

Two fronts in Israel's brutal war

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Two Israeli soldiers were captured on July 12 by members of Hezbollah, the radical Lebanese Islamic movement. Eight Israeli soldiers were killed during clashes, reported the *Haaretz* newspaper. According to a Deutsche Presse-Agentur article, Israeli media reports claimed that "Hezbollah offered Israel an all-inclusive prisoners exchange, which would include the release of the two soldiers and a third held in Gaza against that of thousands of Palestinian and three Lebanese prisoners held in Israel".

Israel responded to the soldiers' capture with air strikes on Lebanese targets, including roads and the Qasmiya Bridge. On July 13, Israeli jets bombed Beirut's international airport. Two military air bases were also targeted. Associated Press reported that Israel was imposing a total sea and air blockade on Lebanon. According to a July 13 *Haaretz* report, at least 60 people had been killed by Israeli air strikes.

The Israeli government has blamed the abduction and deaths of its soldiers on the Lebanese government. At least half of the soldiers were killed after they entered Lebanese territory.

According to *Haaretz*, Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah has told the Israeli government that "no military operation will return" the captured soldiers. According to Nasrallah, the soldiers will only be returned "through one way: indirect negotiations and a trade [of prisoners]".

Hezbollah formed in response to the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and has long supported the struggle of the Palestinian people against the illegal Israeli occupation. The group has previously threatened to open a second front in support of the al Aqsa *intifada*, the Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000.

As a new war front opened up on the Israeli-Lebanese border, Israel continued its relentless assault on the Gaza Strip. "Operation Summer Rain" — launched by Israel on June 28, ostensibly in response to the capture of a soldier during a Palestinian guerrilla attack on the Israeli artillery base at Kerem Shalom — has seen more than 120 air strikes carried out by the Israeli Air Force in its first three weeks.

The attacks have destroyed Gaza's only electricity station, and the three main bridges and roads into the Gaza Strip, resulting in the closure of all entry points into the region. This has made it near impossible for people, food, water and medical supplies to reach the region.

On July 11, *Haaretz* reported that "more than 3000 Palestinians, including 578 deemed 'urgent humanitarian cases' have been stranded", on the Egyptian side of the Rafah border crossing since before the recent assault began. Israel has refused to open the crossing. According to the Red Cross, conditions at the crossing are deteriorating, as there are no

proper waiting facilities and no organised food or water distribution.

Israel has used military bulldozers to destroy Palestinian farmland and houses, and has carried out more than 30 sonic boom attacks, which cause widespread fear and psychosis, particularly among children.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, more than 71 Palestinian men, women and children were killed by the Israeli military assault between June 28 and July 12. Another 197 people were wounded and at least 12 people have had their limbs amputated as a result of the onslaught.

On June 30, Amnesty International issued a statement accusing Israel of carrying out war crimes in Gaza. The group claimed Israel had violated section 33 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which prohibits the collective punishment of a civilian population and the deliberate destruction of public infrastructure.

Since the beginning of the assault, the Israeli government has changed its story several times in order to justify the war crimes it is carrying out in Gaza.

Initially, it claimed that the primary reason for the current assault was to secure the release of Corporal Gilad Shalit, who was captured by a Palestinian militia group on June 25. It later claimed the assault was to stop Qassam rockets being fired into Israel and to secure Israel's borders.

However these have been mere pretexts to allow it to carry out its plan to topple the democratically elected Palestinian Authority (PA) government, which is dominated by Hamas, and to distract world attention as it brings more of the occupied West Bank under its control through the destruction and confiscation of Palestinian land, the expansion of its illegal colonies ("settlements") and the building of the apartheid wall.

The current Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip is neither exceptional nor unusual. During its illegal occupation of the Palestinian territory seized in the 1967 war Israel has regularly carried out military assaults on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. In late 2004, Israeli forces attacked Gaza as part of "Operation Days of Penitence", killing more than 100 Palestinians. In 2002 "Operation Defensive Shield", the largest Israeli military operation in the West Bank, included brutal invasions of Jenin and Nablus.

Over the past 10 months, Israel has carried out "arrests" (i.e. kidnappings) and assassinations of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. The most recent Israeli "incursion" took place just two days before the capture of Shalit, when Israeli security forces invaded Gaza and kidnapped two men, a doctor and his brother, from their homes.

Israel's unilateral "disengagement" from Gaza in 2005, while resulting in the dismantling of illegal Israeli settlements, was not a step towards Palestinian self-determination or towards peace, as claimed by Israel and the corporate media. Instead, the Gaza Strip was turned into what Israeli human rights organisation B'Tselem described as "one big prison", with Israeli occupation forces continuing to control the land, sea and air.

Since the beginning of the year, the Karni crossing, one of the main entry points from Israel into Gaza used to transport food and medical supplies, has been closed over 43% of the time.

For over six months, Israel has continued to fire, each day, hundreds of heavy artillery shells into the region from the sea and from within Israeli territory. In the first three weeks of June, before the current military invasion and assault, 24 Palestinians were killed and another 77 wounded, including seven children and adults from the Ghalia family who were carrying out the dangerous terrorist act of picnicking on Gaza Beach.

However the Israeli assault on Gaza has increased support for the Hamas government, rather than marginalising the group. It has also resulted in, at least for the moment, a dissolution of the tensions between Fatah and Hamas militants, who have returned to fighting a common enemy instead of each other.

In the months leading up to the assault, PA president and Fatah leader Mahmoud Abbas had played a dangerous game of brinkmanship with Hamas. Fatah, which in the past has dominated Palestinian politics and controlled the PA since its inception in 1994, has refused to accept the defeat dealt to it in January, when Hamas swept the PA elections.

Abbas, backed by the US, Israel and the European Union, has sought to undermine Hamas and Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh at every turn.

Danny Rubenstein, writing in *Haaretz* on July 10, noted that “the damaging strikes in the Gaza Strip, the casualties and destruction have stirred up frustration, rage and hatred, both in Gaza and the West Bank. None of these emotions is directed against the Hamas-led government. Everyone considers Israel responsible: for unemployment, the failure to pay salaries, the power outages. No one dares to criticise the Hamas government and no one considers it to be responsible for what is happening.”

According to a poll carried out by the Jerusalem Media and Communication Centre, 70% of Palestinians believe Hamas should not release Shalit until Israel agrees to free Palestinian prisoners. Over 66% of the 1197 people polled expressed support for continued raids aimed at capturing Israeli soldiers. The poll also revealed that support for Hamas had increased 3% despite the international economic blockade, while support for Abbas and Fatah had dropped at least 1%.

Hamas’s popularity will increase further if it is able to secure the release of even a small percentage of the 9000 Palestinian political prisoners being held in Israeli jails. In return for freeing Shalit, Hamas is asking for the release of the more than 400 child prisoners, 120 women prisoners and several hundred prisoners who are suffering major illness and medical problems.

However, despite Israeli governments previously engaging in prisoner exchanges, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert does not want to be seen to be tying the release of Shalit directly to the release of Palestinian prisoners, as this will be viewed as a clear victory for Hamas.

But Olmert’s stance is increasingly being questioned by commentators within Israel. Many have begun to criticise Olmert for not having any concrete plan or “exit strategy” in relation to Gaza. Olmert is being seen as increasingly backed into a corner. A war with Hezbollah, which could possibly also draw in Syria and Iran, would be a disaster for Olmert.

Israel is now fighting on two war fronts in territories it had supposedly withdrawn from. If the war front in the north was to expand, it would force Israel to ease the assault in Gaza, but could mean Israel was once again engaged in a possibly disastrous and protracted war with

Lebanon.

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