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## Death toll mounts in Israeli attacks on Gaza

By Patrick Martin

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The death toll from Israeli bomb and missile attacks on the Palestinian population of the Gaza Strip has reached at least 63 since Sunday, when virtually non-stop air strikes on the blockaded territory began. More than 300 people have been reported wounded. Of the 47 dead who have been identified, 41 were described as civilians. Of these, 12 were children.

The latest atrocity overnight Wednesday was the killing of at least eight people at a café in Khan Younis, a Gaza neighborhood, where spectators were watching the World Cup match between Argentina and the Netherlands. That bomb injured at least another ten Palestinians.

There were other incidents of multiple killings of children and their families. The Palestinian Ma'an News Agency reported that Nidal Khalaf al-Nawasrah, described as a "toddler," his brother Muhammad Khalaf al-Nawasrah, 4, and their mother Sumud al-Nawasrah all died when an Israeli missile struck their house. Agence France-Presse reported the death of two brothers, aged 12 and 13, in Shejaiya, and a four-year-old boy and his mother in Zeitun.

The attacks by the Israeli air force are expanding in intensity and frequency. Israeli spokesmen said that 440 strikes had been conducted in the four days ending Wednesday, more than during the entire eight-day assault on Gaza in November 2012.

While Israeli officials invariably cite Palestinian rocket attacks from Gaza as the reason for the air strikes, the disproportion is clear. A total of 180 rockets have been fired from Gaza in the course of the last month, since the crisis first flared following the kidnapping of three Israeli teenage settlers on the West Bank. Most of these primitive rockets have fallen harmlessly in open areas, and about 20 percent have been shot down. Not one Israeli has been killed, and there are few reports even of minor injuries.

Meanwhile, Gaza is being laid waste by precision-guided bombs, cruise missiles and other sophisticated and high-powered weapons. Hundreds of tons of high explosives have hit Gaza every day this week.

Israeli government officials and media pundits have become increasingly belligerent in their public comments. Israel Channel 2 reported a “growing sense” that the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu would order a ground offensive into Gaza, the first such invasion since the December 2008–January 2009 attack that killed more than 1,400 Palestinians.

The television station cited unnamed sources saying that close aides to Netanyahu are “starting to talk about an incursion into Gaza to try to strip Hamas of its terrorist infrastructure.”

President Shimon Peres, speaking to CNN, said a ground offensive in the Gaza Strip “may happen quite soon.” He continued, “If they won’t stop the missiles, there will be a ground attack. I’m not going to tell you when and where... If they continue, sooner or later, this will be the response.”

Netanyahu himself was less categorical in his public statements, but met Wednesday in Beersheba, at the southern headquarters of the Israel Defense Forces, to review military options with Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon, IDF Chief of Staff Benny Gantz and Sami Turgeman, the IDF’s southern command chief.

He said he had instructed the IDF to “intensify even further” its attacks on Gaza. “The operation will expand and continue until the rocket fire on our cities stops and quiet returns.” Three IDF brigades are now deployed on the Israeli-Gaza border, in position to launch a ground assault.

Netanyahu claimed that Hamas, the party that rules Gaza, “is committing a double war crime when it tries to hurt Israeli civilians and utilizes the Gazan civilian population as a human shield.” In the upside-down world of Israeli propaganda, echoed uncritically by Washington and the American media, the victims of Israeli mass murder are responsible both for their own deaths and for the consequences (however minor) of their efforts at self-defense.

The US government reiterated its support for the Israeli bombardment of Gaza Wednesday, with Secretary of State John Kerry, who is visiting China, speaking with Netanyahu and conveying Washington’s “willingness to engage in helping to stop the rocket fire and restore the 2012 cease-fire as soon as possible,” according to State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki.

She added, siding with Israel against Hamas, “No country should be expected to stand by while rocket attacks from a terrorist organization are launching into their country and impacting innocent civilians.”

American imperialism is quite prepared to back an Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip if Netanyahu decides on that course. The *Wall Street Journal*, mouthpiece of the most reactionary and bloodthirsty faction of the US ruling elite, published an editorial Wednesday that argued for full-scale war. It stated:

“Our advice to the Israelis is that if they want to avoid having to go to war over Gaza every three years or so, they will need to destroy Hamas as a political entity and military power. This does not need a permanent re-occupation of all of Gaza. But it will require a land campaign that destroys Hamas’s ability to wage war.”

Given that Hamas is a political movement with mass popular support—it won the 2006 elections in both Gaza and the West Bank—this amounts to calling for near-genocidal levels of violence. You don’t need to reoccupy Gaza permanently, the *Journal* says, just reduce it to ashes.

The Israeli regime and its US patrons are emboldened by the political isolation of Hamas following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime in Egypt and the establishment of an open military dictatorship, now headed by the “elected” General/President el-Sisi.

The new regime has resumed enforcement of the Israeli-imposed blockade of Gaza and openly sympathizes with Netanyahu’s campaign to destroy Hamas. An Egyptian foreign ministry spokesman said there would be no Egyptian mediation of the current crisis on the model of the intervention by the Muslim Brotherhood president, Mohamed Mursi, during the 2012 confrontation.

Meanwhile, the reality of Israeli “democracy” was put on display when three Arab members of the Knesset were dragged out by security guards when they attempted to make speeches denouncing the Israeli military for “purposefully wiping out entire families” in the Gaza bombardment. One Arab MK simply began reading the names of Palestinian victims in Gaza and was shouted down and assaulted.

There is widespread concern among ordinary Israelis about the dangers of another war with the Palestinians, but it is unrepresented in official politics, dominated by Zionist parties that vie with each other in ever more unrestrained appeals to nationalism and anti-Arab chauvinism.

In Shuafat, the East Jerusalem neighborhood where a 16-year-old Palestinian, Muhammad Abu Khdeir, was kidnapped and murdered last week by ultra-right Zionist settlers, some 350 Israelis came to the family’s mourning tent Wednesday to offer condolences. Hassan Abu Khdeir, the family spokesman, was quoted in the press welcoming the visitors, “because we like peace, and you stand against the Satan of settlements.” He added, “we stand against your government, and we don’t accept your government’s condolences.”

Seven right-wing Israelis have been arrested in connection with the murder, but three of them are to be released Thursday after denying involvement, police said. Three of the arrested men were said to have confessed.