Thousands riot at Gaza border, as Navy clashes with Palestinian flotilla

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/thousands-riot-at-gaza-border-as-navy-clashes-with-palestinian-flotilla/>

Thousands of Palestinians demonstrated on land and at sea along the Gaza Strip’s border with Israel Monday, with the Hamas-run health ministry saying 29 people were injured in the riots, either by Israeli troops or by shrapnel from Palestinian bombs.

Near Zikim beach, south of Ashkelon, thousands of rioters threw explosives and rocks at the Israeli soldiers on the other side of the security fence, the army said.

Protesters also set fire to tires along the fence, filling the air with thick black smoke. Some sabotaged part of the fence, removing pieces of it. A small number cut through the barrier and started a fire in an empty Israeli army sniper nest, before rushing back into the Strip.

Israeli soldiers responded with tear gas and live fire in certain cases, the military said.

Meanwhile, dozens of boats challenged the Israeli blockade and were intercepted by Israeli Navy boats.

There too, Israeli sailors used less-lethal riot dispersal weaponry and, in some instances, live fire, the army said.

The flotilla marked 11 years since Israel imposed a blockade on the Palestinian enclave in 2007, after Hamas came to power there. Both Israel and Egypt enforce a number of restrictions on the movement of people and goods into and out of Gaza. Israel says the blockade is necessary to keep Hamas and other terror groups in the Strip from arming or building military infrastructure.

In total, 29 Palestinians were wounded in Monday’s riots, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry.

Eleven people were hit by Israeli live fire and six people were reportedly struck by tear gas canisters.

Eight Palestinians were hit by shrapnel, and four were treated for tear gas inhalation, the health ministry said.

Fathi Hamad, the Hamas terror group’s former interior minister in the Strip, spoke to protesters near the flotilla and called, “To all those who hesitate, take up arms and fight Israel in the West Bank,” Channel 10 news reported.

Meanwhile Israeli Fire and Rescue Services said Monday evening that they had far been called to extinguish one fire caused by an incendiary balloon flown into Israel from Gaza.

Border riots, dubbed the “Great March of Return,” have increased dramatically in recent weeks. They began as weekly events from late March through the summer, but appeared to slow as Hamas entered indirect talks with Israel aimed at a ceasefire.

As the talks have stalled, Hamas has increased the pace of rioting and demonstrations against Israel, and created new units tasked with sustaining tensions along the border fence including during nighttime and early morning hours.

On Sunday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned ministers that Israel is preparing for the possibility of a military campaign in the Gaza Strip should the humanitarian conditions in the territory cause border clashes to spiral out of control, Hadashot news reported.

Netanyahu spoke during the weekly cabinet meeting of the Palestinian Authority’s attempt to “choke” Gaza, according to the TV report, and said: “If the reality of civil distress in Gaza is diminished, that is desirable, but that is not certain to happen, and so we are preparing militarily — that is not an empty statement.”

Angered by the reported [funneling by Qatar](https://www.timesofisrael.com/qatar-said-providing-fuel-funds-to-gaza-via-israel-overriding-pa-objections/)of aid to the Hamas-run Gaza Strip, PA President Mahmoud Abbas was said on Saturday to be planning on cutting the flow of funds to the Hamas-run coastal enclave.

Senior defense officials told Hadashot that Abbas was particularly frustrated with UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Nikolay Mladenov, who facilitated the transfer despite the PA president’s staunch objections.

The halt of some $96 million that the PA sends monthly to the Gaza Strip could drive a desperate and cash-strapped Hamas toward conflict with Israel, security officials told the news channel. Moreover, they expressed concern that the violence could expand into the West Bank.

The Kan public broadcaster reported Saturday that Abbas had a tense phone call with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi, in which the latter warned Abbas that additional measures against the Gaza Strip would endanger the security of Egypt, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula.

Abbas was said to have responded defiantly by saying, “It is the establishment of a Muslim Brotherhood state in Gaza that is endangering the national security of Egypt, not me and my policies,” in a reference to Hamas.

Qatar’s transfer of funds to Gaza is intended to allow six months of increased fuel to Gaza’s only power plant — which will allow more hours of electricity to the beleaguered Strip.

The majority of households in Gaza receive an average of three to four hours of electricity a day. The new funds would double that amount to around eight hours a day.

Israel officials hope that alleviating one of Gaza’s worst electricity shortages in recent years will diminish the chances of full-blown military confrontation in the Strip, according to a Haaretz report.

However, Israel has also taken steps to punish Gazans for the recent flareup of violence. On [Saturday](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liberman-orders-narrowing-of-gaza-fishing-zone-citing-border-violence/), Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman ordered Gaza’s fishing zones constrained due to the escalation of border violence along the southern frontier.

The fishing zone will be curtailed from nine to six nautical miles, the Defense Ministry said, following deliberations between Liberman and defense officials.

The clashes along the border, which Israel maintains are being directed by Hamas, have included regular rock and Molotov cocktail attacks on troops, as well as shooting and IED attacks aimed at IDF soldiers, and attempts to breach the border fence.

Gazans have also launched incendiary kites and balloons into Israel, sparking fires that have destroyed forests, burned crops, and killed livestock. Thousands of acres of land have been burned, causing millions of shekels in damages, according to Israeli officials. Some balloons have carried improvised explosive devices.

At least 140 Palestinians have been killed during the protests since late March, according to AP figures. Hamas has acknowledged that dozens of the fatalities were its members.