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Israel's West Bank Operation: Causes & Consequences

By: Mouin Rabbani · June, 2014

The disappearance of three Israeli youths in mid-June 2014 while hitchhiking home from a Jewish settlement in the Israeli-occupied West Bank has brought an already volatile situation to the boiling point.[1]

At a time of growing Palestinian agitation on account of a mass hunger strike by prisoners and amidst Israeli legislative initiatives to authorize force-feeding them, the Israeli military has launched its largest offensive in the West Bank since the end of the 2000-2005 Palestinian uprising.

The Israeli government instantaneously blamed Hamas for the alleged abduction, yet almost two weeks on has yet to provide a shred of evidence to validate its assertions. It was a transparently political claim made well before the Israeli security forces were in a position to seriously examine the matter. Similarly, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has held Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas directly responsible for the fate of the missing Israeli youths, even though their last known position was in an area of the occupied West Bank under the sole and exclusive control of the Israeli military, and there is no evidence the youths were subsequently moved to an area under Palestinian Authority control – areas where Israeli forces have in any case been operating without restriction for over a decade.

What is clear is that the search for the missing youths is at best a secondary objective of Israel's current organized rampage throughout the West Bank. No one, for example, seriously believes that the missing youths would have been transported from Hebron to Jenin or Salfit in the far north of the West Bank. The campaign's key aims, which Israeli leaders have hardly been coy about, are to deal a significant blow to Hamas in the West Bank, and more importantly to undermine the recent Palestinian reconciliation agreement to the point where it begins to unravel. It additionally hopes to even further weaken Mahmoud Abbas so that he becomes more pliable, dependent and responsive to its demands when bilateral negotiations are resumed or Israel implements unilateral measures in the West Bank. The prospect of a renewed Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip

should also not be discounted.

Many have speculated that Israel is also seeking to provoke mass Palestinian unrest at a time when Palestinians remain fragmented and are insufficiently organized, and can be more easily beaten down. The Israeli campaign may also produce sustained protests against the Palestinian Authority (PA), which to the growing anger of its constituents has maintained unconditional security coordination with Israel – a relationship Abbas recently characterized as "sacred".

These developments are of course not transpiring in a vacuum. Israel is facing growing diplomatic isolation, and today even its closest allies are warning it of the consequences of its blatant violations of Palestinian rights and international law, and have all, at least implicitly, recognized the new Palestinian government without much talk of the sanctions that have accompanied previous reconciliation agreements. From Israel's perspective, changing the narrative from colonialism to terrorism – even as its soldiers have killed five Palestinians, including a 15-year-old boy – has obvious advantages.

For the Palestinian people at large, Israel's military crackdown poses one of the most serious challenges since the Hamas-Fatah schism of 2007. Palestinians within and without the occupied territories will be challenged to find ways to respond that strengthen their position rather than complicating it further. First and foremost, they need to properly rebuild national institutions so that these develop into an inclusive, representative, and dynamic national liberation movement capable of formulating and implementing a coherent and effective strategy, both on the ground and around the world.

Secondly, Palestinians must pursue a serious strategy of internationalization that is based on attaining their inalienable rights, first and foremost the right to self-determination on the basis of the prevailing international consensus and international law. It is an approach incompatible with the Oslo process and therefore requires an irrevocable disengagement from it.

The challenges are huge but hardly insurmountable. Implemented properly, a dynamic Palestinian strategy can turn Israel's continued depredations against the Palestinian people into an effective weapon against its extremist leaders, robbing the latter of the structural advantages they seek to derive from their colonial project and organized rampages such as we have seen in the past two weeks. As always, the key objective should be to arrest and reverse Israel's impunity in its dealings with the Palestinian people and to replace this with effective and meaningful accountability.

1. *Al-Shabaka publishes all its content in both English and Arabic (see Arabic text here.) To read this piece in French, please click here. Al-Shabaka is grateful for the efforts by human rights advocates to translate its pieces into French, but is not responsible for any change in meaning.*

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