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Netanyahu agrees a ceasefire with Hamas—for now

Israel ended its weekend bombardment of Gaza, the most ferocious flareup since the 2014 war, after agreeing to yet another Egyptian-brokered ceasefire reached on Monday.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu pledged to facilitate Qatar's transfer of funds to Gaza and to ease Israel's blockade in return for a distancing of Gaza's protests from the border and an end to nightly riots and the launching of incendiary balloons into southern Israel. This was essentially the same terms it had agreed just six weeks ago. It was Israel's failure to deliver that had led to this latest clash. But three days after the ceasefire, *Ha'aretz* was warning that Gaza was still waiting for Israel to implement measures to ease the blockade.

Netanyahu authorised the massive assault on Gaza in response to rockets launched from Gaza that killed two Israelis, following Israel's tightening of restrictions on Gaza's fishing limits. His decision came just days after being sworn into Israel's new parliament following the victory of his far-right bloc in last month's elections. It was the necessary down-payment to ensure that his about-to-be formed ultra-nationalist coalition will protect him from corruption charges and a hefty prison sentence.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), the most powerful military in the region, launched more than 150 aerial strikes and shelled at least 200 sites in the tiny Palestinian enclave, targeting multi-storey residential buildings, mosques, shops and media institutions. Turkey's Anadolu news agency was in one of the buildings destroyed.

Israel sealed off access to Gaza's territorial waters and closed all its land entrances to prevent anyone from leaving or entering Gaza, only allowing in fuel for the territory's sole power plant.

According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, the 27 Palestinians killed in the shortest and most violent attack in recent years included at least 14 civilians, with the Palestinian Ministry of Health confirming that two pregnant women and three infants were killed by Israeli strikes. Another 154 Palestinians were wounded.

Israel, for its part, suffered the loss of four civilians, the first casualties since 2014, as more than 700 rockets were launched from Gaza. While some of the rockets were intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome system, most landed without causing damage or injury.

Netanyahu boasted, "In the past two days, we've renewed the policy of assassinating senior terrorists," referring to the targeted assassination of Hamed Ahmad Abed al-Khoudari on Sunday, the first such killing in four years. "We've killed dozens of Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists and we toppled terror towers," he added, referring to the IDF's destruction of entire apartment buildings that destroyed or damaged more than 830 homes and left more than 350 Palestinians homeless.

"The campaign is not over and requires patience and judgment. We are preparing to continue," he threatened, indicating that a resumption of aerial bombing, if not an outright invasion, might resume at any time.

Netanyahu came under ferocious attack from his right-wing coalition partners who were virulently opposed to the ceasefire. Bezalel Smotrich, a member of the Union of Right-Wing Parties who is angling to become Israel's next minister of justice, said, "We should have killed 700 terrorists"—one for every rocket fired from Gaza.

This was from a man whose party agreed to an electoral alliance, brokered by Netanyahu, with the fascist and anti-Arab terrorist Jewish Power, comprised of followers of the late Rabbi Meir Kahane, who advocated the "transfer" of Palestinians to neighbouring Arab countries and a ban on intermarriage between Jews and Arabs. The precursor to Jewish Power, Kahane's Kach Party, was banned as a terrorist organization.

Benny Gantz, the former chief of staff and head of the Blue and White coalition that sought to unseat Netanyahu as prime minister, excoriated the ceasefire as "another surrender to the blackmail of Hamas and terrorist organizations."

Gantz had launched his campaign with a video boasting about how many Palestinians had been killed under his command during the 2012 and 2014 wars against Gaza. This merchant of death faces a civil lawsuit for killing six Gazan residents on July 20, 2014.

Netanyahu also came under fire from a rival within his own Likud Party, Gideon Saar, who said, “Timed intervals between rounds of violence directed at Israel and its citizens are getting shorter, while Gaza’s terror organizations are getting stronger. The round of fighting has been delayed rather than prevented.”

Netanyahu, for his part, was determined to bring the hostilities to an end before the events held May 8 and 9 to mark Israel’s Memorial Day, “Independence Day,” which Palestinians mark as the Nakba (Catastrophe), and the Eurovision Song Contest, which Tel Aviv is hosting May 14-18. The latter is already proving to be a commercial disaster, with tickets sales and hotel bookings down on forecasts, despite heavy promotion and subsidies.

According to the daily *Ha’aretz*, Israeli military officials had warned politicians “that if significant steps are not taken to implement understandings with Hamas [to ease the blockade], the group controlling the Gaza Strip will struggle to prevent other organizations in the coastal enclave from acting against Israel,” a reference to Islamic Jihad. Yet despite the warnings, “there has not been an increase in aid or goods going into the Strip.”

The IDF has been discussing a broader military campaign in Gaza in the coming months that would have devastating consequences.

A 2017 document, published by Israel’s Institute for National Security Studies, also warned that without a significant change to the humanitarian situation in Gaza, Hamas, the bourgeois clerical group that emerged out of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and controls Gaza after winning the 2006 elections, was in danger of being outmanoeuvred by more extreme forces. Last March, Hamas faced down protesters angry over new taxes and their abysmal living conditions in the Strip, which will soon become uninhabitable.

Israel confronts, not only the consequences of Gaza’s economic and social collapse, but also the crisis engulfing President Mahmoud Abbas’s Fatah-led Palestinian Authority (PA). This stems in large part from Netanyahu’s decision to stop the transfer of Palestinian tax revenues because of its stipends to the families of those accused of terrorist activities against Israel, a cut of some \$138 million. Abbas is responding by refusing all tax monies owed to the PA, \$100 million a month, in order to precipitate a crisis and secure international aid. As a result, he has been unable to pay PA workers their full salaries.

A further factor in Abbas's calculations is the expected launching of US President Donald Trump's "deal of the century," to be announced in June, that will provoke a furious backlash from Palestinian workers. Extensive leaks make clear that what the US envisages is not a Palestinian state alongside Israel but some sort of "autonomous" rule in disconnected bits of PA territory to be funded by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf petromonarchs.

Without substantial economic aid, the PA is staring into the abyss. Unable to fund its institutions, Abbas faces the prospect of mass protests by workers whose livelihoods depend upon the PA and who reject the US plan. While Qatar has agreed to send \$300 million to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and \$150 million to the besieged Gaza Strip, after the ceasefire was announced on Monday, this is a drop in the ocean.

Two weeks ago, Nikolay Mladenov, the UN's envoy to the Middle East, stated that without measures to resolve the PA's economic crisis, the situation could escalate into major violence threatening the existence of the PA and the stability of the entire Middle East.

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