



SOLACE GLOBAL

# ISRAEL AND PALESTINE

DEADLIEST CONFLICT IN DECADES

MAY 2021



# Israel and Palestine

## Deadliest Conflict in Decades

### Executive Summary

The past week has seen a sudden and deadly escalation in the simmering conflict between Israeli forces and Palestinian militant groups, including Hamas. The situation started on 6 May when protests over evictions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem escalated to clashes at the Al-Aqsa mosque. On 10 May, Hamas launched a barrage of rocket attacks targeting Israeli territory, stating that the strikes were in retaliation to the continued violent suppression of Palestinian protesters at Islamic religious sites in Jerusalem's Old City. In response, the Israeli military has launched a campaign of aerial bombardment targeting cities in the Gaza Strip.

This situation is ongoing and the likelihood of a cessation of hostilities remains unlikely without foreign intervention at this time. Both sides are continuing to conduct military operations with Hamas rockets targeting urban centres in Israel and the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) conducting airstrikes on believed Hamas positions in the densely populated Gaza. Additionally, outside of the region, pro-Palestine protests have occurred, while there have also been reports of anti-Semitic attacks.

The weekend of 15-16 May saw the heaviest day in terms of fatalities with 42 Palestinians killed by airstrikes in Gaza. At the time of writing, it is believed that 10 fatalities and nearly 600 casualties have occurred in Israel, with over 200 fatalities and 1,200 casualties having occurred in Gaza. The West Bank and East Jerusalem have seen over 18 reported fatalities and 1,500 casualties. The majority of the casualties have been civilians.

### Situation Snapshot

The current crisis started on 6 May when a Palestinian protest broke out in East Jerusalem. The demonstrations were over an upcoming Israeli Supreme Court decision regarding the eviction of four Palestinian families in the East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah. The Supreme Court decision has since been delayed by 30 days and is still to be announced.

The unrest quickly escalated with clashes being reported between Jewish and Palestinian protesters. The violence coincided with the Israeli national holiday of Jerusalem Day and with Qadr Night, which holds extreme significance to Muslims. A march by far-right nationalists was also planned for Jerusalem Day, this was later cancelled. On 7 May, Israeli police stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound (also known as Temple Mount) using crowd dispersal methods, with clashes being reported.

On 10 May, Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad began firing rockets into Israel. The militant groups have employed the tactic of mass barrage, in the hope of overwhelming the sophisticated Israeli Iron Dome missile defence system. The tactic has seen some success, with rockets, or rocket debris, landing in numerous areas of Israel, including urban areas, and even reports of a school being struck.

The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) responded with numerous targeted airstrikes on Hamas, and other militants, firing at sites and safe houses. Due to the urban nature of Gaza, which is one of the most densely populated regions in the world, civilian casualties have occurred. The IDF has released video footage of its aircraft ceasing attack runs after they identify children in proximity to a target. There have also been reports that Hamas rockets are falling inside the Gaza Strip, though this has not been confirmed by independent sources.

The situation has also resulted in protest action throughout Israel, The West Bank and outside embassies globally. Such unrest in Israel has been largely driven by Israeli Arabs; especially in cities with an Arab majority or large minority. The most notable of which being in Lod, where Jewish homes were attacked. The city's mayor declared that the authorities had lost control of the situation and, on 11 May, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared a state of emergency in Lod. This was the first time that Israel has used emergency powers over an Arab community in the country since 1966.

Haifa and Ramla also saw looting and sectarian violence between the Jewish and Arab residents leading to at least one lynching and a number of shootings. Unrest has been widespread in both the West Bank and within Israel itself. In addition to the fighting and clashes in Gaza and the West Bank, Israeli security personnel have had to counter the risk of violence and protests within Israel itself, especially in areas with large Arab minorities or majorities. Arab Israelis, or Israeli Palestinians, make up around a fifth of Israel's population.

The clashes have resulted in widescale casualties and fatalities at a level not seen since the Second Intifada of the early 2000s. The Israeli military is continuing to conduct military operations in Gaza, while rocket attacks on Israeli territory continues. Violence has also occurred on the Israel-Lebanon border.

Thousands of casualties have occurred on both sides of the fighting. At the time of writing, hundreds of civilians, mostly within Gaza, have been killed. Exact figures vary between sources, with around 200 people, not including the estimated 20-75 militant fatalities, having been killed in Gaza, 17 in the West Bank, one in East Jerusalem, two on the Israel-Lebanon border, and nine within Israel.

Elsewhere, the risk and violence extend beyond the immediate region. The escalating tensions have seen a sharp increase in anti-Semitism globally, including a number of attacks. It has been reported that a number of synagogues have been attacked in Germany. Additionally, in Ontario, Canada, an elderly Jewish man was beaten while a young Jewish woman was sexually assaulted by pro-Palestine Muslims. In the UK, four people were arrested following a police investigation into anti-Semitic language being shouted from a pro-Palestine convoy. In France, a banned pro-Palestine protest saw clashes with police. The rally had been banned due to the risk of a repeat of the attacks on synagogues and other Israeli and Jewish targets in 2014 following the last Israeli-Palestine conflict.

## Miscommunication and Fake Tweets

The current clashes are occurring in the context of the wider Israel-Palestine conflict. As a result, there are very strong emotions towards and against both sides. This has seen a number of fake social media posts. Notably, there have been videos depicting the Al-Aqsa mosque on fire, which Israel was "allowing" to burn. The fire actually occurred on a tree next to the mosque, possibly caused by a firework. The blaze has since been extinguished and did not damage the mosque. There have also been old videos of rockets in Hamas-controlled areas of Gaza. The actual video was first shared in 2018.

There have been a number of fake viral tweets that depict official Israeli accounts stating that "We just love killing" and "Just bombed some kids", among others. These tweets were widely shared and were made using freely available online tools. The original source of the tweets is understood to be a pro-Palestinian account.

Israeli accounts have also shared a fake funeral where a "body" is dropped by a number of alleged Palestinians following a siren sound. The body then also gets up and runs away. The video was also shared in March 2020 and was then allegedly showing Jordanians breaking COVID-19 restrictions.

The use of misinformation has also been employed by the Israeli military. On 14 May, the IDF feigned an invasion into Gaza, even communicating to the international press via social media and via direct text messages to journalists that they had "entered" Gaza. Within hours the "reports" had been corrected claiming a miscommunication. However, Israeli news sources have indicated that the "mistake" was in fact a ruse to trick Hamas and other militant forces into believing that a ground invasion had begun, in the hope that they would expose their positions.

## What Next?

Despite the initial triggers of the Supreme Court decision and clashes at Temple Mount, the underlying unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict lies at the root of this new round of violence. For Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and within Israel itself, frustration has been building for years while the overall situation remains unresolved.

In Israel, the unprecedented number of rocket attacks required a stern response. The IDF has reported that over 3,000 rockets have been launched from Gaza thus far. The vast majority of these rockets have been intercepted by the Iron Dome system. Despite this, there have been successful attacks on Israeli territory, including Tel Aviv. A number of people have also been killed or injured in sectarian violence within Israel.

The fact that the violence has now spread beyond the normal confines of Gaza, indicates that this current wave of violence is unlikely to subside in the short term without an international backed ceasefire. Indeed, the rhetoric from both Israel and Hamas appear to show that neither believes an immediate cessation of hostilities is possible. International mediators, who have previously had success, have indicated that neither side is currently willing to talk. Indeed, Israel's Netanyahu has publicly stated that the ongoing offensive will "take time".

Despite these negatives, on Sunday 16 May, a US envoy arrived in the region to conduct de-escalation talks. The situation in Gaza is also believed to be critical beyond the daily airstrikes. There are reports of fuel shortages that would cause hospitals to lose power. Such humanitarian calls would put increased pressure on the United States to intervene. Thus far, the Biden administration has stated that Israel retains the right to self-defence and for a general cessation of violence.

Indeed, while a ceasefire looks unlikely now, it remains unclear where either side can go from here. Given the number of rockets that have been fired at Israel, it is unlikely that Hamas can continue to fire at such a rate without depleting their stockpiles or being targeted by Israeli airstrikes. The IDF also cannot realistically increase the number of airstrikes it is conducting without further escalating the number of civilian casualties. As a result, Israel may believe that the only further escalation that they can realistically achieve is through a possible invasion of Gaza. However, such an operation would only further inflame tensions in Israel and Gaza and could result in heavy casualties, on both sides.

Such an invasion would be contentious in Israel given the ongoing political stalemate that currently exists. The caretaker government led by Netanyahu and the Likud party does not have a majority in the Knesset; the unicameral national legislature of Israel. This means that any legislation could be blocked by the opposition, though a 2018 law means that only a council vote is all that would be required.

The most likely outcome is for Israel to continue to push its military advantage until it has dealt further damage to Hamas. This will undoubtedly result in civilian casualties and will only serve to increase the international calls for a ceasefire. Such a ceasefire will result in a resumption of the status quo, with tensions and the unresolved stalemate in the region unlikely to subside without concrete international efforts to resolve the plethora of issues that the region has.

## Advice

### *General advice:*

- Heightened tensions are highly likely to persist in the short-term. Expect further unrest in the region especially in Jerusalem and the West Bank. All protest action should be avoided as clashes are almost certain.
- Expect anti-Semitic unrest globally, this includes protest action, attacks on synagogues and direct violence.
- Further attacks by Palestinian militants and the IDF are almost certain.
- Individuals in the country or with interests in the wider region should keep up to date with the latest developments.
- Travellers in Israel, Palestine or the wider region should avoid discussing the current conflict and other sensitive topics/developments in public given the politically charged and emotive nature of the situation.
- Look to reconfirm itineraries and expect possible travel disruption as a result of the unrest, rocket attacks and Israeli airstrikes.
- Israeli and Palestinian embassies and consulates are likely to see associated unrest in the coming days and weeks. This should be avoided due to the risk of violence and localised disruptions.

*If currently in or travelling to Israel (Including East Jerusalem):*

- Travellers should defer all but essential travel to Israel due to ongoing unrest and rocket attacks.
- If currently in the country and unable to depart by commercial means, remain in a safe location and adhere to all instructions by the authorities, sirens and media announcements.
- While the risk of casualties or damage to buildings in Israel is mitigated by the country's Iron Dome air defence system, the Hamas/Palestinian militant tactic of mass barrages can result in rockets occasionally striking targets in Israel. Settlements close to the border with Gaza are most likely to be impacted.
- If rocket warning sirens are activated, seek secure shelter immediately, ideally in a purpose-built shelter. If in a building when sirens are sounded, head to a secure room, stairwell or inner room and close all windows and doors. Stay in the shelter for ten minutes after the siren ends.

*If currently in or travelling to the Palestinian Territories (Not including East Jerusalem):*

- Avoid all travel to the Palestinian Territories, both Gaza and the West Bank, due to the ongoing conflict and unrest.
- If currently in either Gaza or the West Bank where possible look to leave.
- If departure is not possible, shelter in place in a safe location. Adhere to all instructions by security personnel.



Solace Global remains available to provide our full range of Travel Risk Management services to clients throughout this current pandemic. Whether you require customised reports, training, comprehensive crisis management, in-country journey management, traveller technology, tracking, response, evacuation services or something specific, we are able to tailor our services to your operational needs, wherever or whatever they may be. For further details, please email [risk@solaceglobal.com](mailto:risk@solaceglobal.com) or give us a call on +44 (0) 1202 308 810. Follow Solace Global's [LinkedIn account](#) for the latest risk and travel updates.