

Israel Struggles to Explain Why Snipers Used to Quell Palestinian Protest

- Putrid water, tear gas has limited effectiveness, Israel says
- Palestinians appeal for UN help to save them from 'massacre'



Israeli soldiers and snipers at the border east of Gaza City on May 15. Photographer: Thomas Coex/AFP via Getty Images

Skunk water, sticky foam, sponge grenades and tear gas-spraying drones are among the non-lethal methods Israel has pioneered to quell Palestinian protests.

Given this extensive toolkit, Israel is struggling to explain why its snipers fired enough bullets into Gaza Monday to kill 60 Palestinians and wound about 1,200. As with previous conflicts there, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government may face investigations and censure from international legal bodies.

"It's simply unacceptable and outrageous to use live fire, not as the last

resort but as the basic modus operandi for dealing with these demonstrations,” said Amir Gilutz, spokesman for Israeli human rights group B’tselem.

Some 40,000 of Gaza’s 2 million residents converged on Israel’s border on May 14 to protest against the transfer of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move they say sets back peace efforts and undermines their bid for statehood. Juxtaposed with the festive mood at the opening of the U.S. embassy, footage from Gaza, showing scores of Palestinians shot by Israeli soldiers, alarmed viewers around the world.

Some youths hurled rocks and petrol bombs at Israeli troops. Others used wire-cutters to try to breach the border fence. Though witnesses say most protesters were unarmed, army footage aired on Israel’s Hadashot News showed a group with guns, bombs, grenades and wire-cutters trying to cross the fence; all eight were shot dead.

Ambulances and hospitals were overwhelmed, said Ayman Sahabani, chief of surgery at Shifa Hospital in Gaza City. “We’re at 25 times our capacity and our drug inventory is exhausted,” he said.

Israeli army spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Conricus said troops tried using non-lethal weapons like tear gas and rubber bullets when possible and had tried dousing burning tires with water cannons, but those methods had not proved sufficiently effective.



An injured protester is carried to an ambulance in Gaza City on May 15.

Photographer: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

“We are defending ourselves against terrorists and rioters,” he said. “We shoot in order to stop them so that they cannot harm the security infrastructure and infiltrate into Israel.”

Investigate Incidents

Ranked as the world’s seventh-largest arms exporter, Israel has developed expertise in making non-lethal weapons to subdue protests in Gaza and the West Bank. Among them are putrid-smelling fluids and immobilizing foam. In preparation for this week’s demonstrations, it equipped drones to drop tear gas.

Given the availability of those methods, UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process Nickolay Mladenov told the Security Council Tuesday there was no justification for the killings.

“Israel has a responsibility to calibrate its use of force, to not use lethal force, except as a last resort, under imminent threat of death or serious injury,” he said. “It must protect its borders, but it must do so proportionally and investigate every incident that has led to a loss of

human life.”



An Israeli drone drops tear gas canisters during clashes with Palestinian protesters on May 15.

Photographer: Thomas Coex/AFP via Getty Images

Israel faced criticism from countries including Saudi Arabia, France, Belgium and the U.K. Turkey expelled Israel’s ambassador and recalled its own from Israel and the U.S. The Palestinian Authority appealed to the Arab League and UN for international protection and urged the International Criminal Court to investigate Israeli officials.

Israel is “conducting a massacre against our people,” said Mahmoud al-Aloul, deputy chairman of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s ruling Fatah party.

In the 2008 Gaza conflict that left about 1,400 Palestinians and five Israelis dead, a UN fact-finding commission found both Israel and Hamas, the group which rules Gaza, committed war crimes. The panel’s chief, Richard Goldstone, later said the report erroneously accused Israel of intentionally killing civilians.

Hamas said 50 of the dead were members of the armed Islamist group, which is designated a terrorist organization by the U.S. and European Union.

Trump's ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, blamed Hamas and said Israel acted with restraint.

Following investigations in the aftermath of three Gaza wars, the army has assigned lawyers, senior officers and video photographers to its regional commands to document military actions and try to ensure no war crimes are committed. The army says soldiers adhere to open-fire regulations and officers were prepared to defend their actions.

"Every bullet that's fired is ordered by a commander and every bullet has a target," said Conricus. Still, he said, smoke, sand, wind and tear gas created a chaotic environment in Gaza, and "unfortunately we do not always hit where we are trying to hit."

The death toll appeared to deter a second day of protests that had been expected Tuesday to mark 70 years since Palestinians fled or were forced from their homes with Israel's establishment. Instead, Gazans were burying their dead.

Israeli gunfire "will never make us lose hope to get back our land," said Mohamed Abu el-Majd, 23, whose left leg was fractured. "They can shoot me in the right leg now and I swear to God I'll come crawling back."

— *With assistance by Fadwa Hodali*

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