

More Palestinian deaths as Israel attacks protests in Gaza and West Bank

By Jean Shaoul
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Israeli troops opened fire on several thousand Palestinians rallying along Gaza's border with Israel Tuesday, killing two people.

The demonstration marked the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the state of Israel, the day Palestinians call the "Nakba" or "catastrophe."

More than 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes following the 1947 UN vote to partition Palestine and during the 1948-49 war between Israel and her Arab neighbours.

The rally followed the funerals in Gaza of some of the 60 killed on Monday in a mass slaughter of unarmed Palestinian demonstrators by Israel Defence Forces (IDF), in the bloodiest day since the 2014 war. Shops across Gaza are closed for three days of mourning.

Tens of thousands of peaceful and defenceless protestors met with a brutal, pre-planned assault by the IDF, with more than 2,800 wounded, more than half by live fire. Five boys and a girl were among those massacred. The death toll rose above the 58 announced yesterday, due to two additional shootings and the death of an eight-month-old baby due to gas inhalation during Monday's IDF attacks.

Monday's demonstrations against Washington's moving of its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in breach of international law, were the culmination of the rallies held since the start of the Great March of Return nearly seven weeks ago.

The March has been fuelled by the anger and deprivation of the Palestinians, who face a humanitarian crisis, thanks to the 12-year-long joint Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the tiny enclave. Deprived by Israel of fuel and access to clean water and sanitation, Gaza has become almost uninhabitable. Many are destitute. Forty-six percent of the population are without work, while some 65 percent live on \$1.90 or less a day.

Since the start of the March more than 100 have been

killed, including at least 12 children. The death toll is expected to rise substantially, as more than 70 of those injured on Monday are in a critical condition and Gaza's hospitals are struggling to cope.

The number of injured has reached the staggering level of 13,000, with 6,800 Palestinians requiring hospitalisation—more than half as a result of live ammunition, according to the Palestinian Ministry of Health in Gaza.

According to Jason Cone, the US director of Doctors Without Borders, "the injuries sustained by our patients are terribly similar to what we see in conflict zones," with fist-size exit wounds and "bone ... pulverized into dust."

Among those injured were 10 journalists, indicating the degree to which the IDF is targeting reporters and photographers covering the protests in Gaza to minimise adverse publicity and conceal evidence of its criminality.

No Israelis have been killed or injured, or seen their homes damaged, since the March began.

Hamas, the bourgeois Islamist group that controls Gaza, is routinely blamed for provoking the conflict. However, it has repeatedly indicated its willingness to come to some sort of deal with the Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority and Israel. On Wednesday last week, Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman confirmed that Israel had received indirect proposals from Hamas for a long-term truce in the Gaza Strip, which Israel had rejected.

Instead the IDF deployed 13 battalions, as well as snipers and police special forces, along the entire length of the border, after cancelling its training of conscripts this week to concentrate on Gaza.

According to a lengthy report in *Ha'aretz*, army bulldozers moved into the Gaza Strip early on Monday and levelled the sandbanks built by Palestinians to protect them from snipers. The army also used drones to fire at tents in the March's camps, sending the tents, including some used by first-aid teams, up in flames. Police dogs

were reportedly sent into the March's camps, while the army sprayed "skunk" water in the border area.

Ha'aretz also reported that soldiers are ordered "to prevent demonstrators from crossing into Israel at any price, including use of live fire." Should any Palestinians manage to cross the boundary, "the orders are to shoot directly at them with intent to hit, to prevent them from getting into these communities."

Israeli snipers, positioned alongside the Gaza security fence, have orders to shoot unarmed Palestinians who come within 100 yards.

The IDF dropped leaflets on Gaza warning the Palestinians that they risked death by participating in the protests. Despite this, the Palestinians in Gaza rallied in their tens of thousands Monday. Protests in the West Bank have generally been small, thanks to the PA's security forces that work closely with Israel.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas has played a crucial role in enforcing the Israeli blockade of Gaza and exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in Gaza by recently upping the PA's sanctions and cutting funds for the besieged enclave. But to conceal his role, Abbas was forced to call for three days of mourning and the lowering of Palestinian flags, and a general strike for Tuesday.

On Tuesday, in addition to the rally in Gaza, there were protests in several West Bank cities. Clashes broke out between Palestinians and Israeli security forces in Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus and Ramallah, leading to scores of people being injured.

The Israeli government is preparing for civil war against its own Arab citizens within Israel, at the same time as it prepares for military war against Gaza, Iran and its allies in Syria and Lebanon.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu feels emboldened by Washington's support for Israel as a key strategic ally in the resource-rich Middle East, as reflected in President Donald Trump's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem.

But support also comes from the other imperialist powers.

Britain, for example, approved a massive increase in the shipment of arms to Israel after the 2014 war against Gaza: from \$28 million in 2015 to \$300 million in 2017, including grenades, bombs, missiles, armoured vehicles, assault rifles, small arms ammunition, sniper rifles and components for drones, combat aircraft and helicopters, along with spare parts for sniper rifles.

The Campaign Against the Arms Trade (CAAT), which compiled the figures, warned that there was "little doubt"

that UK-made weapons have been used in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, particularly as it has become clear that many of the deaths and injuries are a result of sniper fire. This makes Britain complicit in Israel's attacks on the Palestinians.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has called for a review of arms sales to Israel, in a message condemning its "illegal and inhumane" killing and wounding of "yet more unarmed Palestinian protesters." He called for Britain to support an "independent and transparent" UN inquiry into the shootings and a review of the sale of UK-made arms that "could be used in violation of international law."

On Monday, Corbyn denounced Israel's slaughter of at least 60 Palestinians as an "outrage" and demanded that the international community take action to "hold those responsible to account." He accused the IDF of a "wanton disregard for international law" and repeated his call for a review of UK arms sale to Israel.

It is Corbyn's opposition to Britain's diplomatic, political and military support for Israel that is the real reason the pro-Israel lobby in both the Conservative and Labour parties have targeted him and his supporters with accusations of widespread "anti-Semitism" on "the left."

One of the foremost voices in this campaign is the group Labour Friends of Israel, which has the support of over 80 Labour MPs. In a tweet posted Monday, the group gave its apology for Israel's massacre, insisting that " Hamas must accept responsibility for these events. Their successful attempts to hijack peaceful protest as a cover to attack Israeli border communities must be condemned by all who seek peace in the Middle East."

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