

Israel escalates war with Lebanon, plans Rafah invasion, as Nasser hospital atrocity details emerge

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25 April 2024

Israel's conflict with Lebanon is entering a "different phase" of "higher-intensity conflict", in the assessment of *Al Jazeera's* Zeina Khodr, reporting from Marjayoun in southern Lebanon.

She writes that, on Wednesday, "Israel carried out the largest number of strikes in a single day," hitting 40 separate targets with fighter jets and artillery. The assault continued into the early hours of Thursday morning, targeting not just southern Lebanon but also the east of the country.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told reporters, "Half of the Hezbollah commanders in south Lebanon have been eliminated... and the other half hide and abandon south Lebanon to [Israel Defense Forces] IDF operations."

An official IDF statement explained that the strikes were not carried out in response to any specific attack but as "part of the effort to destroy the organization's infrastructure in the border area."

Roughly 250 Hezbollah fighters have been killed since the latest round of fighting began after October 7, and more than 70 Lebanese civilians. Over 90,000 have been displaced, forced to leave around 100 southern towns and villages under threat of bombardment, and hundreds of acres of farmland damaged.

Jan Egeland, secretary general of the Norwegian Refugee Council, warned Thursday after visiting the country and writing of "communities suffering throughout," that tensions in Lebanon "are on the brink of exploding. It simply cannot continue like this."

He went on, "People fleeing southern villages in search of a safe place end up in overcrowded shelters. Their livelihoods have been destroyed, but we have insufficient funding to help them. There is a feeling of desperation..."

"People must be able to go back to their homes and jobs, farmers to their lands, and children to their schools. Families and children are being caught at the centre of a regional crisis here."

These are the consequences of initial skirmishes heralding a major and far more destructive war. *Haaretz's* Ravit Hecht wrote Thursday that the Israeli government is "signalling that after the Rafah operation, whose duration nobody knows, the army will deploy for a more substantial campaign up north to push Hezbollah away from the border".

She cited one government minister as saying, "First Rafah, then Hezbollah, then Iran."

The *Jerusalem Post's* Avi Abelow wrote enthusiastically Wednesday, "Israel is already at war in the North, escalation with Lebanon is inevitable." He agitated, "Israel must put an end to the Iranian regime's threat to Israeli lives on Israel's borders, and that can only be done by Israel finally destroying the Iranian capabilities in Lebanon."

"Just as the war in Gaza is a just war, so too is the inevitable war in Lebanon. It is actually the same war, just on different fronts."

A lengthy piece by Maha Yahya, published Wednesday in *Foreign Affairs*, asked with apparent concern, "Israel's Next Front? Iran, Hezbollah and the Coming War in Lebanon."

She noted, "Israel has now deployed 100,000 troops to its north to confront the Shiite militant group Hezbollah." Moreover, "on April 21, Benny Gantz, a member of Israel's emergency war cabinet, declared that Israel's border with Lebanon now constitutes its 'operative front' and its 'greatest and most urgent challenge.'"

Earlier this month, "the Israeli military released a statement titled 'Readiness for the Transition From

Defense to Offense,' outlining its preparations for a conflict with Lebanon. Since then, its targeted attacks in Lebanon have intensified. It may no longer be a matter of whether Israel attacks Lebanon, but when."

Yahya cautioned that such a war would light the fuse on the region's conflicts:

"A fuller regional escalation would also almost certainly prompt more attacks by Iran's allies against U.S. forces stationed in Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. Such attacks, in turn, would likely solicit more lethal responses by the United States... the symbolism of rockets falling into Israel from a variety of countries in the region could galvanize the United States and other Western powers to get more involved militarily, not only by defending Israeli airspace but by directly attacking Israel's enemies."

War in Lebanon and beyond is bound up with intensified war, repression and ethnic cleansing in Gaza and the West Bank.

According to *Haaretz*, "The Israeli army has informed the government that its forces have completed their preparations for an upcoming operation in Rafah, and that the date for such an operation is to be decided by the cabinet." Israel's war and security cabinets both met in Tel Aviv Thursday to discuss the plans.

The *Times of Israel* reports that Israel's Nahal Infantry Brigade has been withdrawn from Gaza to train for the offensive, along with the rest of the 162nd Division. Nine new military bases have been established near Gaza as staging posts.

Airstrikes continue to be carried out against the city of more than 1.5 million refugees in preparation for the attack. *Al Jazeera* journalist Hani Mahmoud, reporting from the city, described a "surge in attack drones" flying over the city. Among casualties were a Belgian aid worker, Abdallah Nabhan, and his seven-year-old son Jamal; they and five others were killed in an Israeli strike on a building housing 25 people, including displaced refugees.

Two more children were among the day's victims, adding to the two percent of Gaza's children killed or maimed in the Israeli genocide to this point.

Another child, 16-year-old Khaled Raed Arouq, originally from Jenin, was shot in the chest and killed by Israeli security forces in Ramallah, in the West Bank. According to eyewitnesses, Israeli forces used stun grenades and live fire against several young people who they claimed were "terrorists" who had "thrown stones."

Arouq's cousin, Majed Arqawi, told Agence France-Presse, "He was hit by a bullet in his back, which exited

through his chest ... they assassinated him in cold blood."

In the town of Beit Furik, east of Nablus, another Palestinian boy was shot and hospitalised in an Israeli house raid.

More details have meanwhile emerged of the atrocities carried out by the Israeli occupiers at Khan Younis's Nasser hospital, where close to 400 Palestinian dead have been discovered in three mass graves. Corpses have been uncovered for six consecutive days.

According to the Palestinian Civil Defence organisation, only a minority have been identified because the others are too badly decomposed or mutilated. Head of the department Yamen Abu Sulaiman said Thursday that there was evidence of torture and field executions, including the killing of patients. Ten bodies had their hands tied, and others still had medical tubes attached. Children are among the dead.

Palestinian Civil Defence member Mohammed Mughier commented, "We need forensic examination for approximately 20 bodies for people who we think were buried alive."

An official statement from the Israeli Foreign Ministry declared "any attempt to blame Israel for burying civilians in mass graves... categorically false and a mere disinformation campaign aimed at delegitimizing Israel... The grave was dug—by Gazans—a few months ago."

A Civil Defense statement released Thursday appealed "to the secretary-general of the United Nations and international institutions to form an independent international investigation committee to investigate crimes of genocide." The UN has backed this call, as has a European Union embarrassed by the revelations and safe in the knowledge that Israel is backed unabashedly by the United States.

The US has led the publication of a revoltingly cynical open letter, signed by eighteen of the imperialist powers and their allies, placing all responsibility for the war at Hamas's feet by calling for its release of Israeli hostages. A senior US official commented, "if they would do that, this crisis will wind down."



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