health ministry, the victims among the 16 Palestinians killed included a pregnant mother and her 14-month-old baby, as well as at least eight militants. A further 70 Palestinians were wounded in the attacks.

Israel has admitted to carrying out a targeted assassination, saying its forces killed Hamas commander Hamed al-Khoudary with an air strike on his car. Three others were injured in the attack.

The Israeli government claimed that the 34-year-old leader was responsible for transferring money from Iran to terrorist organizations in Gaza. This was the first admission of a targeted murder since 2014. It takes place under conditions where Interior Minister Gilad Erdan is calling for a return to the policy of targeted assassinations.

One of the sites in Gaza City targeted by Israeli forces is a building housing Anadolu, Turkey's state-run news agency. Although the building was badly damaged by at least five

Israeli rockets, following the firing of warning shots, there were no reports of deaths or injuries.

Turkish President Erdogan denounced the attack, which is likely to exacerbate the already tense relations between Israel and Turkey. Last month, Erdogan called Netanyahu a “tyrant” after the Israeli prime minister referred to him as a “dictator” and a “joke.”

Erdogan tweeted Sunday: “We strongly condemn Israel’s attack against Anadolu Agency’s office in Gaza. Turkey and Anadolu Agency will continue to tell the world about Israeli terrorism and atrocities in Gaza and other parts of Palestine despite such attacks.” Presidential aide Ibrahim Kalin accused Israel of striking Anadolu Agency to “cover up its new crimes.”

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu tweeted: “Targeting of Anadolu Agency Gaza office is new example of Israel’s unrestrained aggression. Israeli violence against innocent people without distinction is a crime against humanity. Those who encourage Israel are also guilty. We will keep defending the Palestinian cause, even if alone.”

Netanyahu, who also holds the defence portfolio, said that the military would keep up its “massive strikes” on targets in the Gaza Strip in response to hundreds of rocket attacks into southern Israel from the Palestinian territory. He said, “I instructed [the military] this morning to continue its massive strikes on terror elements in the Gaza Strip and ordered [it] to reinforce the troops around the Gaza Strip with tanks, artillery and infantry forces.” He added, “ Hamas is responsible not only for its attacks against Israel, but also for the Islamic Jihad’s attacks, and it is paying a very heavy price for it.”

Netanyahu’s statement has stoked fears of a ground invasion. According to Israeli media, senior defense sources say they expect the fighting to last for some time.

As usual, Israel’s patron, the United States, stood four-square behind Israel, condemning Gaza’s rocket attacks on Israel and declaring its full support for Israel’s “right to self-defence against these abhorrent attacks.”

The European Union for its part blamed the Palestinians and called for an immediate de-escalation, backing the attempts of Egypt and the United Nations to bring the Palestinians to heel. EU spokeswoman Maja Kocijancic said, “The rocket fire from Gaza towards Israel must stop immediately. A de-escalation of this dangerous situation is urgently needed to ensure that civilians’ lives are protected.” She added cynically, “Israelis and Palestinians both have the right to live in peace, security and dignity.”

The Arab regimes long ago made their peace, whether formally or de facto, with Israel, which they view as a key ally in the line-up against Iran.

This latest escalation of Israeli brutality against Gaza comes after Israeli forces killed four Palestinians in two separate incidents and injured at least 50 people taking part in last Friday's protests near the Gaza-Israel border, which have been ongoing for more than a year. The protests are demanding the Palestinian refugees' right of return to their homes in what is now Israel and the lifting of Israel's criminal and inhuman blockade on Gaza.

The twelve-year siege—a collective punishment, which is banned under international law—has turned the enclave into an open-air prison for its two million inhabitants and deprived them of the most basic essentials of everyday life, including clean water, sanitation and electricity. This, as well as Israel's three murderous wars on Gaza, which have destroyed much of its infrastructure, has wrecked the territory's economy and made it almost uninhabitable. With the ending of US aid to the Palestinians via the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (UNRRA), more than 50 percent of the population is unemployed and poverty is rampant.

Gaza's health ministry reported that the IDF shot two people dead and killed two Hamas fighters in an air strike. The IDF said this was in response to a shooting incident on the border that left two Israeli soldiers wounded.

The IDF has killed at least 267 Palestinians in the Gaza Strip since March 30 last year and injured 29,000 more, while Israel has lost just two soldiers. Many of the Palestinians 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,” as snipers “intentionally” shot civilians, including children, journalists and the disabled.

Tensions have also been rising because of Israel's failure to honour the terms of a deal brokered by Egypt, which Hamas, the bourgeois clerical group that has controlled Gaza since winning elections in 2006, had hoped would lead to an easing of Israel and Egypt's blockade on the territory, in place since 2007.

According to Hamas, there had been some relaxation in maritime controls, increasing the fishing limit from six to 15 nautical miles, but Israel reduced the limit again last Tuesday after a rocket was fired from Gaza, without causing any damage. Hamas has also accused Israel of delaying the transfer of Qatari money to pay salaries for Gaza's cash-strapped public institutions and of failing to ease the enclave's crippling power shortage.

On Thursday, Israel struck a Hamas military compound after it claimed that balloons carrying firebombs and explosives had been launched across the border—again without incident.

The deaths, the self-evident futility of trying to reach any accommodation with Israel, and Israel's constant provocations prompted Palestinian militants to fire rockets at Israel, breaking the month-long truce that followed Israel's savage bombardment of Gaza last March. While the Israeli military said its Iron Dome defence system had intercepted dozens of the rockets, some got through, killing three Israeli civilians—the first civilians to die from Gaza rocket fire since the 2014 war with Hama—and wounding several others.

As hostilities escalated over the weekend, another Israeli was killed by rocket fire. While the Israeli media made much of the 83 Israelis requiring hospital treatment, at least 62 were treated for panic attacks.

With this latest brutal attack on the Palestinians, Netanyahu is seeking to demonstrate to his far-right allies that he is the most ardent defender of Israel's security, including that of Israel's settlements in the occupied West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Syrian Golan. It puts paid to any notion that Israel seeks "peace" or even a *modus vivendi* with the Palestinians.

At the same time, Netanyahu is seeking 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 against the soaring cost of living, as well as a mass protest of thousands of people demanding an investigation into the fatal police shooting of a mentally unstable Ethiopian-Israeli.

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