

Israel stokes up Hamas-Fatah strife in Gaza, considers ground invasion

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Israel is intervening in the mounting factional strife in Gaza between Fatah and Hamas, with the explicit aim of eliminating Hamas as a military and political force.

On May 17, Israel gave the go-ahead for 500 Fatah fighters to cross into the Gaza Strip from Egypt, so as to lend support to the forces loyal to Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas who are fighting Hamas forces loyal to Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh. The 500 are reported to have been trained under a US-sponsored programme. Many Fatah security personnel have received training in Arab and European Union countries, often by American and Russian personnel.

The previous day, an Israeli military helicopter had fired at a target in Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, killing four members of Hamas's Executive Force and injuring 18. Israeli troops opened fire at Gaza's only cargo terminal at the Karni crossing, where a shoot out occurred between Hamas and Fatah, killing one person.

Also on May 17, Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz, of the Labour Party ordered the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) to launch air strikes against Hamas and suspected militants. In one strike, Israeli forces hit the headquarters of Hamas's Executive Force, its armed security group that has operated in Gaza since Hamas took power in January 2006. The Israeli military carried out targeted assassinations, blowing up cars it claimed were carrying suspected militants. Hamas said that three of its members were killed. Two further missiles hit a pick-up truck killing a family, including 13- and 18-year-old brothers.

Artillery forces massed on the border and some tanks crossed into Gaza. A ground force entered the northern part of Gaza, but Israel's military stopped short of an all-out invasion. This was followed on May 18 with several more air strikes. In all, at least 20 people have been killed and dozens injured by the Israeli attacks.

Israel claims that its actions were aimed at destroying the ability of Hamas to launch crude missiles, known as Qassem rockets, against Israel's southern towns. In the past week, Hamas has fired more than 80 rockets, injuring at least seven people, damaging several houses, and forcing several hundred to flee their homes. Sederot, a border town of impoverished Israelis of North African and Middle Eastern descent, which has a high unemployment rate, has born the brunt of the missiles.

A senior Israeli military officer said that the goal of the current operation in Gaza was to "make Hamas pay" for its rocket attacks against Israel. But he then made clear that this was not the main issue for Israel by adding that the IDF operations could continue

even if Hamas stopped firing rockets.

Israel is not "conducting a dialogue" with Hamas, he said, and the IDF operations were not necessarily dependent on the continuation of rocket attacks. "We're not just attacking real estate. We want to make Hamas pay for the terror," he said. The officer said the IDF would present its plans for continuing the operation to the cabinet.

The military has tried to pretend that its actions are unrelated to the ongoing factional fighting between Hamas and Fatah, but the sheer scale of the attack and the Palestinian casualties gives the lie to this.

On May 20, Israel's security cabinet approved plans to step up operations against Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza. It authorised operations to dismantle "terrorist infrastructure," but stopped short of authorising a full-scale ground invasion.

The violence that flared up a week ago has resulted in by far the worst casualties in the warfare that has simmered on and off between Hamas and Fatah for two decades. Peretz says his sources tell him the infighting has left 73 dead so far, mostly Fatah members. Dozens more have been wounded, including civilians caught in the crossfire.

Raging street battles broke out as tensions mounted, threatening to bring an end to the Hamas-Fatah coalition government sworn in on March 17. Israel never recognised the government and has continued its efforts to isolate and starve Gaza and hasten its political descent into civil war.

Palestinian Interior Minister Hani Kawassmeh repeatedly found that his plans to coordinate Fatah and Hamas' militias were countermanded by his security chief, Rashid Abu Shbak, who is on the payroll of Mahmoud Dahlan, a Fatah warlord in Gaza. Shbak ordered Fatah forces out onto the streets of Gaza without either Hamas's agreement or Kawassmeh's instructions, precipitating the violence of the past week. For Kawassmeh, this was the last straw and he resigned his post in the government.

Later, Hamas forces attacked Shbak's home, killing at least five of his bodyguards. Shbak and his family were not at their heavily guarded residence at the time.

A colour photograph in the *Financial Times* of Shbak's home shows something more like the Alhambra Palace in Grenada than the average slum in Gaza City or the refugee camps. It adds fuel to the widespread belief that the real reason for the Palestinian Authority's burgeoning security forces, the largest per capita in the world, is not to protect the Palestinian people from Israeli

attacks, but to police a US- and Israeli-dictated settlement, while protecting the Palestinian millionaires and billionaires from the Palestinian people.

Last Wednesday, when casualties had mounted to 41 in just four days, there were mass demonstrations in Ramallah in the West Bank and Gaza City calling for an end to the fighting. But in Gaza City, at least eight were wounded when shooting broke out, scattering the crowds of people. According to the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 150 Palestinians have been killed and 650 wounded in the factional fighting since the beginning of the year.

There is no agreement within Israel's ruling elite as to what approach to take to the near-civil war raging in Gaza and whether to authorise a full-scale ground operation.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has so far rejected an invasion. He clearly fears a second military debacle after Lebanon, particularly in light of reports from the security services that Hamas has doubled its military forces to 10,000, and allegations that it has smuggled large numbers of anti-tank missiles and weapons-grade explosives into Gaza. In any event, it would be difficult to move directly and immediately to such an option, after Israel's 2006 debacle in Lebanon.

His stance at this point appears to have the support of Washington, which fears that an Israeli invasion could destabilise the Middle East. The US is focused on continuing to support Abbas as its local puppet. To this end, Israel has allowed money to be transferred to Abbas's forces and for Fatah to receive training in Jordan.

But this policy has backfired. The more that Abbas is seen to have US and Israeli backing, the more the Palestinian people become alienated from Abbas and Fatah, already widely despised because of their corruption and inefficiency. Reports that the US has been supplying Abbas's forces with guns and millions of dollars to take on Hamas's supporters have added fuel to the fire.

One veteran Fatah member admitted that it lacked the support of the Palestinian public. "Most Palestinians still don't trust us," he said. "Most Palestinians still hold us responsible for the financial corruption in the Palestinian Authority. And what's worse is that many Palestinians don't like the fact that we are being supported by the US and Israel."

Israeli leaders supporting the pro-Abbas policy have argued that Fatah did well against Hamas's forces, which were better armed, better trained and numerically stronger, in the clash last Tuesday at the Karni checkpoint.

Whatever the hesitations and internal differences among Israeli policymakers, the general drift is towards an open military conflict. Many of Israel's military and intelligence chiefs and the most hawkish political elements led by Likud leader Benjamin Netanyahu have insisted that Abbas is incapable of policing the Palestinian Authority.

Speaking at a Likud faction meeting at the Menachem Begin Heritage Centre marking the 30th anniversary of the party's 1977 rise to power, Netanyahu said that the government "could evacuate whomever necessary, enact a closure on the Gaza Strip, stop providing services like electricity and water, or decide on a limited invasion of four or five kilometres to distance the range of the

Qassem."

For his part, Deputy Prime Minister Avigdor Lieberman of the far-right Yisrael Beiteinu has called for more intense ground activity in the Gaza Strip. He even threatened to withdraw his eleven Knesset members from the government and bring it down, stating, "The present coalition has reached the moment of truth. Either we dismantle Hamas, or we dismantle the government."

The Gaza Division commander, Brigadier General Moshe Tamir, has long urged that infantry and tank brigades be deployed on the ground in the Gaza Strip. He has been pushing a hard-line approach at cabinet meetings on Gaza, urging Olmert and Peretz to give the green light for an invasion.

He and others in the army's high command want to crush Hamas "before Gaza turns into another southern Lebanon," said a source. Their plan is to divide Gaza into three parts, seal its borders, and crush Hamas by flooding its towns and villages with troops in an operation intended to last no more than a week. Israel would rely on speed, superior technology, better training and intelligence, numerical superiority and, not least, sheer brutality to smash Hamas.

The aim—for which they seek US backing—is not so much to install another government as to create such devastation and privation that the Palestinians will finally submit to being penned into impoverished ghettos, or leave altogether. With the Palestinian territories virtually sealed off from the outside world, unable to get the agricultural produce upon which the Palestinian economy depends, poverty is the rule and shortages are widespread.

When Saudi Arabia brokered an agreement between Fatah and Hamas in Mecca last February leading to the establishment of the unity coalition, promises were secured from several Arab states to bankroll the Palestinian Authority, but as yet only the United Arab Emirates have come up with any cash.

The US and the European Union have maintained their own boycott of the Palestinian Authority. And while foreign aid has doubled to \$900 million, Israel has refused to release the \$800 million in taxes it has collected on behalf of the PA, and the total is rising by \$55 million a month. Without funding, neither the PA nor the coalition government can survive much longer.



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