

The political calculations behind Israel's assault on Gaza

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29 June 2006

Israel's invasion of Gaza is a calculated act of aggression for which the capture of Corporal Gilad Shalit by Palestinian commandos provided the pretext. If anything, the scale and nature of the incursion, which has targeted Gaza's infrastructure for destruction and has been accompanied by threats to assassinate the leaders of Hamas, works against the safe return of the 19-year-old conscript.

The huge number of troops and tanks that have either entered Gaza or are massed on its borders—3,000 soldiers and 100 tanks—belies Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's claim that "We have one objective, and that is to bring Gilat home."

The destruction of three major bridges and the bombing of the region's only power station, cutting off electricity for most of Gaza, underscore the cynicism of his statement that Israel does not "intend to punish ordinary Palestinians." Israeli planes fired at least nine missiles at the power station. Water pumps throughout the area are powered by electricity, and hospitals in Gaza City face a permanent loss of power.

In addition, Israel has closed off the borders to Gaza, preventing food, medical supplies and other necessities from getting in and blocking the inhabitants from getting out. These actions are creating a humanitarian disaster throughout the impoverished region. If this is not "punishing ordinary Palestinians," then what is?

At the same time, Israel is using its vast military supremacy to terrorise the defenceless population. Israeli warplanes have flown low over Gaza City, producing sonic booms that have shattered windows.

Things will not end there. Olmert has issued the following sinister threat: "We won't hesitate to carry out extreme action to bring Gilad back to his family.... All the military activity that started overnight will continue in the coming days."

Talk of "extreme measures" suggests bloodshed on a scale that prompted one BBC correspondent to raise the possibility of "Jenin mark two"—referring to the destruction of the heavily populated refugee camp during Israel's 2002 invasion of the West Bank.

A further indication that Israel is planning a major and long-term military offensive was provided by Defence Minister Amir Peretz, who told the 71st Armoured Battalion, to which Shalit was attached, "I want to strengthen you and to tell you

that the missions you are carrying out will decide the fate of the State of Israel for many years."

Israel's planned aggression may not be limited to Gaza. Palestinian sources in Ramallah reported yesterday evening that a large Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) contingent including 30 jeeps entered the West Bank city, where a kidnapped Israeli settler is reportedly held. The IDF surrounded a home near offices belonging to Fatah, and exchanges of fire were heard.

More serious still, the capture of Corporal Shalit could provide a *casus belli* with respect to Syria. Israeli sources acknowledged Wednesday that Israeli jets flew over the home of the Syrian president in Damascus.

Israel's Public Security Minister Avi Dichter and National Infrastructures Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer have both threatened that Hamas leaders based in Syria could be attacked. Justice Minister Haim Ramon said on Army radio that Khaled Meshaal had ordered the kidnapping and has definitely become a target for assassination.

Israel's vice premier, Shimon Peres, told CNN, "The directives for this action came from Khaled Meshaal in Damascus. There sits a man determined to destroy any chance for peace."

There are clear indications that plans for a military attack were in place for some time, awaiting only an excuse to be implemented. Israel has mounted a five-month-long military and economic siege of the Occupied Territories, with the support of the United States and Europe. It has sought to justify this with the victory of Hamas in the January 25 elections to the Palestinian Authority and the Islamist group's stated aim of seeking the violent destruction of Israel.

Olmert seized on the election results to press ahead with his plans to permanently annex East Jerusalem and some 45 percent of the West Bank to Israel, leaving the Palestinians in a number of non-contiguous ghettos, including the Gaza Strip. As events have demonstrated, these would be open to military attack by Israel at any time.

Israel has stepped up its military offensive in recent weeks, launching hundreds of shells at Gaza and killing 14 civilians. The aim of this week's escalation is to scupper efforts to secure the acceptance by Hamas of the so-called "Prisoners' Charter," committing the organisation to a "two-state" solution that

implicitly recognises Israel, and facilitating a common command structure between Hamas and Fatah. This agreement would hamper Israel's efforts to prevent the creation of even the truncated Palestinian state that is the formal aim of the Quartet—the US, Europe, Russia and the United Nations.

Even before the present hostilities were launched, evidence had begun to emerge that the Kadima-led coalition had allowed the Sunday raid at Kerem Shalom in which Shalit was captured to take place, in order to justify a large-scale military incursion into Gaza.

Israel's security service, Shin Bet, insisted in the aftermath of the raid that it had given the government and the Israeli Defence Forces a specific warning that militants intended to use a tunnel to abduct soldiers on the crossings situated on the southern part of the Israel-Gaza border. This forced the government to mount an inquiry into possible "security failings" that is due to report on July 10.

Reports also make clear that the raid could only politically strengthen a hard-line wing within Hamas which is opposed to the Prisoners' Charter and which in all probability carried out the raid that led to the capture of Shalit.

Israel, with its extensive security network, would have known from the outset that the Hamas leadership in Gaza, led by Prime Minister Ismail Haniyya, had no knowledge of the raid and that it was most likely authored by forces close to Hamas's political leader, Khaled Meshaal, who lives in exile in Damascus, Syria.

In private conversations with Fatah leaders, Haniyeh and his aides have insisted that the attack was carried out on instructions from Hamas leaders in Syria and Lebanon. Sources close to Haniyeh said on June 27 that those within Hamas's armed wing, Izaddin al-Kassam, who carried out the attack did not consult with the party's political leadership in Gaza and were intent on thwarting attempts to reach an agreement with Palestinian Authority President and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas over the Prisoners' Charter.

Neither the likely non-involvement of the Islamist leadership in Gaza nor the entreaties of Abbas could deflect Israel from its plans to destroy Gaza's infrastructure and bring down the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority.

It should also be noted that the Israeli incursion has cut across diplomatic efforts by both Egypt and France to secure the corporal's release, but not before one Egyptian diplomat said, "I'm not sure we've been talking to the right people. Apparently, the political leadership of Hamas does not have any connection with the kidnappers."

In the end, Hamas did sign up to the Prisoners' Charter, only a few hours before Israel invaded Gaza.

The agreement accepts the creation of a Palestinian state within the Occupied Territories alone and pledges to "concentrate" resistance to Israel within that area. It further authorises the Palestine Liberation Organisation and Abbas to negotiate on behalf of Palestinians, subject to the approval of the Palestinian National Council, an assembly that represents

Palestinians all over the world.

Israel has reacted with undisguised hostility, insisting that the capture of Corporal Shalit overrides all other factors. Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev said, "[I]t is a pity and tragedy that on a day that the entire international community was expecting the responsible Palestinian leadership to facilitate the speedy release of Corporal Shalit, energy was invested in this document."

A senior official in Olmert's office characterised the document as a "non-starter" that "changes nothing." He added, "We will only negotiate with the Palestinian government that adheres to the three principles accepted by the international community," meaning recognition of Israel, an end to all armed resistance and acceptance of previous agreements.

Israel could not have contemplated such a dangerous escalation of hostilities without the tacit approval of Washington. The Bush administration has all but abandoned its own "Road Map" in favour of the unilateral drawing of Israel's borders first advanced by Ariel Sharon and now adopted by his successor, Olmert.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice initially responded to Israel's massing of troops on Gaza's border with the usual appeal for restraint on all sides to allow for a diplomatic solution. But once the invasion was underway, White House Press Secretary Tony Snow declared that Israel had "the right to defend itself."

Snow was equally quick to endorse Israel's dismissal of Hamas's signing up to the Prisoners' Charter. He said he had only seen media accounts of the Hamas-Fatah accord, but insisted that Hamas had to meet three conditions before the US and its allies would lift its economic boycott. "Once again," he stated with unconcealed contempt, "we can all recite from memory now: recognise Israel's right to exist, renounce terror, and abide by all past agreements. Those are the preconditions."

The European Union also made the Palestinian leadership responsible for averting bloodshed. Austria, which holds the rotating EU presidency, issued a statement calling for Shalit's "immediate and unconditional release," while urging all parties to show restraint and "avoid further escalation."



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