

# Israel's aim: To make the Gazan prison even more secure

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There are two persistent myths about the aim of Israel's onslaught on Gaza: the first that it is an entirely defensive move, a way to end the rocket fire of Hamas; and the second that it is designed to restore the army's credibility after its failure to cow Hizbollah in 2006.

No doubt the Israeli army has been itching to repair its battered image, and for sure the rocket attacks from Gaza create domestic pressures that are only too clear to an Israeli government about to face an election.

But it is a gross misunderstanding of what is unfolding in Gaza to believe Israel's motives are capricious. The politicians and generals have been preparing for this attack for many months, possibly years — a fact alone that suggests they have bigger objectives than commonly assumed.

Israel seized this particular moment — with western politicians dozing through the holidays and a changeover of administrations in Washington — because it ensured the longest period to implement its plan without diplomatic interference.

The pressure on Israel to reach a political settlement will grow, however, as the inauguration of Barack Obama on Jan 20 approaches. That explains why, as the army brings ever greater force to bear on Hamas's urban heartlands, the outlines of an Israeli plan are starting to become visible.

Despite talk in Israel that a chance to topple Hamas is within reach, that option does not have to be pursued. Israel's aims can be achieved whether Hamas stays or falls — as long as it is crushed politically.

Certainly, a permanent re-occupation of the enclave with its 1.5 million inhabitants is not desired by Israel, which withdrew its settlers and soldiers in 2005 precisely because the demographic, economic and military costs of directly policing Gaza's refugee camps were considered too high.

It therefore needs another ceasefire similar to the one that expired on Dec 19. The questions are: who will "sign" it and what will be its terms?

Writing in The Jerusalem Post newspaper this week, Martin Kramer, a leading Washington neoconservative, suggested that Israel's goal was to forge an agreement with Mahmoud Abbas and restore his rule in Gaza. "Hamas would swallow the pill in the name of 'national unity'," he argued.

The idea that Mr Abbas and his Fatah party can ride into the Gaza Strip on the back of Israeli tanks may be a fantasy that makes sense to the neocons who brought us “regime change” in Iraq, but few in the Israeli government or army seem to believe it is feasible.

In any case, the distinction between Fatah’s “rule” over the West Bank ghettos Israel has created and Hamas’s oversight of the prison that Gaza has become is one Israel appears keen to maintain. The Israeli vision for the West Bank, in which significant parts are annexed, depends on its political severance from Gaza.

Instead, Israel is again pursuing its favourite mode of diplomacy: unilateralism. According to officials quoted in the local media, it wants a deal that is approved by the United States and western governments but passes over the heads of Hamas and the Palestinians.

At a recent cabinet meeting, Tzipi Livni, the foreign minister, put it this way: “There is no intention here of creating a diplomatic agreement with Hamas. We need diplomatic agreements against Hamas.”

According to the latest reports, the ceasefire would require, as before, that Hamas prevent all rocket fire out of the Strip, but it would also introduce what officials are vaguely terming a “mechanism” on the only border with Gaza not under Israel’s control.

During its lengthy blockade, Israel has been able to prevent goods, including food, medicines and fuel, from entering the Gaza Strip through crossing points on its two land borders while its navy patrols the sea coast. But Gaza also shares a short southern land border, next to the town of Rafah, with Egypt.

Before the 2005 disengagement, Israel sought to control this fourth border too by bulldozing swathes of Palestinian homes to create a no-man’s land between Rafah and Egypt. This area, overlooked by military watchtowers, was referred to as the Philadelphi corridor.

After the withdrawal, Israel hoped the steel wall along the Rafah border and its oversight of the crossing point into Egypt would ensure that nothing went in or out without its approval.

However, a small private industry of tunnelling under the wall quickly burgeoned, becoming a lifeline for ordinary Gazans and a route for smuggling in weapons for Hamas.

Egypt had little choice but to turn a blind eye, despite being profoundly uncomfortable with an Islamic party ruling next door. It faces its own domestic pressures over the humanitarian catastrophe that has been visibly created in Gaza.

Israel believes the current invasion will have achieved nothing unless this time it regains absolute control of the Rafah border, undercutting Hamas’s claims to be running the Strip. The “mechanism” therefore requires that technical responsibility is lifted from Egyptian shoulders.

According to the Israeli plan, it will pass to the Americans, whose expertise will be called on to stop the tunnelling and prevent Hamas from rebuilding its arsenal after the invasion comes to an end.

Israel may additionally seek the involvement of international forces to diffuse the censure the Arab publics are likely to direct at Egypt as a result.

Once Hamas has no hope of rearming and cannot take any credit for the Gazans' welfare, Israel will presumably allow in sufficient supplies of humanitarian aid to pacify western governments concerned about the images of Gaza's cold and hungry children.

Ghassan Khatib, a Palestinian analyst, believes that in this scenario Israel would probably insist that such supplies come only through the Egyptian crossing, thereby "fulfilling another strategic aim: that of making Gaza Egypt's responsibility".

And once the Gazan albatross is lifted from Israel's neck, Mr Abbas and his West Bank regime will be more isolated than ever. Undoubtedly, the hope in Israel is that, with Gaza disposed of, the pressure will grow on the Palestinian Authority to concede in a "peace" deal yet more Palestinian land in East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

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