

Israeli assault on Gaza threatens wider Middle East conflagration

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With each day that passes, Israel's attempt to justify military aggression as a response to the capture of an Israeli soldier becomes less credible. Tel Aviv has signaled not only its intention to bring down the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority (PA), but also its readiness to inflict massive destruction to Gaza's infrastructure and heavy civilian casualties in order to do so.

Already its assault has involved military raids in the West Bank to seize top Palestinian politicians and lawmakers and a provocative flight by four Israeli fighter planes over the summer palace of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, while Assad was in residence. An Army spokeswoman said the flyover was intended as a warning "because the Syrian leadership supports and harbours terrorist leaders, among them Hamas, the kidnappers of the soldier."

Israel claims that the raid that led to Corporal Gilad Shalit's capture was masterminded by Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal, who is exiled in Damascus. The government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has threatened Meshaal's assassination.

Such an action would be tantamount to a declaration of war against Syria. This would dovetail with the ongoing efforts by Washington to undermine Assad's regime and, together with the attacks on the Occupied Territories, ratchet up tensions between the US, Israel and Iran. Israel has made repeated threats of a military strike against Iran since September last year.

There is support for such an option amongst hard-line neo-conservatives in Washington, who have long insisted that only a broader military offensive targeting Iran and possibly Syria can extricate the US from the quagmire in Iraq and succeed in establishing America's undisputed hegemony over the Middle East and its oil supplies.

The US administration likely signed off on an Israeli offensive in Gaza when President Bush met with Olmert at the White House in late May, in what was described as a "strategy session" dealing with the Palestinian Authority, Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions and the US occupation of Iraq.

There is already substantial evidence that Israel allowed the Palestinian commando raid at Kerem Shalom to take place in order to provide a pretext for such a pre-planned offensive. Olmert has still failed to respond to statements by the security service Shin Bet that it had warned the government and the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) that such a Palestinian commando raid was planned. Instead, he authorized an "inquiry" to effectively bury the issue while military hostilities proceed.

Israel's ability to marshal 3,000 troops and 100 tanks in a couple of days indicates forward planning. The same is true of the West Bank raids by the IDF. These resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of 64 Hamas ministers and parliamentarians and 23 military operatives, including Deputy Prime Minister Nasser a-Shaer, Finance Minister Omar Abdel Razek, Labor Minister Mohammed Barghouti, Minister Samir Abu Aysha and Jerusalem Affairs Ministers Naef Rajoub, the brother of senior Fatah official Jibril Rajoub.

Israel's National Infrastructure Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer hinted that Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh is not exempt from arrest or harm. "No one is immune... This is not a government. It is a murderous organization," he said.

Reporting on the raids, the Israeli daily *Haaretz* noted, almost in passing, "The arrests were planned several weeks ago and received approval from Attorney General Menachem Mazuz on Wednesday."

Israeli spokesmen have made clear that the arrest of the central leadership of Hamas, including fully one-third of the 24-member cabinet, has nothing to do with Shalit's capture. In response to suggestions that the captured politicians were to be used as bargaining chips to secure the 19-year-old conscript's release, an IDF spokeswoman said "It was simply an operation against a terrorist organization... They will be investigated, brought before a judge to extend their detention and charge sheets will be prepared."

Israel has not only beheaded Hamas, it has at the same time politically discredited PA President Mahmoud Abbas and ended any hope that he could secure acceptance by Hamas of a negotiated settlement with Tel Aviv.

Fatah spokesman Saeb Erekat accused Israel of "waging an open-ended all-out war against the Palestinian people that aims to topple the Palestinian presidency and the Palestinian government." He summed up the political impact of the arrests, stating, "We have no government, we have nothing. They have all been taken."

Depriving the Palestinians of any political leadership has been Israel's goal since it first proclaimed that it had no "partner for peace," in order to justify the military and diplomatic isolation of Yasser Arafat. After Arafat's death, it made the same claim towards his successor Abbas, using the justification of Abbas' failure to clamp down on Islamic militants. When Hamas won the PA elections in January, Tel Aviv secured the agreement of the Western powers to impose an economic and military blockade on

the basis of the Islamists' declared intention of seeking the destruction of Israel.

A major consideration in launching the current military hostilities was the calculation that Hamas' agreement to accept a two-states solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, implicitly recognizing Israel's right to exist, which came to fruition on the very day Gaza was invaded, would expose its justification for isolating the Palestinians.

The political beheading of the Palestinians is seen as one precondition for Israel unilaterally dictating its borders. The aim is to end any possibility of organized opposition to Olmert's plan to annex 45 percent of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

The other prerequisite is to reduce the Palestinians to a state of utter desperation. The economic blockade of the Occupied Territories imposed since January has already had a devastating impact. The impoverished population of the West Bank and Gaza has been deprived of wages owed by the cash-starved PA and denied the possibility of working in Israel.

The present offensive will produce a full-blown humanitarian disaster. Israel's first military action was not directed against Hamas, but the civilian population—the destruction of Gaza's only power station, threatening both water supplies and the ability to keep cool in scorching heat. The plant provided 42 percent of the power to Gaza's 1.3 million residents. Abbas's office described the action as "unacceptable and barbaric collective punishment of civilians, including women, children and old people."

This is only a down payment on what is to come. Israel has significant forces massed around the disused Gaza airport in the south and has begun a similar buildup in the north. This would suggest a classic pincer movement, eventually targeting Gaza City and other major conurbations. Israel has dropped leaflets on the northern Gaza town of Beit Hanun urging residents to leave. Senior military sources predicted a mass evacuation.

The most ominous development are reports claiming that Corporal Shalit is being held in the Khan Yunis refugee camp in southern Gaza, home to over 200,000 people. Air strikes have begun, but a full-scale ground invasion is possible that would produce wanton destruction on a scale not seen since the demolition of Jenin, in the West Bank, in 2002.

Israel is carrying out a war of aggression, accompanied by collective punishment, targeted assassinations and the seizure of elected officials, in blatant disregard of international law. But it can do so only because of the tacit support of the major powers.

Washington could not make clearer its support for Israel's actions. Bush's spokesman, Tony Snow, declared that Hamas has been "complicit in perpetrating violence" and that Israel has the right to defend itself. But neither the European Union nor the United Nations has issued any condemnation of Israel. The G-8 meeting of foreign ministers in Moscow merely called on Israel to exercise "restraint" and stated that the "detention of elected members of the Palestinian government and legislature raises particular concerns."

The terrible situation facing the Palestinian masses demonstrates the impossibility of realizing their democratic and social aspirations on the basis of a national programme and under the leadership of the Palestinian bourgeoisie. All that has been

achieved by decades of heroic struggle and sacrifice is the creation of a heavily militarized ghetto, completely at the mercy of its more powerful neighbour.

Fatah and Hamas have, in fact, agreed to champion a two-states solution at the very point that Israel has made absolutely clear it will not tolerate even the most truncated and partial expression of Palestinian sovereignty. Both are reduced to appeals to the "international community" to rein in Israel, or for the Arab states to come to the aid of Palestine. This is forlorn hope. All that will be forthcoming from the Arab League will be mealy-mouthed protestations.

In the case of Egypt, there is every reason to believe that it was consulted about Israel's plans. In any event, it has made clear that it will collaborate in the attack on Gaza. Some 2,500 Egyptian guards were deployed in the Rafah area on Monday on the pretext of preventing Corporal Shalit from being smuggled over the border. In reality, their task will be to turn back the thousands of refugees that are expected in the event of a full-scale military assault.

The Israeli working class has been led into a tragic impasse by the nationalist programme of Zionism. The Israeli bourgeoisie, which promised to create a safe home for the Jewish people, has created instead a monstrous and heavily militarised garrison state whose crimes against the Palestinians have earned it the enmity of millions in the Middle East and throughout the world. Reliant on massive subsidies and military aid from the United States, it has at the same time proved incapable of offering economic security to the Israeli working class.

Social and political tensions within Israel are growing ever more intense and malignant, as the Israeli ruling elite pursues an agenda of "free market" attacks on previously established social welfare programs and working class living standards, while on the right flank of the Kadima-Labour coalition government an outright fascist element looms, the product of Israel's occupation of the West Bank and its encouragement of Israeli settlement in the occupied territories. This explosive internal situation is itself a significant factor in the decision to launch new provocations and attacks on the Palestinians, as a means of diverting internal opposition.

Only a unified struggle by Arab and Jewish workers on the basis of a socialist program offers a means of defeating the machinations of Washington and Tel Aviv and averting a catastrophe.

All those in Israel seeking to oppose further bloodshed must break with Jewish nationalism and reject the Zionist state. The suffering of the Palestinian people and the impasse facing Israeli workers demands the forging of a revolutionary movement of the working class and the oppressed masses to end imperialist domination and capitalist exploitation, which is maintained through the reactionary regimes led by the Arab bourgeoisie no less than through the armed might of Israel.



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