

Israeli tanks enter Gaza Strip

By [Global Research](#)

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In-depth Report: [PALESTINE](#)

Israeli tanks enter Gaza Strip

Widest operation since Hamas took over; 6 Palestinians killed

The Associated Press

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KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip – Israeli tanks and bulldozers backed by attack aircraft moved into the southern Gaza Strip on Tuesday, killing five militants in the widest operation in the territory since Islamic Hamas forces wrested control in June. Another died in an airstrike in northern Gaza.

The violence took place on the eve of the first formal peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians since early 2001. The Israeli military described it as a routine operation “against the terror infrastructure” in Gaza.

But the scene on the ground — bodies lying amid the rubble of a destroyed building, Israeli tanks pushing deep into Palestinian territory, schoolchildren scurrying for cover — looked anything but routine. Palestinian officials accused Israel of trying to sabotage the peace talks.

Since the Hamas takeover, Israel has carried out frequent airstrikes and ground incursions into Gaza in response to Palestinian rocket and mortar attacks on Israeli border communities. Israel considers Hamas a terrorist group and holds it responsible for all attacks launched from Gaza.

At the same time, Israel has been pursuing a peace agreement with the rival Palestinian government of President Mahmoud Abbas in the West Bank.

In Tuesday’s operation, tanks and bulldozers pushed about a mile into southern Gaza, on the main road between the towns of Khan Younis and Rafah, and deployed over a 2.5-mile stretch of territory.

Residents and Hamas security forces said at least 30 tanks and bulldozers took part in the operation, but the military said 10 tanks were sent in.

Multistory building targeted

Among Israel's targets was a multistory building that suffered heavy damage. Amid the rubble, at least two militants lay dead, including one man whose body was torn in half by a blast. As rescuers pulled the bodies away, two Israeli shells struck the building seconds apart, sending people scrambling for cover. The body of a third man lay motionless after the blast.

The incident was filmed by Associated Press Television News. An AP cameraman and several other journalists at the scene suffered minor injuries and shock.

The Islamic Jihad group said an Israeli tank shell killed three of its fighters, and the smaller Popular Resistance Committees said a member died in an airstrike. Hospital officials confirmed the deaths.

Schoolchildren ran through the streets of Khan Younis, let out early from school so they could take refuge in their homes.

Militants carrying land mines and other weapons dodged among houses and maneuvered behind the tanks to fire at troops. Others took cover behind trees or covered themselves in leaves to camouflage themselves in open farmlands.

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Focus on rocket-launching area

The operation focused on an area that is a main launching ground for rocket and mortar assaults on army bases and the Israeli-controlled Sufa crossing into Gaza. More than 15 militants have been killed in the area in recent Israeli airstrikes.

Soldiers took over the rooftops of several homes at the onset of the operation, which began around dawn, and detained more than 60 people in house-to-house raids, residents said. The Israeli military said they were taken into custody for questioning.

An Israeli tank was smoldering after it was hit by a Palestinian grenade. Four soldiers inside were slightly wounded, the military said.

The gunfire kept frightened motorists away from the Khan Younis-Rafah road, which was blocked at one section by an Israeli tank. Troops also demolished a gas station on the road.

"They believe that such operations will harm the resistance and weaken it, but they are mistaken," said Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum.

Although Israel has warned that a major operation against Gaza militants was in the offing, it has said now is not the time for such action. The army said Tuesday's incursion was nothing out of the ordinary.

In other fighting, Israel carried out two airstrikes early Tuesday against armed Palestinians who approached troops in northern Gaza, the military said. The military said it identified hitting two militants. Palestinian officials said one was killed.

Formal peace talks set to begin

The violence came a day after Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert pledged to “forge a historic path” toward a final accord with Abbas’ moderate West Bank Palestinian government. On Wednesday, the two sides are to launch their first formal peace talks in seven years at the historic King David Hotel in Jerusalem.

Olmert and Abbas hope to wrap up a deal next year, but Olmert has warned that Israel cannot implement any agreement until Abbas regains control of Gaza and reins in militants there and in the West Bank.

Abbas’ spokesman, Nabil Abu Rdeneh, called for the international community to intervene to end the latest Israeli incursion in Gaza. “The Israeli policy of escalation aims to sabotage and place obstacles before the negotiations even before they start,” he said.

Also casting a pall over talks is an Israeli plan to expand a Jewish neighborhood in east Jerusalem.

Israel captured the eastern sector of the city in the 1967 Mideast war, and the Palestinians consider any construction there to be a violation of Israel’s commitment to the U.S.-backed “road map” peace plan, which requires Israel to halt all settlement construction.

Israel says the road map’s freeze on settlement construction does not apply to east Jerusalem, which Israel annexed in 1967. The Palestinians claim east Jerusalem as their capital.

Palestinian officials told The Associated Press that Palestinian negotiators would not be prepared to discuss anything in the talks except settlement construction until Israel declares it will halt all settlement expansion.

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