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Israel fights to dismantle Hamas – Christian Science Monitor

After a series of Israeli crackdowns in Gaza, a suicide bombing killed at least 15 Israelis in Haifa Wednesday.

By Nicole Gaouette Ben Lynfield March 6, 2003

BUREIJ REFUGEE CAMP AND JERUSALEM — The deceptive calm created by Israel's firm grip on the Palestinian territories shattered Wednesday afternoon.

Images of a street littered with charred and smoking ruins once again flashed across TV screens here after a massive bombing shredded a bus in a leafy residential neighborhood in the northern port city of Haifa.

The bombing, which killed at least 15 and injured dozens, was the first since early January. It bolsters analysts who argue that Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank, and repeated strikes against the militant group Hamas in Gaza won't end Palestinian violence. Instead, these analysts argue, Israel's actions simply serve to boost militant groups' support, popularity, and determination.

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"The harder they are hit, often the more benefit they gain," says Hisham Ahmed, a professor at Bir Zeit University in the West Bank who studies militant groups. "There are short-term losses - infrastructure, financial, human - but after that they tend to capitalize by further mobilizing their constituencies and the public at large."

Local officials at the scene of the bus bombing said a suicide bomber, not an explosive device, was to blame. The bombing, which the Palestinian Authority condemned, is likely to give impetus to a new Israeli initiative to craft an international treaty against suicide bombers and those who incite or support them.

The bombing comes at a time when Israel is being criticized for Palestinian civilian deaths. Israeli Defense Force raids targeting Hamas in Gaza have killed at least 60 since mid-February. The army wants "to keep the terrorists busy running for their lives and not planning the next terrorist attack against us and our soldiers," says army spokeswoman Maj. Sharon Feingold.

But keeping Hamas "under constant pressure, as the army is doing now, is enough to reduce the threat, not eliminate it," says Shlomo Brom, a senior research associate at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies in Tel Aviv. "If there has been quiet, it's the result of Israeli pressure, but the attempts are not stopping - they are foiled by the IDF."

Indeed, while Hamas spokesman Abdel Aziz Rantisi told the press that his group was not responsible for Wednesday's bus bombing, he praised the attack and stressed that Hamas was "not going to give up in the face of daily killing of Palestinians."

The IDF has pursued Hamas with increasing intensity since a land mine planted by the group killed four soldiers riding inside a tank in Gaza on Feb. 15. The Israeli raids have also been stepped up in response to Hamas rocket attacks on Gaza settlements and towns inside Israel proper.

On a raid Monday to arrest Hamas political leader Sheikh Mohammed Taha, Israeli troops killed eight people, including Noha Maqadme, a pregnant mother of 11. Hours after that raid in the densely packed Bureij refugee camp, shock fused with calls for revenge in an example of the way IDF incursions into Gaza may be hardening resistance instead of undermining it.

In the crumbling streets, endurance seemed to be the order of the day as youths hoisted mattresses on their shoulders for those made homeless by the damaging or complete destruction of 14 houses.

Four of those structures housed families of Palestinians involved in attacks on soldiers and Jewish settlers, the army says. Though human rights groups condemn the practice as collective punishment and a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, the army says the demolitions deter others considering violence against Israeli targets.

Neighboring houses were blown apart by the force of the blasts, which toppled the wall of a room where the Maqadme family took shelter after soldiers announced a curfew.

Jamil Maqadme, his face bruised and sweater torn in the explosion, remembers his mother leaving to make tea for his brother - and then an explosion. "Everyone was under the ruins," he says. "It was deep darkness. I heard my mother scream 'help.' "Something was on my chest, and it was difficult to breathe," he says. His father and a neighbor extricated him, but four of his siblings were injured, and his mother, Noha, was dead.

A block away at the house of Mr. Taha, the Hamas leader, nothing was left except toys and pieces of books in the rubble. Taha and two sons were in Israeli custody after a battle in which the army said grenades were tossed at troops.

The army holds the sheikh responsible for planning armed attacks, but Taha's son Hassan, sitting on a plastic chair amid the ruins, argues that his father is a preacher uninvolved in Hamas' armed wing.

As US-made F-16s flew above the camp, Hassan Taha asked: "Do the Israelis need to destroy half of Bureij to arrest my father? This will only increase the anger and the resistance."

It's a sentiment that fits snugly with Hamas's outlook. "The resistance is the best way to build more support among the Palestinians," says Ismail Abu Shanab, a senior Hamas leader. "Those who sacrifice their lives are seen by the people as patriots."

Though Hamas has taken part in recent Cairo cease-fire talks among Palestinian groups, Mr. Abu Shanab says the group is committed to armed resistance. Bir Zeit Professor Ahmed suggests that stance may be designed for domestic consumption. Championing resistance ensures Hamas's popularity while signing a cease-fire would rob the group of its reason for being, he says.

He notes that Hamas, which hopes one day to rival Mr. Arafat's Palestinian Authority as a political power, clearly scales back operations when it wants calm.

For now that is not the message Abu Shanab wants to convey. His office boasts a poster of Hamas's primitive Qassam rocket, which he calls a "message to Israelis that even though we do not have arms, we can develop means of resistance. The conclusion should be that Israelis cannot stop this resistance whatever security measures they take."

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