

The Horrors of Israel's Invasion of Gaza

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The trail of blame for three missing Israeli boys, which the Israeli government has used as the reason for their latest military exercise, is weak.

Before the alleged murders of Eyal Yifrach, Gilad Shaar and Naftali Frenkel – the culprits of which have still not yet been definitively proven – the three Israeli teenagers went missing from a settlement on June 12 near Hebron and remained missing until their bodies were reportedly found on July 1.

What followed has been the summary bombardment of Palestinians, which has included the killing of babies, children, the elderly and the disabled. The horror of a ground invasion continues, the impetus of which lies on a kidnapping and murder story that is fast losing traction in the mainstream media, under the fireworks-and-blood display of a full-scale war on Palestinians.

But the trail of blame from the disappeared Israeli boys to Hamas-Fatah, which the far-right-dominated government of Israel used as the main reason for their latest military exercise, is weak, and riddled with unanswered questions.

The powers behind Netanyahu

The disappearance of the boys, and subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza took place in a climate of increasing external and internal pressure on Netanyahu's coalition government. Pressure from the far-right Yisrael Beteinu party, headed by the current Israeli minister of foreign affairs Avigdor Lieberman (a party that espouses the imprisonment and expulsion of African immigrants from Israel, and whose representatives include MPs who support illegal settlements and who call for bans on Arab-Israeli marriages), could have also had a strong influence on Netanyahu's decision to invade Gaza.

"To Lieberman and his party, anything short of re-conquering the congested coastal enclave and eliminating Hamas is unacceptable," writes American academic Tariq Ramadaan. "About a week after making this clear to Netanyahu, Lieberman ended his party's alliance with Likud. With far less political backing in the Knesset now, Netanyahu faces serious internal pressures."

Aside from the very strong possibility that Netanyahu is pandering to the far-right, Israel's actions in Gaza are not to be seen in isolation from its desire to secure unfettered access to untapped gas reserves off the coast of Gaza, worth an estimated \$4-billion by British Gas.



“The Gazan gas fields are part of the broader Levant assessment area,” writes Michel Chossudovsky, emeritus professor of economics at the University of Ottawa, for Global Research.

“What is now unfolding is the integration of these adjoining gas fields, including those belonging to Palestine, into the orbit of Israel.”

Predictably, traders and investors were rubbing their hands with glee on July 13 as bombs rained down on the people of Gaza, according to Bloomberg, “Israeli stocks jumped the most since December after energy companies raised estimates for reserves at the Leviathan gas field by 15%.” Delek Group, which owns stakes in the Leviathan field via its Delek Drilling LP and Avner Oil Exploration LLP units, advanced 1.7%.

Delek is owned by Yitzhak Tshuva (Isaac Sharon), chairman of the El-Ad Group, which owned the New York Plaza Hotel. This year, he was listed by Forbes as the seventh wealthiest Israeli. As of May this year, his personal wealth is around \$3.5-billion.

Delek group has links to US company Noble Energy, a Houston-based energy firm credited in numerous reports of “re-invigorating” the American energy industry. In short, “big men” stand to make big money from this “war”.

Growing international isolation

All of these forces arose within an international climate of growing impatience with, and cynicism towards, the Netanyahu government’s policies towards Palestinians and its ongoing support of illegal settlements – even from the governments of its long-time allies, the US and UK. In January, UK envoy to Israel Matthew Gould told Israel’s Channel 2 news: “Attitudes are shifting, Israel is losing support. I look at the British Parliament, look at the media – there is a change. It’s not a tsunami ... but if you don’t spot it before it’s too late then it’s very hard to repair.”

When peace talks collapsed earlier this year, US Secretary of State John Kerry in a closed door meeting in late April with top world leaders, let it be known that Israel stood in danger of “becoming an Apartheid state” like the old South Africa. Despite later back-peddalling and apologising for his remark, the sound byte made an indelible imprint.

Successes by the international Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement included the Dutch pension giant PGGM divesting from all five of Israel’s main commercial banks.

The largest mainline Protestant church in the US, the US United Methodist Church, divested from British security company G4S over the key role it has in Israel’s military occupation and the prison system in which Palestinian men, women and children are held without trial and under torture. The news followed an earlier decision by the Gates Foundation to divest from G4S.

The French government warned banks and businesses against doing deals with businesses and citizens in Israeli settlements. Spain, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Luxembourg were expected to publish similar guidance in a coordinated move by European states. As many as 17 countries have since followed suit. On June 2, when the Hamas-backed unity government was sworn in in Ramallah, Netanyahu’s efforts to urge the world to isolate the Palestinian

government failed.

“After failing to convince Washington, the EU and the other four permanent UN Security Council members to snub the reconciliation government, the fuming, ‘deeply troubled’ prime minister, vowed to hold Palestine authority president Mahmoud Abbas ‘directly responsible’ for terror attacks emanating from his reunited jurisdiction,” reported Barbara Opall-Rome for Defense News.

“The Cabinet also decided ‘to form a team to consider ways of action given the new reality that has been created’.” It was in this context that Mossad chief Tamir Pardo, according to report in the Israeli daily Ha’aretz, on 5 June, sketched a scenario that was eerily predictive of the kidnapping of the three Israeli teens seven days later.

Security Cabinet

Pardo was addressing a meeting of the security Cabinet, which was debating the Habayit Hayehudi Bill, a Bill that would prohibit granting pardons to “terrorists” in exchange for the release of prisoners. Pardo was arguing against the Bill, which he said would give security forces less room to negotiate in future abduction cases. Referring to the disappearance of 200 schoolgirls in Nigeria, Pardo said: “What will you do if in a week three 14-year-old girls will be kidnapped from one of the settlements? Will you say there is a law, and we don’t release terrorists?” Pardo did not convince the ministers.

By Wednesday, the Bill passed its preliminary reading in the Knesset. In other words, a Bill that prevented negotiation in abduction cases was passed just days before the three Israeli teens disappeared. Which explains a great deal why, now, the Israeli government is denying Hamas’s claim that they have captured an Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) soldier, despite Hamas providing details of the soldier right down to his ID number.

In raising his hand, what exactly did Pardo know? In March, the Israeli army embarked on a concerted drive to attract enlistment from Arab Christians and Druze populations in Israel – a move that is seen by many commentators as a way of using sectarian differences to isolate Muslims from their Christian and Druze compatriots. The mainstream media makes much of Christian and Druze loyalty and pride in serving the IDF, but this takes place within a society where the military has become the only definitive way of getting somewhere in life, both economically and socially.

What is clear is that from March this year, and possibly earlier, the IDF was casting its net wider, under the dubious banner of pluralism. During the kidnapping-and-murder story When Yifrach, Shaar and Frenkel disappeared, a Twitter campaign tagged #BringBackOurBoys, was launched. According to a report in the China Post on June 22, ten days after they were lost, Netanyahu insisted Israel had “unequivocal proof” that Hamas was behind the youths’ disappearance. “Soon this information will be made public,” he told ministers at a weekly cabinet meeting.

He did not, during the entire duration of the search, provide this proof, and it still has not been forthcoming. “I have no credible information that Hamas was behind the kidnapping,” said Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas soon after the boys disappeared on June 12. “I do not intend to punish anyone based off suspicions or because Netanyahu claims something.” A comment by Israel defence forces spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner on June 16 to the American channel NBC in this context is illuminating: “As long as

our boys remain abducted Hamas will feel pursued, paralysed and threatened,” he said. In the same report, Lieutenant General Benny Gantz, chief of Israel’s armed forces, said: “We are on our way toward a significant campaign. We will get our plans in order.”

On June 17, an ex-member of the Israeli Mossad even warned of Netanyahu’s claims: “Netanyahu’s naming of those who abducted these kids is more political than factual,” Rami Igra, a former head of the MIA unit in Mossad, told the Jerusalem Post. On June 18, the “kidnapping” narrative had still not fully caught on. The Palestinian Ministry of Information issued a statement slamming Israel’s military efforts to find the “three allegedly missing Israeli teens”.

Rescuing the three boys

On June 19, an IDF officer told the ultra-Orthodox news outlet Hadrei Haredim that parts of the search operation, dubbed Operation Brother’s Keeper, were planned in advance and were being implemented with no connection to their stated purpose – that of rescuing the three boys. Instead, the officer stated that the army was intentionally trying to agitate Palestinians in order to provoke disorder, which would then allow Israeli snipers to shoot.

Referring to a particular situation in Jenin, within the context of Operation Brother’s Keeper, he said: “This was actually the true goal: to provoke them into causing disorder, and then put down those causing the disorder.” One Israeli journalist for 972 magazine pointedly asked: if we are looking for three boys in the West Bank, then why are we invading Gaza? One cannot discount the possibility that the Israelis’ intention in this whole affair was always to wage war on Palestinians.

In a *New York Times* story, published on July 2, journalist Isabel Kershner reported: “On Wednesday, the YNET news site posted the full two-minute recording of an emergency call one of the Israeli youths placed to the police from the car in which they were apparently shot to death. After what sound like gunshots and cries of pain, the kidnapers can be heard congratulating themselves and singing.” The bodies were found on July 1.

So, YNET posted the alleged two-minute recording of the shooting, on June 25, six days before the bodies were found, according to the *New York Times*. And yet, in a report published on July 2 in the *Jewish News*, a paper based in northern Arizona in the US, Shaar’s mother reportedly “told YNET on Wednesday that the recording was not released until after the bodies of her son, Naftali Fraenkel and Eyal Yifrach were found, out of fear that they would punish him if he were being held captive.” In other words, the recording was not released on YNET, according to the mother of one of the disappeared boys, who reportedly told YNET itself that the audio was not available until after July 1.

A strange chain of events, this. Israeli police did not react to the call because they thought it was a fake. The police officers in question have not been interviewed or quoted in the media. They were, it was reported, relieved of their duties.

On top of this, and almost a month later and over 600 Palestinians dead, a third of them children, there has still not been any conclusive proof that the bodies found by the Kfir Infantry Brigade, the elite Maglan unit, and civilian volunteers in a field some 3km from the Palestinian town of Halhoul, north of Hebron, are in fact the bodies of Yifrach, Shaar and Frenkel.

There have been no images of the bodies – unlike the plethora of photographs and records of dead Palestinians laid out on stretchers. There has been no DNA evidence to show that these remains were indeed the remains of the three Israeli teens. “Security evaluations are that the teenagers were murdered a short time after being kidnapped,” reported The Jerusalem Post.

DNA of the killers

But what exactly these “security evaluations” entailed is unclear. There is no face to which the media might direct questions and gain clarification.

The DNA of the killers surely, must also be on the bodies – this would indeed provide conclusive proof that the Palestinians accused of the crimes (who have also, incidentally, disappeared), Marwann Kawasme and Amar Abu Aysha (who had both distanced themselves from Hamas), are in fact the culprits. We are living in the age of CSI. Israel is one of the most – if not the most – technologically advanced nation in the world. Surely authorities must provide DNA proof of the alleged kidnappers and killers, as well as the deceased, before launching a full-scale offensive on an entire people.

We know they are able to do so. The bodies of the boys were reportedly held at the Abu Kabir Forensic Institute in Tel Aviv. This is where the body of Muhammad Abu Khdeir, the Palestinian boy who was burnt to death a day after the burial of the three Israeli teens, was also being held. His father, Hussein Abu Khdeir, at the time of writing had not been allowed to see his son’s body but he had been told that investigators had identified it “by matching DNA samples taken from the saliva of both parents”.

While Palestinians give up hope of any answers from the Israeli government on these and other issues, as an international community we can ask the following questions of Israel: Where is “the unequivocal proof” that Hamas is responsible for the disappeared Israeli boys? Why were the two police officers who took the alleged emergency call not interviewed or quoted by the media as to their reasons behind such a huge oversight? Why have there been no pictures of the disappeared Israeli boys’ bodies as there have been many pictures of Palestinian bodies?

Why were no DNA tests done on the bodies of the Israeli boys, while DNA tests were done on the body of the dead Palestinian teen? What is the reason behind Tamir Pando’s eerily predictive scenario sketched June 2? Was there any foreknowledge of the boys’ disappearance by Mossad? How much money does US oil and gas company Noble Energy stand to make from the Laviathan assessment area currently being consolidated under Israeli control? How much money will Israeli companies make? Who will be the end beneficiaries of these deals?

Wounds on Palestinians

These questions are by no means meant in disrespect or dishonour to the missing boys. Rather, the opposite. They are attempts to gain clarity in a situation that is fast becoming a macabre theatre of events, in which we all stand to lose – no matter what our beliefs – in increasing lies and confusion, and unspeakable violence. On Sunday, the deadliest day so far for Palestinians (100 killed mostly women, children and the elderly), the IDF bombed the only Palestinian rehabilitation hospital, housing paralyzed people.

On Tuesday, the IDF bombed a school. In an interview with Democracy Now! Dr Basman Alashi sketched a scene that outlines the terror of so-called Israeli “warning calls”: “Last night, just before 9am, they sent us a warning over the phone that “We will bomb the hospital, so you need to evacuate.”

And we’ve been receiving these calls for the last 11 days, so we did not take that call, that issue and matter seriously, because of repeated calls from the Israeli forces that “We will bomb you, we will bomb you,” but they haven’t done anything. And we insisted that we cannot leave the hospital. Our patients are, all of them, paralyzed ... They’re unable to move.”

On Monday, reports on Press TV indicated that Israel was using white phosphorous – a chemical weapon whose use constitutes a war crime – on Gaza villages. White phosphorous burns straight through skin and into bone. It causes devastating damage to ecosystems and water purity. Medics are also reporting wounds on Palestinians from weapons that doctors with previous experience in war zones, do not recognise.

Only time will tell what the real reasons were behind the Gaza onslaught. In the meanwhile, BDS is calling for a complete trade and military embargo against Israel and all those who profess to care about human rights, social justice and truth must support it.

All will be held accountable for what is happening in Palestine.

Karen Jayes is the winner of the 2013 Sunday Times Literary award and the K Sello Duiker Memorial Literary award for her novel ‘For the Mercy of Water’. She is a member of PEN International.

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