

# Why is Israel Back in Gaza?

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Global Research, July 18, 2006

18 July 2006

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

The disparity between Israel's public narrative and its actual intents cannot possibly be any more palpable than in the current Gaza onslaught following the capture by Palestinians of an Israeli soldier near Gaza in a daring June 25 raid on a military post.

"Anybody who calls this operation disproportionate has no clue about the facts on the ground. We have been attacked and bombarded for months and weeks," Yitzhak Herzog, the Israeli cabinet secretary, said, responding to what some media described as "an increasing international concern" over the Israeli reinvasion of parts of the Gaza Strip and the subsequent high death toll. Shortly after Herzog made his comments, the death toll among Palestinians as a result of the Israeli action rose to 52, mostly civilians. However, numbers can hardly communicate the humanitarian crisis underway as a result of the Israeli siege and bombardment.

The Israeli official was reiterating a new mantra adopted by the Israeli government, aimed at silencing any serious criticism of the Israeli military and its deadly practices in Gaza. Such rebuttal however, seemed overly exaggerated, considering that no serious, or at least meaningful international criticism of the Israeli raids in Gaza, dubbed by the ever poetic Israeli army as "Summer Rain." The Israeli one-sided war was exasperated by the fact that Palestinians have been under a long economic siege which was tightened even further with the election of Hamas to power last January.

The Gaza Strip, a stretch of land that hardly exceeds a few kilometers in length and is much smaller in width has always been the home of the poorest of Palestinians, with living conditions that speak of utter misery, and can only be compared to the poorest countries in the world, despite Gaza's highly educated population.

Israel insists that its operation is not intended to harm the civilian population, but to root out and for good the so-called terrorist elements that use the civilian infrastructure to attack adjacent Israeli towns with rockets. It also says that it will not cease its 'military activities' in the area until its captured soldier is returned home safely and without conditions.

Israel's demands, without proper context – sound reasonable, to say the least. Israeli and US media commentators agree; their overall assessment is: Israel doesn't want to set precedent by giving terrorists an incentive to carry on with their acts of terror, and Israel's favorite mantra, any democratic country would do precisely what Israel has done to secure its citizens.

Again, the historic role of the media, that of completely acknowledging and sympathizing with Israeli concerns, while regularly disregarding Palestinian concerns as unworthy, continues to perpetuate with equal force and tenacity. Thus the only relevant context, as far

as the Western media is concerned, is that context instructed by Israel, who, in turn, wishes to convince everyone that the above demands are indeed the real reasons behind its bloody Gaza onslaught.

If the military's intentions are indeed to "root out terrorists" as Israel tirelessly asserts, then why insist on pursuing the same detrimental policies – those of siege, isolation and overt militarism – that deprive Palestinians of any sense of hope that Gaza could finally become an economically viable, truly independent polity? Why push desperate Palestinians – through endless assassinations and targeting of civilians in broad daylight to embrace vengeful notions and counter-violence?

I say, "notions" because the so-called Palestinian rockets, as ominous as they may appear on television, are yet to claim one Israeli casualty for over a year, while the Israeli military has killed over 150 Palestinians in the last two months alone.

But how about the captured soldier? Is that not a legitimate grievance? It would be if it was not Israel who insisted on creating utterly perilous circumstances under which it places not just its soldiers, but also its civilians. For example, Gilad Shalit – no matter how harmless the photos Israel deliberately provides of him to the media – was taking part in a murderous mission aimed at exactly that, murdering Palestinians. In the seven weeks prior to Shalit's capture, the number of Palestinians killed at the hands of the Israeli military – i.e. Shalit's equally innocent looking colleagues – approached the 100 mark.

Shalit however, was a soldier, trained to physically and mentally endure difficult moments. But how can one explain the transfer of nearly half a million Israeli civilians to the Occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem – in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention? How could any responsible 'democracy' endanger its own population by placing them in a war zone, while providing Palestinians with every reason to seek revenge and retaliation for their heavy losses at the hands of the Israeli military?

It's rather odd that the Israeli government is painting this rosy media image for Israel, as a nation that would go to great lengths to save the life of one man, while it puts the life of hundreds of thousands of its people in great danger, notwithstanding the total disregard for the life of all Palestinians. If Israel's actions send any message, it's one filled with hypocrisy and racism.

But what does Israel exactly want? Is its bloody show in Gaza aimed exclusively at the toppling of the Hamas-led government? Or is it directed to the international community to further demonstrate that Palestinians are no peace partner? Or perhaps it's a message to Israelis themselves, to those who were doubtful that a civilian government with little military history – particularly the records of the Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and his Defense Minister Amir Peretz – can prove equally ruthless?

It's not clear where this Israeli experiment is heading. But what is hardly unmistakable is that by maintaining low intensity warfare in Gaza, Israel is creating the perfect cover up to its army bulldozers to partition the rest of the West Bank and Jerusalem in accordance with the second phase of Olmert's Disengagement Plan: which intends to slice up the West Bank into various enclaves with no physical continuity, and place its population under an effective, long term, collective incarceration in Bantustan-like areas, to be allowed or denied movement at the behest of an Israeli soldier. The plan is being actualized in record time, yet few seem to notice, a reality that Israel will strive to maintain.

Despite the tragic events unfolding in Gaza, the truth is Gaza never was and will unlikely to strategically relevant to Israel's expansionist objectives. Gaza at best - as has been the case for generations - is simply grounds for Israeli military experimentations, and at worst, a mindless killing field, where Palestinians are forced to 'learn' the same lesson, time and again. Indeed, the current Israeli military 'operation' in Gaza is keeping true to expectations.

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