

Israel Escalates War, While U.S. Does Nothing

by Dean Andromidas

The Israeli attacks against Palestinians in Gaza are threatening to further destabilize the rest of Southwest Asia, with an immediate threat to Syria. As of this writing, a prisoner exchange deal involving the release of at least 100 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, who is being held by Palestinian militants, is under intensive discussion, but has not yet been accepted by the government of Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. Instead, Olmert is escalating threats against Palestinian leaders, including those resident in Syria.

Meanwhile, as Israeli Meretz party chairman Yossi Beilin has charged, the United States is doing absolutely nothing to bring an end to the crisis. Others in Israel are speaking out against the Olmert government's policy, including Corporal Shalit's father, who called for a prisoner exchange, noting that such things have been done many times before.

But the government is not listening, and tensions are rising with each passing day. On July 4, in a not-so-veiled threat against Syria, Olmert told a business conference in southern Israel that he had ordered the army "to strike terrorists and those who sent them, and those who sponsor them. None of them will be immune." Defense Minister Amir Peretz and other government officials have made similar threats, which have only served to diminish any hope of securing the Israeli soldier's release.

Following these threats, both Israel and Syria have raised the level of alert of their troops along their common borders. The Syrians went on high alert after Israeli F-16 jets buzzed the Latakia Palace of Syrian President Bashar Assad on June 28.

Far from being intimidated, Assad told the Arab daily *Al Hayat* that Syria will not act against the Hamas leaders who are living in Syria, including Hamas leader Khaled Meshal.

"We were asked [by the Americans] to lay siege to Hamas, strike Hamas," Assad said. "This was a change of behavior requested of Syria." He made clear that Syria was not willing to comply. "If we were, we would have done that a long time ago."

A Cheney-Rumsfeld 'Rear-Guard' Action

The real cause for this very predictable escalation, which will go much further if not stopped, lies at the doorstep of

Vice President Dick Cheney and his agent-in-place, Likud Party Chairman Benjamin Netanyahu. Netanyahu met Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld June 17 in Beaver Creek, Colorado, where the topic of discussion was U.S. policy toward Iran. It is well known that Cheney does not support the recent shift in U.S. policy toward direct talks with Iran, a policy proposed by saner elements in Washington.

Senior Middle East intelligence sources have told *EIR* that they view the latest round of Israeli military operations against the Palestinians as a "rear guard" action by Cheney and Rumsfeld to spread more chaos and war in the region in the face of efforts from within and outside the Bush Administration to resolve both the Iraq war and Iran crisis. The same source said to expect an Israeli attack against Syria in the context of an assassination attempt against Hamas leader Meshal. "Cheney can't get away with an attack on Syria now, so he will have the Israelis do it for him."

Another senior British intelligence source said that the Israeli attacks on Gaza, and the arrest and assassination of Hamas officials, is destabilizing the entire region. He said it has already affected talks the U.S. is having in Iraq with the Sunnis, who are demanding that something be done to stop the Israelis as a condition in their negotiations.

Even if a prisoner exchange takes place, it will not calm the situation, but instead, will only set the stage for the next crisis. Palestinian militants continue to launch homemade Qassam rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel, some of which have reached the coastal city of Ashkelon, nearly 15 kilometers away. The Israelis' only response has been to re-enter Gaza and continue targeted assassinations.

U.S. Must Play a Role

The only way to end the violence, as with any asymmetric warfare, is through negotiations that resolve the conflict and lead to the early establishment of a Palestinian state. Only a strong U.S. involvement can broker such negotiations, but it is obvious that, under Cheney and the neo-cons, quite the opposite is taking place. In fact, the Bush Administration is seen as doing absolutely nothing to help resolve the crisis, a policy that will lead to predictable results: the spreading of the conflict to Syria, Lebanon, or even Jordan, as the Olmert government lashes out militarily.

This "absolute American silence" was condemned by Meretz party chairman Beilin, in a commentary in *Ha'aretz* July 5, pointing out that George W. Bush is the first U.S. President who has done nothing to help Israel. He recounted the role of Reagan Administration envoy Philip Habib in 1981, who brokered a ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization which held until Ariel Sharon sabotaged it by launching the Lebanon War.

After describing how the Bush Administration "doesn't have any form of dialogue with Iran or Syria, it boycotts the

Hamas government,” and therefore refuses to mediate the crisis, Beilen writes:

“A different administration would have sent a special envoy to the region who would shuttle between Syria, Gaza, and Jerusalem, trying to calm things down, threatening, promising, fuming—all in order to end the crisis.” He also pointed out that President Clinton not only sponsored the Oslo peace accords, but intervened in several major crises, including when Benjamin Netanyahu nearly triggered a war in the region in 1996.

“The worsening violent conflict in the Middle East is a blatant reflection of the weakness of the American partner. At the moment of truth, when Israel needs a powerful third party capable of moving things in the area, it turns out that little beyond the repetitive recitation of Bush’s vision and the dust-covered road map can be expected, which neither side intends to actually implement.”

According to press reports, the proposed prisoner exchange has not been brokered by the U.S., but by Egypt and Turkey, who had taken it upon themselves to mediate talks with Syria, the Hamas government, and intermediaries for the Palestinian militants, i.e., everything the U.S. Administration refused to do.

Voices of Sanity in Israel

There are also voices of sanity within Israel, notably among military circles, who would like to see Corporal Shalit returned alive and well. According to Israeli intelligence sources, Chief of Staff Dan Halutz told the Israeli cabinet July 2 that military force alone would not be able to secure the release of Shalit. Halutz outlined what acceptable terms would be for a prisoner exchange. These could include the release of Hamas parliamentarians and those held under the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance as long as they did not have “blood on their hands.” The military said they would not recommend a phony prisoner release like one conducted in 1996 by then-Prime Minister Netanyahu, when he freed common criminals, rather than political detainees, in order to fulfill Israeli obligations under the 1996 Wye agreement brokered by President Bill Clinton.

Despite the hyperventilating statements by Olmert, a whopping 69% of Israelis would support a prisoner exchange, according to a poll commissioned by the daily *Yediot Ahronot*. Noam Shalit, father of the captured Israeli soldier, called on the government to release the Palestinian prisoners. Shalit told *Ha’aretz*, “I know releasing prisoners was on the agenda before the incident, as a kind of gesture, so there is no reason for it not to be on the agenda also after the incident. . . . In the end, it will be necessary to pay a price for Gilad’s freedom. I don’t understand why the government is delaying negotiations on the price.” Shalit also said that he was willing to meet with those holding his son.

A few days earlier, Shalit told Israel’s Channel 10 TV that

when he spoke with Chief of Staff Halutz, he asked him “to represent Gilad’s interests, as a soldier sent by the army, as a soldier to a soldier, that he represent Gilad’s interest to Israel and to the decision-making echelons.” Shalit added, “Of course, when I say ‘Gilad’s interest,’ that is for him to return home, safe and healthy, as soon as possible.”

In an interview appearing in *Ha’aretz* July 3, even “dirty” Rafi Eitan, former Mossad agent, and now head of the Pensioners Party and a Minister in Olmert’s government, expressed doubts about the wisdom of invading the Gaza Strip. “I would have thought twice about going into Gaza with a large military force, or would have waited until I had the defensive means to deal with the Qassams [rockets] appropriately, something I believe the IDF will have to do sooner or later. As a rule, I believe that in the long race against terrorism, defense must come first. We cannot kill all of our enemies, and therefore we must defend ourselves.”

War Crimes

In seeking a military solution, Israel is committing war crimes. Already the Swiss Foreign Ministry has released a statement declaring that Israel has been violating international law in its attacks on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

“A number of actions by the Israel Defense Forces in their offensive against the Gaza Strip have violated the principle of proportionality and are to be seen as forms of collective punishment, which is forbidden,” the statement said. “There is no doubt that Israel has not taken the precautions required of it in international law to protect the civilian population and infrastructure.” Although the statement did not mention the 1949 Geneva Convention directly, it is well known that collective punishment is a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.

The statement also said, “The arbitrary arrests of a large number of democratically elected representatives of the people and ministers . . . cannot be justified.”

The Palestinian National Authority is drafting a petition to take Israel to the International Court in the Hague over the Gaza air strikes.

Palestinian Justice Minister Ahmed al Khalidi said they are taking action against Israel for “war crimes it committed against the Palestinians.” He said “We have taken legal steps to press charges against Israel with the International Court of Justice. Suing Israel in the International Court is a test for international institutions. If they deny the rights of Palestinians, then the international community has to act responsibly when it comes to blocking the legal channels to the Palestinians, forcing them to use violence to defend ourselves and our people.”

In another statement, the PNA charged, “What is being done against the Palestinian people and its government amount to war crimes which require the intervention of the United Nations.”