

# Israeli military kills four Palestinians in Gaza protest

By Jean Shaoul  
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Israeli forces opened fire on Palestinian protestors in Gaza on Saturday, killing four young Palestinians, three of them children, and sending more than 300 other people to hospital. Five of the 60 wounded by live fire are in a critical condition, while nine are in a serious condition.

Tens of thousands joined the demonstration to mark one year since the start of weekly protests at the Gaza-Israel border under the slogan of the Great March of Return. Originally scheduled to conclude on May 15 of 2018, the 70th anniversary of Israel's declaration of independence, which Palestinians mark as Nakba (Catastrophe) Day, the rallies have demanded the right of Palestinians to return to the homes from which their families were driven in the wars of 1948-49 and 1967.

They have also called for the lifting of Israel's blockade of Gaza, which has turned the tiny enclave into an open-air prison for its two million inhabitants and deprived them of the most basic essentials of everyday life, including clean water, sanitation and electricity.

Those killed included three 17-year-old boys, Tamer Abu el-Khair, Bilal Al-Najar and Adham. It brings the total of children killed by Israeli forces in Gaza since the Great March of Return began to 52. The fourth person killed was Mohammed Jihad Saad, a 21-year-old Palestinian who was hit late Friday night by live fire east of Gaza City. He died of his wounds during a protest near the border fence.

This was Israel's brutal response to what Brigadier General Ronen Manelis, a spokesman for the Israeli army, acknowledged were "remarkably restrained" demonstrations. One can only imagine what the "most moral army in the Middle East" would have done had the protests been less restrained!

The Israel Defence Forces (IDF), the most powerful military force in the Middle East, is attacking an impoverished and virtually unarmed population, and doing so in the most cowardly fashion. It is slaughtering

civilians who have suffered an economic siege, the destruction of their livelihoods and repeated bombardments and military assaults over the last 11 years.

According to figures produced by the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights and *Al Jazeera*, the IDF has mowed down 266 Palestinians in the course of the Gaza border demonstrations and wounded 30,398, of whom 16,027 required hospital treatment. Some 6,857 were shot with live ammunition and a further 844 with rubber-coated bullets, while 2,441 need treatment for tear gas inhalation. The IDF particularly targeted medics and journalists, killing two journalists and injuring 347 and killing 3 medics and wounding 665.

The UN Independent Commission of Inquiry that investigated Israel's actions in Gaza during the protests stated that they "may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity." It noted that Gaza is "one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a health worker."

Saturday's protests, which took place in the pouring rain, attracted some 40,000 Palestinians, far fewer than the million-strong protest called for by Hamas, the bourgeois clerical group that controls Gaza.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu faces a raft of corruption charges and potential defeat at the polls on April 9 at the hands of a trio of former generals in the Blue and White electoral alliance, headed by former Chief of Staff Benny Gantz. This opposition has criticised his Gaza policy, as have his own right-wing colleagues, calling for wider military action.

In anticipation of a far larger turnout, Netanyahu authorised a call-up of reservists and sent additional troops and tanks to the area. As well as firing live rounds, rubber bullets and tear gas, the IDF also used a new type of gas on protestors.

Nizar Abu Amro, a paramedic with the Medical Relief Association, told the *Middle East Eye*, "They used nerve

gas and another strange kind of tear gas, which is yellow. We do not know anything about its contents, but it causes strange disorders.” It was reportedly used for the first time in the southern city of Jabaliya in southern Gaza two days earlier, and was being tested to determine what it was.

Speaking for the IDF, Manelis said: “The restraint Hamas exercised today was such that we hadn’t seen over the past year. There were hundreds of Hamas personnel who wore orange vests and prevented demonstrators from reaching the [border] fence. This shows that Hamas are the ones to control the events and they are the ones who determine how heated the protests will be.”

He added that Israeli air strikes on Gaza earlier in the week in response to rocket fire from the Strip “led Hamas to understand that we don’t accept such incidents and we don’t just move on after they happen.”

A senior Israeli official said that following the Israel Defence Forces’ extensive preparations, ordered by the prime minister, “the border-fence events passed relatively quietly.”

Hamas and all the Palestinian factions had appealed for calm. Hamas deployed some 8,000 security personnel wearing military uniforms along Gaza’s 65-kilometre frontier with Israel to stop protesters from reaching the boundary fence, telling them to stay back from Israeli guns, follow the commands of organisers on the ground, refrain from any aggressive actions and not burn tyres.

Some 2,000 Arab Israelis also demonstrated in the Israeli-Arab city of Sakhnin on March 30 to mark the annual commemoration of Land Day, when Israeli security forces shot dead six Israeli Arabs who were protesting the expropriation of Arab-owned land in northern Israel to build Jewish communities in 1976.

The protests come just days after Israeli air strikes across Gaza in revenge for a rocket fired from Gaza that damaged a house in Israel, for which both Hamas and Islamic Jihad, Gaza’s other major armed faction, denied responsibility. In other acts of collective punishment, Israel blocked the entry points into Gaza and forcibly turned back Palestinian fishermen attempting to fish off the territory’s coast.

Egypt has been trying to broker a truce between Israel and Hamas, with reports that Israel has agreed to ease restrictions on employment, fishing, electricity and aid from Qatar, in return for an end to rocket fire. Netanyahu is keen to avoid an escalation in hostilities in the run-up to the hosting of the Eurovision song contest in Tel Aviv

in May.

However, Netanyahu’s electoral opponents are all attacking him from the right and baying for blood. Naftali Bennett and Ayelet Shaked, leaders of the New Right party and ministers in Netanyahu’s Likud-led coalition, vowed to vote against any long-term ceasefire deal, saying that “Israelis are feeling humiliated” and Hamas leaders Sinwar and Haniyeh “are celebrating victory, with no fear that Israel will eliminate them.” He added, “That is not how deterrence is created.” Bennett said that Sinwar should have been eliminated long ago.

They feel emboldened by President Donald Trump’s announcement of official US recognition for Israel’s illegal annexation of Syria’s Golan Heights, which was, in part at least, aimed at propping up his right-wing ally Netanyahu in the forthcoming elections.

This move will not only fuel Israeli military aggression against the Palestinians in Gaza, it will also escalate tensions with the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, where 16 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli soldiers or settlers since the beginning of the year, including 10 during the month of March alone.

Trump’s support for Netanyahu and his fascistic partners will accelerate the expansion of Zionist settlements and creation of new ones, escalate the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from East Jerusalem, and sanction the outright annexation of the Palestinian land known as Area C, which constitutes 60 percent of the occupied West Bank.

Trump’s backing for their pursuit of the “Greater Israel” expansionist project is bound up with broader aims of US imperialism to escalate its military intervention in the Middle East, particularly to roll back Iranian influence in the wake of the successive debacles suffered by Washington in Iraq, Libya and Syria. The deafening silence of Trump’s Sunni allies, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States, in the face of Israel’s murderous and criminal actions against the Palestinians only serves to confirm this.

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