

Mounting death toll as Israel's war on Gaza escalates

Jean Shaoul**13 May 2021**

Air strikes have continued to pound the Gaza Strip, killing more than 100 Palestinians, among them at least 27 children, and wounding more than 980 people since the start of hostilities.

Israel has struck more than 750 targets associated with Hamas, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated group that controls Gaza, since the beginning of Operation Guardian of the Walls. These include buildings used by Hamas, its security and intelligence apparatus, banks, and a Hamas naval squad. It has destroyed three high-rise buildings and killed around 60 Hamas operatives, including 10 senior commanders.

Israel's Minister of Defence Benny Gantz glorified the carnage, saying, "We have attacked many hundreds of targets, towers are falling, factories are collapsing, tunnels are being destroyed and commanders are being assassinated."

He declared that military operations in the Gaza Strip would continue until it brings a "complete and long-term peace."

Threatening the Palestinians in a video, Gantz said, "Gaza will burn." He reminded them that he was Israel Defence Forces (IDF) chief during Israel's last war on Gaza in 2014. That war killed 2,192 Palestinians, including 1,523 civilians of whom 519 were children, injured tens of thousands more, and destroyed or damaged thousands of homes and much basic infrastructure. Gantz warned, "If Hamas does not stop its violence, the strike of 2021 will be harder and more painful than that of 2014."

On Thursday, Gantz ordered the called up of 16,000 army reservists and sent ground forces to the border in preparation for "all eventualities and an escalation." IDF spokesperson Hidai Zilberman said that plans for a ground invasion were being prepared and that the IDF had begun an arrest campaign in the West Bank against

Hamas members. At least three Palestinians have been killed in clashes with security forces in the West Bank and a further 27 injured as protesters took to the streets.

Gaza's hospitals, already struggling to cope with the pandemic, are battling to care for the wounded amid a shortage of beds, staff, equipment and blood and problems with the power supply. A Red Crescent coordinator said, "The situation here is very difficult, I can't describe the horror in words."

This takes place in one of the most impoverished and densely populated areas in the world, with more than two million people living in just 140 square miles. Subject for 14 years to Israel's illegal blockade of its borders, it has become an open-air prison like the Warsaw Ghetto. Gaza has the highest unemployment rate in the world, with 82 percent of the population now out of work. A recent survey by the New Family organisation reported that 63 percent of Gazans live below the UN-defined poverty line of \$2 a day. Electricity is only available for a few hours a day, while almost all water is contaminated by untreated sewage or salt.

The IDF said Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups had launched more than 1,500 projectiles towards Israel. Rockets have killed seven Israelis, including two Palestinian citizens and two children, indicating the overwhelming superiority of Israel's aerial weaponry.

Israel's bombardment began after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ignored Hamas's ultimatum to withdraw security forces from the al-Aqsa Mosque compound and Sheikh Jarrah, an East Jerusalem neighborhood, on Monday evening. More than 1,000 security forces had stormed the compound during Ramadan, attacking worshippers with rubber bullets and stun grenades and injuring hundreds.

East Jerusalem has witnessed weeks of increasingly violent clashes between the Palestinian residents of Sheikh Jarrah, who face a court order evicting them from their homes, and Jewish settlers and right-wing fanatics. Several families in Silwan, a neighborhood to the south of the Old City, are also facing expulsion. The planned evictions are part of a broader campaign of ethnic cleansing to remove Palestinians, who form 40 percent of Jerusalem's population, in favour of Jewish settlers.

Last year, Israel increased home demolitions in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, making more than 1,000 Palestinians homeless. In the first four months of this year, in East Jerusalem alone, Israel has demolished more than 50 Palestinian homes and structures, issued 40 additional demolition notices and approved plans for nearly 5,000 new settlement units.

The reaction from the US and the major European powers to Israel's pre-meditated criminality has been one of staggering hypocrisy. For months, they have demonized China for its supposed genocide of the Uighurs without citing evidence to support their claim. Yet in the case of Israel, its war crimes against Gaza are greenlighted with the mantra of "Israel's right to defend itself," while its plans for ethnic cleansing in East Jerusalem are portrayed as no more than a legal dispute over ownership.

Netanyahu has also declared war on Israel's Palestinian citizens opposing the planned evictions of the Sheikh Jarrah families, the racist attacks on East Jerusalem residents, and the storming of the al-Aqsa mosque. Israel Palestinians, some 21 percent of the population, are the poorest in Israel, with nearly half of Arab households below the poverty line. They have suffered decades of discrimination, made official in 2018 with the passage of the "Nation-State Law" enshrining Jewish supremacy as the legal foundation of the state.

Jewish racists along with hundreds of settlers from the occupied West Bank have marched through Arab neighbourhoods in towns and cities, chanting "Death to the Arabs," throwing bottles and stones and provoking violent clashes while the security forces turned a blind eye.

While such attacks have long gone on in the occupied West Bank, attacks now taking place openly within Israel itself echo the ethnic cleansing that drove the

Palestinians from their homes between 1947 and 1949.

This week, in the central city of Lod, riots broke out, with violent clashes between Jewish mobs and the Palestinians, leading to the death of a Palestinian and further riots in which a synagogue, school and several vehicles were burned by Palestinians. The government announced a city-wide nighttime curfew and declared a state of emergency, the first time the government has used emergency powers since the lifting of military law over Arab communities in 1966.

In Bat Yam, a seaside town south of Tel Aviv, gangs of Jewish extremists marched down the main streets, smashing Arab-owned businesses and attacking passersby. They took turns beating and kicking a man presumed to be an Arab, even as his body lay motionless on the ground, on live television. Four of the alleged attackers were arrested while chanting "death to Arabs" and "may your village burn." All have been released on bail anonymously. According to the city's mayor, the riots were "organized by provocateurs who came from outside the city."

Video clips have circulated on social media of Jewish mobs trying to break into Palestinian homes, shops and setting up roadblocks.

President Reuven Rivlin warned that the country was descending into a "senseless civil war." Netanyahu said the attacks amounted to "anarchy", and that he was sending in military forces, including 10 reservist units, to help police maintain order in towns and cities with mixed populations.

A major factor in Netanyahu's calculated efforts to ram through the ethnic cleansing of East Jerusalem and provoke a war was his determination to end any possibility of opposition leader Yair Lapid forming a government. He appears to have been successful. Naftali Bennett, leader of the right-wing Yamina Party, said that in the light of recent events, a "government of change," made up of parties seeking to replace Netanyahu as prime minister was now out of the question and he was in favour of a unity government.



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