

Israel's invasion of Gaza: A calculated act of aggression

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BILLY I AHMED

ISRAEL'S invasion of Gaza on 28 June is a calculated act of aggression for which the capture of Corporal Gilad Shalit by Palestinian commandos provided the pretext.

While Israel Defense Forces officials claim that the operation is to rescue Israeli Corporal Gilad Shalit, who was captured by Palestinian militants, the scale of the attack on Gaza, the targeting of key infrastructure and the mobilisation of more than a hundred Israeli tanks and thousands of troops demonstrate the absurdity of these claims.

Hamas's armed wing has claimed responsibility for the joint attack, together with other factions, on a tank at an Israeli border post on June 25. Two Israeli soldiers were killed in the raid and Cpl. Shalit was taken prisoner.

Israel is exploiting the capture of Shalit as an excuse to launch a long-planned military offensive into Gaza as part of a campaign to

scuttle any return to peace talks and deliberately inflame the situation.

On the eve of the Israeli attack on Gaza, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared: "The time is approaching for a comprehensive, sharp and severe Israeli operation. We will not wait forever." He continued: "I gave the orders to our military commanders to prepare the army for a broad and ongoing military operation to strike the terrorist leaders and all those involved. There will be immunity for no one."

Despite the spiraling violence in the Gaza Strip, from where Israel withdrew unilaterally last year, he insisted he would press ahead with his plan for a unilateral pullback in the West Bank, but that all changed in the pre-dawn hours of Jun. 28, with the destruction of three major bridges and the bombing of the region's only power station, located in Nusseirat refugee camp in Gaza, cutting off electricity for most of Gaza.

Israeli planes fired at least nine

missiles at the power station, plunging large parts of the territory including Gaza city in the darkness. Water pumps throughout the area are powered by electricity, and hospitals in Gaza City face a permanent loss of power.

A short while later, thousands of Israeli troops and armoured vehicles poured into Gaza, taking over the airport and setting up positions about two kilometres inside the strip, around the town of Rafah. At the northern tip of Gaza, thousands more Israeli troops sat waiting for the order to move. Their mission: to stop the firing of rockets by militants into Israel.

In the West Bank, troops swooped overnight on dozens of Hamas officials, arresting a total of eight ministers and 20 lawmakers, for what Israel said was their involvement in a "terrorist organisation."

In addition, Israel has closed off the borders to Gaza, preventing food, medical supplies and other necessities from getting in and blocking the inhabitants from

getting out. These actions are creating a humanitarian disaster throughout the impoverished region. If this is not "punishing ordinary Palestinians," then what is it?

Things will not end there. Olmert has issued the following sinister threat: "We won't hesitate to carry out extreme action to bring Gilad back to his family.... All the military activity that started overnight will continue in the coming days."

Defence Minister Amir Peretz, who told the 71st Armoured Battalion, to which Shalit was attached, "I want to strengthen you and to tell you that the missions you are carrying out will decide the fate of the State of Israel for many years", provided a further indication that Israel is planning a major and long-term military offensive.

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Israel has stepped up its military offensive in recent weeks, launching hundreds of shells at Gaza and killing 14 civilians. The aim of this

week's escalation is to scupper efforts to secure the acceptance by Hamas of the so-called "Prisoners' Charter," committing the organisation to a "two-state" solution that implicitly recognises Israel, and facilitating a common command structure between Hamas and Fatah. This agreement would hamper Israel's efforts to prevent the creation of even the truncated Palestinian state that is the formal aim of the Quartet the US, Europe, Russia and the United Nations.

Olmert seized on the election results to press ahead with his plans to permanently annex East Jerusalem and some 45 percent of the West Bank to Israel, leaving the Palestinians in a number of non-contiguous ghettos, including the Gaza Strip. As events have demonstrated, these would be open to military attack by Israel at any time.

Reports also make clear that the raid could only politically strengthen a hard-line wing within Hamas which is opposed to the Prisoners' Charter and which in all probability carried out the raid that led to the capture of Shalit.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice initially responded to Israel's massing of troops on Gaza's border with the usual appeal for restraint on all sides to allow for a diplomatic solution. But once the invasion was underway, White House Press Secretary Tony Snow declared that



An example of Israeli wrath

Israel had "the right to defend itself."

According to UN, Israel has launched more than 500 shells at Gaza since March, devastating its

infrastructure and claiming dozens of lives.

Israel's military assault on Gaza, one of the most densely populated regions in the world, has potential to be bloodiest since

Operation Defensive Shield and Operation Determined Path claimed hundreds lives in West Bank in 2002.

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Mumbai bomb blasts - crossing the limits

ASGHAR ALI ENGINEER

IT was indeed terrible Tuesday (11/7/06) when innocent commuters going back home after a hard day's work were targeted with bomb from Matunga to Bhayandar on western suburban trains in Mumbai. So far the death toll is more than 200 and about 700 people injured, many of them quite severely. No words are enough to condemn such horrible crime against humanity. No one who has even an elementary sense of being human will commit such dastardly act.

Same day in the morning, eight persons lost their lives in Srinagar, five of them tourists from West Bengal. Grenades were thrown at the tourist bus proceeding towards Pahalgam. Why these killings? Who is behind it? Earlier violence was mostly confined to Kashmir Valley. Now this has spread to various cities of North India, Delhi, Varanasi, Ayodhya and Mumbai. Mumbai witnessed such horrifying bomb blasts second time, first time in March 1993 in which more than 250 innocent people lost their lives.

Some people think, as many Kashmiris thought in 1989, that violence is the only way out and if they take to guns, azadi (freedom) will be near at hand. Now after loosing 80 thousand people they have realised what repercussions use of violence has. Azadi is as far away as it ever was for the Kashmiris and all they have gained is violence and more violence. Peace now is as elusive as azadi itself.

We can very well realise the wisdom of Gandhiji's insistence on non-violence for attaining freedom for India from the clutches of British imperialism. No one believed Gandhiji when he talked of achieving India's freedom through non-violence. Even Churchill, the then Prime Minister of Britain, talked of Gandhiji with scorn and said what this 'naked faqir' could do to mighty British empire on whom sun does not set.

However, it is not easy to practice non-violence for an ordinary person. It requires tremendous inner discipline. Thus in Gandhiji's theory of non-violence there is equally important concept of what he called satyagraha (insistence on truth) and this requires tremendous patience. Thus non-violence, insistence on truth and patience, all go together and this has appeal of its own and if practiced honestly, it can achieve tremendous results as Gandhiji showed. Interestingly, Gandhiji's concept comes very close to the Qur'anic teaching of truth and patience (haq and sabr) as enshrined in chapter 103.

It is a great shame that the so called 'jihadis' are committing such dastardly acts of violence in the name of Islam. Nothing can be more un-Islamic than these horrifying inhuman acts. This game is being played for power and pelf by a section of the Pakistani army. These terrorists cannot carry on such powerful blasts without the support of ISI of Pakistan. Lashkar-

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The Mumbai mayhem

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Nawaz Sharif, the Ex-Prime Minister of Pakistan has said in his recently published biography that ISI is not under government control and has been trying to de-stabilise India and Bangladesh. It is certainly in the know of things in Pakistan and what he says cannot be dismissed lightly. In fact if Pakistan is true to Islam than it should have been heaven of peace. The prophet of Islam (PBUH) made peace central to Islamic teachings.

He accepted peace treaty of Hudabiyyah, which was thought to be humiliating by most of his close companions and yet the Prophet (PBUH) insisted on accepting the

treaty as it led to establishing peace. What better noble example than this? But these terrorists feel no pang of conscience in killing innocent citizens. Even according to the rules of Shari'ah, non-combatants cannot be killed. These rules are precursors to the Geneva Agreement, which was drawn up hundreds of years after these Shari'ah rules.

However, it is these Muslims who are openly defying these Shari'ah rules in the name of Islam. What could be more condemnable? Also how can one say that one needs jihad for taking Kashmir? Jihad is not meant for conquering territory it is for defending oneself, if attacked and for controlling ones evil desires. The Qur'an specifically prohibits any war of aggression. It clearly says, "Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you. Do not commit aggression; Allah does not love aggressors." (2:190)

And in throwing bombs and

killing innocent people they are doubly guilty: they are aggressing against those who are not aggressors and over and above that they are killing non-combatants. Thus they are violating every injunction of Islam and ironically in the name of Islam. They have named their armed groups as "Lashkar-I-Tayyiba" (Holy Army) and "Jaish-I-Mohammad" (the Army of Mohammad, peace be upon him). How can an army which kills innocent people be a holy army or army of Holy Prophet. Those who commit such inhuman deeds can never deserve to be called holy army or army of Mohammad (PBUH).

And as for jihad, it has never been used in the sense of war in the Qur'an. There are other words like qital and harb for war. The Prophet (PBUH) when asked what is jihad he is reported to have said that best form of jihad is speaking truth in the face of tyrannical ruler. Here so called jihadis themselves are

tyrannical and it is needed to speak plain truth in the face. They need to be told that what they are doing is tyrannical against innocent people.

It is such dastardly acts, which has brought bad name to Islam in popular imagination. We claim that Islam is a religion of peace but such acts convince people that Islam has nothing to do with peace but with violence and terrorism. It is in fact duty of Muslims to project themselves as model for peaceful behaviour. We cannot expect common people to discern and discriminate between handful of aggressors and large mass of Muslims living in peace with others and sticking to the Islamic teaching of peace.

It is believed that one of the intentions of throwing bomb on innocent people is to start communal violence in India. They threw bombs in Ayodhya, in a temple in Varanasi and earlier in a market place in Delhi last October. But people of India are mature enough not to fall prey to such dirty game. When a bomb was thrown at a temple in Varanasi it was feared that it would trigger off communal riots. But not only Muslim leaders and intellectuals but also the chief mufti of Varanasi issued a fatwa decrying that attack on temple quoting the Qur'anic verse that to kill one innocent human being amounts to killing the whole humanity (5:32).

The chief mufti and the chief priest of the temple in Varanasi came together and expressed solidarity thus completely frustrating the designs of those who wanted to ignite Hindu-Muslim riots. When a bomb as thrown at Ayodhya it was feared in the same way that it might trigger off violence between Hindus and Muslims but nothing happened. We must salute the maturity of the Indian people.

This time around also all the important Muslim leaders have condemned this cowardly attack on innocent people. Jamiat-I-Ulama-i-Hind, Muslim League, Jamat-e-Islami-Hind, none of them spared any words in condemning this heinous crime against humanity. No sane person will ever condone such ghastly killings. The Hindus and Muslims in Mumbai rose to the occasion and helped all those who were injured and removed dead bodies to hospitals.

It seems India will have to live with such attacks for sometime to come. It is therefore, necessary to be ever alert. What happened on terrible Tuesday is also partly an intelligence failure. Though it is very difficult to predict when and where terrorists will choose to attack, it becomes all the more necessary to be very alert. It is the duty of the Government of India to protect the lives of people against such attacks.

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Time to pursue "look around" diplomacy

NAZMUL HASAN AZAM

ARTICLE 25 of our Constitution has laid down the basis of our relations with other countries states, "The State shall base its international relations on the principles of respect for national sovereignty and equality, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, peaceful settlement of international disputes, and respect for international law and the principles enunciated in the United Nations Charter, and on the basis of those principles shall-

a. Strive for the renunciation of the use of force in international relations and for general and complete disarmament; b. uphold the right of every people freely to determine and build up its own social, economic and political system by ways and means of its own free choice; c. support oppressed peoples throughout the world waging a just struggle against imperialism, colonialism or racialism."

Foreign policies are not built on abstractions. Otto von Bismarck said, "For me there is only one compass - only one pole star: the well being of the state." A country's foreign policy is usually aimed at preserving or promoting its economic and political interests abroad. Foreign policy of a country should never be static and should be contextual with the times. As we see, the foreign policy of United States has changed with times. Thus we were introduced to several foreign policies of US, which came in the name of doctrines like Monroe, Truman, Eisenhower and Bush etc. Each doctrine was implemented to ensure US national interest. Here there is only one thing in terms of foreign policy, which is to maximize national interest.

The BNP-led alliance came to power with more than two-thirds seats in the October 2001 parliamentary election. Then the government of this Republic chalked out new foreign policy, one of which was the 'look east' policy. Through this, special attention was accorded to the East. 'Look east' diplomacy seemed to be unfolding a new rhythm in the foreign policy of Bangladesh to enhance the country's trade and business. Khaleda Zia told a gathering in Dhaka that her government was marching towards the East because "it would bring good for us at this moment". The immediate back-to-back visit of Prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia to Thailand and Myanmar, and visit to Dhaka of the premiers of both countries signifies success of the policy. However, the policy is limited to words only and, in reality, very little progress has been made. 'Look East' policy is a result of frustration over the slow progress in the SAARC compared to the success of other regional bodies (European Union, ASEAN). Since Bangladesh's 'look east' policy has made no progress, we should seek new policies to maximise our national interest.

We get the clear evidence of the failure of so called 'Look East' policy when we see that Bangladesh did not get its way in determining the route through and out of it in the 'Asian Highway'. Moreover, it seems, Bangladesh is going to lose on both counts. Our gigantic neighbour India, who is geographically encircling us, has a traditional conflict with China. Therefore, when Khaleda Zia visited China and subsequently she made an official tour of India, she could not bring any substantial benefit for the people of Bangladesh. And the reason was chiefly Bangladesh's China tilt.

Of course China is our tested friend and the other South East Asian eastern countries are also our friends due to geographical proximity and trade relations. But the reality is, we have huge trade deficit with these countries. With ASEAN members we have about US \$1.4b and with China alone we have about US \$1.25b trade deficit. Therefore we should proceed with such policy, which would be mutually beneficial for both countries in terms of bilateral relations. Due to our porous borders we are also vulnerable to India in respect of trade. India is a powerful country both militarily and economically, and since its inception its powerful neighbour has exploited Bangladesh. It has also huge trade deficit with India (more than US \$1b). Last five years Bangladesh's official visit to India occurred only once and therefore, Khaleda Zia had to come back virtually empty handed.

In recent days Bangladesh is developing its relations with the Middle Eastern countries. This is undoubtedly a timely initiative because Middle East consumes the bulk of our manpower, which means remittance. And remittance is our largest source of earning foreign currency. Moreover Bangladesh is the third largest Muslim country; therefore they have immense goodwill towards Bangladesh. As they have a surplus of money, they would be interested to invest in our country and just are waiting for official overtures. What we have to do is to ensure political stability and favourable investment environment. We get the evidence of their keenness to be real friends of us from their recent back-to-back visit to Dhaka and from their commitment to the government of Bangladesh.

More than 95% of Bangladesh's exports go to the West. Its exports to the European Union stood at 50.12% and to the US, 45.5% during the year 2002-03. Such total dependence of exports on the EU and the US is not prudent since any disruption in export to these countries will seriously affect the economy of Bangladesh. Export is one of the ingredients of economic security of a country. We should be careful about trade; the more diversified our export to as many countries as feasible the more would it be beneficial for our trade. One should not put all the eggs in one basket. This is especially true in respect of trade. Therefore, we should seek alternative export markets immediately to ward off any unexpected disaster.

The geo-political importance of Bangladesh is also considerable. Geographically the location of Bangladesh is between India and ASEAN. Therefore it can utilise the benefits of its location. It could be a springboard for export of some of the manufactured products to India, ASEAN and beyond. To promote rapid development we can attract the attention of the investors throughout the world because Bangladesh is still a country of cheap labour. We should appreciate investment in industrial sectors rather than service sectors because industries can consume a large labour force and it will reduce the unemployment rate of our country besides infrastructure development would also occur to facilitate production. Bangladesh should take Malaysia and Singapore as role models.

Bangladesh is one of the most open economies among developing countries in Asia. In recent years it has taken appropriate steps in trade liberalisation by reducing tariffs and in encouraging 100% foreign investment and joint ventures with sufficient tax incentives. Nonetheless, Bangladesh is still lagging behind in taking the advantage of globalisation due to regional politics and traditional mindset of the regional leaders. Bangladesh is always keen to promote regional ties; in this respect it pioneered the establishment of SARRC as a regional organisation. But stepmother like conduct of two major members has hindered the progress of SARRC, that could benefit other members. Our intra-regional trade is very poor in size compared to the European Union and ASEAN. Within SARRC countries, intra-regional trade accounts for only 5% to 7%, while within European Union countries, intra-regional trade accounts for more than 50% of its exports. This is why we have to persuade other members to enhance intra-regional trade.

Former British foreign secretary and Prime Minister Lord Palmerston asserted, "We don't have any eternal friend; we don't have any eternal enemy; what is eternal that is our interest." Keeping this in mind we should adopt foreign policy. Both the ministry of commerce and ministry of foreign affairs should be active in reviewing the trade policy taking into account the recent developments in international political and economic relations. We should knock at the door of all potential markets and conclude more bilateral agreement, which will be mutually beneficial for both signatories. There is another parliamentary election forthcoming in our country within a few months. Whichever party is mandated, it should formulate a foreign policy, which is more beneficial for the country. There should be continuity in our foreign policy irrespective of the internal political changes.

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