'Fires Raging Nationwide Likely the Result of Terrorist Arson'

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Twelve people were arrested on Thursday and Friday on suspicion of arson and incitement to arson as massive wildfires continued to rage across Israel Friday and numerous firefighting teams continued to battle the flames in what is now feared to be a wave of terrorist arson attacks.

Some 1,500 fires have broken out [nationwide](http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=38227) since Tuesday, and it is now believed that at least half of them were the work of arsonists.

The police and Israel Fire and Rescue Services announced a national state of emergency on Wednesday, resulting in a nationwide call-up of all fire department personnel and volunteers.

The IDF canceled all leave for soldiers currently undergoing combat training, saying they will remain "ready to assist [civilian] security forces fighting the fires nationwide."

Firefighters serving with the Homefront Command have been called up as well, and the corps' Search and Rescue Unit has been placed on special alert.

The flames have been fueled by strong winds and extremely dry weather, abnormal even for the Israeli fall. The Israel Meteorological Service said weather conditions will remain unchanged in the coming days, and the state of emergency is expected to remain in force until this coming Tuesday.

On Wednesday, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu exercised the civilian emergency aid treaties Israel maintains with a number of [allies](http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=38271), all of which immediately agreed to help.

Greece, Croatia, Cyprus, Italy, Turkey, Russia, France, Ukraine and Britain all dispatched aid: Three planes and 32 crew members arrived in Israel from Greece on Thursday, followed by two Croatian aircraft with 14 crew members; two Turkish planes with eight crew members; two Italian planes with 13 crew members, and a Cypriot aircraft with a crew of seven. Russia dispatched two Beriev Be-200 Altair aircraft and 19 crewmen to Israel's aid. Two French planes and two Ukrainian aircraft arrived in Israel early on Friday, and a British firefighting plane followed suit.

The international aid joins Israel's own firefighting squadron of 14 planes.

The Palestinian Authority also offered its assistance, and on Friday, four of its firetrucks joined the efforts to extinguish flames across Judea and Samaria and near Jerusalem.

On Friday, Egypt and Jordan offered their aid as well. Cairo will send two firefighting helicopters, while Amman has already dispatched several firetrucks to join the Israeli emergency teams.

The Environmental Protection Ministry has opened its situation room, mobilizing all its hazardous materials teams. The Finance and Interior ministries have also been holding situation assessments, to ensure local authorities have all necessary resources to fight the fires and assist the tens of thousands of Israelis evacuated.

On Friday, Netanyahu and Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan visited the site of a recently extinguished blaze in Moshav Beit Meir, next to Jerusalem, where they spoke with firefighters.

Both thanked the teams for their tireless efforts.

"The most important thing is to get people out safely, and that includes you [the firefighters]. No one should die here. There are other important things, but safety first," the prime minister said.

Netanyahu and Erdan continued to the Hatzor Airbase, which is housing the foreign aircraft sent to Israel. They were joined by police, fire department, military, and emergency services officials for a situation assessment.

Commenting on the possibility of arson terrorist attack, the prime minister said, "This is the conclusion from intelligence we have. Arson was definitely involved in some of the cases, but not all of them. Whether or not this was an organized phenomenon -- that I can't say.

"The police are working overtime and they have been instructed to prosecute arsonists. Like with any crime, punitive action is key. Arson terrorism will come with a cost," Netanyahu said.

**'Number of fires indicates arson'**

Netanyahu, Erdan and Police Commissioner Roni Alsheikh all said Thursday that the unusual number of fires indicated at least half involved arson.

"I won't go into details so not to disrupt the investigation, but it is likelihood this is more than pyromania and there is also a nationalistic motive," he said.

Alsheikh has ordered Investigations and Intelligence Commander Maj. Gen. Manny Yitzhaki to form a special task force to investigate the fires. The investigation will involve measures ranging from tracking dogs that specialize in sniffing out accelerants to surveillance footage and aerial intelligence gathering. Erdan has instructed the police to focus on social networks as well, to locate those who incite arson.

The taskforce was also asked to formulate recommendations on how to thwart potential waves of arson in the future.

A group called the "Intifada Youth Coalition" took to Arab social media Thursday and claimed its operatives were responsible for the arson. Their tweets carried the hashtag "#burntheforest."

The claim has not been ascertained by any official Israeli source. Given the potential nationalistic angle of the fires, the Shin Bet security agency has also been asked to investigate.

Some 60,000 people were forced to evacuate their homes Thursday as smoke and flames engulfed 13 neighborhoods in Haifa, Israel's third-largest city. According to the Haifa Municipality, over 700 homes were severely damaged in the fire.

Some 350 firefighters, 115 trucks and several aircraft battled the huge forest fire, which officials said had multiple points of origin. Sixty-five people suffered from smoke inhalation.

Given the extent of the blaze, all hospitals in the greater Haifa area were placed on emergency alert. Power supply was cut to some 7,500 homes in the area as a precaution.

The Damon and Carmel prisons, which are close to Mount Carmel, were evacuated on Prison Service Commissioner Lt. Gen. Ofra Klinger's orders, after heavy smoke reached their area.

Netanyahu, Erdan, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon, Construction Minister Yoav Gallant, Interior Minister Aryeh Deri, and top police and fire department officials held a special situation assessment in Haifa on Thursday evening.

Netanyahu lauded firefighters' efforts and denounced the arsonists.

"Any fire caused by arson or incitement to arson is an act of terror and will be treated as such. I have instructed security forces, including the police, Shin Bet, and IDF accordingly," the prime minister said in a press conference held after the meeting.

"Those behind such lawless acts will be held accountable. Anyone who has or is trying to set parts of Israel ablaze will be made to answer for it to the full extent of the law."

Netanyahu thanked Israel's allies for sending firefighting planes to its aid.

"When fighting the forces of nature, nations come together. We did the same -- a few weeks ago we offered our fire squadron's help to Cyprus, and today, I spoke with the president of Cyprus and he sent his firefighting aircraft," he said.

"We have considerable [aerial] firefighting abilities, yet we need help. This is what nations do. I want to thank the leaders of Russia, Greece, Italy, Cyprus, Croatia and Turkey, who have sent their aircraft to help us."

Commenting on the Palestinian Authority's offer of assistance, Netanyahu said, "We accepted their offer of firetrucks, and now we'll see if we need to use them."

Netanyahu noted the firefighting planes were pivotal to the efforts to extinguish the flames, as without them more communities would be at risk.

Erdan told reporters that "it has become clear that a significant number of fires were set on purpose. As the prime minister said, this is a new phenomenon of arson terrorism. As the police chief noted, we have some suspects in custody, but at this point, we can't elaborate, so not to compromise the investigation."

**'An act of madness'**

Habayit Hayehudi leader Naftali Bennett tweeted Thursday, "Only those to whom this country does not belong are capable of burning it."

Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said Thursday that under Israeli law, arson is a criminal offense punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

Meretz Chairwoman Zehava Galon lambasted the arsonists.

"Security forces now believe that some of the fires are arson, and one nationalistically motivated," she wrote on her Facebook page. "I don't know what these people tell themselves, but they are no freedom fighters.

"Setting a fire that could kill men, women and children, and inflict untold damage on property, land, the vegetation -- this is a horrendous act, an act of madness that has nothing to do with a struggle for liberation."

Joint Arab List Chairman Ayman Odeh urged against automatically calling the fires an act of terrorism.

Odeh, a resident of Haifa, said Thursday that "it's heartbreaking to see the Carmel on fire. This is no time for incitement. This is a time to band together and do everything to save [the city]."

The flames, he said, "can't tell the difference between Jews and Arabs. Unfortunately, there are those who a taking advantage of this horrible situation to incite against an entire sector. Those who love our land should focus on putting out the fires and helping those affected, not fanning the flames of hate. Right now, we have to save what can be saved. Later, when we find out who is behind this -- be it a Jew or an Arab -- we will condemn them and punish them to the full extent of the law."

Since Tuesday night, Israelis in dozens of communities nationwide have opened their homes to the evacuees, many of who will not be able to return to their homes until next week.

Arab communities joined the effort on Thursday, as many mayors and local officials took to social media to invite their Jewish neighbors in need into their homes.

The Balad party, which together with Ra'am-Ta'al, and Hadash make up the Joint Arab List faction, opened a situation room to which Haifa residents, Jews and Arabs alike, can turn for information and assistance.

The Haifa Islamic Waqf has offered the lower Haifa mosque as a shelter to evacuees, and the Christian Bishops Council condemned the arson, and said its churches in northern Israel will accommodate any evacuees seeking shelter.