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Israel escalates assaults on Palestinians with US backing

The weekend saw no let-up in Israel's bombardment of Gaza, even as security forces cracked down on Nakba Day protests across the occupied West Bank.

In Gaza, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) attacked Hamas and other militant groups, assassinated senior Hamas personnel and terrorised the defenceless population in Gaza with merciless air strikes. Among the targets was the home of Yehya al-Sinwar, Hamas's most senior official in Gaza, who heads the group's political and military wings—the third such attack on the home of a senior Hamas official. Hamas and Islamic Jihad have confirmed that 20 of their members have been killed. The IDF has sought approval for further attacks on Hamas, including assassinations.

A single bombing in Gaza City overnight Saturday—the deadliest since Monday—killed at least 42 people, including 12 women and eight children, and wounded 50 others, numbers likely to rise as rescuers bring out victims from under the rubble. Another airstrike hit a house in the Shati refugee camp in Gaza City, killing at least 10 members of an extended family, mostly children, while at least eight people were killed and 45 wounded on Saturday night, mostly civilians, including two doctors.



Mourners pray over the bodies of 17 Palestinians who were killed in overnight Israeli airstrikes in Gaza City, Sunday, May 16, 2021. (AP Photo/Sanad Latifa)

The Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza has confirmed that at least 192 Palestinians have been killed, including 58 children, and about 1,200 wounded since Israel started its bombardment of the besieged enclave Monday evening. Around 220 homes have been destroyed or damaged, rendering 20,000 homeless.

Indicating the one-sided nature of the slaughter, Israel has reported 10 deaths, including two children and a soldier as 3,000 projectiles were launched from Gaza, most of which either landed inside Gaza or were intercepted by Israel's sophisticated Iron Dome system—funded by US aid to the tune of \$1.5 billion.

On Saturday afternoon, the IDF downed the media tower in Gaza housing the offices of Al Jazeera, the Associated Press (AP) and other outlets after giving the occupants less than an hour to evacuate. It follows the bombing of two other buildings housing media outlets earlier in the week in a deliberate attempt to silence the reporting of Israel's crimes.

While the IDF claimed that the building was used by Hamas, it has failed to produce any evidence. Gary Pruitt, the head of AP, said that despite using the building for 15 years, AP had never seen any indication that the building was used by Hamas. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu applauded the air raid as a successful attack on “terrorist organisations.”

The near-destitute Palestinians now have to cope with a shortage of electricity as Israel halted the supply of diesel fuel to Gaza's power station days ago and power lines from Israel to Gaza have been hit.

The IDF mounted a brutal crackdown on demonstrations all over the West Bank marking Nakba Day, also known as the Palestinian Catastrophe. It is usually commemorated on or around May 15, marking Britain's official departure from Palestine in 1948 and the establishment of the State of Israel. This saw the start of the first Arab-Israeli war, the destruction of Palestinian society, and the permanent displacement of the vast majority of the Palestinian people. Between 750,000 and 900,000 Palestinians became refugees or internally displaced persons after fleeing the war or being forced to leave their homes, in a campaign of ethnic cleansing, the necessary corollary of establishing a homeland for the Jewish people in Palestine, where they were a minority.

Today, the Palestinians and their descendants around the world number around 13 million, of whom five million live in the occupied West Bank and Gaza, 1.5 million live in Israel and a further 6.5 million either live as refugees in Lebanon, Jordan and Syria or are scattered throughout the world. They have been denied the right to return to their homeland, despite in many cases still holding the title deeds to their property, while Jews who have never lived in Palestine are entitled to claim Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return.

However, while their dispossession has been maintained through numerous wars and repression, their number in Israel/Palestine will soon outstrip that of the Jews. It is the realisation that Israel's Palestinian residents in occupied East Jerusalem and its citizens in Israel itself will now be subject to ethnic cleansing that has brought so many Palestinians onto the streets. In East Jerusalem, families in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan face court-ordered evictions to make way for Jewish homes. In Israel, ultra-nationalist and fascistic parties have for years been calling for "population transfers" and far right forces have moved into mixed population towns like Lod, which saw forced evictions in 1948 and is now subject to emergency rule and curfews, with the explicit aim of "judaicising" them.

The IDF dispersed angry protesters in the West Bank with rubber tipped bullets, stun grenades and tear gas, killing nine. Soldiers killed a further two protesters, allegedly because they were attempting to carry out a terrorist attack, who turned out to be unarmed,

making it the deadliest day since the military invasion of the West Bank in April 2002. It brings to 14 the number killed in the West Bank since the start of the week. The army has deployed additional troops to the West Bank, nearly doubling the usual number, including both regular units and reservists to replace the Border Police sent to crush the Palestinian protests within Israel.

Minister of Defence Benny Gantz, who earlier in the week pledged that “Gaza will burn,” declared that Israel was “seeing an escalation” of tension and conflict in the West Bank and was “ready for any scenario.” He threatened that if the Palestinians did not submit to Israeli rule quietly and without resistance, “We’ll be forced to cancel steps that are meant to help the Palestinian economy and society after the year of coronavirus.”

Israel has rejected Hamas’ attempts to reach a cease-fire, along with Egypt’s efforts to broker an agreement to end the fighting. On Saturday evening, reassured by the unquestioning support of US President Joe Biden, who only sent mid-tier diplomat Hady Amr, the deputy assistant secretary of state for Israel and Palestinian affairs, to Israel to work on a ceasefire, Netanyahu declared there would be no let-up in the onslaught on Gaza. He said Israel was “still in the midst of this operation, it is still not over and this operation will continue as long as necessary.”

He warned Hamas that Israel had a list of assassination targets, declaring, “You can’t hide, not above land or below it. No one is immune,” and thanked the US president for his “clear and unequivocal support.”

Netanyahu condemned the recent riots in Israeli towns and cities provoked by vigilante groups belonging to his far right, Jewish supremacist allies that have left mixed population towns and cities looking like war zones while the police turned a blind eye. A dozen people have died and nearly 1,000 have been arrested, mostly Palestinians. He said, “The Jewish state will not tolerate pogroms against our citizens. We will not allow our Jewish citizens to be lynched or live in fear of murderous Arab gangs. We will not tolerate the torching of synagogues and the torching of property. Whoever incites will pay a very heavy price.”

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