

Backed by Obama, Israeli Leaders Threaten Full Scale Ground Invasion of Gaza

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The Israeli government intensified its barbaric nine-day bombardment of the Gaza Strip yesterday, as senior ministers issued new warnings of a full-scale ground assault that would send the Palestinian death toll—already exceeding 220—soaring further.

They did so confident of Washington's full support. Speaking at the White House yesterday, President Barack Obama declared, once again, that Israel had a right to defend itself against rocket attacks. Cynically, he blamed the Hamas-led government in Gaza for the "heartbreaking" deaths and injuries of "so many innocent civilians."

"There's no country on Earth that can be expected to live under a daily barrage of rockets," Obama said, effectively giving a green light for an Israeli escalation. "Now, yesterday Israel did agree to a ceasefire. Unfortunately, Hamas continued to fire rockets at civilians, thereby prolonging the conflict."

While he claimed that the US government was working intensively for a truce, Obama's comments pointed to the real purpose of the supposed ceasefire proposal cooked up earlier in the week by the US-backed military regime of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Issued to Hamas as an ultimatum, without any consultation, the Sisi-Netanyahu pact was nothing but a pretext for Israel to unleash a new, even deadlier, phase of its military onslaught.

According to media reports, Hamas had proposed its own truce, offering ten years of calm in exchange for a complete lifting of Israel's crippling siege of Gaza and the release of dozens of prisoners detained over the past month. The Sisi-Netanyahu plan, drawn up with US backing, met none of these demands, beyond a vague promise to ease the economic and supply blockade of Gaza "once the security situation stabilises."

Today, under the cover of a five-hour ceasefire requested by the UN, supposedly for "humanitarian" purposes to allow food supplies into Gaza, preparations are being made for an invasion. Its goal would be to pulverise Gaza and destroy the Hamas leadership that has governed Gaza since winning elections in 2006.

Eight thousand more Israel Defence Force (IDF) reservists were called up yesterday in readiness for a ground blitzkrieg, taking the total to 50,000. More than 100,000 Gaza residents were again barraged with automated phone messages and air-borne leaflets

ordering them to evacuate their homes.

Yesterday's bombing targeted both the homes of prominent Hamas leaders and innocent children, in a bid to further terrorise the entire 1.7 million population of the tiny overcrowded enclave.

Israeli missiles hit the residences of Hamas leaders—including Mahmoud al-Zahar, an international spokesman; Fathi Hamad, a former interior minister; Ismail al-Ashqar, an ex-member of parliament; and Bassem Naim, an adviser to the former prime minister, Ismail Haniya.

While striking these homes with pinpoint precision, missiles also slaughtered four boys, aged between 8 and 11, on a Gaza beach in full view of international journalists.

Witnessing the atrocity first hand, *Guardian* reporter Peter Beaumont noted that after an initial missile hit the sea wall of Gaza City's small harbour, "four figures could be seen running, ragged silhouettes, legs pumping furiously along the wall. Even from a distance of 200 metres, it was obvious that three of them were children."

Minutes later, "the second shell hit the beach, those firing apparently adjusting their fire to target the fleeing survivors. As it exploded, journalists standing by the terrace wall shouted: 'They are only children'."

When relatives gathered to bury the four dead boys, their uncle, Abdel Kareem Baker, 41, told reporters: "It's a cold-blooded massacre. It's a shame they didn't identify them as kids with all of the advanced technology they claim they're using."

In a dismissive statement, Israel's military said the deaths appeared to be the "tragic outcome" of an Israeli strike targeting Hamas "terrorist operatives."

Mark Regev, spokesman for Netanyahu, said yesterday that an invasion of Gaza was "definitely an option." Strategic Affairs Minister Yuval Steinitz, a frequent Netanyahu mouthpiece, urged a takeover of Gaza for a few weeks to "demilitarise" it, topple Hamas and pave the way to "something else."

Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman reiterated his call for an invasion. "[I]t is not possible to ensure summer vacation, a normal summer for our kids, without a ground operation in Gaza," he said. "We expect the international community to back Israel diplomatically as we act to ensure our citizens will live in peace."

Speaking to international journalists at the IDF's Tel Aviv headquarters, an unnamed senior Israeli military official said the likelihood of an invasion was "very high." An Israeli takeover of Gaza would take "a matter of days or weeks," but could require an occupation "of many months."

The official said the military had a variety of operational plans, including a full re-occupation of Gaza, which Israel seized in the 1967 war, withdrawing its settlers and soldiers only in 2005.

By yesterday, Israel had struck more than 1,800 sites in Gaza, exceeding the 1,500 targets of its eight-day assault in November 2012. More than 220 people have been killed and 1,500

injured. The Israeli army stated yesterday that “about half” of those killed have been civilians. However, the UN put the figure much higher, closer to 80 percent.

The Israeli leaflets dropped yesterday in northern Gaza and some neighbourhoods of Gaza City warned: “Whoever disregards these instructions and fails to evacuate immediately endangers their own lives, as well as those of their families.”

It was unclear how many residents were heeding the call. Hamas urged people to stay put, calling the warnings “psychological warfare.” In the densely populated and poor neighborhoods of Zeitoun and Shejaya in Gaza City, journalists said many people appeared confused, with some seeking shelter in friends’ homes deeper inside the neighborhoods rather than leaving.

“We got leaflets and calls to evacuate,” Um Mohammed Rahmi, 56, who was fleeing in a donkey-drawn cart with six of her neighbours, told *Al Jazeera*. “We don’t know where we are going. We don’t know where we should go ... We are just going aimlessly.”

Hundreds of residents were seen walking in the streets, carrying small bags with belongings. “We don’t want to leave our homes, but we do this because of the children. There are many bombings and they get terrified,” Um Ramez said, as she and her grandchildren packed a car with clothes bags and food.

Meanwhile, on the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority regime of President Mahmoud Abbas blocked and suppressed protests against the Israeli offensive. Abbas was in Cairo yesterday to meet with Sisi, underscoring his complicity with the Egyptian and US administrations.

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