

Gaza's Military Operation Against Israel Surprise to No One

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Gaza's ongoing military operation against Israel should have surprised no one, least of all Israel, which has besieged, blockaded and brutalised the 2.2 million Palestinian inhabitants of the narrow coastal strip for decades. Israel's initial occupation of Gaza and Egyptian Sinai took place in October 1956 when France, Britain and Israel attacked Egypt to counter Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal. While Israel sought to end Palestinian resistance raids from Gaza, France and Britain aimed to topple Nasser. When Israeli forces reached the bank of the Suez Canal then Israeli David Ben Gurion proclaimed his intention of subduing the strip's fedayeen (fighters) and absorbing Gaza into Israel.

The allies chose the wrong moment to mount their ill-fated Suez campaign as it coincided with Russia's invasion of Hungary to crush that country's anti-Soviet revolt. US President Dwight Eisenhower was furious and had no choice but to order the aggressors to withdraw. Israel withdrew from Sinai in February 1957 and Gaza in March, leaving an angry and abused Palestinians, the majority of whom were 1948 refugees, who were determined to resist Israel.

General Ariel Sharon took a tough line with Gaza after Israel's second occupation of the strip. He set the tone by bulldozing scores of Palestinian homes and arresting Palestinians who dared to resist the occupation. Realising the risks posed by Gaza, he withdrew Israeli soldiers and settlers in August 2005 but, instead of granting Gazans freedom, he imposed Israeli land, sea and air control from the periphery. After Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian legislative election Israel instituted its siege and blockade, deepening Gaza's isolation after Hamas took control in mid-2007. Since then Gazans have been subjected to major Israeli attacks four times.

Hamas has been preparing for Operation Aqsa Flood for many months. The movement has

amassed weapons, ammunition and paragliders and staged large and small-scale military exercises. Hamas has also acquired the skills to evade Israel's sophisticated surveillance of the strip and deal with its spies. Deception became the means to lull Israel to believe Hamas did not intend to mount anything which the Israeli armed forces could not manage. A sense of false security reigned in Israel.

The operation was launched after Hamas jammed Israel's electronic equipment strategically placed around the Gaza strip. Hamas claims 5,000 rockets (were fired into Israel early Saturday to cover flights across the border with Israel by paragliders and incursions by foot soldiers, and sea-born infiltrators into Israel. Once on the Israeli side paraglider troops unlocked and opened gates in Israel's fence which surrounds Gaza. Bulldozers blundered through others. Israel was warned of the invasion as the fence is well protected by ground sensors and other devices and topped with razor wire. Palestinian fighters fanned out to attack Israeli military posts and adjacent settlements and a rave festival being held nearby. Palestinian commandoes took prisoners which could be exchanged for high profile Palestinians among the 5,200 political detainees in Israeli prisons. In the evening, Hamas fired more rockets into Israel where sirens wailed in Tel Aviv and other cities. This was the first time Palestinians have plotted a campaign with such precision.

Hundreds of Israelis and Palestinians died and thousands were wounded on Saturday. Israeli casualties, the highest ever in a single day, shocked Israel and its friends in the West who routinely note and then ignore Palestinian fatalities and injuries.

With this operation Hamas demonstrated a high degree of competence which Israel and the West never dreamed it had acquired. Hamas suddenly became a ferocious, punitive opponent rather than an enemy which did not have the ability to mount a serious challenge to Israel. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to eliminate Hamas and will do his best to carry out this mission. Gaza and its hapless citizens are certain to pay a terrible price. Netanyahu will have to wreak vengeance because of the failure of his government, three intelligence services, and army to pre-empt Hamas' offensive which was modeled on the 1973 war when Egypt and Syrian mounted a surprise attack on Israel on October 6th of that year. In the aftermath of that war, which Israel won, its generals squabbled and the then Prime Minister Golda Meir was compelled to resign.

Netanyahu is not Meir who was honoured as a founder of the state. For several years, Netanyahu has been mired in indictments for bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He is determined to use all means to stay in office to avoid prison. His current, extreme right, wing coalition and campaign to weaken Israel's supreme court endangering Israel's democracy are intended to keep him in office for as long as possible. His failure to understand what Hamas was preparing could bring him down along with his radical ministers and consign him to jail time.

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