

Israel Launches Bloody Reprisals in Egypt and Gaza

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Israel's aggressive response to a series of suicide and roadside bomb attacks near the Red Sea resort of Eilat on Thursday has exacerbated tensions with both the Palestinians and its neighbour, Egypt.

The attacks killed eight people, including two Israeli security personnel, and injured dozens more. While Israeli security forces had been warned of an attack from Egypt's Sinai desert, they appear to have taken no additional precautions. They pursued the attackers, whom eyewitnesses said were wearing Egyptian army uniforms, presumably stolen, on land and by air, killing at least seven people, including several Egyptian policemen.

This has sparked the worst diplomatic crisis between the two countries since the signing of the 1979 Camp David Accords, with Egypt threatening to withdraw its ambassador from Israel.

Israel sought to get the United Nations Security Council to condemn the attacks as acts of terrorism, but this was knocked back by Lebanon, which currently has a seat on the Security Council.

No group has taken responsibility for Thursday's attacks, the deadliest in several years. Hamas, the Islamist party that controls the Gaza Strip, denied responsibility for the attacks, which appear to have taken it by surprise. It accused Israel of using the attacks to justify aggression against Gaza.

Shin Bet, Israel's intelligence agency, claimed the attacks were launched by the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC), a splinter from Fatah which has launched several attacks in recent years and was involved with the Islamic Army in the kidnapping of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006. Nevertheless, the Israeli government still blamed Hamas, saying that at the very least it played an indirect role in aiding militants who travelled from Gaza through the Sinai to attack Israel's southern border. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman blamed the Palestinian Authority for the attacks.

Without having provided any evidence linking the attack to either Hamas or the PRC, Israel's security forces carried out bombing raids on Gaza, killing seven people, including two senior PRC members, a three-year-old child and a 13-year-old boy. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called this "swift justice."

Abu Mujahed, the spokesman for the PRC, while denying involvement in Thursday's attacks, praised them and opposed any ceasefire with Israel—an implicit attack on Hamas, which has, since Israel's 2008-09 military offensive, largely observed a ceasefire and has reached a deal with the Palestinian Authority, which controls the West Bank and works closely with

Israel.

Israel's targeted assassinations prompted militants, including the PRC, to fire dozens of rockets on southern Israeli towns and cities over the weekend, killing one person in Be'er Sheva. Hamas' military wing also fired rockets into Israel.

This provoked a further military response from Israel. All told, at least 14 Palestinians have been killed since Thursday.

There are signs that Israel is preparing a major military escalation. Kadima, the main opposition party, is calling for a military campaign against Gaza.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak described the attacks as "a grave terrorist incident" that had originated in Gaza and could be attributed to the "loosening" of Egypt's control over Sinai since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak. Although Israel last year announced plans to build a sophisticated security fence along the porous 150-mile border it shares with Egypt, only 10 percent has been completed.

One Israeli official said, "Our hope is that this tragedy will serve as an impetus for the Egyptians to firmly exercise their sovereignty in all of Sinai and to end the security vacuum that has started to emerge there."

Thursday's attacks have led to calls for increased troop numbers on the border with Egypt and the reestablishment of a military headquarters, restoring the pre-1979 situation. This would create a new theatre of war, akin to Southern Lebanon, where Israel may intervene. Ha'aretz noted that Egypt's military leaders had hinted that Israel was seeking to take control of several kilometres of the security zone inside the Sinai Peninsula.

The fall of Mubarak has prompted the impoverished Bedouin tribes in Sinai to pursue their own long-standing claims for social justice, with militant actions aimed at undermining the new government. They have on five separate occasions blown up the pipelines that supply gas to Israel and Jordan and bring important revenues to Egypt, in a bid to exploit the widespread popular opposition in Egypt to Israel. Islamic militants also recently attacked a police station in the northern city of El-Arish, the regional capital.

The military junta that replaced Mubarak recently received approval from Israel, as required under the Camp David Accords, which declared Sinai a demilitarised zone, to send 1,000 extra troops into Sinai. In the last week, troops found a weapons producing plant and shot several people whom it claims were arms smugglers.

The military rulers are using the anger of the Egyptian people over Israel's brutal treatment of the Palestinians and killing of the Egyptian policemen to boost their own tattered credentials. They brokered a fragile deal between Fatah and Hamas and loosened somewhat the tight embargo Mubarak enforced on Israel's behalf at the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt, allowing several hundred Palestinians a day to cross into Egypt.

The junta allowed thousands of people to demonstrate outside the Israeli embassy in Cairo and the consulate in Alexandria for two nights running, while protecting the buildings with a cordon of armoured vehicles. There were calls for the government to break off diplomatic relations with Israel, halt gas supplies to the country, and change the Camp David Treaty.

The military council demanded an apology from Israel and an investigation into the death of five policemen, whom Israeli officials claim were killed either by one of the suicide bombers or by Palestinian militants involved in a firefight with Israeli forces. The Egyptian junta declared Israel's actions to be a breach of the Camp David Accords.

Following diplomatic pressure from the United States, France and Germany, Tel Aviv was forced to back down, admit responsibility for killing the policemen and express its "regret" to Egypt.

"We regret the death of members of the Egyptian security forces during the terror attack on the Israeli-Egyptian border," Barak said. He also announced a joint Israeli-Egyptian committee of investigation and stressed the importance of the peace treaty with Egypt.

Israel's belligerent response to the attacks on Eilat was, at least in part, aimed at diverting into nationalist and anti-Palestinian channels the growth of social tensions within Israel, as expressed in mass protests over the past four weeks against the cost of housing and soaring inflation. These protests have seen demonstrators carrying banners in both Hebrew and Arabic and citing the mass protests in Egypt that brought down Mubarak. The promotion of war fever has long been Israel's way of dealing with internal dissent.

The leaders of the protests, who have opposed calling for the bringing down of the Netanyahu government and have worked to defuse the movement, dutifully responded by calling off rallies scheduled for last weekend.

Two demonstrations did go ahead. Four thousand people took part in a silent march in Tel Aviv, while 1,000 rallied in Kiryat Shemona. But the organisers made sure they were low-key, with no megaphones or chants.

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