Israel mounts bloody offensive against Gaza

Jean Shaoul
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In the last few days, Israel has mounted a massive offensive against the political leadership of Hamas and its military wing as well as the civilian population of Gaza. The attacks, claiming the lives of over 100 Palestinians, including many civilians, presage a full scale aerial bombardment and a possible ground invasion. Israeli officials are already describing the conflict with Gaza as a "war".

Early Sunday morning, Israel's air force demolished the office of Hamas Prime Minister, Ismail Haniyeh, in Gaza City, wounding five people, and hit seven weapons depots in northern Gaza, killing five militants. While the office was empty at the time of the air strike, there was no mistaking its message to the Hamas leadership—the same given to Yasser Arafat in April 2002 when his Ramallah compound was demolished—that nothing but total submission to Israel's diktats will suffice. It was one of a dozen targets of a dawn raid by the Israel air force.

The previous day, in the deadliest attack since Israel supposedly "disengaged" from Gaza in August 2005, Israeli ground forces entered northern Gaza, targeting militants in and around Jabaliya refugee camp. They killed 61 Palestinians, at least two dozen of whom were civilians, including a baby, and wounded about 200, 14 of them critically.

"We are in the middle of a total war. We hear the rockets and the explosions everywhere... we cannot leave our homes," a Jabaliya resident, Abu Alaa, told the BBC. "They're shooting at everything that moves."

Gaza's streets are deserted. Universities and schools have closed.

The latest attacks bring to at least100 the number of Palestinians killed since Wednesday last week. This compares with 80 Palestinians killed and 82 injured in January, with deaths running at the rate of at least 20 a week in the last few months. In 2007, 379 Palestinians were killed by Israeli security forces.

The number of Israel casualties testifies to the grossly unequal balance of forces. Two Israeli soldiers were killed and seven were injured in the operations over the weekend. While the injured soldiers were airlifted for treatment to a hospital in Beer Sheva, where six of them are reported to be in a good condition and the seventh in a moderate condition, wounded Palestinians face a desperate situation where the hospitals have little or no power or medication as a consequence of Israel's economic blockade of the territory. Only 100 Palestinians are to be allowed to enter Egypt for medical treatment.

Added to this, there is now the threat of water borne disease. Gaza's water authority has urged people to boil their drinking water as Israel has withheld essential supplies such as chlorine. Water contamination, now a very real threat, could lead to a health disaster for Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said that Israel would press on with military action against Gaza rocket squads, saying the current operation would not be halted even for a second.

"If anyone in Gaza has illusions that extending the range of rocket fire will bring our operations to an end they are sorely mistaken," Olmert told ministers in a cabinet meeting. "Let me be clear, Israel has no intention of stopping the fight against terror for even a second, and we will act according to the blueprint set by the government at a time and intensity of our choosing, in order to strike the terror organizations and those who provide them with cover and the ability to operate."

The immediate pretext for Israel's declared intention of wiping out Hamas's political leadership by targeted assassinations and of destroying its military capabilities is the ongoing firing of Qassem rockets from Gaza against Israel's southern towns. Most of the rockets are inaccurate, with less than half reaching Israel. But they have caused 13 Israeli deaths, numerous injuries, and considerable damage and disruption since 2001. Sederot, which borders the Gaza Strip, has faced daily rocket attacks.

In January, 267 rockets and 256 mortars were fired at Israel, injuring nine Israelis. In February, three children were wounded, one of whom lost his leg. Last Wednesday, a 47-year-old Israeli was killed by a Hamas fired rocket, the first fatality in Sederot in nine months. On Saturday, six Israelis were injured.

On Thursday, in a new development, a rocket hit a block of flats in Ashkelon, a city of 120,000 inhabitants, ten miles north of the Gaza Strip, breaking through the roof and slicing through three floors below. While no one was injured in that incident, another rocket landed near a school, wounding a 17-year-old school girl.

The greater range and accuracy of these latest rocket attacks has raised the possibility that Hamas has obtained more lethal weapons from Iran, possibly during the Gaza breakout in January.

The former army general, Matan Vilnai, utilised this unproven threat to warn that Israel was close to launching a full scale military operation against Gaza and that the Palestinians "would bring upon themselves a bigger holocaust because we will use all our might to defend ourselves". His remarks were particularly significant as he used the Hebrew word *shoah* which is usually reserved for the Nazi genocide of six million European Jews.

On Thursday, February 28, Defence Minister and Labour Party member Ehud Barak, speaking in Ashkelon, said that a response was "required". "Hamas bears responsibility for this deterioration and it will also bear the results," he continued. Yesterday, Barak made it clear that Israeli Defence Force (IDF) was intending to

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escalate operations against Gaza. He said that the IDF operation against Gaza rocket fire would broaden, and reiterated earlier comments that a major ground offensive was a real and tangible option. “We are not happy about it [referring to the Palestinian civilian casualties], we won’t shy from it,” Barak told Israel Radio. “There are many considerations about the timing,” he said, without elaborating.

In a separate interview on Army Radio, Barak said, “This is not the broad ground operation, but whoever says there will not be a big ground operation speaks on his own behalf.”

Any broad incursion into Gaza would seek to crush militant rocket squads and also “weaken the Hamas rule, in the right circumstances even bring it down,” he said.

Israel’s Kadima coalition cabinet, including Labour Party members, support such an escalation, with many calling for a full scale invasion. Eli Yishai (Shas party), Haim Ramon (a former Labour party member who joined Ariel Sharon’s Kadima party in 2005), and Ami Ayalon (Labour) have gone so far as to propose that the IDF fire on residential areas from which the Qassem rockets are launched after warning residents to evacuate their homes.

Such a policy in fact flows inexorably from former prime minister Ariel Sharon’s policy of “escalate, escalate, escalate” in pursuit of the Zionist aim of a Greater Israel at the expense of the indigenous Palestinian population (and of the Israeli working class, who have borne the costs)—an aim that can only be achieved by military means. It was for this purpose that he formed the Kadima party from both the Likud and the Labour parties, with the backing of Washington.

While the government is determined to press ahead with its attacks on Gaza and Hamas, yet another opinion poll indicated that 64 percent of Israelis want an end to the conflict and favour direct negotiations with Hamas to secure a ceasefire and the release of Gilad Shalit, the young soldier captured by Hamas in June 2006.

Hamas has indicated that it is willing to negotiate a ceasefire in return for the release of prisoners held in Israel and a lifting of the blockade on Gaza.

The broader context of Israel’s military offensive against Gaza is Washington’s increasingly threatening stance against Iran, which backs Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Syria. The US decision to deploy the USS Cole and other warships off the coast of Lebanon has also been linked by Nabih Berri, the Lebanese parliament speaker and opponent of the pro-Washington government of Fouad Seniora, to Israel’s raids in the Gaza Strip.

“The target [of US warships] is Gaza. It is aimed to allow what must happen in Gaza to happen without anyone moving to support [the Palestinians],” he said. “This is a real threat, not merely a muscle-flexing.”

Berri also said that the US military move was designed to focus attention on Lebanon “in order to cover up the massacres being committed in Gaza” He added, “This [US] fleet comes to back Israel so that it can complete its plan.”

Israel’s actions drew perfunctory condemnation from the European Union, while the Arab regimes were also muted in their criticism. The United Nations Security Council voiced its concern at the events. The US, which as a permanent member can veto any resolution, would not accept any criticism of Israel’s actions.

The White House made clear its support for the Israeli onslaught. While issuing a formal call for an “end to violence,” national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe, speaking from Bush’s Texas ranch, stressed, “There is a clear distinction between terrorist rocket attacks that target civilians and action in self-defence.”

Both Democratic presidential contenders chimed in with support for the Israeli attacks. “Israel has a right to defend itself,” declared Senator Barak Obama, while Senator Hillary Clinton criticized the White House for failing to take “a more active role in bringing international pressure on Hamas.”

Riyad Mansour, the Permanent Observer of Palestine to the UN, accused the international community of an “unjustifiable and unacceptable” silence on events in Gaza.

Gazan schoolteacher Tawfek Shaban, a 44-year-old father of five, summed up the reaction of the people of Gaza when he told the Associated Press, “Shame on the Arabs, shame on the Muslims, shame on humanity ... When they will act to stop Israel?”

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who lost control of Gaza to Hamas last June, condemned Israel’s operations on Saturday, calling Israel’s pounding of Gaza a “holocaust” and “genocide” and suspended peace talks. These recent attacks on Gaza threaten to unleash a backlash against him in the West Bank. In Ramallah, thousands of schoolchildren demonstrated against Israel. Some accused Abbas of being an Israeli agent, and protesters threw stones at cars and burned tires, forcing shopkeepers to close their stores.

Violent protests erupted near Jerusalem, as Palestinians in Atarot, Har Adar and Qalandia began throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at IDF troops. Spontaneous demonstrations took place throughout the West Bank at checkpoints, watchtowers and patrol routes and there were angry clashes with the IDF. In Hebron, hundreds of Palestinian youths threw stones and bottles at an Israeli checkpoint in the city centre. Israeli troops fired on the crowd, killing a teenager and wounding two people.

Later, about 2,000 angry Hamas supporters marched through the city, waving copies of the Quran and green Hamas flags and chanting, “Revenge. Revenge. Retaliate in Tel Aviv”. Demonstrations also took place in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.

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