

Israel escalates attack on the Palestinians in Gaza

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The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have ramped up their attacks on Gaza, with fighter jets launching strikes on Hamas targets on Monday and Saturday in response to home-made incendiary balloons set afloat from the besieged Palestinian enclave.

It marks the heaviest escalation in hostilities since Israel's 11-day war on Gaza last May that killed more than 250 Palestinians, including at least 66 children and 41 women.

Israel's attacks follow Saturday's demonstration near Gaza's border with Israel, when Israeli soldiers fired live shots and injured at least 41 Palestinians, including two people who were critically injured, one of whom was a 13-year-old boy shot in the head. The IDF said that the Palestinians had shot and critically injured one of its security personnel, a 21-year-old sniper from the Border Police undercover antiterrorism unit.

On Monday, Palestinian groups, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, announced plans to hold a major rally on Wednesday in southern Gaza near the border with Israel. The IDF responded by building up its forces along the heavily fortified border with the Gaza Strip and instructing its officers and soldiers to respond 'more aggressively' to any attempts to breach the border fence or attack soldiers.

Hundreds of Palestinians had gathered on Saturday near the border to mark the 52nd anniversary of the arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, Islam's third holiest site. Built on the site of the second Jewish temple destroyed by the Roman Empire 2,000 years ago, it is one of the most contested religious sites in the world. While the attack was carried out by a mentally unstable Christian Australian tourist, there were suspicions that Israel had been actively involved in planning and facilitating the arson attempt.

The Mosque has become a symbol of the ongoing violations of the basic rights of Palestinians, including

their ability to worship freely, most recently during Ramadan earlier this year, precipitating the tensions that gave rise to Israel's murderous assault on Gaza. Since Israel's capture and annexation of Jerusalem's Old City after the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war, it has become a frequent flashpoint, regularly stormed by Jewish settlers and armed security forces, while worshippers are turned away at the gates and its foundations are being damaged by tunnelling.

Israel's Channel 7 reported "Temple Mount groups" saying there had been a 60 percent increase in the number of Jewish Israeli incursions into Al-Aqsa Mosque compound over the past three months, with some 9,804 Jewish Israelis storming the compound over the past three months, compared to 6,133 over the same period last year.

Under an agreement with Jordan, only Muslims can worship at the Mosque compound, while Jews can pray at the Western Wall below. But recently, Israel's newly installed government, led by Naftali Bennett, a former leader of a West Bank settlers council, has allowed increasing numbers of Jews to pray there; a move that will exacerbate tensions in East Jerusalem. While he initially appeared to confirm a formal change in policy, saying that all religions would have "freedom of worship" on Temple Mount, he was forced to backtrack after criticism from Jordan and leftist and Arab members of his coalition, saying that the *status quo ante* continued.

In the days before Saturday's demonstration, Palestinian fighters had launched a rocket, the first since the May 21 ceasefire, towards Israel that was shot down by Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile system.

The Palestinians' balloons and rockets are aimed at securing the release of Hamas prisoners detained in Israeli jails, the lifting of Israel and Egypt's 14 year-long blockade and the release of funds pledged by international donors for Gaza's reconstruction following Israel's criminal wars on Gaza in 2008-09, 2012, 2014 and 2021.

While Israel claimed its 2,750 aerial attacks and 2,300 artillery shells on Gaza last May were aimed at Palestinian militants' arms factories and warehouses, most of the damage (61 percent) fell on the housing and infrastructure sector, 33 percent on the economic and business sectors, with some 1,500 economic establishments destroyed or damaged, and 7 percent on the social development sector. This caused losses and damages amounting to \$479 million, according to the Higher Governmental Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza, with the World Bank estimating Gaza needed \$485 million to restore it to the same penurious state it was before the war.

On Monday, a third report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) on last May's war concluded that Israeli air raids that demolished four high-rise buildings in Gaza City, including the 12-storey al-Jalaa building housing the local offices of the Associated Press and Al Jazeera and many families, damaged neighbouring buildings, left dozens of people homeless and destroyed scores of businesses, and "apparently" had not violated international laws of war.

HRW's earlier reports accused Israel of war crimes for attacks it said had no clear military targets but killed dozens of civilians, while it said the actions of Palestinian groups based in Gaza, by firing rockets indiscriminately at Israeli cities, also constituted a war crime. HRW has called on the International Criminal Court to include last May's assault on Gaza in its ongoing investigation into possible war crimes by Israel and Palestinian fighters.

Israel's targeting of businesses and factories and small businesses, along with its repeated closure of Gaza's borders, has pushed the Palestinians even further into poverty. According to the International Labour Organisation, fewer than 20 percent of people of working age in Gaza has a job, while two-thirds of women and young people are unemployed.

Since the war, Israel has refused to allow building materials needed for reconstruction that would provide work for 60,000 workers to enter Gaza until Hamas agrees to release two Israeli civilians and the bodies of two Israeli soldiers. Hamas has made this release conditional on the release of Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

Last Thursday, the United Nations and Qatar agreed to channel aid to impoverished families in Gaza whereby 100,000 families will each receive \$100 monthly starting in September from funds provided by the Qatari government and distributed by the UN's World Food Programme and bank transfers rather than direct cash

transfers. The deal did not address the broader issue of Gaza's reconstruction, nor did it include any arrangement to pay the salaries of the civil servants in the Hamas-run government.

In a move evidently designed to ramp up the pressure on Hamas and the Palestinians in Gaza, Egypt confirmed that it would close its border crossing at Rafah with Gaza, the only point of entry and exit not controlled by Israel, indefinitely starting on Monday. Neither Hamas nor Egypt explained the reasoning behind the closure of the crossing that Egypt had opened in May to allow wounded Gazans to be treated in Egyptian hospitals and to deliver aid. Yesterday, *Al Arabiya* network reported that Hamas had agreed to stop launching incendiary balloons from Gaza following talks with Egyptian intelligence officials.

Israel's increasingly aggressive stance towards Hamas in Gaza takes place amid stepped up violence against the Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. Yesterday, an Israeli soldier shot and killed a 16-year-old Palestinian after security forces stormed the Balata refugee camp near Nablus. Earlier this month, Israeli troops shot and killed a Palestinian man and injured 21 others during a protest in Nablus when Israeli troops fired on them with rubber bullets.

Israel has been waging a covert war against Iran, targeting its nuclear facilities, basic infrastructure and shipping. Last Thursday night, Israel struck Syrian military camps near Damascus and Homs, targeting weapons stores linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Shi'ite militias, including Lebanon's Hezbollah, that were reportedly intercepted by the Syrian army's Russian air defense systems.



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