

Israel conducts military offensive in the West Bank and Gaza

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In the past fortnight, Israeli armed forces have conducted large-scale raids throughout the West Bank and repeatedly bombed targets in Gaza. The military operations are the largest since Israel's disengagement from Gaza last year and form part of a general Israeli offensive against the Palestinian people following Hamas's victory in the January 25 Palestinian legislative election. A total of 31 Palestinians have been killed since the vote.

The largest single raid undertaken by the Israeli army was conducted in the Balata refugee camp in the West Bank. "Operation Northern Lights" was launched on February 19. According to Palestinian reports, hundreds of Israeli soldiers backed by armoured vehicles, bulldozers and helicopters occupied Balata. The camp is the largest centre for Palestinian refugees in the West Bank, with a registered population of 21,000. Israeli forces cut off Balata from the neighbouring city of Nablus and conducted house-to-house searches for wanted militants.

At least eight Palestinians have been killed in the ongoing operation, including four civilians. Local hospital officials reported that more than 50 Palestinians have been injured, many of them children who were shot after throwing stones at the Israeli forces. The Israeli military claims to have arrested 15 militants, most of whom are alleged members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which is aligned with Fatah.

On the first day of the raid, two 17-year-olds, Ahmed al-Sheikh 'Eissa and Mohammed al-Natour, died after Israeli troops shot them through the neck as they were standing outside their homes. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights reported that the boys were killed "without any apparent reason...[a]ccording to eye witnesses, the area was completely quiet when the two children were shot dead."

Five more Palestinians in Balata were killed on February 23. Three Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades militants died after Israeli forces surrounded them in a local house. Witnesses reported that two helicopter gunships and ground forces strafed the house with gunfire. The same day, two Palestinian civilians were killed by Israeli snipers. Mohammed Saleh Abu S'reis, 22, was reportedly shot as he was standing on the roof of his home. Ibrahim Mohammad Ali Sa'idi, 19, was killed after Israeli forces shot live rounds into crowds of youth throwing stones at Israeli military vehicles.

Three medical workers suffered shrapnel and gunshot wounds as they attended the injured. Due to the interference of Israeli troops, it took more than 30 minutes to evacuate the wounded personnel. One of the medical workers, suffering shrapnel wounds that had severed an artery in his leg, was removed from an ambulance by Israeli soldiers and held at one of their checkpoints for an hour. According to the ambulance driver, soldiers looked at the medical worker's wounds and said, "Good, let him die, you can go only after he is dead."

Other medical workers were reportedly forced to act as human shields by standing between stone throwing youth and Israeli troops. The Israeli Physicians for Human Rights organisation issued a statement in which they "strongly condemn[ed] this attack on medical personnel as a flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention which clearly stipulates the neutrality of medical teams and workers."

Israeli soldiers have repeatedly established temporary bases in structures in civilian areas throughout the Balata refugee camp, including homes, schools, youth clubs and cultural centres. Forty-three houses were reported damaged, and at least one was destroyed by Israeli bulldozers. The United Nations Relief and

Works Agency (UNRWA) condemned the Israeli operation for hindering its work by occupying two schools it runs. UNRWA officials also reported that Israeli forces blocked a health clinic and prevented patients and staff from leaving the building.

The Israeli army has conducted raids in other towns and refugee camps throughout the West Bank. Alleged militants have been arrested in Jenin, Qalqilya, Bethlehem, Tulkarm, Hebron and Ramallah.

In Gaza, Israeli forces have launched a number of missile attacks. On February 19, a missile strike on the southern refugee centre of Khan Yunis killed two members of the Palestinian Popular Resistance Committees. Two days later, an artillery shell hit an apartment building in northern Gaza and seriously wounded a two-year-old resident. On February 24, another two Palestinian militants were shot dead, reportedly as they were planting bombs along the Gaza-Israel border. One of the militants was the son of senior Hamas leader and recently elected parliamentarian Abdel Fattah Dukhan.

The killings in the West Bank and Gaza sparked angry demonstrations. Last Friday, thousands of Palestinians, including dozens of gunmen firing in the air, marched through Nablus for a funeral procession of four of the men killed in Balata. Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade militants chanted “revenge, revenge” on loudspeakers. Rabiya Abu Liel, a Martyrs Brigade leader, vowed vengeance. “What they did to us we will do to them,” he declared. “They killed our leader so we will kill their leaders.”

Similar demonstrations led by Hamas were held in Gaza. Ismail Haniyeh, Hamas leader and nominee for prime minister, denounced “aggression committed against our people” and called on the international community to censure Israel. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas warned that Israeli military operations threatened the year-long “period of calm” adhered to by most Palestinian militant groups.

The Israeli government has continued to ratchet up the pressure. “Today we have hit Nablus, last week we struck at Gaza and before that in Jenin and we’ll continue to do so in every place, with all our forces and without compromise,” acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert declared on February 24, according to AFP.

Avi Dichter, senior member of the ruling Kadima party and former head of the Shin Bet internal security

service, threatened the Hamas leadership with assassination. “I see no situation in which [Ismail] Haniyeh enjoys immunity just because he is prime minister,” he told the *Yediot Aharonot* newspaper. “If there is a terror attack and Israel decides to reply with a targeted assassination, Haniyeh will be a legitimate target, because Hamas cannot carry out an attack without the leadership’s consent.... If Haniyeh turns up at a military checkpoint I believe that he would be arrested, interrogated, and put on trial for being involved in terror attacks.”

Israeli government officials are free to make such blatantly provocative declarations because they are assured of the Bush administration’s backing. Washington has remained silent during Israel’s latest military offensive; State Department officials have not even bothered to issue the standard appeals for “restraint.” The Bush administration’s position is consistent with its past support for every measure taken by the Israeli government against the Palestinian people, particularly since Hamas’s election victory. Washington has endorsed Israel’s uncompromising stance against the incoming Hamas-led Palestinian Authority, including its confiscation of Palestinian tax and customs revenue.



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