

# Seven Palestinian civilians killed on Gaza beach

## The political calculations behind Israel's latest atrocity

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Seven Palestinian civilians were killed and about 35 wounded by an Israeli artillery shell on a beach in northern Gaza on the evening of June 9. The murder of the seven beachgoers, including an 18-month-old girl and an infant boy, is another atrocity perpetrated by the Israeli government against the Palestinian people.

Friday's massacre was a deliberate and calculated political provocation. It follows a four-month-long Israeli military offensive and economic siege of the Occupied Territories, which has received the full backing of Tel Aviv's allies in the US and Europe.

Tel Aviv hopes to put an end to an attempted rapprochement between Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants—sought on the basis of an agreement by the Islamists to recognise Israel and negotiate for peace based on a “two-states” solution.

By shelling the beach and provoking the militant organisations to abandon their cease-fire and launch reprisal attacks, the Israeli government is seeking a *casus belli* for a full-scale offensive in the Occupied Territories, possibly including the reoccupation of Gaza by Israeli ground forces.

Footage of the shelling of the beach is one of those rare occasions when the daily reality of Israeli oppression of the Palestinians is seen by an international audience.

Six of the seven Palestinians killed were from the Ghalia family, who were picnicking. Gaza journalist Sami Yousef described the horrific scenes when the shell struck. “There were remains scattered along the beach,” he told the BBC. “Three children were there, two with severe deep cuts in their heads. One girl was screaming, crying out for her father.... Nobody was expecting this to happen. Children had just finished their exams and had come with their families to the beach to enjoy the sunshine. This was a place where people came to enjoy themselves, somewhere away from the crowds and the trouble. A few hours later Israeli jets made sonic booms in the air over Gaza.”

Initial reports suggested that Israeli navy gunboats, which patrol Gaza's sea border, were responsible for the shelling. But it now seems that the shells were fired from artillery massed on Israel's eastern border with the Palestinian territory. Major-General Yoav Galant suggested that the shelling was an accident caused by an artillery shell falling off course or even an “explosive device which was tinkered with.”

This is not credible. In the past week, Israel has stepped up artillery bombardment and missile attacks in northern Gaza. On the same day as the beach was shelled, four Israeli missile attacks killed three suspected Palestinian militants. The previous day, another four militants were assassinated, including Popular Resistance Committees

leader Jamal Abu Samhadana.

An Israeli official has claimed that the shells were intended for a target 400 yards away. But even if this were true, it only underlines Tel Aviv's callous disregard for Palestinian life.

Hamas's military wing responded to Israel's attacks by declaring an end to the “period of calm” it has maintained since February 2005. “The Zionist massacres are opening the fight,” Hamas declared in a statement. “This means that the earthquake in the Zionist cities will start again.”

Over the weekend, an unprecedented 32 rockets were fired at Israeli settlements bordering Gaza, seriously injuring one man. A spokesman for Hamas said, “We have decided to make Sderot a ghost town. We are not going to stop launching our rockets until they leave.”

Israel was swift to retaliate. Two Hamas militants were killed in an Israeli air strike near Beit Lahiya, while a member of Islamic Jihad was killed in a separate incident in the northern Gaza town of Jabaliya.

The reaction of Hamas is exactly what the Israeli government anticipated. The shelling of the Gaza beach is a direct response to developments within the Occupied Territories in the past several weeks.

Fatah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad militants detained in Israel's Hadarim prison released a joint statement last month that demanded an end to recent clashes between the militant groups in Gaza and the West Bank. The 18-point document also called for Hamas and Islamic Jihad to join the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), as well as the formation of a “Palestinian Resistance Front” umbrella grouping of the different militant organisations, and the creation of a Fatah-Hamas Palestinian Authority coalition government.

The “prisoners' document,” which was drawn up by leading Fatah militant Marwan Barghouti, called for the Islamists to accept the establishment of a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza, with Jerusalem as its capital—the perspective championed by Fatah that would require Hamas to abandon its call for the destruction of Israel.

Barghouti was attempting to shore up the PLO and assure his own domination of it, but most importantly to end the international boycott imposed on the Palestinian Authority since Hamas won January's legislative elections. He hoped that Hamas formally recognising Israel would enable the PA to win the support of the Arab regimes, Europe and possibly even Washington. “This is the first document approved by both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, which recognises the birth of a Palestinian country on the borders of '67,” Barghouti told the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. “It is pivotal because it unites the

factions for a purpose that has international legitimacy.”

For his part, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas seized upon the prisoners’ document to place maximum pressure on the Hamas-led PA and convince Washington and Tel Aviv that he was responding to their demands to rein in the militant groups. Abbas issued an ultimatum to Hamas: either endorse the text or a referendum would be held within 40 days.

Last Friday’s atrocity ended any possibility of Hamas signing up to a common position, let alone acquiescing to the blackmail of Abbas. Formally the Kadima-led government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert maintained a neutral stance on the referendum. They did not want to be seen to oppose an attempt by Abbas to bring Hamas into line. In reality Tel Aviv supported Abbas’s move only to the extent that it helped polarise the situation in the Occupied Territories. What it most certainly did not want is for Hamas to agree to change its stance on recognising Israel.

Israel has used the election of Hamas as the pretext for a stepped-up offensive against the Palestinians. Kadima and its predecessor Likud, under Ariel Sharon, have long sought to precipitate a civil war between the Palestinian groups that would leave the PA in ruins.

The shelling of the Gaza beach has in a single stroke destroyed any chance of Hamas and Islamic Jihad backing the prisoners’ document. Renewed fighting between Hamas and Fatah broke out on June 10 in Gaza. Fatah accused the Islamists of killing Basim al-Qutub, one of their security officers, in Gaza City. Rival Fatah and Hamas-aligned police later engaged in a shootout as Qutub’s funeral convoy passed through the city’s streets.

Olmert has repeatedly defended Kadima’s proposed unilateral drawing of Israel’s borders on the basis that there is no Palestinian “partner for peace.” Hamas has been made into a pariah for its refusal to recognise Israel, while Abbas is condemned for being powerless because he cannot accede to Israeli demands for Hamas to be forcibly disarmed.

On this basis, East Jerusalem and about 10 percent of the West Bank is to be formally annexed. Israel will also maintain its occupation of the Jordan Valley, which constitutes a further 30-35 percent of the territory. While all this contravenes international law and numerous United Nations resolutions, Olmert has enjoyed the full support of Washington for his plans.

The last thing he wanted was for a change in Hamas’s position to create political problems, given US support for the referendum as a means of strengthening Abbas and the more serious possibility of a weakening of European support for a military offensive preceding a final settlement on Israeli terms.

In a cabinet meeting held June 4, Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter demanded the reoccupation of northern Gaza. “If need be we can turn [northern Gaza town] Beit Hanoun into a ghost town,” he told his colleagues. “We need to return the balance of deterrence.”

In response, Olmert stressed the need to be conscious of the potential international response. “We have severe means in our arsenal, but sometimes, with international consideration, they are not effective,” he said. “It is not good to hurt civilians, and therefore anti-terror activity combines a few considerations. We must weigh what is effective and when.... If sharper measures become necessary we will use them.”

The inevitable Palestinian reprisals for Friday’s killings provided the required justification for “sharper measures,” which Olmert will argue for in planned visits to Britain, France and Germany.

In an interview jointly conducted by the *Financial Times* and the

*Independent*, published June 10, Olmert gave full vent to his hostility towards the proposed referendum.

“The referendum is an internal game between one faction and the other,” he declared. “It is meaningless in terms of the broad picture of chances towards some kind of dialogue between us and the Palestinians. It’s meaningless.”

In its stead, Olmert declared his support for the “basic principles” of the US-sponsored “Road Map.”

The Israeli government, with the support of the Bush administration, has redefined the terms of the Road Map so that the only thing that matters is the insistence that nothing happens until the PA disarms Hamas and other militant groups.

Olmert said he would seek European support for his proposals to define Israel’s borders unilaterally “in the likely event” that talks with Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, failed.

He would meet Abbas towards the end of this month, but stressed that progress would depend on Abbas abiding strictly by the terms of the Road Map. Olmert was asked whether he demanded the disarming of Hamas despite the fact that this would lead to a Palestinian civil war. “Of course,” he replied. “This is the principle.... So [Abbas] will not be able to get away by saying I forced a referendum that accepted a programme which is far behind the basic principles that the international community defined anyway.”

Olmert placed particular emphasis on convincing the European powers to back unilateral separation. “I don’t believe that at the end of the day they [European governments] would prefer a stalemate or a deadlock and a status quo for ever,” he said. “I don’t believe that there is one European leader, serious European leader, [who] would say that unless the Palestinians receive 100 percent of every demand of theirs, there can be no peace.”

The Israeli government has every reason to believe it can secure the backing of the US and Europe and that there will be no repercussions as a result of atrocities such as the shelling of Beit Lahia beach. The muted response to the shelling left no doubt that it is business as usual as far as the “international community” is concerned. The incident is by no means the first Israeli atrocity, and everyone knows it will not be the last.

In a brief statement, the Bush administration merely appealed for “mutual restraint” and urged the Israelis and Palestinians to avoid exacerbating tensions. Washington’s sole demand was issued to the Palestinian Authority, which was ordered to “prevent all acts of terrorism, including the firing of missiles and rockets from Gaza.”



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