

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly delayed his March 23 trip to Moscow following a bombing at bus stop in central Jerusalem that injured as many as 34 people. The bombing follows a series of recent mortar and rocket attacks emanating from the Gaza Strip reaching as far as the outskirts of Ashdod and Beersheba, as well as the March 11 massacre of an Israeli family in the West Bank settlement of Itamar.

Netanyahu, already facing a political crisis at home in trying to hold his fragile coalition government together, now faces a serious dilemma. There were strong hints that Netanyahu may hold a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in Moscow to restart the peace process and avoid becoming entrapped in another military campaign in the Palestinian territories, but that plan is now effectively derailed. Though the precise perpetrators and their backers remain unclear, a Palestinian faction or factions appear to be deliberately escalating the crisis and thus raising the potential for Israel to mount another military operation in the Palestinian territories.

Attacks in Jerusalem, while rare, raise concerns in Israel that a more capable militant presence is building in Fatah-controlled West Bank in addition to Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. Even before the Jerusalem bombing, Israeli Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom told Israeli citizens in a March 23 Israel Radio broadcast that "we may have to consider a return" to a second Operation Cast Lead in Gaza. He added, "I say this despite the fact that I know such a thing would, of course, bring the region to a far more combustible situation." The past few years of Palestinian violence against Israel has been mostly characterized by Gaza-based rocket attacks as well as a spate of attacks in 2008 in which militants used bulldozers to plow into both civilian and security targets in Jerusalem. Though various claims and denials were issued for many of the incidents, the perpetrators of these attacks likely deliberately remained unclear.

The names of shadowy groups such as the "al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade-Imad Mughniyah" also began circulating, raising suspicions of a stronger Hezbollah and by extension, Iranian link to Palestinian militancy. (Imad Mughniyah, one of Hezbollah's most notorious commanders, was killed in February 2008 in Damascus.) The Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades-Imad Mughniyah group claimed the March 11 West Bank attack, which Hamas denied. Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) armed wing, the al-Quds Brigades, has meanwhile claimed responsibility for the recent rocket attacks launched from Gaza that targeted Ashkelon and Sderot. PIJ spokesman Abu Hamad said March 23 prior to the Jerusalem bus bombing that his group intends to begin targeting cities deep within Israeli territory as it enters a "new phase of the resistance." This is notable, as PIJ, out of all the Palestinian militant groups, has the closest ties to Iran.

The wider regional context is pertinent to the building crisis in Israel and the Palestinian territories. Iran has been pursuing a covert destabilization campaign in the Persian Gulf region to undermine its Sunni Arab rivals, particularly in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis reacted swiftly to the threat with the deployment of troops to Bahrain and are now engaging in a variety of measures to try to suppress Shiite unrest within the kingdom itself. The fear remains, however, that Iran has retained a number of covert assets in the region that it can choose to activate at an opportune time. Iran opening another front in the Levant, using its already well-established links to Hezbollah in Lebanon and its developing links to Hamas and other players in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, remains a distinct possibility and is likely being discussed in the crisis meetings under way in Israel at this time.

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