

INFO PACK

The Fourth Israeli War against Gaza in Brief

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Introduction

Tensions between Israel and the Palestinians rose sharply after an Israeli court ordered the displacement of Palestinian families from the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of East Jerusalem in the first week of May. Displaying resistance to this decision, Palestinians initiated a wave of protests across Eastern Jerusalem, the West Bank and in cities where many Palestinian citizens of Israel live. The Israeli police's brutal tactics against Palestinian worshippers in and around Al Aqsa Mosque further escalated the highly charged situation. Israeli agression reached its climax in the launch of yet another heavy offensive against Palestinians in Gaza following rocket launches from the besieged enclave in response to Israeli violations in Jerusalem, killing 242 Palestinians, including 66 children. Armed Palestinian resistance groups in Gaza fired thousands of rockets at Israeli cities. After 11 days of fighting, an Egypt-brokered ceasefire was implemented on 21 May 2021.

This info pack explains how the ongoing Israeli siege against Palestinians in Gaza came into being. After explaining the incidents that culminated with Israel's offensive on Gaza, namely the displacement of Palestinians in Sheikh Jarrah, the wave of protests that spread into multiple locations in Palestine, and the launching of rockets by Armed Palestinian resistance groups, the previous three wars (2008, 2012 and 2014) and the recent fourth war of Israel against Gaza will be evaluated in detail.



A man walks past a damaged apartment after Israeli warplanes struck the headquarters of the Qatari Red Crescent Society in al-Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City, Gaza on May 17, 2021. (Ali JadallahAnadolu Agency)

Background

The recent uptick in violence began when an Israeli district court approved a decision to evict 13 Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of occupied East Jerusalem. As Palestinians were protesting the decision and showing solidarity with the victimized families, Israeli forces' use of heavy-handed tactics in dispersing the Palestinians raised tensions. Israeli police also actively protected Jewish settlers in the neighbourhood seeking to forcibly displace Palestinian residents, further inflaming sentiments amongst Palestinians.

The situation was further strained when Israeli police restricted access to parts of Jerusalem's old city as Muslims were performing evening prayers at Al Aqsa Mosque during the month of Ramadan. After clashes at the Al Aqsa compound, Palestinian citizens of Israel also came out on the streets in solidarity with Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah. In the Israeli cities of Lod, Acre, Jaffa, Tiberias and Bat Yam, fierce clashes between Palestinians and Israeli forces took place. Israeli extremists also launched attacks on Palestinians, leading to inter-communal violence between Jews and Arabs in Israel. As tensions worsened and Israeli violations in Jerusalem continued unabated, Palestinian groups in Gaza began launching rockets in response. This chain of violent incidents led the Israeli military to initiate airstrikes across Gaza, beginning on 10 May.



Israeli police use tear gas, rubber bullets and stun grenades to disperse Palestinians who were on guard Al-Aqsa Mosque to prevent raids by extremist Jewish settlers, in East Jerusalem on May 10, 2021. (Eyad Tawil - Anadolu Agency)

Previous Wars on Gaza

Israel occupied the Gaza Strip during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. After the 2005 withdrawal of Jewish settlements from Gaza and subsequent military withdrawal, Israel continued to implement tight control over the territory. This included control over Gaza's water and electricity, telecommunication networks, refusing to allow Gazans to have an airport, seaport, or commercial crossing on its border with Egypt and preventing them from developing infrastructure for transportation and farming.

In December 2008, the Israeli military carried out its first extensive post-disengagement offensive in the Gaza Strip, which came to an end in January 2009. Following a week of air and naval bombardment, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) launched a ground incursion. The offensive killed 759 civilians, including 344 children, and more than 5,300 Palestinians were injured according to B'Tselem. In addition, Amnesty International reported that the IDF destroyed more than 3,500 homes, leaving some 20,000 Palestinians homeless. An investigation that was carried out by the The United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, also known as the Goldstone Report, in the wake of the offensive found that "deliberate actions of the Israeli forces and the declared policies of the Government of Israel [...] cumulatively indicate the intention to inflict collective punishment on the people of the Gaza Strip in violation of international humanitarian law."

On 14 November 2012, an eight-day Israeli offensive on Gaza was launched. Until a ceasefire was reached between Israel and Palestinian resistance groups in Gaza, the Israeli military killed 162 Palestinians, 32 of whom were children. According to Israeli human rights group B'Tselem's investigation, the IDF did not send any prior warning to most of the Palestinians who were killed or injured in the war and defined what was a "legitimate target" very broadly, in a breach of international humanitarian law.

Table 1: **Israel's Wars On Gaza Post-2005 Disengagement**

War and Duration	Palestinian Casualties
2008 War (27 Dec 2008 – 18 Jan 2009)	759 Civilians Killed 5,300+ Injured 33,000+ Houses destroyed or damaged
2012 War (14-21 Nov 2012)	162 Civilians Killed 1,300 Injured 1,500+ Houses destroyed or damaged
2014 War (8 July - 26 Aug 2014)	1,460 Civilians Killed 11,000+ Injured 20,000 Houses destroyed or damaged
2021 War (10 – 21 May 2021)	242 Palestinians[1] Killed 1,900+ Injured 8,000+ Houses destroyed or damaged

Source: B'Tselem, Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor, Gaza Information Office

[1] According to figures released by the UN humanitarian coordination office, OCHA, the Occupied Palestinian Territory and verified by the UN human rights office (OHCHR), the number of civilian casualties in Gaza have yet to be fully accounted for.

The most devastating Israeli offensive on Palestinians in Gaza since in 1967 was the 56-day offensive in 2014. During the offensive, 1,460 civilians, including 556 children, were killed, and 11,230 Palestinians were wounded. During this offense, the IDF launched a ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, a decision that proved costly for Israel with the loss of 67 soldiers. As a result of the war, 450,000 Palestinians in Gaza lost access to municipal water and almost 20,000 housing units were either destroyed or severely damaged, leaving almost 110,000 Palestinians in Gaza homeless.

Along with the blockade, three wars in 12 years has crippled the local economy and severely exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. As a result, 80% of the population is now aid-dependent and most are deprived of basic services such as safe water and medical care. Moreover, people in the besieged territory continue to struggle with poverty, high rates of unemployment and food insecurity. According to UN estimates, more than one million children have severely limited access to essential services, and at least 500,000 children have restricted access to safe and clean drinking water.

The Fourth Gaza War

Unlike previous occasions, Israel's most recent war against Gaza began on the tail-end of confrontations between Israeli forces and Palestinians in occupied East Jerusalem. On 10 May, Hamas fired rockets towards Jerusalem in response to Israeli violations at the Al Aqsa Mosque compound, which prompted Israel to launch airstrikes. Since the beginning of the conflict, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups have fired more than 3,700 rockets at Israel. Despite numerous claims that Iran supplied these rockets, Amos Yadlin, a former Israeli military intelligence chief, said that the rockets that fell in Tel Aviv were likely manufactured in the Gaza strip, although Iranian technical assistance cannot be ruled out.Despite the clear disparity in military forces between the two sides, the most recent war demonstrated that the capabilities of Palestinian resistance groups has increased. Moreover, rockets from Gaza reached the vicinity of Tel Aviv-based Ben Gurion Airport for the first time, causing the cancellation of flights three times since the beginning of the war. Furthermore, a fuel pipeline belonging to an Israeli state-owned energy company near the Mediterranean city of Ashkelon was also targeted.

Despite its largely indiscriminate response to Palestinian groups, Israel also faced challenges. First, even though many rockets fired from Gaza were intercepted by the Iron Dome air defence system, Israel was unable to prevent a significant number of casualties, including 12 fatalities and hundreds wounded. Second, its military options in Gaza showed themselves to be relatively limited. Following heavy military losses in the 2014 war, the likelihood of an Israeli ground operation in Gaza was low, despite deliberate efforts to deceive the international press into thinking otherwise. Third, as Israeli military experts have pointed out, fighting in the Gaza Strip has illustrated the dilemma of when, how, and under what conditions the campaign should be brought to an end. For many of them, the Netanyahu government's strategic goal of forcing Hamas to think twice next time before shooting at Israel has failed.

Following the ceasefire announcement, Palestinians in Gaza and other parts of Palestine poured onto the streets to celebrate the ceasefire as a victory. Officials from Hamas said that the declaration of the truce was a defeat for Netanyahu and "a victory to the Palestinian people." Declaring that the ceasefire is a positive step, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki also stated that this deal is "not at all sufficient" to ease the existing tensions in the Palestine-Israel conflict. Many world leaders and chiefs of international organisations also hailed the ceasefire.



(Abed Zagout - Anadolu Agency)

Violations of Human Rights

Israel's bombardment caused the death toll to reach at least 242, including 66 children and 38 women. In addition, more than 1,900 Palestinians have been injured. Two senior doctors –Dr Mooein Ahmad al-Aloul, a neurologist and Dr Ayman Abu al-Ouf, the head of internal medicine at Al-Shifa hospital, Gaza's largest, were among those killed. Along with civilians killed by the Israeli attacks, it has also been reported that Israel's targeting residential buildings was part of a deliberate strategy and may amount to war crimes. Rights group Amnesty International reported that Israeli forces had disregarded Palestinian lives by carrying out several airstrikes targeting residential buildings, which, in some cases, killed entire families, including children.

As Palestinians were already struggling with increasingly difficult conditions as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Israel's offensive has served to further exacerbate the humanitarian situation in Gaza. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that more than 90,000 people had been displaced in the latest round of violence. According to the data reported by Gaza Information Office, Israel's destruction of residential buildings was extensive, and more than 8,000 homes were either destroyed or damaged during the offensive. In addition, the Office reported that 33 media offices were destroyed. Israeli attacks in Gaza also damaged 57 health centres and schools along with 29 mosques, and one church. Among the civilian targets was the al-Jalaa tower, which hosted several offices, including those belonging to Al Jazeera and the Associated Press. Some health centres, such as Al Remal clinic, Gaza's only Covid-19 laboratory, and Qatar's Red Crescent office, were also hit by Israeli airstrikes. With the attacks on health centres, Gaza's already feeble health system has been further degraded. In addition, many vital medicines and fuel to keep the electricity going are rapidly running out in the blockaded enclave.

Inside Israel

One of the triggers for the latest Israeli offensive on Gaza was the political situation in Israel itself. As no stable government has been formed since the March 2019 elections, negotiations after the elections on 24 March this year, the fourth in two years, were already on the brink of failure. Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu has a history of pursuing a political strategy that keeps tensions high and presents himself as the only figure capable of bringing stability to the country. As a result, as AP reported, his rivals' prospects have crumbled and "Netanyahu is back in his comfortable role as Mr Security." It is not a coincidence that Netanyahu's electoral victories in 2009, 2013, and 2015 followed on the heels of wars in Gaza.

The most recent war has deeply impacted the Israeli political landscape, particularly the coalition talks among the anti-Netanyahu camp. For instance, Naftali Bennett, leader of the far-right Yamina party, abandoned talks with the main opposition, Yesh Atid party head Yair Lapid, shortly after the fighting began. Another significant impact of the war on the coalition talks became apparent when Mansour Abbas, the Ra'am / United Arab List (UAL) party leader, suspended his party's participation in negotiations. Abbas had enjoyed a kingmaker position following the most elections. He even flirted with Netanyahu following his decision to leave the Joint List, an alliance of four Arab parties in the Israeli parliament. However, the war in Gaza and rising tensions between Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel has prevented Abbas from maintaining that privileged position, one that would have been unprecedented in Israeli political history.

Some Israeli politicians also made statements to the effect that Netanyahu serves to benefit politically from keeping tensions high in Gaza rather than seeking to decisively end the conflict with Hamas. For example, Meretz chairman Nitzan Horowitz stated that Netanyahu does not actually want to bring down Hamas and that he ultimately does not want to see a political solution. "As long as that is the policy, this operation, too, will not change a thing," he said on his official Twitter account. In addition, Aluf Benn, the editor in chief of Haaretz daily, labelled the country's latest war in Gaza as the "biggest failure and pointless Gaza operation ever."

For this reason, the Egypt-brokered ceasefire deal was also embraced by Israeli security officials. Sourcing an official who attended the cabinet meeting, Barak Ravid declared that the chiefs of the IDF and the Shin-Bet intelligence service both recommended ending the operation.

International Reactions

Since the beginning of the conflict, the US has followed a stance that aims to bolster Israel's right to "self-defence." Both Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki condemned the rocket attacks into Israel and emphasised President Joe Biden's support for Israel's "legitimate right to defend itself and its people." However, despite calling for ending hostilities and de-escalating tensions, the US also opposed a draft UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire. In addition, after the ceasefire came into effect on 21 May, Biden stated that he would give his "full support to replenish Israel's Iron Dome system to ensure its defence and security in the future." Meanwhile, a progressive and leftist group within the Democratic Party criticized Biden's stance on the issue. This group is composed of senior figures like Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who advocate conditioning US military aid to Israel on Palestinian human rights, as well as some other new generation politicians such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Ayanna Pressley and Rashida Tlaib, who have expressed critical stances towards Israel's actions towards Palestinians.

Although EU officials called for a ceasefire and expressed the need for a political solution for the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, some of the EU member states followed a different stance. Among these states were Austria, Czechia and Hungary, whose statements emphasised that Israel has a right to defend itself. Hungary's support for Israel was to the extent that it broke the unanimity between the convening EU foreign ministers and declined to join them in calling for a ceasefire on their video call.

The incidents also garnered reactions from people all over the world. Many people gathered in cities like Istanbul, New York, London, Paris, Berlin and other world cities to express solidarity with Palestinians and voice their condemnation of Israeli actions. Numerous celebrities and some other well-known figures also showed solidarity with Palestinians and condemned Israeli violence. Among them, Palestinian-American models Bella and Gigi Hadid, pop singer Dua Lipa, Pink Floyd's Roger Waters along with football players such as Liverpool FC's Mohammed Salah, Manchester City's Riyad Mahrez, Fenerbahçe's Mesut Özil and Leicester City's Çağlar Söyüncü have shared pro-Palestinian posts on their social media accounts since the start of the protests in Palestine.

While Egypt and Jordan were at the forefront of ceasefire talks, roles they have traditionally played for decades, definitive action from other Arab states has notably absent.

While voicing a general condemnation of Israeli violations against Palestinians, Arab states that had recently normalised relations with Israel failed to take action beyond the rhetorical. However, contrary to the ruling elite, many people in these countries demonstrated a strong reaction towards Israeli brutality on Palestinians. For instance, in Bahrain, civil society groups signed a letter urging the government to expel the Israeli ambassador, while many people in the UAE shared photos wearing the Palestinian keffiyeh on Instagram and others have tweeted under hashtags supportive of the Palestinian cause. However, some UAE social media influencers also accused Palestinians of escalating tensions. For example, Waseem Yousef, a preacher with close ties to Mohammed Bin Zayed, accused Hamas of "making Gaza a cemetery for innocents and children."

While the Qatari foreign minister called the international community "to act urgently to stop the repeated brutal Israeli attacks against civilians in Gaza", several Qatari humanitarian aid organisations also announced the allocation of financial aid to the Palestinians in Gaza. Lolwah al-Khater, Qatar's Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, also condemned the attitude of several Western media outlets towards Israel's actions against the Palestinians. Meanwhile, massive protests in support of Palestinians also took place in Kuwait, Tunisia and Algeria.

Since the beginning of the conflict, Turkey showed solidarity with Palestinians politically and diplomatically. Strongly condemning the Israeli brutality against Palestinians in Gaza and described it as terrorism, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said that nations should also discuss the "idea of sending an international protection force to the region in order to protect Palestinian civilians." In this regard, Erdoğan actively manoeuvred diplomatically to put pressure on international backers of Israel to stop the latter's attacks and support the Palestinians. Erdogan held calls with the leaders of Russia, Qatar, Jordan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Pakistan, Algeria, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Libya, Oman and Uzbekistan. Furthermore, the President of the UN General Assembly, Volkan Bozkır, a Turkish diplomat, actively sought to hold an emergency meeting by the UN General Assembly on the conflict.

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