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Attacks on Gaza Unite Palestinians

By Jillian Kestler-D'Amours

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HAIFA, NORTHERN ISRAEL — Dozens of Israeli tanks slowly made their way south on the back of flatbed trucks along Israel's Road 6 highway Sunday. Emblazoned with Stars of David and Hebrew letters and carrying frayed Israeli flags, the movement of these tanks has left many believing that Israel will soon launch a large-scale ground operation into the Gaza Strip.

"I see [the tanks] every day. It hurts me because I know they are going to kill children," 20-year-old Mohammad Eghbariya told IPS at the computer store where he works in Umm Al-Fahm, a Palestinian city in Israel's northern triangle area.

A Palestinian citizen of Israel, Eghbariya said that while it also hurts him to see Israeli civilians get injured in rocket attacks, he is Palestinian and stands in solidarity with the people of Gaza.

"We are behind them. We support them. They are related to us, as Palestinians," Eghbariya said, as Israel's Channel 2 Hebrew-language news showed images of the war on a nearby computer screen. "But of course it's going to be worse. It's going to be worse because of the pride of both sides."

Last Wednesday Israel assassinated Ahmad Jabari, the head of Hamas's military wing in Gaza City. A barrage of Israeli airstrikes on the besieged Palestinian enclave quickly followed; a total of 1,350 sites have been targeted throughout the Gaza Strip, according to the Israeli military.

About 90 Palestinians were killed and several hundred injured in less than a week of violence.

Hamas, the Islamic movement that governs the Gaza Strip, declared that Jabari's killing would "open the gates of hell" for Israel. Palestinian fighters fired hundreds of rockets from Gaza onto Israeli cities, with some reaching as far as the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Three Israelis have been killed as a result of rocket fire.

"Deterrence is always a very important thing in Israel's calculations. It's always viewed itself as a small country facing many, many enemies that outnumber it, and therefore it needs to be perceived as tough," Nathan Krall, a Jerusalem-based Middle East policy analyst for the International Crisis Group told IPS, commenting on the possibility of further escalation.

Despite the uncertainty about what's to come, Palestinians have mobilized against a possible increase in Israeli attacks on Gaza, holding demonstrations across the West Bank and Jerusalem and inside Israel itself.

"We are here to demonstrate against Israeli aggression and Israel's war on Gaza. We are here in solidarity with the people of Gaza and with the resistance," said 23-year-old Said Suidan, who was among some 40 people demonstrating in Haifa Sunday evening against the attacks in Gaza. Haifa is the largest city in northern Israel, and the third largest in Israel.

A philosophy and sociology student at Tel Aviv University, Suidan said that while Palestinian resistance to Israeli policies takes various forms — bullets in Gaza, stones in the West Bank, and protests inside Israel — it is all the same fight.

"I'm part of the Palestinian people. This is my duty. We're raising our heads higher because of their strength [in Gaza]," Suidan told IPS.

There are approximately 1.6 million Palestinian citizens in Israel, representing some 20% of the total population. Israeli leaders often describe Palestinian citizens as a "demographic threat" to the state's self-defined Jewish character.

Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has gone so far as to suggest forcibly transferring Palestinian cities in Israel to the control of the Palestinian Authority. Newly passed Israeli legislation also mandates all citizens to declare their loyalty to Israel as a "Jewish and democratic" state.

According to Jafar Farah, director of the Mossawa, the Advocacy Center for Arab Citizens of Israel, the violence in Gaza is rebuilding solidarity among Palestinians who have for decades been divided by geographic location and daily circumstances.

Discussion between Palestinian and Jewish citizens of Israel about what's happening in Gaza, however, is almost entirely absent, Farah said.

"People don't talk about the issue, don't talk about the situation. If you look at Israeli media, Jews are talking to each other and that's it. They don't want to listen to the voice of the Arab community, and this is also reflected on the street," Farah told IPS.

While many Palestinians were hesitant to talk openly to IPS about their feelings toward the violence in Gaza, the community is becoming increasingly vocal about their opposition to the situation as Israeli airstrikes continue and Palestinian deaths mount.

“Children and people in Gaza are suffering, and America and the world are complicit,” said Mariam Odeh, a Haifa resident who participated in the protest there Sunday. “We’re one people. We’re Palestinians. When they bleed [in Gaza], we bleed.”