

In a Criminal Escalation, Israeli Occupation Forces Strikes on Gaza Kill and Injure over 900 People

By [Mahmoud Abu Rahma](#)

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In a Criminal Escalation, IOF Strikes on Gaza Kill and Injure over 900 People as the Siege Continues to Debilitate Health and Other Vital Services

In one of the bloodiest escalations of Israeli military operations, the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF) initiated a wide-scaled air strike operation against the Gaza Strip. Dozens of targets were attacked from the air simultaneously using heavy missiles and bombs. Mostly, the strikes targeted police and security installations across the densely populated Gaza Strip, which indicative of IOF's disregard of civilians' life and wellbeing. Over 900 people have been killed and injured, most of whom are non-combatants. The number of casualties was exacerbated by the timing of the strike, which coincided with the change in schools' shifts when tens of thousands of schoolchildren were on their way from or to school. Seven of UNRWA's Gaza Vocational Training Center students were also killed in one of the airstrikes in Gaza City.

According to Al Mezan's monitoring, at approximately 11:30am on Saturday 27 December 2008, Israeli military aircrafts launched a coordinated series of airstrikes targeting dozens of police, security and other premises across the Gaza Strip. The first wave of attacks lasted for less than five minutes, during which over 100 missiles and bombs were dropped on Gaza. One of the largest strikes targeted the Arafat Police Town, which is located near several UNRWA schools. Dozens of people were killed in this attack, including tens of young men who were undergoing training to join the police. Moreover, Colonel General Tawfik Jabir, who is the Police General Director in the Gaza Strip, and Captain Ahmed Al-Ja'bari, the Director of the Security and Protection Apparatus, were killed in the same attack.

The IOF's air strikes have been characterized by their unprecedented fierceness. Police stations located in densely populated neighborhoods were attacked, destroying them and causing severe damage to tens of schools and homes and killing dozens of civilians, including children and old people.

Air strikes have continued through the night, targeting houses and other civilian premises, including water-wells, workshops, CBO offices, mosques and communications facilities. A guard of a water-well and three employees of the Palestinian Telecommunications Company were killed in North Gaza. Another two men were killed in a strike that targeted the Al-Borno Mosque near the Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. The Hospital's building was damaged in this same strike. Moreover, IOF targeted prisons, including Gaza's main prison facility of As-Saraya at noon today. Initial reports indicate that many policemen and prisoners were killed and injured in this attack.

Additionally, dozens of homes were destroyed, along with tens of UNRWA and government schools and clinics. Local government offices and private vehicles were also destroyed.

Al Mezan's initial monitoring indicates that at least 257 people have been killed in the IOF's strikes in the last 24 hours. Of those, the vast majority are non-combatants and civilians; including 20 children, 9 women and 60 civilians. The majority of the rest of the casualties are members of the civilian police who were inside their stations or undertaking training. At least 597 people were also injured, including 35 children whose wounds were reportedly critical. Al Mezan's believes that the number of casualties is expected to increase as many cases have been buried by their families without being registered at hospitals. Besides, a high number of people lie at hospitals between death and life. Moreover, dozens of people who were lightly wounded and; therefore, not admitted at hospitals were not counted. As the airstrikes continue, more people fall victims of them. This makes this operation one of Israel's bloodiest, most criminal military actions in Gaza in the past few decades.

This escalation comes amidst unprecedented deterioration of the humanitarian conditions Gaza's 1.5 million people face owing to Israel's tight siege which prevents their access to food, medicine and power. Ordinary Gazans have particularly been suffering from shortages in water supplies, cooking gas and foodstuffs. The siege has also impacted on hospitals' capacity to function under severe shortages in medicines and equipment. Hospitals' ability to handle very high numbers of casualties in a short time since yesterday has been particularly problematic; and particularly during the first hour after the first wave of attacks yesterday.

With the strongest possible terms, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights condemns the IOF's criminal military escalation in the Gaza Strip, which indiscriminately harms civilians and civilian property, and blatantly breaches the rules of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), qualifying as war crimes. Al Mezan particularly condemns the IOF attacks against civilian objects in which children and uninvolved civilians have been killed and maimed; despite the high technological capabilities that the IOF employs in their surveillance of the Gaza Strip.

Al Mezan stresses that police members who do not take part in any hostilities do not qualify as legitimate military targets under IHL and must not be deliberately targeted. It further stresses that, regardless of the soundness of the Israeli justifications of this operation, Israel must respect the rules of international law at all times, particularly when the use of force is involved. A reaction to rocket attacks cannot justify the perpetration of grave breaches of IHL, i.e. war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Al Mezan warns about the continued silence of the international community in the face of Israel's escalation, which only encourages Israel to further escalate its attacks. Al Mezan calls on the international community to intervene urgently to protect the civilian population in harmony with its legal and ethical obligations under international law. International intervention is required urgently as the IOF's attacks on Gaza continue, and news about the falling of more casualties mounts while drafting this press release.

Mahmoud Abu Rahma is Communications & Int'l Relations Coordinator, Al Mezan Center for Human Rights - Gaza

Email: mahmoud@mezan.org

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Rahma](#)

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