

The real goal of the slaughter in Gaza

Hamas cannot be defeated, so it must be brought to heel

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Global Research, January 01, 2009

1 January 2009

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Ever since Hamas triumphed in the Palestinian elections nearly three years ago, the story in Israel has been that a full-scale ground invasion of the Gaza Strip was imminent. But even when public pressure mounted for a decisive blow against Hamas, the government backed off from a frontal assault.

Now the world waits for Ehud Barak, the defence minister, to send in the tanks and troops as the logic of this operation is pushing inexorably towards a ground war. Nonetheless, officials have been stalling. Significant ground forces are massed on Gaza's border, but still the talk in Israel is of "exit strategies", lulls and renewed ceasefires.

Even if Israeli tanks do lumber into the enclave, will they dare to move into the real battlegrounds of central Gaza? Or will they simply be used, as they have been in the past, to terrorise the civilian population on the peripheries?

Israelis are aware of the official reason for Mr Barak's reticence to follow the air strikes with a large-scale ground war. They have been endlessly reminded that the worst losses sustained by the army in the second intifada took place in 2002 during the invasion of Jenin refugee camp.

Gaza, as Israelis know only too well, is one mammoth refugee camp. Its narrow alleys, incapable of being negotiated by Merkava tanks, will force Israeli soldiers out into the open. Gaza, in the Israeli imagination, is a death trap.

Similarly, no one has forgotten the heavy toll on Israeli soldiers during the ground war with Hizbollah in 2006. In a country such as Israel, with a citizen army, the public has become positively phobic of a war in which large numbers of its sons will be placed in the firing line.

That fear is only heightened by reports in the Israeli media that Hamas is praying for the chance to engage Israel's army in serious combat. The decision to sacrifice many soldiers in Gaza is not one Mr Barak, leader of the Labor Party, will take lightly with an election in six weeks.

But there is another concern that has given him equal cause to hesitate.

Despite the popular rhetoric in Israel, no senior official really believes Hamas can be destroyed, either from the air or with brigades of troops. It is simply too entrenched in Gaza.

That conclusion is acknowledged in the tepid rationales offered so far for Israel's operations.

“Creating calm in the country’s south” and “changing the security environment” have been preferred over previous favourites, such as “rooting out the infrastructure of terror”.

An invasion whose real objective was the toppling of Hamas would, as Mr Barak and his officials understand, require the permanent military reoccupation of Gaza.

But overturning the disengagement from Gaza — the 2005 brainchild of Ariel Sharon, the prime minister at the time — would entail a huge military and financial commitment from Israel. It would once again have to assume responsibility for the welfare of the local civilian population, and the army would be forced into treacherous policing of Gaza’s teeming camps.

In effect, an invasion of Gaza to overthrow Hamas would be a reversal of the trend in Israeli policy since the Oslo process of the early 1990s.

It was then that Israel allowed the long-exiled Palestinian leader, Yasser Arafat, to return to the occupied territories in the new role of head of the Palestinian Authority. Naively, Arafat assumed he was leading a government-in-waiting. In truth, he simply became Israel’s chief security contractor.

Arafat was tolerated during the 1990s because he did little to stop Israel’s effective annexation of large parts of the West Bank through the rapid expansion of settlements and increasingly harsh movement restrictions on Palestinians. Instead, he concentrated on building up the security forces of his Fatah loyalists, containing Hamas and preparing for a statehood that never arrived.

When the second intifada broke out, Arafat proved he had outlived his usefulness to Israel. His Palestinian Authority was gradually emasculated.

Since Arafat’s death and the disengagement from Gaza, Israel has sought to consolidate the physical separation of the Strip from the much-coveted West Bank. Even if not originally desired by Israel, Hamas’s takeover of Gaza has contributed significantly to that goal.

Israel is now faced by two Palestinian national movements. The Fatah one, based in the West Bank and led by a weak president, Mahmoud Abbas, is largely discredited and compliant. The other, Hamas, based in Gaza, has grown in confidence as it claims to be the true guardian of resistance to the occupation.

Unable to destroy Hamas, Israel is now considering whether to live with the armed group next door.

Hamas has proved it can enforce its rule in Gaza much as Arafat once did in both occupied territories. The question being debated in Israel’s cabinet and war rooms is whether, like Arafat, Hamas can be made to collude with the occupation. It has proved it is strong, but can it be made useful to Israel, too?

In practice that would mean taming Hamas rather than crushing it. Whereas Israel is trying to build up Fatah in the West Bank with carrots, it is using the current slaughter in Gaza as a big stick with which to beat Hamas into compliance.

The ultimate objective is another truce stopping the rocket fire out of the Strip, like the six-month ceasefire that just ended, but on terms even more favourable to Israel.

The savage blockade that has deprived Gaza's population of essentials for many months failed to achieve that goal. Instead, Hamas quickly took charge of the smuggling tunnels that became a lifeline for Gazans. The tunnels raised Hamas's finances and popularity in equal measure.

It should come as no surprise that Israel has barely bothered to hit the Hamas leadership or its military wing. Instead it has bombed the tunnels, Hamas's treasure chest, and it has killed substantial numbers of ordinary policemen, the guarantors of law and order in Gaza. Latest reports suggest Israel is now planning to expand its air strikes to Hamas's welfare organisations, the charities that are the base of its popularity.

The air campaign is paring down Hamas's ability to function effectively as the ruler of Gaza. It is undermining Hamas's political power bases. The lesson is not that Hamas can be destroyed militarily but that it that can be weakened domestically.

Israel apparently hopes to persuade the Hamas leadership, as it did Arafat for a while, that its best interests are served by co-operating with Israel. The message is: forget about your popular mandate to resist the occupation and concentrate instead on remaining in power with our help.

In the fog of war, events may yet escalate in such a way that a serious ground invasion cannot be avoided, especially if Hamas continues to fire rockets into Israel. But whatever happens, Israel and Hamas are almost certain in the end to agree to another ceasefire.

The issue will be whether in doing so, Hamas, like Arafat before it, loses sight of its primary task: to force Israel to end its occupation.

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This article originally appeared in The National (www.thenational.ae), published in Abu Dhabi.

The original source of this article is Global Research
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