

After the Gaza breakout: Israel launches sustained hostilities

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Israeli armed forces are engaged in a sustained offensive against the Gaza Strip with the aim of eliminating Hamas's military and political leadership. Tzahi Hanegbi, chairman of the Israeli parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee, said Israel should go after Hamas's political leaders, and not just its gunmen. Israeli defence officials said they were considering stepping up their air strikes to target Hamas political leaders in Gaza.

In another announcement, Defence Minister Ehud Barak ordered the army to prepare for a major operation to end rocket fire from Gaza. Vice premier Haim Ramon said Israel would maintain its blockade on Gaza and reduce supplies of electricity and fuel, tightening once again its grip on Gaza.

The pretext for this escalation of attacks on Gaza was a suicide bombing on February 4 that killed one woman and injured nearly a dozen people in the southern town of Dimona. In truth, however, the resumption of suicide attacks by Hamas and the continuing Qassem rocket fire on Sederot is a desperate response to the human catastrophe that has been inflicted upon Gaza by Israel and its Western backers for months. It was the first suicide bombing in Israel since January 2007 and the first for which Hamas has claimed responsibility since August 2004.

According to United Nations statistics, in the third week of January, Israeli security forces killed 23 Palestinians and wounded 70 in Gaza, compared with 3 Israeli civilians injured by Qassem rockets. Among the casualties of these aerial drones were three from the armed wing of Hamas and one from Islamic Jihad, killed near Jabaliya, and another two militants killed and four others injured near Tuffah. Israel also sent in tanks, one of which fired shells at a high school in Beit Hanun, killing a teacher and wounding three students. Other tanks, backed by helicopters, carried out raids in parts of Gaza City, wounding several Palestinian gunmen.

The total number of Palestinians—mostly Gazan militants—killed since the US brokered peace talks in Annapolis last November is more than 168.

Hamas's political leadership has vacated all its command centres in the Strip in the expectation that they will be bombed. The elected Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, deposed by President Mahmoud Abbas last June, has curtailed his public appearances. A number of his former cabinet ministers have gone underground, and leading members have turned off their cell phones.

Abbas made an appeal urging Israel to let supplies into Gaza, while condemning the militants' rocket fire. "These rockets that are being fired at Israel must stop. It's pointless," he said at a news conference with Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik.

He offered to broker a ceasefire between the Hamas-ruled Gaza

Strip and Israel and restated a willingness to take over operating the crossings into the territory, which Israel has mostly closed off as part of an economic clampdown aimed at applying pressure on Hamas in Gaza. Rejecting the offer, Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum said, "President Abbas doesn't believe in the resistance against the occupier and is looking to promote a defeatist project under the false slogan of wanting to protect the Palestinian people."

The security cabinet of Prime Minister Ehud Barak has so far held back from authorising a full-scale invasion of Gaza because it would mean committing a vast number of ground troops, including the call-up of reservists, to a long operation with major Israeli casualties and uncertain political gains, as the debacle against Hezbollah in the summer of 2006 demonstrated. But the low-intensity operation now being conducted was in preparation long before the Dimona suicide bombing.

Israeli leaders had only held back from carrying out such an assault earlier so as not to embarrass President George Bush during his visit to the Middle East last month aimed at drumming up support for his offensive against Iran and Syria. But the situation for Israel worsened dramatically with the breaching of Gaza's borders with Egypt on January 23, with hundreds of thousands of Palestinians streaming into Egypt to buy the most basic necessities of everyday life.

The breakout was not the work of Hamas, but a spontaneous response to the humanitarian catastrophe provoked by Israel's long-term blockade of Gaza's 1.5 million residents, which culminated on January 17 in the termination of all food, medication, fuel and power supplies to Gaza. As in the 1987-1988 Intifada, there were clear signs of the Palestinians emerging independently and *en masse* as a social force.

The breakout has profoundly destabilised relations both between and within Israel, Egypt, and the Palestinian rulers, be they Fatah or Hamas. The scenes on television of the long suffering Palestinians bringing back the most basic provisions so long denied to them evoked a wave of international sympathy for their plight and provoked outrage among the Egyptian and Arab people. Demonstrations in support of the Palestinians broke out across the region.

The Egyptian border guards were overwhelmed and refused at first to take action against the Palestinians, despite demands to do so from the Israeli government. For the Egyptian government, the breaching of the border created a grave political crisis. President Hosni Mubarak has long policed the border with Gaza, but did not want to be seen as directly aiding Israel against desperate civilians. But he saw the development as a threat to his regime. Hamas is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, the main organised—although only semi-legal—political opposition in Egypt. He feared that Palestinian

militants would move into Egypt and many undocumented Palestinians would make their home there. This would exacerbate the already tense social relations within Egypt, where Mubarak's military-backed government is almost universally loathed. It would also raise the possibility of attacks on Israel launched from Egypt's Sinai desert, which would endanger Egypt's increasingly fragile and unpopular relations with Israel.

For days, Egypt prevaricated. Initially, its border police used water cannon and fired warning shots in an attempt to prevent Palestinians from trying to reach Egypt. Clashes broke out. But additional breaches in the wall on January 25 led to a further outpouring of Palestinians, and by nightfall, Egyptian security forces gave up and left the borders open.

The border area became a giant open-air market selling everything from soap and cigarettes to refrigerators and goats. For several days, there was no attempt to police the border, although Egyptian road blocks in Sinai sought to prevent thousands of Palestinians from travelling into mainland Egypt.

Unable to police the border without an increase in the number of border troops sanctioned under the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, something Israel has repeatedly refused, the Mubarak government turned to the Palestinian leadership for help. PA president Mahmoud Abbas offered to take responsibility for all the Palestinian borders, including Gaza's borders with Egypt. But Hamas, which has been involved in a civil war with Abbas's Fatah-controlled forces, refused to countenance such an arrangement. Instead, it used the opportunity to present itself as a responsible negotiating partner, and called for joint talks with Egypt and the PA to resolve the crisis. It insisted that Hamas must have a role in future border control.

Despite opposition from Abbas, Egypt was in the end only able to seal the borders after securing an agreement with Hamas to restore control over the crossings. One week after the border was breached and more than half of Gaza's 1.5 million people had crossed over, Egypt used coiled razor wire to close much of the border. Hamas guards prevented taxis and private cars from crossing, while continuing to let pedestrians and freight through into Egypt. On February 3, Egyptian forces sealed and reinforced the last remaining gaps in the 12-kilometre border with wire and metal barricades.

Since then, Egyptian guards have refused to let anyone cross the border other than returning Egyptians. Palestinians, who had been hounded across the Sinai desert, were summarily thrown out of Egypt. In border clashes, guards killed 1 Palestinian and injured 59 others. Mubarak's regime has mounted a public disinformation campaign alleging that the Palestinians have flooded Egypt with counterfeit money and set up terrorist cells, in order to lessen sympathy for the Palestinians.

While the breakout appears to have initially strengthened Hamas at the expense of Fatah, it has demonstrated that the Hamas government in Gaza, in the final analysis, functions as little more than the Palestinians' jailer on behalf of Israel and the Arab regimes.

From Israel's perspective, the border break was a major setback. It also raised another danger—the possibility of an orchestrated Palestinian breakout into Israel.

As soon as the breakout occurred, therefore, Olmert despatched additional riot control gear to security forces in the south of the country. He has since announced that Israel will build a security fence all along its 260-kilometre border with Egypt in the Sinai desert.

Originally proposed years ago, it was never built due to the cost, estimated at US\$270 million. While the government said work would

begin immediately, this must presage a further round of public spending cuts. They will take place under conditions of rising inequality, which a recent report from the National Economic Council described as “a mark of disgrace on the state of Israel today,” demonstrations from the impoverished towns in the north and south of the country demanding financial aid, and fears about jobs as the dollar's devaluation threatens Israel's export markets.

No sooner had Hamas and Egypt sealed the border than Israel relaunched its murderous attacks on Gaza, seizing on the suicide bombing that its own actions had done so much to provoke as a convenient pretext. Israel has, in addition, further cut back its shipments of fuel and electricity to Gaza, with the full backing of its supreme court. Israel has tacitly acknowledged that fuel and electricity cuts amount to collective punishment. “There is no justification for demanding that we allow residents of Gaza to live normal lives while shells and rockets are fired from their streets and courtyards at Sederot and other communities in the south,” said Olmert on January 24.

Some such as Ami Ayalon, a minister and former head of Israel's security service Shin Bet, have called for a ceasefire with Hamas in Gaza, something that Hamas has already indicated it would agree to across the occupied territories. But Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit is one of several ministers demanding harsher economic and military measures against Gaza. After a rocket attack from Gaza on Sederot that badly injured two young Israelis, including a child, he told fellow cabinet members that the army should pick a neighbourhood in Gaza, give its residents a day to leave and then level it.

Hawks within the political establishment have argued for some time for a full-scale military operation against Gaza to be mounted. Defence Minister Ehud Barak responded by stating that if the rocket attacks continued, “IDF [Israel Defence Forces] action will get stronger and stronger.” He insisted that there were good reasons for the fact that the IDF were not yet operating at full strength in Gaza, but threatened, “When the time comes for this, we will do it.

“It won't be a one- or two-day operation,” he added.



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