
ISRAEL-OPT: Border communities prepare for the worst

SDEROT/TEL AVIV/GAZA CITY, 16 November 2012 (IRIN) - Sderot's streets are empty, its schools and shops closed. Residents of this southern Israeli town are accustomed to the alarm that sounds almost daily as rockets fired from Gaza land here. But the upsurge in violence in recent days is, for some, the last straw.

Benni Cohen is taking his three children to a family home further north, in Petach Tikva, 20 minutes east of Israel's second largest city, Tel Aviv, and does not intend to come back.

"It's been ongoing for nine years," he told IRIN. "This is not going to end. I'm not putting my children through anymore of this. We should have left [years ago]."

"Seeing your children grow up under a rain of Qassam missiles is no way to live. We have 15 seconds to find shelter [when the rockets hit]. Impossible."

Across the border, in northern areas of the Gaza Strip, like in Beit Hanoun, a town hard hit by the border violence, many people have already started leaving their homes, heading for safer ground near Gaza City, according to Lydia de Leeuw, a documentation officer for the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR).

But there too, they will not find refuge. Jihad al-Meshrawi, a BBC editor, was at the office when he got word his home in Gaza City had been hit by an Israeli airstrike. When he got home, he found his 11-month-old son and sister-in-law dead, and his brother severely burned.

"I am used to editing footage of people who have had their houses destroyed and bombed, people killed," he told IRIN. "But I didn't expect it to happen to me."

"They say they don't attack civilians but we are civilians. Was my child armed?"

Tit-for-tat violence

According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, Israeli air strikes have killed 19 Palestinians, including at least 10 civilians, in Gaza in the last two days. Another 253 civilians have been wounded, it said.

The Magen David Adom, Israel's emergency response service, reported three dead, 10 serious or critical injuries, and at least 50 others treated for bruising, shrapnel wounds or trauma.

Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) spokesperson Yoav Mordechai told Israel's Channel 10 that the military launched more than 200 air strikes in Gaza on 14-15 November, including one that killed Ahmad al-Jaabari, the military commander of Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip.

Armed groups in Gaza have fired rockets into southern Israel for five consecutive days. On 15 November, a rocket landed in Tel Aviv for the first time since the Gulf War, with two more landing there today. The range of the new Fajr-5 rockets puts half of Israel's population within firing range. What was in the past nine years considered a "local hassle" for communities bordering Gaza has, in minutes, turned into a major concern.

For the first time in 20 years, Israeli authorities last night opened public bomb shelters in Tel Aviv and nearby cities. In the three hours after the rocket landed in Tel Aviv, IDF launched 70 strikes on "targets" in the Gaza strip.

"No one has slept since Wednesday [14 November]," de Leeuw said.

Missiles and airstrikes continue raining down on both sides of the border. During a brief conversation by phone with her, IRIN heard three air strikes in the course of a few minutes in Gaza City alone. And in Israel, one red alert is going off after another.

"We have a safety room in our apartment but I never believed we'd have to use it," said Shira, a mother of two in Petach Tikva. "We were not at all prepared for this."

"There are no reserves. The Gaza Strip has been living off of subsistence levels for several years now. When escalations occur, there is no buffer."

There are [differing accounts](#) of how this round of violence started, but it is the most serious escalation since Israel's attack on Gaza in 2008-9, which killed some 1,400 people - almost all of them Palestinian, and at least half of them civilians.

With Israeli elections coming up, and Hamas empowered by an Islamist resurgence in the region, analysts say this violence could quickly spiral into another war.

Ghost towns and dwindling reserves

Residents of border communities are preparing for the worst. Nadav, a student in Beer Sheva, a town in southern Israel, is considering moving to Tel Aviv for the time being to avoid what may be coming.

"It's chaotic. We have to go up and down to the shelter all night; children are crying; shops and schools are closed; weddings and events are cancelled. I hope this ends quickly."

But no one seems to think it will. In Sderot, people stocked up on food and supplies in the few hours supermarkets opened yesterday.

At one petrol station in Gaza City, where cars lined up around the block and people queued on foot with empty fuel tanks, employees tried to limit customers to 1-2 gallons each, to ensure everyone could get at least some fuel. Several petrol stations are closed in Gaza, either for the security of their employees, or because they have run out of fuel.

PCHR's De Leeuw described the Gaza Strip as a "ghost town".

"If people don't have to go out, they don't leave their homes," she told IRIN. "The streets are practically empty. The few cars that are driving around are driving high speed. Anything can be a target at any moment."

Saeed Mahmoud, a Gaza businessman, has closed his shop for the last two days, preferring to stay indoors and trying to calm his family, despite his own fears.

"This is very dangerous," he told IRIN. "It reminds me of the days of the 2008-9 war when Gaza started to be empty. I am expecting things to be worse if there is a land incursion."

Some areas have already run out of bread - a result, de Leeuw said, of the blockade on Gaza.

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According to testimonies collected by Israeli NGO Physicians for Human Rights (PHR), electricity has been cut off by the government of Gaza because of a power shortage.

PHR said it has received many calls of distress in recent days, and especially hours, from medical personnel in Gaza, where hospitals lack emergency equipment and the capacity to treat the injured.

"Gaza residents are confused and anxious," one mental health worker told PHR. "There are ongoing explosions all over the Strip. Media reports are exaggerated, and are causing great stress. People hear about Israeli casualties and fear further escalation. Queues outside bakeries and shops are very long because people fear that Israeli invasion is close. Kids are in a terrible mental state, crying from anxiety."

Another war?

The Popular Resistance Committees, an umbrella group of Palestinian militant groups, has proclaimed the assassination of al-Jaabari (second-in-command of the military wing of Hamas) as a declaration of war against Gaza. Israel, which has named this latest Operation "Pillar of Defence" is already threatening a ground invasion. Israel's Home Front Defense Minister recently said Israel needed to "reformat" Gaza.

"We've prepped the population in the south and the population in Gaza," Mordechai told Channel 10. "We're not limited in time."

A military source who requested anonymity told IRIN that Israel has mobilized its troops and is aiming to recruit 30,000 reserve soldiers in the coming days, with thousands of recruitments beginning last night. On 16 November, Channel 10 televised thousands of reserve soldiers recruited in the south.

"Israel is not keen on a ceasefire agreement right now," the military source said. "We have a bank of targets to take out and restore our deterrent force with Hamas."

The timing of this violence is no accident, [writes](#) Hussein Ibish, a senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine, a Washington-based Palestinian advocacy group. With Israeli elections around the corner, the government is under pressure to respond to an increase in the number rockets fired into Israel this year.

"[Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu has made his political career on security issues, but even if he hopes to limit the conflagration, it could spiral out of everyone's control," Ibish said.

The increase in rocket fire, he added, is a result of a shift in the balance of power within Hamas, as military commanders within Gaza try to regain power from Hamas leaders in exile.

IDF estimates that Gaza is currently home to 10,000 Qassams (primitive missiles manufactured in Gaza, with a range of 7-15km), 2,000 Grads of 30km range and a few dozen Fajrs capable of reaching Tel Aviv.

Still, both sides have much to lose in a full-out war, as Haaretz columnists Amos Harel and Avi Issacharoff [point out](#).

"Such an operation would put the existence of the Hamas regime in Gaza at serious risk. It's doubtful that Israel is interested in that, either. The military preparations at this point are for local brigade operations, not for reoccupying the Gaza Strip."

Yesterday, a [Stratfor report](#) said another offensive would likely follow the same tactics as Operation Cast Lead in 2008-9, only be more complex because of the presence of longer-range missiles in Gaza and a possibly less cooperative partner for Israel in the new Egyptian government.

And if Operation Cast Lead is any indication, the impact on civilians will be huge.

"The [current] shortages are alarming, just as the military strikes are," de Leeuw said. "I don't know how Gaza is going to deal with a new military campaign against it," she added, as another air strike echoed on the phone line.

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