

Israel wages war on Gaza and its own cities

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Israel escalated its assault on Gaza Friday morning, deploying 160 warplanes as well as tanks and artillery massed on the border and firing about 450 missiles and shells. This massive firepower forced residents in northern Gaza to flee their homes and take shelter in Gaza city.

According to Israel Defense Forces (IDF), this was aimed at more than 150 underground targets, including a tunnel network, in northern Gaza. It follows air strikes on Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other targets across the Gaza Strip—at least 800 in the last five days—that have demolished five tower blocks housing Hamas headquarters, regional commands and senior commanders. The IDF claims it has largely wiped-out Hamas and Islamic Jihad sites producing weapons.

Israel's massive assault against an essentially defenceless people has brought the death toll to 122, including 27 children, and the number of people injured to 830, according to Gaza's health ministry. On Thursday alone, 49 Palestinians were killed.

Nine people have been killed in Israel, including a child and a soldier, exposing the enormous disparity in firepower between the Palestinians and Israel's high-tech weaponry. Of the 1,700 primitive missiles launched from Gaza, most either fall inside Gaza or are intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome all-weather air defense system.

According to the United Nations, air strikes have destroyed or severely damaged more than 200 homes and 24 schools in the past five days, while damage to pipe networks and power cuts threaten the already limited access to fresh water and electricity.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted, "The last word was not said, and this operation will continue as long as necessary." The IDF has drawn up plans for a ground invasion of Gaza, telling its forces to "prepare for battle" and called up 16,000 reservists while cancelling leave for all combat units.

Israel has witnessed unprecedented levels of communal violence at home. Netanyahu's far-right, extremist allies—including Lehava, racist football hooligans known as La Familia, Jewish Power and far right settler groups—have rampaged through Palestinian neighbourhoods, provoking violent confrontations that risk turning into a civil war.

TV footage and video clips on social media have captured terrifying scenes of Jewish lynch mobs vandalizing and burning shops and cars, intimidating and beating up Palestinians, as well as stabbings, attacks on homes, shootings and riots. Police allowed these nationalist thugs to run amok in Jerusalem, Lod, Ramle, Nasariya, Tiberias, Beersheba, Haifa and other towns and villages.

Some of the worst violence took place in Lod, a mixed population town of 80,000 people, where a Palestinian was fatally shot Monday. The release of three men suspected of carrying out the killing further enraged the Palestinians, leading to riots and angry clashes. On Wednesday night, the authorities declared a state of emergency in the town, imposed a night curfew and brought in armed border police officers from the occupied West Bank. This did nothing to curb the violence and led to the stabbing of a Jewish man Thursday morning.

Speaking late on Thursday night in Lod, Netanyahu said, "We are dealing with a campaign on two fronts—in Gaza [and] in Israel's cities."

He pledged that the security services would be given a free hand to use force to put down domestic riots and told them not to worry about "commissions of inquiry, investigations and checks... In putting down rioters one needs to use force, a lot of force."

Netanyahu has launched the opening salvo in a renewed ethnic cleansing operation like that of 1947 to 1949. He said he was considering the use of administrative detention—commonly used in the

occupied West Bank to detain Palestinians for long periods without charge or access to lawyers—and deploying the army to maintain order. He added, “The intelligence that we have says that it could very well be that we will have an upsurge of violence here in the coming days.”

Israeli police have arrested Kamal al-Khatib, vice president of the Islamic Movement in Israel, after storming his house in Galilee following a crackdown on protesters in northern Israel. Al-Khatib’s arrest came after Palestinian warnings that prominent activists had received threatening messages from Israeli intelligence officers. Al-Khatib was one of them. His son said, “Many people got a text message, including influential protesters, saying that they were recorded as being present at al-Aqsa and they would be held accountable.” It seems likely the security services were using a GPS system, developed as a track and trace system to control the pandemic, to track and intimidate those who were at the compound.

This comes amid concerns by rights groups and activists that the social media platforms Instagram, Facebook and Twitter are silencing Palestinian voices, after several posts about increased tensions in Sheikh Jarrah were taken down and accounts suspended. While Instagram claimed there had been a widespread technical issue, Mona Shtaya, an advocacy manager for Tamleh, an organization that focuses on Palestinians’ digital rights, told *Middle East Eye* that there was a systematic effort to remove Palestinian content on social media. She said the number of requests from the Israeli cyber unit to social media companies to silence Palestinians had increased annually, adding, “In 2019 Israel made 19,606 requests from the cyber unit to social media companies regarding content takedowns.”

The escalating war on Gaza has triggered angry protests in the West Bank where IDF soldiers have killed at least 10 Palestinians, some during violent clashes with security forces, while others were shot on suspicion of “terrorism,” since Monday. On Thursday, IDF soldiers shot and killed two Palestinians and injured 150 more as confrontations with security forces erupted in towns and cities across the West Bank, according to the Ministry of Health in Ramallah.

There have also been incidents on both the Jordanian and Lebanese borders. Israel claimed its tanks fired warning shots toward rioters, some waving Hezbollah

flags, who crossed into Israel. Lebanon confirmed that the IDF had killed one of the protesters who was holding a Palestinian flag and wounded another. It follows the firing of three Grad rockets from Lebanon that fell into the sea without hitting anything, underlining the risk of another front opening.

Thousands of Jordanians travelled by car and bus to Jordan’s border with Israel in a show of solidarity with the Palestinians far greater than that seen during Israel’s three wars on Gaza. They called on the Jordanian government to open the border, which has seen increased security since the attacks on worshippers in the al-Aqsa mosque compound during Ramadan. Riot police blocked their path before they could reach the border. Jordanians have also been protesting near the Israeli Embassy in Amman for several days in some of the largest demonstrations in the region, calling on the government to scrap the peace treaty with Israel, close the Israeli embassy and end the gas deal with Israel.

Israel’s actions have provoked opposition among Jewish Israelis. Hundreds of Jews have joined the Palestinians in protests in Jerusalem and neighbouring towns against the threatened evictions in Sheikh Jarrah, Israeli violence and the continued occupation of the Palestinian territories, calling for an immediate ceasefire.

Protests against Israel’s war on Gaza have been held across the world with an international day of protest in support of the Palestinians planned for today, Saturday. This has evidently made some countries nervous, with Gerald Darmanin, France’s interior minister instructing police to ban the protest in Paris and German police trying to brand the protest as anti-Semitic. In Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, police fired tear gas to disperse a demonstration expressing solidarity with the Palestinians and made arrests.



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