

Israel launches military onslaught on Gaza

Chris Marsden
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Israeli military forces launched a major assault on Gaza at about 2.30 a.m. Wednesday (Israel time), with missile and bomb attacks on the territory's main power station and three bridges. Infantry and armored units began entering southern Gaza soon after the air attacks.

The destruction of the power station, which is located in the Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza, plunged large parts of the territory, including Gaza City, into darkness. One of the bridges destroyed is a major link between the north and south of Gaza.

While Israel Defense Forces officials claim that the operation is to rescue Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, who was captured by Palestinian militants on Sunday, the scale of the attack on Gaza, the targeting of key infrastructure and the mobilisation of more than a hundred Israeli tanks and thousands of troops demonstrate the absurdity of these claims.

Hamas's armed wing has claimed responsibility for the joint attack, together with other factions, on a tank at an Israeli border post on June 25. Two Israeli soldiers were killed in the raid and Shalit was taken prisoner.

Israel is exploiting the capture of Shalit as an excuse to launch a long-planned military offensive into Gaza as part of a campaign to scuttle any return to peace talks and deliberately inflame the situation.

On the eve of the Israeli attack on Gaza, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared: "The time is approaching for a comprehensive, sharp and severe Israeli operation. We will not wait forever."

He continued: "I gave the orders to our military commanders to prepare the army for a broad and ongoing military operation to strike the terrorist leaders and all those involved. There will be immunity for no one."

Cabinet minister and former general Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said on Army Radio that leaders of Hamas could become assassination targets, including its

political leader Khaled Meshaal, who lives in exile in Damascus.

The Israeli government had already approved a contingency plan to cut food, water and gas supplies to the Gaza Strip.

Olmert rejected out of hand the demand from Hamas's military wing and two offshoots of the Popular Resistance Committees, the Saladdin Brigade and the Army of Islam, for the release of Palestinian women and children imprisoned by Israel. "This is not a matter of negotiations, this is not a matter of bargaining," Olmert declared. "Release of prisoners is absolutely not on the agenda of the Israeli government."

There are some 100 Palestinian women and 300 youth under 18 being held in Israeli jails.

Even as the Israeli Army and government issued professions of concern for the fate of Shalit, evidence was emerging that they allowed the raid at Kerem Shalom that led to his capture so as to justify launching hostilities against the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority.

Israel's security service, Shin Bet, has insisted that it gave the government advanced and highly detailed warnings of the Palestinian attack.

Israel's defence minister, Labour Party leader Amir Peretz, said during a cabinet meeting Sunday that he had been aware of warnings of militant infiltrations, but that these were very general. However, sources from Shin Bet told the daily *Haaretz* that the Defence Ministry had in its possession far more details than either Peretz or Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) officers have implied.

"The sources said the entire defence establishment had received a specific warning, both written and verbal, that militants intended to use a tunnel to abduct soldiers on the crossings situated on the southern part of the Israel-Gaza border," *Haaretz* reports. "They added that they could not explain why the army

minimised the severity of the warning.”

In addition, Ro'i Amitai, the driver and sole surviving member of the tank team that was targeted, has said his unit received an intelligence warning just a day earlier, indicating Palestinians were digging a tunnel. Hospitalised at Soroka Medical Center in Be'er Sheva, Amitai said that when his tank came under fire, the platoon commander called on the soldiers inside the tank to get out.

Some commentators have noted that the tunnel dug by the militants was half a mile long and the IDF's failure to detect it was extraordinary.

Silvan Shalom of the right-wing opposition party Likud stated, “It is now known that there was a warning. I think the warning was very specific. There is no doubt that we should investigate the dispute between the Shin Bet, which claims it forwarded specific information, including the probable location and method of the attack, and the IDF.”

Likud's call for an investigation—one is due to report on July 10—is coupled with demands for war. Party leader Binyamin Netanyahu told the Jewish Agency Assembly: “We have to bring down the government of Hamas.”

Even if one were to attribute the success of the Palestinian raid—and the capture of the first Israeli soldier in 12 years—to intelligence “failings,” Olmert's pose as the injured party responding to a “murderous, hateful, fanatical Islamic extremist desire to destroy the state of Israel” would still be a fraud.

As always, the Israeli government's propaganda relies on the readiness of the media to “forget” what went before and on the support of its backers in Washington. In truth, events are following a well-established pattern: Stepped-up Israeli repression provokes an often desperate act of resistance, which, in turn, is used to justify a massively disproportionate military response.

Sunday's attack on the Israeli tank squad comes after a five-month-long Israeli military offensive and economic siege of the Occupied Territories, which in recent weeks has left 14 Palestinian civilians dead, including the eight people killed on June 9 while picnicking on a beach in Gaza. According to the United Nations, Israel has launched more than 5,000 shells at Gaza since March, devastating its infrastructure and claiming dozens of lives.

The aim of such deliberate and calculated provocations is to sabotage any moves toward a rapprochement between Fatah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad on the basis of an agreement by the Islamists to abandon their call for the destruction of Israel.

Yesterday, Hamas signaled its acceptance of the so-called Prisoners' Charter backing a two-state solution to the conflict with Israel, thus abrogating its own charter, which calls for Israel's destruction and rules out peace negotiations.

Tel Aviv hoped to provoke retaliatory action by militant groups that would provide a *casus belli* for the full-scale offensive now underway in the Gaza Strip. The capture of Shalit, whose portrait was emblazoned across the front pages of all Israeli newspapers, provides the Kadima-led coalition government with the excuse it has sought.

Israel's military assault on Gaza, one of the most densely populated regions in the world, has the potential to be the bloodiest since Operation Defensive Shield and Operation Determined Path claimed hundreds of lives in the West Bank in 2002. Egypt has indicated its willingness to collaborate in this attack. Security officials in Cairo said they posted 2,500 police on the border to head off the flood of refugees that would result from an Israeli invasion of Gaza.



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