

As IDF denies shelling of Gaza beach

Israeli air strike kills ten

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An Israeli missile strike killed ten Palestinians, two of them schoolchildren, in Gaza City on June 13. Later that same day the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) issued a whitewash report, exonerating itself from blame for the June 9 shelling of a Gaza beach that led to the deaths of eight people—including seven members of the same family, of which three were children—and injured 35 others.

Tuesday's missile strike makes clear that the temporary halt to Israel's ongoing bombing of Gaza, forced on the IDF by public outrage over the beach attack, has ended. The slaughter of Palestinian civilians has begun again.

The target for the IDF's latest attack, on a populous neighbourhood in northern Gaza, was a van allegedly transporting an Islamic Jihad squad. But at least eight bystanders died, including two children from one family. More than 25 others were wounded.

According to the IDF's account, an Israeli reconnaissance drone fired a missile at the van, which missed and landed among civilians. Seconds later an Israeli helicopter that had continued chasing the van fired another missile, which killed the occupants, including a leading member of Islamic Jihad's armed wing, the Izzeldeen al-Qassam Brigades.

Eyewitness accounts, however, disprove this official version. They state that the van was in fact hit by the first rocket and that the civilian deaths resulted from an additional rocket fired some time later—after people had gathered at the scene of the first explosion.

The van had careened along the road until it stopped outside a house. On hearing the explosion, ambulance men ran from a nearby hospital and children came out of the house. A second missile then exploded among the gathering crowd.

The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights stated, "Palestinian civilians living in the area gathered around the car and two paramedics from the nearby hospital came to provide first medical aid. Immediately aircraft launched another missile at the car, killing civilians, including a man, his two children and the two paramedics."

The dead included Ashraf Farouq al-Mughrabi, 30, and his two children—Hisham, four, and Maher, seven. Mr. Mughrabi's mother, Hekmat, said her son ran to the door of the house, "shouting to the kids, 'Don't be afraid, don't be afraid,'" and hadn't even finished his sentence when the second missile hit. My son died in my arms."

Shrapnel from the blast flew into the house, injuring several other family members.

A spokesman for Shifa Hospital in Gaza City said that the death toll would probably rise because some of the injured are in critical condition.

The IDF's report into the deaths on June 9 was issued just hours later. Israeli officials have suggested that the explosion on the beach came from Palestinian mines planted to repel an Israeli attack.

General Meir Kalifi, head of the inquiry, admitted that the military fired six shells onto and around the beach where Huda Ghalia's family died, and one of them fell about 100 yards away.

But by coincidence, either a mine planted by Hamas or a buried shell exploded in the same area at the same time, he claimed. Additionally, the shrapnel recovered from one of the victims being treated in Israel did not come from the 155mm artillery shells used by Israel, he added.

The army's account was rejected by Marc Garlasco, the first independent investigator on the scene. He had inspected the shrapnel and saw the wounded and concluded that the blast was caused by an Israeli shell.

Garlasco is the military expert for Human Rights Watch. A former Pentagon advisor who led the US Army's battle damage assessment team in Kosovo, he also worked for the US Defense Intelligence Agency identifying targets in Iraq. "Our information certainly supports, I believe, an Israeli shell did come in and kill these people," he said.

Among the shrapnel he collected at the scene was a piece stamped with the figures: 155MM. "The 155mm shell is what Israel uses in the howitzers that regularly shell northern Gaza," he said. Additionally, most of the victims' injuries were to the upper body. This is typical of artillery strikes, rather than mine explosions that cause injuries to the lower body.

"The crater left by the fatal explosion resembled those left by shells fired earlier in the area. You have the crater size, the shrapnel, the types of injuries, their location on the bodies. That all points to a shell dropping from the sky, not explosives under the sand," Garlasco said.

The crater where the family was killed resembles others scattered the length of the beach caused by Israeli shells. "To say you have five or six rounds in an area and coincidentally there's a land mine next to it and it goes off at the same time is asking a lot," he said.

The IDF's claim that there was an eight-minute gap between when the last shell was fired and when the Palestinians were killed is also disputed. The Palestinian ambulance service logged an emergency call just before Israel says it stopped firing shells.

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan expressed his own doubts over the IDF's findings. "The Israeli claim that the beach blast was caused by an explosive charge at the site sounds strange to me. I don't believe it is plausible that the Palestinians planted charges in a place where civilians often spend their time," he told the London-based *Al-Hayat* daily. He called on Israel to "respect international law and human life," urging the IDF to operate at a distance from civilians.

Israel's actions on June 13 make clear that it has no intention of heeding such polite requests.

The Gaza beach shelling was aimed at provoking retaliatory action from Hamas and other militant groups. The intention was to end at a stroke any possibility of success for the attempt by Fatah leader Marwan Barghouti to create the basis for unity with Hamas and Islamic Jihad based on the so-called Prisoners' Document, which calls on the Islamist groups to abandon calls for the destruction of Israel and accept a Palestinian state on the West Bank and Gaza. This would have provided a diplomatic opportunity to call for an end to the international boycott imposed on the Palestinian Authority since Hamas won January's legislative elections, something the Kadima-led government was determined to prevent. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is seeking to win international backing for plans to unilaterally draw up Israel's borders and seize large parts of the West Bank on the basis that Israel has no "partner for peace."

Israel also calculated that raising the political temperature would provoke fighting between Hamas and Fatah forces loyal to PA President Mahmoud Abbas.

Kadima badly miscalculated by underestimating the horrified response to the tragic deaths of a family picnicking during the school holidays, both internationally and in Israel itself. Particularly given that Olmert was beginning a tour of European capitals, Israel was forced to make a diplomatic retreat, announcing an inquiry into the killings and halting the attacks on Gaza.

But this mock contrition was only ever planned to be short lived. The IDF report and the resumption of its bombing campaign shows that Israel's offensive against the Palestinians will in fact be stepped up.

Following the issuing of the report, Defence Minister and Labour Party leader Amir Peretz declared, "We have been showing restraint due to the international storm caused by the incident on the Gaza beach—but no longer."

IDF Chief of Staff Lt.-Gen. Dan Halutz made clear that civilian deaths would not deter the army from mounting attacks. "We regret any harm done to innocent civilians, but at the same time we need to remember that they operate out of densely populated areas and we will not let them get away with their attacks," he threatened.

The Foreign Ministry has launched an international "information campaign" claiming that the Palestinians are responsible for any deaths because they use the civilian population as human shields

for their rocket attacks on Israeli settlements.

Its information sheet asserts, "Not only do these terrorists use the Palestinian population for cover, they also manipulate and exploit the suffering they cause their own people in order to achieve fleeting advantages in their propaganda war against Israel and its legitimacy."

It also states, "Since Israel's disengagement from Gaza last August, more than 500 terrorist rockets have fallen on Israeli civilian targets, including kindergartens, schools, homes and factories."

What Israel does not explain is that most of these primitive rockets have done little or no damage. In contrast, according to the United Nations, Israel has launched 5,000 shells at Gaza since March that have destroyed vast swathes of Palestinian infrastructure and farmlands and claimed dozens of lives.

Israel was no doubt encouraged to go on the offensive once again by the warm reception given to Olmert by Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair.

At a press conference in London the day the IDF report was issued Blair stopped just short of fully endorsing Olmert's proposed land-grab on the West Bank. But he made clear that he would support it.

Blair wanted negotiations with the Palestinians to take place, but if they failed there would be "another reality": "Then we're in a stalemate that Israel is necessarily and realistically going to want to unlock. This thing either moves forward by negotiations, or other ways have to be found."

Olmert was happy to make the requisite noises about negotiating with Abbas, but added, "In spite of our obvious efforts, we may not be able to achieve our primary goal to negotiate with the Palestinians on the principles of the Road Map. We will have to move forward ... to separate from the Palestinians, pull out from areas of the West Bank, to realign Israelis to other parts of Israel, to leave very large contiguous territories for a state to be formed by the Palestinians." Blair agreed with Olmert that the Palestinians must be presented with a timetable.

Asked whether Israel should negotiate with Hamas, he replied, "You only negotiate with people who are prepared to accept your existence and stop violence."

According to briefings, the killings on the Gaza beach were discussed "only marginally" in private discussions between the two leaders. Publicly, Blair insisted that Israel's military responses were the result of Palestinian fire, not only on disputed areas, but also on areas that were not in dispute.



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