

# Israel deepens offensive in Occupied Territories

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Media reports now refer to Israel's attack on Gaza as the "forgotten war," a conflict overshadowed by the carnage in Lebanon. Tel Aviv is happy for this situation to continue. While the world's media focuses almost exclusively on Lebanon, and Israel has itself concentrated its military efforts on the bombing of Beirut, Tripoli and other major cities, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) has also deepened its three-week-long offensive against the Palestinians.

To describe Israel's actions in Gaza as collective punishment does not do enough to convey the scale of the crimes being perpetrated. The IDF has set out to destroy the social, economic and, indeed, political infrastructure of Gaza and is attempting the same on the West Bank. The aim of the Kadima-led coalition government is to reduce the Palestinians to conditions of utter degradation. This would serve to crush all opposition to the creation of a Greater Israel through the forcible annexation of much of the West Bank and East Jerusalem, leaving the Palestinians in a series of squalid ghettos with the IDF acting as de facto prison guards.

A UN report issued yesterday said the Israeli Army has carried out 168 air strikes and fired more than 600 shells into Gaza, with close to 120 killed as of Thursday night.

In the most ominous development so far, the IDF yesterday dropped leaflets on towns and villages throughout Gaza warning residents that anyone with an arsenal of weapons in their homes would be bombed. Military officials said the IDF was adopting a "new policy" of attacking homes in civilian areas where weapons such as homemade rockets were secretly stored.

The IDF has made clear that entire communities will be targeted, not merely individual dwellings. The leaflets stress that people should be aware of the actions of their neighbours and, if militants were storing weapons in the area, their neighbourhoods could be attacked.

"The life of all those who are holding military

equipment and ammunition in their homes is in danger and they should leave the premises for their safety and that of their families," the leaflet reads. "The Israeli Defence Force will strike and destroy all sites and buildings housing ammunition and military material."

This signals a dramatic stepping up of the targeting of civilians that has been the hallmark of the offensive from the beginning. To date, 70 percent of Palestinian deaths have been in the north around Gaza City, Beit Hanoun and Beit Lahia. Beit Hanoun was occupied on Sunday until Israeli troops withdrew Tuesday, after which it was subjected to renewed bombardment. On July 19, the IDF made a major incursion into parts of central Gaza, taking over buildings and bulldozing farmland.

The attack being mounted on the Mughazi refugee camp is a typical example of the brutality meted out by the IDF.

Mughazi has 22,000 residents and is situated near the Gaza-Israel border fence. On July 19 residents said 30 Israeli armoured vehicles had arrived in the camp by sunrise. Fighting broke out and six people were killed that day, some as a result of air strikes. IDF soldiers opened fire towards paramedics working in the camp, seriously wounding one.

Fighting continued until this morning, when the IDF announced a pullout after killing at least 14 people. Residents said they left behind considerable destruction, tearing up water pipes and electricity wires.

Having quit Maghazi camp, the Israeli forces were massing on the border ahead of a possible new incursion against the nearby Bureij refugee camp. An Israeli army spokeswoman confirmed the Maghazi withdrawal. "Yes, our forces are out, but it is important to emphasise that operations in Gaza continue," she said.

Israel has been systematically destroying major infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, focusing on government buildings such as the Foreign Affairs ministry. But power stations, water treatment plants and greenhouses have also

been singled out. In the latest raids shelling was concentrated on industrial zones, including industrial workshops east of Gaza City. This means that fewer people are killed, but maximises the impact of Israeli aggression in the long term. Many companies have already been forced to close down.

Israel has mounted major attacks on the West Bank centred on the city of Nablus, which has a population in excess of 100,000. Early July 19, the IDF surrounded the local government building with around 100 military vehicles, including bulldozers, jeeps and tanks. The army completely destroyed the preventative security building, killing at least three people. Members of the Ministry of Security were taken prisoner and stripped of their clothing.

The Ministry of Health building was also seized and turned into a detention facility. Palestinian paramedics were prevented at gunpoint from retrieving the bodies of the three government employees assassinated by the IDF.

Attacking medical personnel is an established tactic of the IDF. At Beit Hanoun Hospital, ambulance drivers were fired on July 16 as they attempted to pick up five people wounded and two killed in the Israeli occupation of the town.

The IDF also stormed a government building in Ramallah on the West Bank and the office of the Palestinian WAFA News Agency on July 19.

The attack on WAFA is part of an attempt to prevent any reporting of Israel's criminal behaviour on the West Bank and elsewhere. Wail Tanous, a cameraman for Al Jazeera, was shot in the leg by the IDF while filming in Nablus on July 19. Faten Al-Wan, a reporter with Al Hurrah television, was also shot with a rubber bullet later that day.

The pattern was set in Gaza, where a number of journalists have been fired on at close range despite being clearly identified, including a news crew from the rightwing and avowedly pro-Israeli Fox News from the United States.

Israel's offensive in Gaza has already produced terrible suffering. Its one and a half million residents are living in dire straits, facing shortages of electricity, water and food.

Israel's first major action was to destroy Gaza's sole power station. In addition three major sewage treatment plants and more than 100 municipal wells are not working properly.

Charities Christian Aid, Oxfam International and Save the Children UK have warned of a looming humanitarian disaster, particularly an increase in disease as a result of

the lack of clean water and the buildup of untreated sewage. Should this occur, what remains of a health system already deprived of power would be quickly overwhelmed.

Adam Leach, regional director from Oxfam, commented:

"Ordinary Palestinians are suffering from the destruction of bridges, water pipelines and electricity supplies—all things that civilians are entitled to and depend upon.

"Hundreds of thousands of people are without a regular supply of water. Many of our vital water projects had already been interrupted because of prolonged Israeli restrictions stopping supplies entering Gaza. People's basic rights are being denied...

"The crisis comes as tens of thousands of families in Gaza and the West Bank are struggling to survive without an income because of the suspension of tax payments by the Government of Israel and aid by the international community to the Palestinian Authority.

"Gaza is now very hot and humid with temperatures constantly over 30 degrees. Without power, people cannot pump water up to their flats. Old people cannot reach hospital if they live in high buildings. At least 200 surgical operations have been cancelled."

Israel continues to enjoy the active support of Egypt in pursuing its campaign of destruction in Gaza. It helped ensure the siege imposed by Tel Aviv was complete by closing its own border with Gaza, which runs through the town of Rafah, on June 25, in collaboration with the IDF. Three thousand Palestinians were left stranded on the Egyptian side of the border, after Cairo posted 2,500 police in Rafah. Hundreds of others were denied access to medical treatment in Egypt. In the days that followed, eight people died in the sweltering heat.

On July 14, Palestinian militants forced open the border gate, wounding an Egyptian officer and letting around 600 Palestinians get into Gaza. After protest by the European Union and the United Nations, Egypt and Israel finally agreed to open the Rafah border for just a few hours on July 19 to allow people back into Gaza. No one was allowed to leave.



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