

Israel's military continues airstrikes on Gaza as it prepares for an “indefinite” operation

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On Tuesday, Israel launched a massive aerial bombardment of 140 airstrikes on Gaza, killing a further two Palestinians.

This brings the death toll to 40, including nine children and one woman. Thirty-five of the deaths were in Gaza and five people in Israel were killed. At least 122 people have been injured, 41 of them children. More than 12 percent of all injuries were “serious,” according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

One of Israel's targets, a 13-storey residential tower in Gaza City that houses an office used by the political leadership of Hamas, collapsed.

Salameh Marouf, who heads the government information office in Gaza, told *Al Jazeera* that Israel had “intentionally targeted service facilities, such as near the water desalination facility to the north of Gaza, which put it out of service.”

Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, Israel's military spokesman, said that 15 militants had been killed in strikes by jets and unmanned drones. He said nothing about the civilian deaths and injuries, adding cynically, “We are doing everything possible to avoid collateral damage.” He reported that the military's air campaign was still in its “early stages,” implying that assassinations of Hamas leaders were on the agenda.

Gaza, home to nearly two million Palestinians, most of whom are under 25 years of age, has suffered a criminal 14-year blockade, three murderous wars—the last in 2014—and numerous assaults at the hands of Israel since 2006.

Israel's latest attacks on Gaza started on Monday night in response to calls by Hamas to withdraw security forces from Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque compound and Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has on several occasions ordered the deployment of security

forces to the al-Aqsa compound, the third-holiest site in Islam, during the month-long Ramadan fast that began April 12. None of the authorities have sought to give the slightest justification for Monday's storming of the compound by security personnel who trampled over prayer mats, attacking worshippers with rubber bullets and stun grenades, injuring 520 Palestinians of whom 330 needed hospital treatment.

Police Commissioner Koby Shabtai told *Channel 12 News* that the police had been “too soft” in dealing with the Palestinians in the compound and that they were going to get tougher.

Such military invasions of religious sites are illegal under the 1954 Hague Convention—to which Israel is a signatory. In 1981, UNESCO declared Jerusalem's Old City that includes the compound a world heritage site.

The storming of al-Aqsa came amid demonstrations against escalating land grabs by Israeli settlers, settlement expansion and the planned eviction of Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah, north of Jerusalem's Old City. Provocative marches organized by Religious Zionism chairman Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben-Gvir of Jewish Power, taunted the Palestinians with “death to Arabs” chants. The situation in East Jerusalem, which is heavily reliant on tourism, has been further exacerbated by the pandemic that has left thousands of young people without an income.

The timing of the crackdown on Jerusalem Day—the anniversary of Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem from Jordan following the 1967 War—ahead of the planned Flags March by Israel's settler groups and far right forces through Arab neighbourhoods was planned to precipitate a war with the Palestinians.

It prompted angry demonstrations by Palestinian Israelis, in predominantly Arab towns and cities including Lod, Ramle, Isawiyah, Jaffa, the northern

port city of Haifa, Nazareth and the central region around Umm al-Fahm, as well as in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank, that were met with police repression. In Lod, a Jewish Israeli shot and killed a Palestinian amid violent clashes. On Tuesday, Palestinian Israelis went on strike across the country. This marks a significant shift in the attitude of the mainly young protesters who in the past did not actively solidarise with the Palestinians in East Jerusalem and the occupied territories.

Tuesday's air strikes came after Hamas responded to Israel's Monday night bombardment with rockets, killing two women and injuring dozens in the southern city of Ashkelon.

The scale of the high-tech bombardment makes clear that these latest attacks on Gaza by the most powerful military force in the region mark the start of Israel's fourth war on the besieged enclave. Furthermore, the military campaign—dubbed “Guardian of the Walls”—is set to escalate and widen.

Netanyahu, speaking after the first Gaza rockets were launched on Monday evening, proclaimed that the Palestinians had “crossed a red line” and that “Israel will respond with great force.”

He followed this up on Tuesday with a pledge to step up the assault, declaring “At the conclusion of a situational assessment, it was decided that both the might of the attacks and the frequency of the attacks will be increased.”

He has refused all calls to calm the situation and has not responded to Egypt's offer to mediate between Israel and Gaza, Egypt's foreign minister told an emergency Arab League meeting.

Israel's media and politicians across the political spectrum have supported Netanyahu, parroting the party line about Israel acting to defend itself. Opposition leader Yair Lapid, who is trying to form a coalition government to replace Netanyahu, called for even harsher attacks on Gaza.

Yesterday, Defence Minister Benny Gantz approved the call up of 5,000 reserve soldiers, which he said was to “deepen home front defence.” He instructed Israel Defense Forces (IDF) chief of staff Lieutenant General Aviv Kochavi to continue the attacks on Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets in Gaza, prepare the home front and rebut “false claims” by the Palestinians.

Gantz approved Public Security Minister Amir

Ohana's request for eight companies of Border Police as reinforcements. The police and the army have sealed the crossings into Gaza and closed roads adjacent to the enclave.

Aviv Kochavi said all IDF units had to prepare for a wider campaign of indefinite duration, with the onslaught to be expanded to additional targets. Hidai Zilberman, an IDF spokesperson, warned that the Israeli army has its “foot on the gas” and that attacks on the Gaza Strip would intensify. The military had increased the number of Iron Dome batteries in central Israel in preparation for more rocket strikes.

Netanyahu's preparations for war against the Palestinians come in the wake of his failure to form a new coalition government that would ensure his ability to evade a trial that is exposing his corrupt relations with media figures. He has calculated that a new Palestinian uprising and a war with Hamas would upend any possibility of his rival Lapid securing the necessary support of both his potential right-wing partners such as Naftali Bennett of Yamina and Mansour Abbas' United Arab List, precipitating a fifth election and/or a state of emergency that would ensure Netanyahu's continued premiership.

He is assured of the continued support of Washington and the European powers who have condemned Gaza's rocket attacks on Israel and called for both sides to step back from the brink, absurdly equating Gaza's projectiles with Tel Aviv's sophisticated weaponry. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken demanded that the rocket attacks from Gaza against Israel stop “immediately”. Speaking ahead of his meeting with Jordanian foreign minister Ayman Safadi in Washington, he said, “I am deeply concerned about the rocket attacks.”

Netanyahu has also been bolstered by his new-found Arab allies that have normalized relations with Israel, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain—and by implication its patron Saudi Arabia—Morocco and Sudan, all of whom have said little other beyond pro forma statements of concern.



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