

Israel escalates offensive against Palestinians with Egypt's assistance

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Within days of Israel mounting a weeklong civil defence exercise, Israeli armed forces invaded Gaza, killing about 40 Palestinians and injuring many more. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert threatened Gaza with further attacks.

For the last six months, Israel has cut fuel supplies to 30 percent of its previous level as part of its strategy of starving the Hamas-led Gaza Strip into submission. This has led to low power supplies, long power cuts, sporadic running water, and 30 million litres of sewage a day being dumped onto Gaza's beaches. Even the most basic food items are not getting through fast enough and rubbish is piling up in the streets.

The latest killings follow a Palestinian attack on the Nahal Oz fuel crossing and the shooting of two Israeli workers. Israel launched a number of assaults on Gaza and terminated all fuel supplies. Travel became all but impossible and the four main universities closed as students were unable to attend. Some limited fuel supplies for cooking have now restarted.

On April 11, Israeli forces killed nine Palestinians, including six civilians. On April 15, the military moved into northern Gaza and then struck at various points in the Gaza Strip during the night, killing at least 20 Palestinians in battles that went on for hours. Troops killed at least 11 Palestinians in the Bureij refugee camp, including five children. They fired four shells and numerous bullets at Gaza's El Wafa hospital, the only rehabilitation centre in Gaza, knocking out its generator and water tank.

In another attack, troops killed a clearly marked Reuters cameraman, Fadal Shana, and three Palestinian civilians, including two teenage boys on a bicycle, in an area where there was no military activity by Palestinian militants.

The New York based human right group, Human Right Watch (HRW), said its investigation showed that an Israeli tank crew fired "recklessly or deliberately" at the cameraman and his soundman. Joe Stark, HRW's Middle East director issued a statement saying, "Israeli soldiers did not make sure they were aiming at a military target before firing, and there is evidence suggesting they actually targeted the journalists."

HRW also called on Israel to stop using flechette shells which explode in the air, releasing thousands of metal darts. These weapons indiscriminately kill civilians, particularly in Gaza which is one of the most densely populated areas in the world. Physicians for Human Rights went to Israel's High Court in October 2002 to get the flechette shells banned, but the High Court upheld their use.

During the raids, three Israeli soldiers were killed and three were injured when they were ambushed by Palestinian gunmen. This was the highest toll suffered in one day by Israel since the 2006 Lebanon

war and brings to seven the number killed this year, more than in the whole of 2007.

Israel has also mounted operations on the West Bank, raiding the Qabatiya refugee camp near Jenin and killing two Palestinians, an Islamic Jihad militant and a 16 year old boy. On April 15, Defence Minister Ehud Barak ordered a general closure of the West Bank, scheduled to last for 10 days over the Passover, starting April 17, when exit and entrance to Israel would be closed to Palestinians.

Over this past weekend, Israel killed seven Hamas militants in a series of air strikes after militants drove an armoured personnel carrier and two jeeps packed with hundreds of kilograms of explosives at the Kerem Shalom crossing point into Gaza and pounded the border area with mortar fire. The suicide attacks wounded 13 Israeli soldiers, eight of whom were hospitalised. The four Hamas suicide bombers died in the explosion.

Hamas said its attack was part of a campaign to break the ten-month long economic blockade of Gaza. Israel and Egypt, which shares Gaza's southern border, have closed off Gaza from the rest of the world. Barak warned that Hamas would "bear the consequences" for the suicide attacks.

Israel's ability to carry out its remorseless actions depends first of all on the unqualified military and economic support of the United States and secondly on the complicity of Arab governments—uniformly despotic, corrupt and despised by their own people and dependent upon Washington—which have not lifted a finger to defend the Palestinians.

A crucial role is played by Egypt, which has been instrumental in isolating the Palestinians ever since it signed the Camp David Accords in 1979.

In the aftermath of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "disengagement" from Gaza in 2005, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak signed two agreements with Israel to police Gaza's southern border with Egypt.

The first, an extension to the 1979 agreement, is a military protocol limiting the number of Egyptian troops to 750 whose task is to prevent any Palestinian attacks on Israel, smuggling in general and the transport of arms in particular. The second permits only those with a Palestinian ID card and registered in Israeli records to cross, with the result that many Palestinians living abroad as well as Egyptians and citizens of other countries are unable to enter Gaza from Egypt. The Egyptian side of the border is under the constant surveillance of Israel via video cameras, while on the Palestinian side crossings are subject to European Union approval.

The US has locked Egypt into the Camp David Accords via military aid and some economic aid, although this is both small relative to

military aid and declining, and a trade agreement in which goods with an 11 percent Israeli content and produced in Egypt's Qualified Industrial Zones may be exported to the US without facing a tariff.

The Egyptian regime's dependence on Washington and support for the US occupation of Iraq and Israeli suppression of the Palestinians has fostered popular opposition to Mubarak's military-backed government. This has been exacerbated by rocketing inflation and high food prices, particularly for bread.

Much of the population relies on subsidized food and 40 percent live below the poverty line. At the end of March, there were two days of riots over low wages and high food prices, the worst unrest since 1977 bread riots, resulting in the deaths of several workers. Unofficial estimates of unemployment range between 17 and 25 percent. Conditions are so bad that lawyers, doctors and engineers work in unskilled jobs, such as taxi driving, to supplement their income. Marriage has become an unaffordable luxury.

Mubarak and the ruling military clique around him view Hamas, an offshoot of Egypt's own Muslim Brotherhood, as a threat to their own position. The Brotherhood, although officially outlawed since 1954, is by far the largest opposition party in Egypt. In the 2005 parliamentary elections, despite all the obstacles to standing candidates in its own name and campaigning openly, it managed to win 20 percent of the seats.

Mubarak ensured that there would be no repeat performance of this in the local elections on April 8 by arresting more than 1,100 members of the Brotherhood, intimidating their supporters and preventing almost all their 10,000 potential candidates from qualifying for ballot status. The Brotherhood boycotted the elections in protest, and Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party were returned unopposed on a three percent turnout.

Without the backing of local councillors, under the recent constitutional amendments it will be impossible for a member of the Muslim Brotherhood to run for the presidency.

Mubarak has also sought to outdo the Brothers by fostering the turn to religion. Whereas a generation ago, few young women covered their heads and few Egyptian men went to the mosque for the five daily prayers, now the hijab or headscarf is widespread and there is one mosque for every 745 people—compared to one mosque for every 6,031 Egyptians in 1986.

In January, the breach of the Egyptian border by tens of thousands of Gazans created a major political crisis for the Mubarak regime. While Mubarak has long policed the border with Gaza on behalf of Jerusalem and Washington, he did not want to be seen as directly aiding Israel against the desperate Palestinians who lacked food and basic provisions due to the Israeli blockade. But he feared that Palestinian militants from Hamas would move into Egypt and link up with their sister party, and that many undocumented Palestinians would make their home there, thereby exacerbating the already tense social relations within Egypt.

The breakout also raised the possibility of attacks on Israel launched from the Sinai desert, which would endanger Egypt's increasingly fragile and unpopular relations with Israel. Mubarak, after a few days of prevarication, therefore decided to re-seal and strengthen the borders, making it clear to everyone that he was totally dependent on and subservient to Jerusalem and Washington.

Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul-Gheit said, "Egypt won't allow the border to be breached a second time. Anyone approaching the border will have his legs broken."

The Egyptian police arrested hundreds of Palestinians, including 115

Hamas militants, during the breakout. While 34 Hamas activists were later released, at the end of March Hamas said that some were still in custody, leading to demonstrations on the Egyptian-Gaza border. Demonstrators set up a protest tent at the Rafah crossing with banners condemning Arab and Muslim nations for not doing more to lift the siege of Gaza. They also set up a symbolic cemetery designated "the Arab silence graveyard".

Since then, all but one of the Hamas prisoners, whom Egypt claims was planning to assassinate a senior Fatah member in Egypt, have been released.

At the beginning of April, after Israel terminated all fuel supplies to Gaza in the wake of the attack at Nahal Oz, Egypt intensified its side of the siege. It stopped large trucks from taking goods—food products, fuel and motorcycles—into the border town of Rafah to ensure that Palestinians would have no reason to breach the Gaza-Egypt frontier. It also despatched 1,200 security forces to Sinai to reinforce the border following an announcement by a Hamas leader that the border, which militants demolished in January, could soon be breached again.

The Egyptian government warned Palestinian groups not to try to breach the border or take advantage of what the foreign ministry described as "fabricated" domestic troubles in Egypt. It issued an official statement saying, "Any attempt to violate the sanctity of the Egyptian border by force or to illegally encroach on the border line will be met with the appropriate seriousness and firmness to protect the border and its sanctity."

As Israel continued its attacks on Gaza, Hamas officials went to Egypt to meet former US President Jimmy Carter who is visiting the Middle East to move the "peace process" between Israel and the Palestinians forward.

But President Bush's restart of the peace process after Annapolis is a charade. Fully 40 percent of the West Bank is off limits to the Palestinians due to the Security Wall, as well as the numerous military installations and roads linking the settlements to Israel proper. Israel is continuing to build this security wall, withhold tax and electricity payments from the Palestinian Authority, expand the settlements and tighten the siege of Gaza. It refuses to discuss the substantive issues of the borders of any future Palestinian state, the question of the refugees or Jerusalem, the three key issues in any peaceful resolution of the long running conflict.



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