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Israel's collective punishment of Gaza

By Chris Marsden

22 September 2007

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Declaring the Gaza Strip as a “hostile entity” and limiting its supply of fuel and electricity is an act of collective punishment by Israel. The Kadima-led coalition government has also said it will further restrict the transfer of goods and people in and out of Gaza. The moves are part of an escalating offensive against Gaza’s one-and-a-half million residents that could culminate in an armed attack.

The pretext used by the security cabinet for taking these measures was provided by cross-border rocket attacks, one of which hit an army base last week, injuring 69 soldiers. Israel has blamed the Hamas-led authority deposed with the support of the western powers by President Mahmoud Abbas’s Fatah, based in the West Bank. This is despite reports by Israel Radio that the deposed Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas has met with Islamic Jihad leaders to try and halt the rocket fire.

The Israeli government considered cutting off electricity totally in response to every rocket, but decided instead to reduce the amount of megawattage provided to the Strip. Claiming that this was a legal move, an official stated that “Hamas will have to decide whether to provide electricity to hospitals or weapons lathes.”

The government also decided to cut off all fuel, with the exception of that needed by hospitals and other functions deemed to have a “humanitarian” purpose. Diesel will be allowed in to fuel ambulances, sewage pumps, generators and garbage trucks, but gasoline will be restricted.

According to estimates, Israel still exports approximately US\$500 million worth of goods and services into the Gaza Strip each year.

All attempts to dress up a tightening of the siege on Gaza in legal-sounding terms and to apply humanitarian caveats are lies. Gaza’s people are already on the brink of starvation, with more than 1.1 million totally reliant on food from the United Nations. Israel supplies almost two thirds of its electricity. Cutting power for even a matter of days will halt water supplies to the apartment blocks in which most people live. Refrigerators will not work, and it will be impossible to store food.

There are no substantial fuel reserves in Gaza.

Israel, as the occupying power, is responsible for the well-being of Gaza’s civilian population. Declaring Gaza a “hostile entity” alters

nothing regarding international law. The term has no legal meaning. As Dan Izenberg admitted in the right-wing *Jerusalem Post*, “the government’s decision on Wednesday was a unilateral act, spoken in terminology that no one else in the world uses.”

The move met with formal opposition from United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon as being “contrary to Israel’s obligations towards the civilian population under international humanitarian and human rights law,” as well as from the European Union and the European Commission.

Nevertheless, Israel calculates that, verbal reprimands aside, it can take such action without serious sanctions being taken against it. It is strengthened in this belief because it is only building on the punitive measures against Gaza already taken by the major powers. Bradley Burston noted in *Haaretz* that “ministers may also have been emboldened in taking the step in the wake of an incident last month in which the [European Union] briefly cut off aid for fuel to Gaza, causing an electrical blackout for much of the population. International condemnation was minimal, a reflection, to a degree, of the widespread diplomatic freeze against the Hamas government....”

Israel also believes it can act as it does because of the resort to similar illegal acts by the United States and others in pursuit of the so-called “war against terror.” Declaring Gaza as a “hostile entity” has a similar pedigree to Bush’s defining of alleged members of Al-Qaeda detained by the US as “enemy combatants” in order that they can be tried by the so-called military commissions and deprived of their legal rights. Izenberg gave his own pseudo-legal justification for Israel’s actions, similar in all respects to the rhetoric employed by the White House, writing: “The laws of war deal almost exclusively with regular armies fighting one another. There are no international rules of the game for a war against terrorism. Unless and until that changes, Israel essentially has not [sic] choice but to create its own laws, for better or for worse.”

Hamas described Israel’s move as a “declaration of war.” “They aim to starve our people and force them to accept humiliating formulas that could emerge from the so-called November peace conference,” said a spokesman.

The media has stressed that Israel’s moves were an embarrassment and a surprise for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who was in Israel at the beginning of a Middle East tour to drum up support for the November Peace Conference announced by President George Bush. A senior US official stated, “We did not know about this particular decision beforehand,” while Rice herself insisted that the November conference “has to, in a substantive way, support” efforts to “lay the foundations for the negotiation of a Palestinian state as soon as possible.”

Whether Israel’s moves were a surprise is hard to believe, given the close collaboration between Washington and Tel Aviv. They were so clearly provocative and illegal that denial of foreknowledge by the US was required, but Rice, speaking alongside Israeli Tzipi Livni, nevertheless endorsed the action.

“Hamas is indeed a hostile entity. It is a hostile entity to the US as well,” Rice said.

This only reinforces Israel's efforts to equate the entire population of Gaza with Hamas—a fact changed not one iota by her pledge to “not abandon the innocent Palestinian in Gaza” and to “make every effort to deal with their humanitarian needs.”

Such differences as do exist between Israel and the US are tactical in character. The Bush administration is keen to pave the way for Abbas to sign up to some kind of rotten settlement with Israel sometime following the November conference. Israel's actions make that increasingly difficult, reinforcing the popular view of him as a stooge and a traitor. That is why Abbas was forced to condemn Israel's plan as an “oppressive decision” that “will only strengthen the choking embargo imposed on 1.5 million people in the Gaza Strip, increase their suffering and deepen their tragedy.” Palestinian Information Minister Riyad al-Malki added that “We are going to ask the Americans to pressure Israel to refrain from taking such action.”

The *Jerusalem Post's* West Bank and Gaza correspondent Khaled Abu Toameh called the government's actions a “decision that will backfire” because it would rally “more Palestinians around Hamas and other radical groups,” while they would “vent their frustration and despair against Israel and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and his Fatah faction.”

Where Toameh is wrong is to assume that this is not the government's desired outcome.

For years, Israel insisted that it had no negotiating “partner for peace.” Even after the death of Yasser Arafat, it took the same attitude—to Hamas and also Abbas—based on the claim that he had not moved with sufficient resolve against Hamas. This stance is no longer possible, but this does not mean that an agreement will be struck. Abbas is indeed a US stooge, and it is in Israel's interests to collaborate with him in suppressing Hamas and all resistance amongst the Palestinians. However, it has no intention of rewarding Abbas by granting some form of state, however truncated.

Toameh himself quotes a senior Abbas adviser complaining, “The Israeli government is doing everything to embarrass us and make us look bad in the eyes of our people,” and paraphrasing Abbas himself as saying, “How can I go and talk peace with Israel while hundreds of thousands of Palestinians are living without water and electricity? My people will never support me or any deal I bring back.”

It would be more correct to say that there is no deal for him to “bring back,” given that Israel is determined to permanently annex the whole of East Jerusalem and all the major settlement blocks on the West Bank. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has stressed repeatedly that Israel and the Palestinians are working on a “joint declaration,” rather than an accord of principles.

It would be a mistake to believe that sabotaging a negotiated settlement is as far as the government wants to push hostilities against Gaza. Several commentators have noted that it would be reluctant to take military action at a time of escalating tensions with Syria to the north. However, that only counts as to timing—delaying things until possibly after the November summit—and not to intent.

Calls to cut off Gaza's electricity were once the province of the

most right-wing parties. Now, it has become government policy. There is every possibility that the government will take military action in due course.

The Israeli Defence Force (IDF) is already mounting constant operations against Hamas and other groups in refugee camps in the West Bank city of Nablus. On Thursday, dozens of tanks, bulldozers and jeeps moved 1.5 kilometres into Gaza.

During the security cabinet discussions, Olmert and Defence Minister Ehud Barak both said that the time was not yet right for full-scale military action. However, Barak added that “every day that passes brings us closer to an operation in Gaza; we will decide on the means of an operation and the goals when the time comes.”

The *Jerusalem Post*'s correspondent with the IDF, Yaakov Katz, made clear his belief that that time will come sooner rather than later. He described the security cabinet's decisions as “only an attempt by Israel to delay what everyone in the IDF has realised is inevitable—a large-scale ground operation.”

He cites the IDF's Southern Command and Major General Yoav Galant as having been “pushing for a massive operation for the past year.”

A high-ranking defence official explains, “The first step is to weaken Hamas's ability to govern. If that doesn't work, then the second stage will be to weaken Hamas physically.”

Some Defence officials have already made clear their view that the actions taken against the Gaza Strip do not go far enough. Major General Yosef Mishlav, the coordinator of government activities in the territories, had asked for special permission to appear before the security cabinet. He said by not cutting off supplies altogether, Israel was still allowing Hamas to govern. The only way to really pressure Hamas was to completely cut off supplies and allow a humanitarian crisis to develop, he insisted.

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