

Israeli forces break Gaza ceasefire as Netanyahu outlines his political calculations

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The ceasefire that brought to an end Israel's eight-day blitzkrieg against Gaza is already under strain, after Israeli forces killed a Palestinian man on the border.

Anwar Qdeih, 23, was shot through the head as he tried to place a Hamas flag on the fence near Khan Younis, in southern Gaza. Around 20 other Palestinians were wounded. Israel claimed to be responding to "violent activity" by 300 protesters.

The agreement to end hostilities was pressed on Israel because of Washington's concern that a threatened ground invasion would endanger its broader interests in the region, particularly the campaign against Syria and plans for war against Iran. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has threatened, "We are also prepared for the possibility that the ceasefire will not be upheld, and we will know how to act if need be."

Netanyahu has come under attack from right-wing forces for his failure to send thousands of ground troops into Gaza. He was accordingly compelled to explain the political calculations underlying both "Operation Pillar of Defence" and its cessation.

In military terms, Netanyahu argued that Israel had succeeded in degrading Gaza's infrastructure and destroying 90 percent of Hamas's longer-range Iranian-made Fajr-5 missiles, as well as locally produced M-75 missiles capable of reaching Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, and their launchers in underground silos. The operation tested out Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile system, which the government claimed successfully intercepted at least 85 percent of longer-range missiles.

Hamas has also been tested on its commitment to reaching an agreement with Israel at almost any cost. It had already declared de facto support for the campaign by Islamist opposition forces to unseat the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad when it relocated its external headquarters from Damascus to Doha, Qatar, and was engaged in secret peace negotiations with Israel when Netanyahu launched his latest offensive.

Neither Tel Aviv nor Washington were in favour of deposing Hamas, which would leave a power vacuum and eliminate a potential ally against Syria and Iran—especially given the role played by its parent organisation, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. As Netanyahu said, "We also have other fronts. We must take into account the entire picture."

Netanyahu laid particular stress on the backing he had received from the Obama administration, which, despite his thinly concealed support for Republican rival Mitt Romney in the US presidential election, was "supportive, effective and smooth"—and from Egypt.

Egyptian President Mohammed Mursi and his Muslim Brotherhood regime negotiated the ceasefire and are committed to keeping it. Netanyahu also demanded and got agreement that Egypt would increase security at its border and ensure no weapons reach Gaza.

Egypt would also step up its collaboration with Israel on the Sinai Peninsula, arrest alleged militants and seal the tunnels to the Gaza Strip. It has reportedly already begun to enforce the ceasefire. On Wednesday, three rockets were seized by Egyptian security forces in Sheikh Zawayed, near Gaza.

Notwithstanding the Brotherhood's cynical statements of solidarity with the Palestinians, it is working in collusion with both the US and Israel—first in Syria and now Gaza. No sooner had Israel started attacking Gaza than Mursi began a diplomatic offensive in Cairo to enforce a truce, receiving foreign ministers from Turkey, Germany and Qatar, as well as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. His aim was to block the potential development of broader popular opposition to war in Egypt, Israel, and throughout the region.

Mursi and the Brotherhood are just as reliant on the US as the deposed regime of Hosni Mubarak, and their international connections have an additional advantage for Washington and Tel Aviv. The Ennahda Movement, or Renaissance Party, another Brotherhood offshoot, now governs post-Ben Ali Tunisia. The Justice and Development Party, formed by the Brotherhood, is now the second party in the US-installed Libyan regime. In Syria also, the Brotherhood is considered a generally reliable US proxy within the opposition movement against Assad. Little wonder that Netanyahu described his working relationship with Washington and Cairo as “a great achievement for Israeli policy and regional stability.”

Egypt is only the most egregious exemplar of all the Arab regimes. Not one of them lifted a finger to support the Palestinians, even in the form of an oil and trade boycott of Israel's backers, or demands for a “no-fly zone” and “humanitarian aid corridors” that are their bread-and-butter when it comes to Syria. Once again, the Palestinians were a pawn to be sacrificed on the regional chessboard.

The rival bourgeois factions of the Palestinians were both exposed as politically bankrupt.

Mahmoud Abbas, the “President” of the Palestinian Authority, and his Fatah faction, were compromised by their refusal to oppose Israel, exposing them once again as Washington's stooges and Israel's policemen.

Only after two days of Israel's non-stop bombardment of Gaza did Abbas make a belated and half-hearted speech about the attack.

When angry Palestinians poured out onto the streets in the West Bank in support of Gaza and chanted slogans calling for an end to the Oslo Peace Accords and the fraud of negotiations with Israel, Fatah ordered the Palestinian security forces to stop protesters bursting through the checkpoints into Israel and arrest them. Israeli soldiers then moved in, firing live ammunition bullets, rubber coated steel bullets and tear gas, killing at least two Palestinians.

Of perhaps greater significance is the degree to which Hamas has proved ready to take the next step in forming a new relationship with Tel Aviv after years in which it advanced itself as a militant opposition to Fatah's collusion.

Hezbollah, the Shi'a Islamist party in Lebanon that has, along with Hamas, previously been cast as part of the "arc of resistance" to Israel stretching through Iran and Syria, was also complicit in Israel's war on the Palestinians. Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, issued a perfunctory statement condemning Israel, but refused to open up a second front against Israel. He did not even call for a mass demonstration in support of the Palestinians. Sheikh Hasan Ezzeddine, a senior official, when asked whether Hezbollah would get involved, told The Daily Star, "This is a premature matter. The Palestinian people have so far displayed their ability to confront the Israeli aggression."

Netanyahu's political calculations are predicated upon the ability of such Arab bourgeois forces to police opposition to Israel and Washington's imperialist designs on the energy resources of the Middle East. Domestically, he counts upon the purely notional character of the opposition to militarism by the country's official "left". The hypocrisy of its criticisms found grotesque expression in the November 23 editorial in Ha'aretz, entitled "In praise of Netanyahu", which expressed "our appreciation of this government and its leader for the relative restraint they displayed."

Reuters wrote of Netanyahu being able to "draw some comfort from his offensive against Gaza as he switches his gaze once more to his main strategic challenge—Iran". But it stressed that Iran was in a "totally different league to the problems posed by the Islamist group Hamas" and that "divisions over a much more difficult assault on far-away Iran remain as deep as ever."

Ultimately, all Netanyahu's schemes and manoeuvres ignore the fact that Israel, just like its Arab neighbours, is wracked by mounting social tensions generated by the deepening world economic crisis.

While hundreds of thousands took part in protests last year over inequality and poverty, these mass sentiments, along with popular opposition to militarism, find no political outlet within the Israeli political system. These conditions do, however, create the possibility of building a unified movement of Arab and Jewish workers on a socialist and international basis.

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