

## Is Israel provoking another Gaza conflagration?

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Israel is once again complaining that its “security” is being threatened by new eruptions of violence along the border with Gaza. About two dozen Qassam rockets were fired at Israel from Gaza in recent days. Although they fell in (and may have been deliberately targeted at) open areas, causing no damage or injuries, Israel took revenge with destructive air raids that did cause damage and killed several people, including a 15-year-old boy.

Before asking who should stop first, one should recall who started the latest ugly round of violence.

On 26 December, Israel carried out double attacks in the West Bank city of Nablus and in Gaza, murdering three people in each place. In Nablus, Israeli death squads carried out cold-blooded extrajudicial executions in revenge for the killing of a West Bank settler several days before. According to the wife of one of the Nablus victims, her husband was at home in his living room, completely unarmed when the death squad burst in and shot him in the face. Neither he nor the other victims of these state-sponsored terrorists had been accused, tried or convicted of any crime in a court of law.

In Gaza, the three victims were reportedly workers scavenging near the border fence to salvage building supplies from the rubble of previous destruction.

Since late December, Israeli attacks have killed more than a dozen Palestinians, routine violence which is ignored by the “international community” and for which Israel is never held accountable. On the contrary, Israel’s Western friends continue to justify this terrorism as “self-defense.”

Israel’s recent aggressions look ominously like the 4 November 2008 attack on Gaza, which killed six persons and shattered the four-month-long truce meticulously respected by Hamas. Predictably, Hamas and other factions retaliated for that Israeli provocation and then Israel used their response to justify its massacre of 1,400 people in Gaza this time last year.

It seems that whenever there is relative calm on the Gaza front, Israel is keen to destroy it. Prior to the November 2008 attack, the Gaza situation, despite the siege and the intense international pressure on Hamas, was stable — that was the last thing Israel wanted. And despite the truth that Israel sabotaged the truce and then refused to renew it even though Hamas wanted to, the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority, some Arab states and the so-called international community led by the United States blamed Israel’s attack on Gaza on Hamas rockets, and claimed that Hamas — not Israel — had rejected renewing the truce.

When Israel ended “Operation Cast Lead” last year, it refused to enter into a new formal truce with Hamas. Nevertheless, Hamas has observed a unilateral ceasefire, only using force

occasionally in retaliation for Israeli attacks, say, on tunnels that bring vital supplies into Gaza from Egypt, circumventing the siege. Moreover, Hamas — in the face of much local criticism — has enforced the truce on other Palestinian factions.

Could Israel be following the same pattern again now with its escalating violence against Gaza? Neither last year's war nor the tightening blockade that has prevented any meaningful reconstruction have succeeded in their clear but unstated goal of toppling Hamas.

Is Israel then preparing to do again what it does best: use wanton murder and destruction to try to achieve its political goals?

It is hard to say, but this is an alarming possibility, especially as senior Israeli officials have been dropping hints about preparations for a "second Gaza war."

Israel, which does not act according to any normal or civilized standards, could have several motives for this; not least, another "small war" could give Israel a welcome distraction from the continuing diplomatic impasse or any threat of a renewed American-led peace initiative, no matter how timid.

Up to this point, it looks like Israel has been in the diplomatic driver's seat. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu easily dismissed US President Barack Obama's initial demand for a freeze on construction of Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank. The Obama Administration not only backed down, it also fully adopted Israeli positions and has been continuously putting pressure on the moribund Palestinian Authority to return to negotiations without "preconditions." (Of course "without preconditions" means only that Israel is not obligated to meet any conditions; Palestinians are always presented with lengthy lists of Israeli preconditions.)

But if this seems like a diplomatic victory for Israel, it may only be temporary. If, as expected, the Palestinian Authority eventually succumbs to pressure and returns to "negotiations," it will become instantly apparent that, given Israeli intransigence and expansionism, there is absolutely nothing to discuss and not even an infinitesimal prospect of any sort of peace deal.

It is doubtful that the bankruptcy of the Israeli and American positions can simply be covered up with more empty process, and expect the situation on the ground to remain quiet and stable. Bringing the crisis closer, on its own terms, and once again blaming Hamas, may be the "ideal" way out for Israel.

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