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Israel's recent invasion

Struggle for survival in Kuneitra: Armed forces cross border into Syria for the first time in 50 years



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Under siege: Israeli military checkpoint at the village entrance to Al-Hamidija

Peace seems to reign in the small town of Madinat Al-Salam in Syria's Golan Heights. As morning breaks in the provincial capital of Quneitra, the streets come alive. A group of men gather outside a shop, sipping sweet tea from plastic cups and chatting eagerly, while women in hijabs stroll through the busy market. Traffic, mostly older cars and noisy motorbikes, moves briskly, and the sharp honking of horns frequently cuts through the urban hubbub.

But there are also signs of the country's recent political upheaval. A green, white and black flag with three red stars now flutters in the calm breeze where the banner of the Baath government once flew. Fighters dressed in camouflage, their faces partially obscured by balaclavas, hang around on street corners, heavy rifles slung casually over their shoulders.

The main road leading west out of Madinat Al-Salam is blocked. Uprooted trees and fallen lampposts lie scattered on the destroyed asphalt. In the distance, at the end of a muddy path, a large military tank looms, its cannon pointed threateningly towards the village. The scene is not a relic of the long-running war in Syria or the recent victory of the jihadist militia Haiat Tahrir Al-Sham. Rather, it is evidence of Israel's invasion.

On November 27, a coalition of opposition forces launched a surprise offensive against regime troops in Idlib and Aleppo, and Damascus fell on December 8. On the same day that Bashar Al-Assad fled, Israel crossed the border and entered Syrian territory for the first time in half a century.

Cast expanded

Israel has occupied much of the Golan Heights from Syria since the Six-Day War in 1967. Both countries signed a ceasefire agreement in 1974 that established a demilitarized zone on the Syrian side of the border, patrolled by United Nations peacekeepers. Although the war had expanded into the buffer zone since 2012, the border had remained unchanged.



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"Our cows and sheep are dying": Residents of the village of Al-Hamidija lament the consequences of the siege

This has now changed, with Israeli troops advancing into several villages and towns within the buffer zone and even beyond. The Israeli government claimed its incursion was prompted by the power vacuum following the collapse of Assad's forces, while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated that the army would remain in the neighboring country indefinitely. However, the move was condemned by the United Nations and most countries in the region, which accused Israel of violating the 1974 agreement.

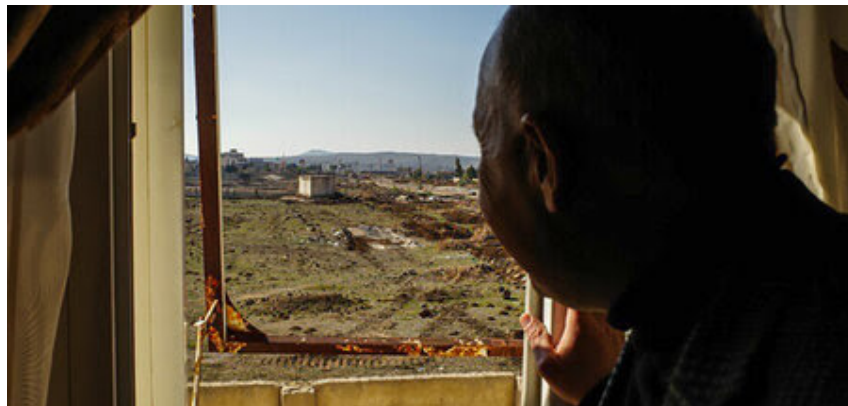
For residents of Madinat Al-Salam, the looming presence of the newly erected military checkpoint next to the Israeli tank has turned life into a daily struggle for survival. "Anyone who passes by risks being shot," says Mutasem, a young resident. Villagers rush past the roadblock, hardly daring to look at the road. Children have turned the military presence into a dangerous game, venturing a few meters down the road before quickly retreating at the sound of gunfire. One neighbor tells how a stray bullet recently pierced the window of her house.

While there have been no casualties in Madinat Al-Salam so far, the surrounding region has seen far more brutal violence. On December 25, six people were wounded in the small town of Dawaja, and five days earlier another was wounded in Maarijah when Israeli soldiers opened fire on anti-invasion demonstrations. At least one civilian was killed in attacks north of Madinat Al-Salam, and residents in nearby villages were wrongfully arrested by the occupation forces.

Life with Tanks

Quneitra is no stranger to violence. For years, the city was a battlefield between the Syrian army and opposition forces, and changed hands frequently during the war. And while much of the country celebrated the fall of the Assad government and the prospect of peace, the region was bracing for a new wave of instability.

"The Zionist enemy entered the area under the pretext of confiscating weapons, but that is a lie," says Abd Al-Rahman, another young neighbor. Israel's stated goal is to demilitarize the border region. The soldiers have searched hundreds of homes, set up checkpoints that restrict freedom of movement, and confiscated buildings and land. "We have also heard that they are taking people's belongings and keeping them for themselves," he adds.



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"Why are they destroying the earth?" asks Ahmad Al-Marduki, the director of the Madinat Al-Salam Cultural Center

Abd Al-Rahman is standing on the roof of his house, looking into the distance. Behind him, barely visible, the white silhouette of Mount Hermon rises out of the morning haze. Located on the border with Lebanon, at over 2,800 meters it was the highest mountain in Syria - until the Israeli forces conquered it in early December and advanced about twelve kilometers into the buffer zone. But the young villager looks away from the mountain and squints against the bright sun. He shields his eyes with one hand, with the other he points to a distant body of water. "My friends and I went there often. We went fishing, ate and enjoyed the beautiful landscape," he remembers. The pond lies within the demilitarized buffer zone, but is now surrounded. "We can no longer go there, the occupying army won't let us," complains Abd Al-Rahman. In its advance, Israel has seized numerous vital water sources and is now said to control up to 40 percent of Syria's water supply.

Tarek, a man in his 60s who has lived in Quneitra all his life, says Israeli forces have devastated "a large part of the region." "Just look at the damage. They took everything from us," he says, his voice filled with anger. Abd Al-Rahman agrees. "I'm angry. The enemy has destroyed our country," he explains, his eyes wandering to the visible signs of the invasion. "This village was once beautiful - the trees, the birds... Now it's completely destroyed."

The Golan House for Culture and Arts is the last building standing before the Israeli military checkpoint in Madinat Al-Salam. A few hundred meters away, in an open area covered with disturbed earth and tire tracks, the tank is clearly visible. The center's smartly dressed director, Ahmad Al-Marduki, looks out of his office window and comments on the scene with a twinkle in his eye. "Look at what they have done. Why are they destroying the earth? Why are they destroying the trees? These trees have been planted for decades, they are older than the State of Israel. Is that why they demolished them?" he asks.

Like most other buildings in the village, the culture and arts center was stormed by the soldiers. The search lasted several hours, as two floors and dozens of rooms had to be searched. "When they came, everything was locked. We had the keys, but did they wait for us to open the doors? No, they kicked them in," explains Al-Marduki. The footprints are still visible on the white doors. Inside, broken glass and discarded paper documents cover the floor - untouched remnants.

"Of course they didn't find any weapons," the center's director explains, shrugging his shoulders. "Not even a knife, not even a spoon. We didn't have any weapons during the war, so why should we carry them now? We're just a cultural platform." The center remains closed

to the public, however, and Al-Marduki is in no hurry to clean up and reopen. "We never know when the army will come back and destroy everything again, so we prefer to wait."



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"From Golan to Quneitra – our resources are not for sale": Protest against the occupation in Damascus

He is familiar with the workings of the Israeli army. "I come from the Golan Heights," he says proudly, pointing out the window at the hill on the horizon. "From the inside." His family had to flee the occupation in 1967 and never managed to return. But he is not worried about the neighboring country's renewed advance into Syrian territory. "Why should we be afraid, my friend? They have always grabbed us by the collar, we are used to it," says Al-Marduki. "You have seen how they treat Palestinian children. Have you seen that they are afraid? No. So we are upright too."

From War to Siege

The situation in Madinat Al-Salam, while dire, is not as desperate as in Al-Hamidiya. The last village before the occupied Golan Heights lies beyond the tank and is virtually cut off from the rest of the world. A military checkpoint guards the village entrance and allows traffic in and out of the village to be tightly controlled. With the main road blocked, the few residents who are allowed to leave the village must take a maze of back roads through the barren landscape, adding at least 20 minutes to each journey.

"We are 430 people trapped in Al-Hamidiya," complain the village elders. They are wrapped in red and white keffiyehs and speak between puffs on their cigarettes, while a dozen young people listen attentively. Since the siege began in early December, they have had to go weeks without food and water and have had no access to essential services such as health care and education. "They don't even let humanitarian organizations in," complains one elder. "Our

cows and sheep are dying because we have nothing to feed them. If a child gets sick at night, we can't take him to the hospital. We are starving and have nothing left."

Like many villages in Syria, Al-Hamidiya bears the scars of war and economic hardship. Only a handful of shops are open, their shelves almost empty and shrouded in darkness due to a power outage. The buildings are half-finished or dilapidated, their facades riddled with holes from previous Syrian military airstrikes. "After 14 years of suffering under the criminal regime, after we drove out Bashar Al-Assad, the Israeli occupation forces came. We got rid of one occupation only to face another," says an elderly man bitterly. Another adds: "All of Syria is celebrating, but not us."

Al-Hamidiya was one of the first villages to be taken by the invading army. The soldiers searched every house, looking for weapons and making an extensive register of residents, while some houses were confiscated entirely. The tracks of a tank can still be seen along some streets. The villagers feel forgotten and abandoned. "Where is the government? Where is the United Nations? Where are the Arab nations? Where is the world? Why is no one helping us?" they plead. "Is it our fault that we stayed in our country? We will not leave even if we starve. We will not repeat the mistake of 1967."

But the people of Quneitra are not entirely forgotten. About 70 kilometers away, in the heart of Damascus, a small but defiant protest is taking place, denouncing Israel's invasion of Syria and its ongoing occupation of Palestine. Under the watchful eyes of onlookers and the armed militiamen who now control the country's capital, the demonstrators wave Syrian and Palestinian flags. On their banners and in chants, they demand Israel's immediate withdrawal from Quneitra and the occupied Golan Heights. For them, the invasion of Syria is nothing more than a lie. "We know very well that Israel is a colonial, expansionist entity that uses every opportunity to expand its presence in the region. This has always worried us," says Zein Khuzam, a writer who joined the protest. Similarly, filmmaker Riham Ezzaldeen explains that Israel is never honest about its true intentions. "They have a map, a plan, a goal, and whenever they get a chance, they take it," she says.

But behind her strong convictions there is also uncertainty. "To be honest, I am not very optimistic. There is always the possibility that this invasion will become permanent," warns Zein. But Riham is determined. "I refuse to even think about that possibility," she argues. "It happened once before with the Golan Heights. It will not happen again."