

Israel to Strike Hamas During Gaza Protests if Attempts to Breach Border Fence Continue

The Israeli army will try to minimize the number of Palestinian casualties and avoid a larger conflict in Gaza, but defends the use of live fire for fears of a massive breach of the aging border fence.

✘ A drone photo shows smoke rising as Palestinian protesters burn tires during a demonstration near the Gaza border, April 6, 2018. STRINGER / Anadolu Agency / AFP

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The Israel Defense Forces will react forcefully, using airstrikes against Hamas military targets if attempts to damage the fence on the Gaza border continue during the mass demonstrations there.

Israeli defense officials are worried that a war of attrition may develop along the border amid attempts to breach the fence and damage the equipment building Israel's barrier against the tunnels leading from Gaza. Attempts to damage the fence would happen under the cover of the large-scale demonstrations.

Nine Palestinians were killed during Friday's demonstrations, with almost 300 wounded, all by live fire. The total number of dead over the last two weekends has reached 29. The Palestinians reported that all of Friday's fatalities were civilians and that one was a journalist. Israel hasn't yet released information linking casualties to the armed wings of Hamas and other groups.

So far neither side has taken action outside areas near the fence. The Palestinians haven't fired rockets into Israel and the IDF has focused on blocking attempts to breach or damage the fence. One reason for the attempts to contain the confrontation to the fence area has been Israel's wish not to disrupt everyday life in communities along the border during Passover, now over.



Smoke from burning tires between Palestinian protesters and Israeli soldiers, April 6, 2018. JACK GUEZ/AFP

But army sources believe that Hamas - which to a large extent is dictating how the demonstrations play out, even though the protests began as an independent initiative by Gazans - will want to maintain a high degree of friction along the border until mid-May. If there are many Palestinian casualties, the international community might be shaken out of its apathy toward events in the territories and renew diplomatic pressure on Israel.

The army will try to minimize the number of Palestinian casualties in the coming demonstrations and avoid a larger conflict in Gaza, which intelligence agencies believe Hamas doesn't want either at this time.

The government also doesn't want an escalation because of the anticipated costs of such a confrontation, and because of negative developments on the northern front, where Iran is consolidating its presence with Russia's acquiescence. This became clear at the tripartite summit Wednesday in Ankara.



Palestinians protest as Israeli forces fire tear gas on the Israel-Gaza border, April 6, 2018. MOHAMMED ABED/AFP

The army says it's using live fire because it fears a massive breach of an aging fence that hasn't been well-maintained, making it easy to cross. Hamas has instructed members of its security apparatus and military wing to show up at demonstrations in civilian clothes; some have been told to breach the fence to allow massive entry through the hole.

Israeli defense officials have received intelligence showing that Hamas has prepared for a possible sabotage of the equipment building the anti-

tunnel barrier, or for kidnapping a soldier if an opportunity arises during the demonstrations.

Against this backdrop, snipers have been instructed to shoot anyone identified as a key activist operating near the fence. Moreover, snipers have told to shoot at the legs of Palestinians trying to sabotage the fence.



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