

Israel targets Hamas's political leadership

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Israel is continuing to mount air strikes in Gaza as part of its drive to destroy Hamas as a military and political force and torpedo the Palestinian national unity government, as well as any possibility of a negotiated deal with Palestinian leaders.

Israel argues that its air strikes are aimed at halting Hamas's ability to launch Qassem rocket attacks on its towns bordering Gaza. On Sunday, an Israeli man died as a result of a Qassem rocket in Sederot—the twelfth person to have been killed by rockets fired from Gaza at Israel in the past three years.

But the scale of deaths, injuries and damage sustained by Palestinians defies such claims. Nearly 50 people have been killed in Israeli attacks over the past fortnight. Dozens more have been injured, including women and children, and many buildings have been destroyed.

Moreover, while previously Israel's military forces have focussed on Hamas's armed wing, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert warned on Sunday: "There will be no limit in acting against the terror groups and against those who are responsible for the terror. No one is immune."

Helicopters and fighter planes, using precision weapons, have conducted air strikes against money-changing offices and businesses in the Gaza Strip that Israel claimed had been transferring money to Hamas and other militant organisations, as well as Hamas's arms caches, training bases and command posts for its militia, the Executive Force.

Having eschewed a major ground offensive against Gaza at this stage, Israel is extending its policy of targetted assassinations to political as well as militant leaders, including Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of Hamas's political wing.

On Saturday, Israel's military forces fired two missiles that landed near Haniyeh's home in the Shati refugee camp on the outskirts of Gaza City. They hit trailers used by his bodyguards and cut electricity to the crowded camp.

Though the army claimed Haniyeh was not a target, the missile strike was part of a larger offensive against Hamas targets that killed five people only hours after Gaza militants had indicated they would stop their rocket attacks if Israel

halted its air strikes. Following this assault, Hamas rejected any talk of a ceasefire.

Earlier in the week, Israeli missiles destroyed the home of Khalil al-Haya, a Hamas member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, killing eight of his relatives and neighbours.

In the West Bank, Israeli forces arrested leading members of the Palestinian government, including cabinet minister Wasfi Kabaha. Last Thursday alone, 33 Hamas politicians, legislators, the mayors of four West Bank cities, including Nablus and Qalqilya, and local council members, were detained in overnight raids. The army also seized computers and files from politicians' offices, charities and a school in Hebron.

Palestinian information minister, Mustafa Barghouti, described the arrests as "a massacre" of Palestinian democracy and civil society. Last year, Israel arrested more than 40 Hamas politicians, including several ministers and the speaker of the parliament, Aziz Dweik, following the capture of Israeli Army corporal, Gilad Shalit. They had been elected in January 2006 on Hamas's Change and Reform list, which won the parliamentary elections. Nearly all are still being detained without trial in Israeli jails. The charges against them include membership of Hamas, which Israel and the US have designated as a terrorist organisation.

The most senior Palestinian official arrested in the recent raids, Education Minister Nasser Eddin al-Shaer, is not even a member of Hamas. He was also detained in last year's swoop but was released later by a military court, because no incriminating evidence was found.

Israel's foreign ministry issued a statement saying, "a terrorist organisation remains a terrorist organisation, even if its members stand for democratic elections. Membership in such an organisation is a violation of Israeli and international law."

Defence Minister Amir Peretz said in a radio interview that Israel would not make a distinction between the political and military wings of Hamas. "The arrest of these Hamas leaders," he said, "sends a message to the military organisations that we demand that this firing [of Qassem rockets] stop. If the rockets do not stop, we will not stop."

He added that Israel was “biting its lip” and refraining, for now, from launching a wide-scale ground offensive in Gaza.

Peretz’s deputy, Ephraim Sneh, went even further. Having described Hamas leaders as “terrorists in suits,” he was asked if this meant the Palestinian prime minister could be targetted for assassination.

Sneh replied, “I’ll put it like this. We don’t care if he’s a ringleader, a perpetrator of rocket launching or if he is one of the political leaders. No one has immunity. There is no one who is in the circle of commanders and leaders in Hamas who is immune from a strike. For what does political Hamas do? It gives the operational approval to those who are doing the fighting.”

In other words, Israel has arrogated to itself the power to kill another country’s elected leadership so as to eliminate it as a political force. It is to this end also that Israel has intervened in support of Fatah in the factional fighting with Hamas that has killed at least 50 Palestinians this past month.

Confirmation of Israel’s success in this regard has come from Javier Solana, the European Union foreign minister. Speaking after talks with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli leaders on Thursday, Solana said he did not know whether the current Fatah-Hamas unity government had reached its “death,” but it was a “non-functioning government”.

The recent offensive in Gaza and the West Bank underscores Israel’s hostility to any form of Palestinian state. The logic of the demographic situation is that for Israel to survive as an explicitly Jewish state, the Palestinians in the Occupied Territories must be driven out and the Palestinians as a whole reduced to an atomised mass that is easily policed.

No Palestinian leadership, whatever its political hue, is therefore acceptable to Israel. It had previously rejected Fatah, which had recognised Israel, as a “partner for peace” under Yasser Arafat’s leadership. In so far as Israel continues to have any dealings with Fatah under Mahmoud Abbas, this is solely for the purpose of fomenting civil strife and chronic instability so that the Palestinians either leave “voluntarily” or submit to Israel’s diktats.

The right-wing Likud leader and former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu articulated this policy most openly. Last week he proposed “a wide range of actions... to apply pressure”. This was to “begin with a general closure of Gaza,” he said, “through a controlled stoppage of services such as electricity and water, up to targetted killings and actions from the area on infrastructure targets, or limited ground incursion to the radius of the Qassam range or a larger ground incursion.”

Asked if he favoured a large-scale infantry incursion,

Netanyahu said, “I think the problem here is to return to the balance of deterrence that was so very eroded in the last year. As a result of the last war, Gaza has turned into Lebanon Two with bunkers.”

In an interview published on Thursday in the *Financial Times*, Netanyahu reiterated Likud’s long-standing position that the Palestinians already had their own state—Jordan—and called for “some kind of federation or confederation between Jordan and the Palestinians”.

Netanyahu, who is closely aligned with Washington’s neo-conservative clique, also indicated that the offensive against the Palestinians was part of a broader objective to reorder the Middle East.

Israel was fighting a war on several fronts, he stressed. “We now have three live fronts: one Hizbullah, which has rearmed itself with more weapons than it had before the war and better kinds of weapons... Second, Gaza, which is turning itself into a second Lebanon; and, third, Syria, which is arming itself feverishly, which is something it has not done in 30 years.”

He added: “The largest issue confronting Israel is the tide of militant Islam sweeping our region and threatening the entire world. But it is centred on the Middle East and the two streams—the Shia stream in Iran and the Sunni stream in al-Qaeda—they sometimes collide with each but more often than not, as in Iraq, they collude against the common enemy.”

The greatest danger was Iran, he continued, which Israel claims is funding and training all the terrorist groups. Here, he said, there were three courses of action: “First, nothing, in which case they will get [nuclear] weapons, possibly in three or four years ... Second, you can reserve the military option, preferably by the US, which has the means to do so. But that should be a last resort.”

Finally, “you can use the economic weakness of the regime to put economic pressure upon it by a combination of actions to limit its credit lines and divestment, divesting by companies, primarily European companies that do business there”.



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