

Israeli offensive in Gaza targets Hamas

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A massive military offensive, coupled with political assassinations and arrests of more than 400 Hamas candidates and activists, has been mounted barely two weeks after the withdrawal of the last Israeli soldier from Gaza.

These events have exposed the fraud of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's so-called "disengagement" from Gaza. Far from being a first step towards alleviating the suffering of the Palestinian people—normalising relations between Israel and Palestine, and creating an independent Palestinian state, as the Western powers have claimed—the pullout has been a preliminary to a sustained military and political offensive against the Palestinians. The largest offensive since the assault on Jenin in April 2002, its purpose is to terrorise and intimidate the Palestinian people and cripple Hamas, the largest Islamist party, as a political force.

Israel was determined to prevent Hamas from making political gains in both the local elections on September 29 and the parliamentary elections due in January next year. The elections are widely expected to further erode support for Fatah, the main faction within the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) headed by Israel's main political partner, Mahmoud Abbas.

Israel's actions, though directed against Hamas, are meant as a warning to Abbas and the Palestinian Authority. After months in which Tel Aviv has insisted that the PA move to suppress all opposition to Israeli authority, Sharon's actions serve notice that the only Palestinian regime he will tolerate is one that is totally subservient to Israel's needs.

The world's press has kept its coverage of these crimes off the front pages. Not one editorial has seen fit to mention it, let alone denounce Israel's assault on the Palestinians' physical, social and political infrastructure and Tel Aviv's gross interference with the elections. Needless to say, both the Bush and Blair administrations have been silent.

Israel seized the opportunity to launch an offensive against Gaza after Hamas fired a handful of homemade rockets against the southern town of Sederot in Israel close to the Gaza Strip, injuring several people. Hamas said this was in response to an Israeli air force attack on one of Hamas's victory rallies in Gaza on September 23 that killed 21 people. Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority denied this, saying that there had been no air strike and that Hamas had accidentally set off the rockets, which were on display at the rally.

Sharon convened an emergency cabinet meeting and gave the army a free hand to strike militant targets and resume its policy of political assassinations. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) immediately sent in helicopter gunships, fighter jets and spy planes and launched more than 30 aerial strikes against Gaza, knocking

out the power supply to Gaza City for most of the night of September 27 and destroying a bridge and homes. The aerial bombardment targeted Hamas's welfare facilities and charities, destroying a school.

With the settlements gone, the Israeli military was free to attack the Palestinians without the complication of having to protect the settlers. Its armed forces killed four Hamas and Islamic Jihad oppositionists in targeted aerial attacks on two cars, and destroyed weapons stores.

Israel stated that its offensive was a "warning" to the PA to rein in the militants and stop the attacks on Israeli towns. An IDF spokesman said that its purpose was to "deter" further attacks. "New rules" were in place following Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said that the offensive was meant to show that Israel would not tolerate any attacks from Gaza after the Israeli withdrawal. He threatened Hamas leaders Mahmoud Zahar and Ismail Hanieh by name, saying they could be the next targets. He also said that a ground invasion was possible as a last resort.

Speaking on a tour of a military installation near Gaza on September 27, he pointed to an artillery battery and said, "This battery ... is not meant to be decoration. It is operational, within range and it will respond against every firing of a Qassem [rocket] in real time, and that is to deter."

He took the US appeals for restraint for the empty ritual they were and went ahead with further military action, firing live artillery shells into Gaza. This was despite PA moves to enforce a ban on the public display of weapons and the wearing of uniforms by militant oppositionists in Gaza, and the agreement by Hamas and other militant groups to halt their public display of weapons and attacks, and abide by the ceasefire reached last March. On September 29, the army announced that strikes would continue for several more days.

As well as attacking Gaza to take out Hamas militants and destroy its infrastructure, Israel seized on the kidnap and murder of an Israeli settler on September 26 to target and crush Hamas's political wing in the West Bank before the September 29 local elections.

Its security forces raided 15 offices across the West Bank belonging to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, including Islamic charitable societies, and closed them down, removing their equipment. Israel claimed that they were used as a conduit to distribute money to the families of suicide bombers and those in detention in Israel.

Israeli soldiers raided Balata refugee camp near Nablus and killed two Palestinians and a 13-year-old boy.

They arrested 420 “wanted Palestinians” in 100 raids on the West Bank cities of Ramallah, Nablus and Hebron, the largest such sweep since August 2003 when some 300 Hamas members were arrested. Nearly all of these were Hamas party candidates in the local elections, prospective candidates for the parliamentary elections due in January, or Hamas members who were actively campaigning in the elections. Some of those arrested were sitting councillors.

Israeli government spokesman Mark Regev shamelessly denied that Israel had specifically sought to detain election candidates, “We are arresting Hamas activists because there is perceived to be a significant terrorist threat. It could well be that Hamas activists are also political candidates, but that is not our motivation,” he said.

Israel “is using every possible means to block Hamas and push it aside,” said Hamas spokesman Mushir al-Masri. “Those arrested are leaders ... of the first and second level,” he said, adding that Israel’s objective was to “weaken Hamas, particularly before the legislative elections.”

The arrests came after the Israeli government failed to win international backing for its demand that Hamas be barred from the elections. Sharon warned that if Hamas was not disqualified, Israel could disrupt the voting, at least in the West Bank, which it still occupies, by refusing to ease travel restrictions.

Hamas, with its extensive welfare and charitable network, has been gaining support at the expense of Abbas’s ruling Fatah party. Fatah is widely reviled for its incompetence and corruption, and above all its failure to improve the social conditions of the mass of the population while a handful of Palestinian businessmen both at home and abroad have become billionaires at their expense.

While publicly Hamas claims Sharon’s disengagement from Gaza as a victory for its strategy of armed resistance to Israel, privately it seized on the pullout as a way of exiting a war that both brought overwhelming retaliation against the Palestinians, decimating its own ranks, and acted as an obstacle to its aspirations to legitimacy and leadership.

It sought to turn the situation to its own political advantage by agreeing to end suicide attacks in Israel, while escalating armed resistance in Gaza until Israel’s decision to withdraw seemed irreversible. By reinforcing the perception that Israel was leaving under duress, its aim was to strengthen its hand with the PA and reach a power sharing agreement in any government after withdrawal. It would participate in all PA elections, including parliamentary elections, which it had boycotted before, and seek integration into the Palestinian political system, including the main PLO committees.

Its strategy towards Fatah and the PA has largely been successful. Abbas has refused thus far to discuss the disarming of Hamas as Israel has demanded. The PA’s foreign minister, Nasser al’Kidwa, said, “Dismantling the armed groups is not on the table as long as the occupation exists.”

In the Palestinian local elections held in December-January and May, in effect the first national elections since 1996, Hamas won about 60 percent of all seats and control of 30 percent of all councils, including Fatah strongholds such as Qalqilya in the West Bank.

Abbas’s response was to postpone the parliamentary elections, due to be held last July, until January next year. Local courts annulled the results of three municipal elections in Gaza, which Hamas claimed it had won.

In July, following an Israeli assault on Gaza and the political assassination of seven members of Hamas’s military wing—ostensibly in response to a suicide bomb attack on Netanya by Islamic Jihad that killed five people—PA security forces moved against Hamas, leading to an armed confrontation between Hamas and the PA.

Palestinian sources say that since the Israeli withdrawal, Hamas has taken over much of the Gaza Strip and virtually all the refugee camps are under its control. “This is the new reality,” said a PA official. “All we can do is look on.”

The arrests last week of 400 Hamas men were aimed at disrupting Hamas’s electioneering and eliminating it as a political force before the January elections. But they were also a warning to Abbas to disarm the militant groups. Abbas’s dilemma is that he is caught between the rock of the Israeli government and the hard place of a people increasingly hostile to his and Fatah’s rule. To take on Hamas would be to provoke the type of all-out conflict that he is anxious to avoid.

Sharon’s senior advisor, Zalman Shoval, said that Israel was trying to make Abbas understand that peace efforts could be frozen if he brought Hamas into government. Sharon upped the ante and suspended talks with Abbas scheduled for the beginning of October.

In the event, in Thursday’s elections Fatah kept control of 61 councils, Hamas won 28 while other parties and independents won 15 councils. Hamas did not contest all the councils. Fatah won 54 percent of the vote and Hamas 26 percent. A Hamas spokesman in Gaza, Sami Abu Zuhri, said he did not trust the accuracy of the preliminary results and that Hamas would publish its own count. He added that Israel’s mass arrests of party candidates and activists had affected the result.

Pressured by Israel, the PA has stepped up its security presence on the streets of Gaza to enforce the ban on displaying weapons and wearing uniforms in public, precipitating a bloody confrontation with Hamas. After police officers attempted to arrest the son of Abdul Aziz Rantis, the Hamas leader assassinated by Israel last March, a fierce gun battle broke out in which three people were killed, two bystanders and a police officer, and more than 50 injured.

Having achieved its objective, in the short term at least, Israel has suspended its attack on Gaza and said that preparation for talks with Abbas would now go ahead.



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