

Israel rejects Hamas offer of cease-fire and steps up hostilities in Gaza

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11 July 2006

There can be no clearer demonstration of Israel's aggressive stance than its immediate dismissal of a proposed cease-fire by Hamas.

Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh offered a cease-fire early on Saturday, July 8. The proposal went far beyond a temporary halt to fighting in Gaza. On offer was a permanent cease-fire that had the backing of Khaled Meshal, the political leader of Hamas who is exiled in Damascus. He has been portrayed as a militant opponent of the recognition of Israel.

Hamas sources told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* that Meshal supports an agreement for the release of the 19-year-old Israel Defence Forces (IDF) Corporal Gilad Shalit, whose capture by the military wing of Hamas provided Israel with a *casus belli* for its two-week assault on Gaza, in return for the release of some Palestinian prisoners.

The agreement would include an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and an end to targeted killings, in return for a long-term cease-fire, or hudna, on the part of the Palestinians that would include an end to Qassam rocket attacks.

The deputy of the Hamas political office, Musa Abu Marzuk, later told the London-based Arab-language *Al-Hayat* that Israel need only recognize the principle of prisoner exchange before negotiations could begin on the number of Palestinian prisoners to be freed. The newspaper stressed that Hamas would accept the release of just 100 female prisoners and 30 men who have already served long sentences.

Senior Hamas members told *Haaretz* that the entire organisation now supports a hudna. They complained that there was no one on the Israeli side willing to hear the clear messages sent by their mediators and that all their offers have been turned down.

Within hours of the proposal being made, Israel made clear that it would not consider any cessation of hostilities. Instead, it continued to mount attacks throughout Gaza, including one that claimed three civilian lives.

An Israeli tank stationed in eastern Gaza City fired several shells at the neighbourhood of Sheja'eya. One of the shells

hit the home of the Hajaj family, as more than a dozen people were gathered in a small courtyard. Amna Hajaj, in her late 40s, her son Mohammed, in his early 20s, and her 6-year-old daughter Rawan were killed. One other adult son and three more people under the age of 12 were seriously wounded. "Everything and everyone was covered in blood," said Amna's brother-in-law.

The Israeli military acknowledged mounting a missile strike in the area, but claimed that the target was a group of Palestinian gunmen in the street. Israeli spokesmen made the usual suggestion that the house in Sheja'eya had been hit by Palestinian ordnance.

The next day, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert convened a cabinet meeting that he used as a platform to reject any possibility of a cease-fire, denounce the mealy-mouthed criticisms of Israeli actions by the United Nations and the European Union, and affirm that the Gaza campaign was intended as a "long war."

Olmert stated flatly that "we will not hold negotiations with Hamas—we will not hold negotiations with terrorists." The Gaza offensive, dubbed Operation Summer Rains, was a "war that cannot be bound by time," he said.

Even this was not enough for some within his cabinet, as well as Knesset members of the opposition parties, who urged the IDF to "clean up" Gaza. This prompted Olmert to call for patience: "It is possible to launch operations like in the movie James Bond, but we will then lose international support."

He told ministers that Israel had prepared for military activity against the Qassam rocket firings before the border raid by Palestinian commandos at Kerem Shalom and Shalit's capture, but stressed: "This is not the place to hold a public discussion on Gilad Shalit's abduction, due to its sensitivity."

To do so would, in fact, risk confirming that Israel had allowed the raid to take place to provide an excuse for its pre-planned military offensive.

Noam Shalit, the father of Gilad, has publicly criticised Israel's refusal to release Palestinian prisoners in exchange

for his son. He said that the prisoner issue would be “handled better... on the negotiation table, not in the battlefield.” His views have been ignored.

Last week, Israeli Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter said publicly that a release of Palestinian prisoners was possible on condition that Qassam firings were halted and Shalit released. But he reversed himself on Sunday, telling the meeting, “I want to make it clear that I am opposed to a deal in which terrorists are released in exchange for Gilad Shalit... the nation is currently facing a war of attrition.”

That same day, senior sources in the IDF told *Haaretz* that the military will intensify and broaden the scope of its raids into the Gaza Strip in the coming days. Operation Summer Rains was likely to last two months, they said.

Israel’s southern region commander, General Yoav Galant, indicated that Israel was planning a bloodbath. He threatened that Palestinian militants “will think twice before launching attacks when they see in a week, a month or two months from now that hundreds of terrorists have been killed.”

On Monday, Olmert gave a press conference during which he attacked the European Union for criticising the scale of the Israeli response to attacks by primitive rockets that had done little damage. The pro-government *Jerusalem Post* took the same line, with a headline that ran, “As Israel Fights, Europe Starts to Squirm.”

US Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns had taken the same stance the previous day, telling CNN, “Let’s remember who started this. It was the outrageous actions of Hamas in violating Israel’s sovereignty, in taking the soldier hostage.”

The IDF is presently concentrating operations on two areas—between the Karni crossing and the Sajayiyeh and Zeitun neighbourhoods, east of Gaza City, and the area of Dahaniye airport, south of Rafah. But the plan is to intensify raids by the middle of the week.

Over 50 Palestinians have been killed so far. On Sunday, the IDF disclosed that the sole Israeli soldier shot dead in northern Gaza on June 28 was actually killed by friendly fire.

Israel has rebuffed international criticism, including statements by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, of its collective punishment of the Palestinians. Israel has destroyed Gaza’s sole power plant and continued an economic blockade that, together with its military campaign, has created a humanitarian disaster.

Last week, John Ging, the new head of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Gaza, told the press, “Living conditions are at a new low. It’s a struggle to survive. Water, food, electricity, sanitation; these are the problems. The situation doesn’t get more basic than that.”

The IDF head of the Gaza Liaison Administration, Col. Nir Press, responded by insisting, “The situation in Gaza is not even close to developing into a humanitarian crisis.”

Last week, Israel reopened the Karni crossing into the Gaza Strip but closed it on July 6 after just 80 trucks loaded with medicine and food had been allowed through.

Ging urged Israel to open supply routes at Karni, where 235 containers of UN food were waiting to cross. Border closure was also preventing the UN from shipping its empty containers out of Gaza to be refilled and returned.

Instead, Defence Minister Amir Peretz informed the cabinet that the Karni, Kerem Shalom and Sufa border crossings from Gaza to Israel were closed once again.

Israel has taken the additional step of preventing entry to the West Bank of Palestinians with foreign citizenship for first time since 1967. The government made no formal announcement about a policy change. Those refused entry, most of whom have lived and worked for years in the West Bank, found out only when they reached the border crossings.

The ban has so far affected several thousand people, mainly American citizens, but also European nationals. Foreign relief workers will also be hit.

Palestinians born in the territories had their residency in Israel revoked after 1967 while they were working or studying abroad. Israel rejected their applications to have their residency restored, but permitted them to live in the Occupied Territories on tourist visas that must be renewed every three months.

The US has not even formally protested this flagrant attack on the democratic rights of its own citizens. The US Embassy told *Haaretz* that the US cannot intervene in sovereign decisions of another country.



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