

Israeli troops kill unarmed Palestinian protesters on borders

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Israeli soldiers yesterday killed at least fifteen Palestinians and wounded many more as they suppressed protests held at border posts facing Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza to mark the 63rd anniversary of the founding of the Zionist state.

This latest massacre of Palestinian civilians inflicted by the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) again demonstrates the Israeli government's brazenly unlawful operations. The situation also exposes the Obama administration's "humanitarian" pretext for the bombardment of Libya.

NATO's war is supposedly necessary to protect unarmed civilians from the possibility of being killed by government forces—but Washington raises no objections to the murderous activities of its closest ally in the Middle East, which it arms and finances to the tune of billions of dollars each year.

The exact death toll from yesterday's demonstrations remains unclear, with differing numbers provided by various media outlets. According to the Associated Press, Lebanese security officials reported that ten people were killed on the Lebanese side of the border fence. One person was shot dead by an Israeli sniper in Gaza. Others were killed in Israeli-occupied Golan Heights when a crowd of unarmed protesters broke through the demarcation fence with Syria and marched into the village of Majdal Shams.

May 15 marks the anniversary of Israel's establishment in 1948, but for the Palestinian people it is commemorated as "the catastrophe," or al-Naqba. The Zionist state was founded through a terror campaign triggering one of the largest forced migrations in modern history. An estimated 700,000

Palestinians were expelled or fled their homes, and their property was expropriated. Denied the right to return ever since, there are now about 4.5 million refugees and their descendents in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the occupied territories.

Thousands of refugees and their supporters protested around the world yesterday, coordinated through social networking Internet sites. Young Palestinians were especially inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries.

Within the occupied territories, tens of thousands took to the streets, many holding keys of their family homes lost in 1948. Israel yesterday imposed a 24-hour shutdown across the West Bank, closing the various crossings and checkpoints.

There were clashes between protesters and Israeli troops in Hebron, Wallajah and Jerusalem, while at Gaza's Erez border crossing at least 15 unarmed civilians were wounded by Israeli gunfire. The IDF fired what it described as "warning shots," including tank shells and machine gun bullets aimed at open fields adjacent to the protest. One Palestinian, alleged by Israeli authorities to have been planting a bomb, was shot dead.

In Egypt, thousands protested outside the Israeli embassy. More than 100 were injured when Egyptian security forces fired tear gas and rubber-coated steel bullets after an attempt was allegedly made to storm the building. *Al Jazeera* reported that at least 20 people were arrested.

The worst of the violence occurred outside the

southern Lebanese village of Maroun al-Ras, where thousands of people gathered at a border fence. Protesters reportedly hung flags on the barbed wire and sang songs, with some young people throwing rocks across the border, before both Israeli and Lebanese soldiers began firing. Lebanese forces initially fired warning shots, though it remains unclear whether they also fired into the crowd. Israeli forces were reportedly responsible for those killed.

The violence was the worst inflicted on Lebanon since Israel's 2006 invasion of the country.

Those killed yesterday on the Syrian border were the victims of an Israeli operation to retake the village of Majdal Shams. According to one report, of the 200 protesters who crossed the border waving flags and placards, more than 100 were wounded in the Israeli offensive, demonstrating an indiscriminate use of force.

Before the attack, villagers had welcomed the protesters, with the *Independent* reporting that "local residents greeted the infiltrators like heroes, joining them as they marched towards the main square singing and waving Palestinian flags."

One of the protesters, Muhammad Umran, 35, from the Yarmouk refugee camp in Syria's capital Damascus, spoke with the *Washington Post*. "We cannot put up with this anymore," he explained. "We are demanding our right of return. We are not afraid."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu openly defended the violence. "I instructed the Israel Defence Forces to act with maximum restraint but to prevent any infiltration into our borders," he declared. "Everyone should know that we are determined to protect our borders and our sovereignty." Defence Minister Ehud Barak likewise insisted: "The IDF must protect the sovereignty of Israel and it succeeded in doing so."

In reality, Israel invaded Syria's Golan Heights in 1967 and later illegally annexed the territory. Its "sovereignty" over the area is not internationally recognised.

The Netanyahu government and Israel Defence Forces have also alleged that the Naqba protests were "provocations" which bore "the fingerprints of Iran." The Syrian government and Lebanon's Hezbollah were also accused.

"The Syrian regime is intentionally attempting to divert international attention away from the brutal crackdown of their own citizens to incite against Israel," Israeli military spokeswoman Lieutenant Colonel Avital Leibovich claimed.

These allegations are consistent with the Israeli government's typical response to crises—to ratchet up tensions and beat the drum for war with Iran.

It remains unclear how the Israeli military was overpowered on the Syrian border by a relatively small group of unarmed demonstrators. Protests for the Naqba anniversary were publicly prepared, and security officials in Israel were on high alert. Days earlier, one military official cited in the Israeli media explained: "We don't want to be surprised or improvise a response at the last moment."

Yet only a small number of Israeli troops were stationed at one of the key Syrian border checkpoints. The question must be raised as to whether elements within the Israeli state and military ordered forces to be stood down in order to create the conditions for a violent crackdown and a campaign of fear and hysteria about a supposed threat to Israel's sovereignty.



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