

Israel says strikes on Gaza will be ongoing

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Israeli military incursions into Gaza and targeted assassinations of militants have become an almost daily occurrence since last month's Annapolis summit. Dozens of Palestinians have been killed in such attacks.

Attended by representatives of 40 nations, including 16 Arab states, Annapolis was billed as a restart to negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians that would resolve all the core issues involved in the long-running conflict by the end of 2008. But it was little more than a crude attempt by President Bush to provide a cover for the Arab regimes' support for Washington's preparations for an assault on Iran.

Mahmoud Abbas, the Fatah president of the Palestinian Authority, was told in no uncertain terms that his task was to ensure the "security of Israel" by crushing all resistance to the occupation and regaining control of Gaza from Hamas. Any future Palestinian state was dependent on whether the United States determined that he had carried out this assignment. Implicit in this ultimatum was the threat that if he was not up to the job, Israel would intervene against Hamas.

The Paris donors' conference that followed Annapolis was a sordid money-raising affair to provide the Palestinian Authority with the funds it needs to take on Hamas.

Israel only held off from launching an assault on Gaza before Annapolis so as not to be blamed for torpedoing the summit. Since then it has felt less constrained, announcing the expansion of the Har Homa settlement in East Jerusalem and ramping up its pressure on Gaza.

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) has carried out repeated operations in Gaza, from which it nominally withdrew in August 2005. These attacks are aimed at destroying Hamas and other militant groups' positions and preventing them from launching rockets or digging tunnels between Gaza and Egypt. They have carried on during the Moslem religious holiday, Eid Al Adha.

Ehud Barak, Israel's minister of defence, announced December 13 that Sederot, the Israeli city that has borne the brunt of the home-made Qassem rockets launched from Gaza, would be placed under military rule. This must be seen as a possible preparation for full scale attacks on Gaza.

Early last week, Israel launched air strikes against Gaza, killing at least 12 people, including a leading militant. It has embarked on a deliberate policy of targeted assassinations of Islamic Jihad, the group thought to be behind the daily Qassem rocket fire on Israel's southern towns.

Last Thursday, an infantry force, with armour and combat engineers, went 2.5 kilometres into Gaza and mounted a raid against the Maghazi refugee camp. In a battle lasting all day, it killed seven Palestinians, whom the IDF claimed were militants, as well as injuring several others, including a Reuters television soundman and a Hamas cameraman. The IDF has described this as a "routine mission."

On Friday, the IDF killed Majed Harazin, whom Israel described as the most senior militant to be killed in the past year, near the southern Gazan town of Khan Younis.

In all, more than 20 militants have been killed over the past week in these operations.

The *Jerusalem Post* cites senior defence officials as indicating they were not surprised by the Foreign Ministry's assessment last Thursday that 2008 would be the year Israel goes to war with Gaza.

Israel's military attacks follow an economic blockade on Gaza, which has brought its people to the brink of starvation. Israel imposed economic sanctions on Gaza last year following the election that brought Hamas to power. It closed its borders with Gaza, including Karni, Gaza's only crossing used for shipping agricultural produce to Israel and the outside world. There are also tight restrictions on Gazans leaving through Rafah, the southern crossing with Egypt.

If economic strangulation and virtual imprisonment were not enough, Israel has now sharply reduced the supply of fuel and electricity and is proposing to stop all such supplies.

Israel's raids have continued despite two offers from Hamas to end the rocket attacks in return for an end to Israeli operations against Gaza, the removal of its economic embargo and the opening of its borders.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert reiterated his position that he will not countenance a deal with Hamas until it recognises Israel, renounces violence and accepts past peace accords. Two former defence ministers, Shaul Mofaz and Benyamin Ben-Eliezer, now transport and infrastructure ministers

respectively, said it was not vital that Hamas recognise Israel, only that it cease firing rockets into Israel and smuggling arms into Gaza, and that it release Gilad Shalit, the soldier whose capture on June 25 last year provided Israel with a pretext for a major offensive against Gaza that summer. But Olmert rejected any consideration of a truce with Hamas.

“This war will continue,” he told his ministers. “The state of Israel has no interest in holding negotiations with those who refuse to accept the basic principles of the Quartet,” he said, referring to the international Quartet of Middle East mediators—the US, European Union, Russia and the United Nations. “This applies to Hamas, Islamic Jihad and anyone else,” he declared.

The ostensible reason for Israel’s actions is the continuing launching of rockets against Israel’s southern towns and cities, notably Sderot. But its response has been out of all proportion to the losses suffered. In the years since the first rocket was fired in 2001, 5,900 rockets and mortar shells have landed in Israel, killing 18 people and wounding about 600. More than 1,000 rockets have been fired since June this year.

Much as sections of Israel’s political establishment would like to launch an all out war against Hamas and Gaza, more is needed to provide a *casus belli*.

Yoel Marcus articulated Israel’s calculations in a commentary opposing such a war in the newspaper *Ha’aretz*, headlined “A Vietnam called Gaza.”

He noted that 18 casualties paled into insignificance even when compared with the number of Israelis killed in traffic accidents—210 in the previous six months, or 35 fatalities a month. “World opinion views the number of casualties from Qassem attacks over the last six years as negligible, surely not enough to justify World War III,” he wrote.

Marcus said that former Israeli leader Ariel Sharon had “considered the option of an aerial bombardment of the areas from which the Qassem rockets are launched, but dropped the idea when it was made clear to him that anyone who starts indiscriminate bombing of a civilian population is liable to end up in the International Criminal Court in The Hague.”

He continued, “Even now, when public demand for sending the army into Gaza is growing, this option is not as simple as it seems. It is impossible to launch a war in a densely populated area, with narrow alleys housing thousands of women and children, without the support of international public opinion. And we cannot muster such support when we have suffered a single kidnapped soldier and 18 fatalities in six years.

“Having learned the lesson of the Second Lebanon War—that in order to eradicate terror, you need an M-16, not

an F-16—sending a massive ground force into Gaza for a kind of expanded operation Defensive Shield is liable to pin us down for months or even years in a bloody war.” He noted that would require a call-up of Israel’s reservists.

That Marcus should write that the invasion of Gaza could trigger World War III implies that Jerusalem and Washington know that this would precipitate a much wider war in the region. Indeed, any war against either Gaza or Lebanon is aimed primarily at Iran and Syria.

Despite such warnings, the right-wing *Jerusalem Post* confirmed that military operations were being planned. It said in a commentary, “The thinking within Jerusalem that a large-scale operation against Gaza is the only real way for Prime Minister Ehud Olmert’s peace partner, Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, to gain power in Gaza has been floating around the halls in the Kirya Military Headquarters for several months now.”

This would be no small operation. The *Post* said it believed Israel would first bomb Hamas positions from the air and assassinate the military and political leadership of Hamas. Having learned its lessons from the Lebanon war, the IDF would early on send in large ground forces to stop the rockets and hunt down alleged terrorists in a door-to-door operation through Gaza’s densely packed streets. It would patrol the border with Egypt to stop weapons being smuggled into Gaza, as well as Gaza’s northern border from which the rockets were launched.

The *Post* acknowledged that there were two problems. It asked what price Israel was willing to pay. Official estimates put likely Israeli losses at more than the 119 soldiers killed in the Lebanon war.

More importantly, Israel had to have an exit strategy. “It is easy to go in, but more difficult to get out,” the *Post* cited a senior defence official as saying. The newspaper added that within the IDF and Shin Bet, Israel’s security agency, few believed that Abbas would be able to take over the reins in Gaza.

For these reasons, Olmert’s Kadima government and his coalition partners may have decided, for the time being at least, to hold back from a full-scale invasion. But the logic of the situation leads inexorably to such an outcome.



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