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MIDEAST: FEARS GROW OVER POSSIBLE ISRAELI WEST BANK INVASION

JERUSALEM, Apr. 28, 2006 (IPS/GIN) -- The Israeli government promised restraint in the wake of the bombing of a Tel Aviv falafel snack stand this month, the promise has not calmed fears of a reprisal attack.

The Tel Aviv bombing, described as the worst suicide attack in two years and condoned by the Hamas government, was just one aspect of a troubling surge in Palestinian violence. Political observers, the Israeli government and the military are at odds about whether Israel will one day strike back fiercely through a controversial ground troop invasion of the Gaza Strip, which it sees as a hotbed of terrorism.

Since January's election of the Hamas government in the Palestinian territories, the Israeli military has seen an increase in stabbings and rocket-fire attacks by Palestinians. This has spurred concern that Israel is facing the third Palestinian uprising since the 1980s against occupation of land Palestinians claim for their future state.

Publicly the Israeli government has said invading Gaza is a last resort. Instead it has pledged to continue firing against Gazan targets like bomb factories, assassinating militant leaders, revoking the residency rights of Palestinian lawmakers living in Jerusalem, and preventing the smuggling of Palestinians into Israel.

But current and retired top military brass have been quoted in the Israeli press as saying that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are preparing to reoccupy Gaza -- which Israel vacated last year along with thousands of Jewish settlers -- if Qassam rocket attacks persist. Israel has already made two brief forays to search for explosives.

The Israeli government's views appear to run counter to those of its defense establishment, but Hisham Ahmed, professor of political science at Ramallah's Birzeit University, told IPS that this seeming contradiction is easily explained.

"The Israeli government hasn't been fully formed yet," Ahmed said. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

"doesn't want to move against the Palestinians without a full mandate."

Olmert, who won the general elections March 28 and was sworn in the day of April's Tel Aviv suicide bombing, must finish patching together a coalition government this week, Ahmed said. Olmert's Kadima party is particularly interested in keeping the support of the left-leaning Labor Party, which prefers nonviolence to resolve the decades-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Labor leader Amir Peretz may become Israel's next defense minister.

Mobilizing public opinion in favor of a full-scale invasion of Gaza and possible attack against the predominantly Palestinian West Bank is another challenge for Olmert, Ahmed said.

Despite Israel's decision against any immediate attack on Gaza, Ahmed said "nothing is to be ruled out at all."

The government would have to work out whether it would completely take control of Gaza again or make a brief but hard-hitting incursion. Either way, predicts Ahmed, "it will open a whole can of worms."

Ahmed said this would particularly be the case if an Israeli military maneuver extends into Syrian or Iranian territory. Israel has accused both countries of helping Palestinian militants.

At the moment, the Israeli military is keeping up a powerful shelling campaign on the territory to deter terrorist group Islamic Jihad's homemade rocket attacks against nearby Jewish settlements. Although the rockets rarely do physical harm, Israel is worried that stronger Katyusha rockets originating in Iran will increasingly make their way into militant hands. A Katyusha rocket was fired from Gaza for the first time on Israel's election day.

Despite uncertainty within the Israeli military and government about the next move, at least one Israeli academic doubts the prospect of a major Gaza clash.

"The Israeli people are against it," Mordechai Kedar, lecturer in the Arabic department at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat-Gan in Israel, told IPS. "We don't (want to) have kids to bury after such an invasion. The government will think many times before it goes into Gaza."

Moreover, Kedar said, the government fears a backlash by the media and Israeli citizens if the military fires on populated areas. "We as Jews have a big problem with that."

The same moral debate was seen in 1996. The Iran-backed Hezbollah party, which operates from Lebanon, launched Katyusha missiles from a U.N. Palestinian refugee camp on Lebanese soil. About 100 of the 800 Palestinians living in the camp were killed when the Israeli military retaliated.

"The event caused the fall of the government in Israel," Kedar said.

As Israel ponders a major military effort in Gaza, speculation continues about whether the country is truly in the midst of a third Intifadah, or popular uprising. The first ran from 1987 to 1993. The far more vicious second revolt, from 2000 to 2005, was marked by a barrage of suicide bombings.

"The more Palestinians are driven to the corners, the more volatile the situation will be," said Ahmed.

Kedar believes that Israel will be pushed toward further unilateral detachment from the West Bank through construction of a security barrier made of chain-link fences and concrete walls. Kadima was elected on this platform.

But there could be a push for the exact; Israel could take aim at Gaza. "We are at war," Maj. Gen. Yitzhak Harel, head of the IDF's planning directorate and a senior member of the IDF general staff, told the Jerusalem Post.