



January 16, 2008

**Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center  
at the Israel Intelligence Heritage  
& Commemoration Center (IICC)**

## **Two days of hard fighting in the south: Israeli counterterrorist activities and Hamas rocket attacks (January 15-16)<sup>1</sup>**

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**A house in Sderot damaged by a Qassam rockets (Amir Cohen for Reuters, January 15).**



**Israeli police sappers examine the remains of a rocket which fell near Kibbutz Niram (Amir Cohen for Reuters, January 16).**

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<sup>1</sup> As of noon, January 16.

## Overview

1. January 15-16 were days of war for the Gaza Strip and the western Negev towns and villages, the worst since the Hamas takeover of the Strip (June 2007).

2. On January 15 the IDF carried out intensive counterterrorist activities against squads of mortar-shell launchers in the Gaza Strip and dealt Hamas a severe blow. Eighteen Palestinians were killed, most of them Hamas terrorist operatives (according to Hamas reports). Among those killed was the son of senior Hamas activist Mahmoud al-Zahar. Hamas reacted with a massive barrage of rockets aimed at Sderot, Ashqelon and the western Negev towns and villages for **the first time** since it took over the Gaza Strip. About **60** rocket hits were identified in Israel as of the afternoon of January 16.

3. Senior Hamas officials called for revenge and employed hate propaganda against the Palestinian Authority and the United States. Senior PA officials, among them Abu Mazen, took the same tone as Hamas in reference to the IDF counterterrorist activities, calling them a “**slaughter**” and “**massacre**” of the Palestinian people (while completely ignoring the rocket and mortar shell fire from the Gaza Strip and the fact that most of those killed were Hamas terrorist operatives fighting IDF troops at the time.) Arab and even some Western spokesmen accepted the false Palestinian version of the event and accused Israel of killing Palestinian civilians, with no mention of the terrorists involved.

## The IDF action and its outcome

4. As part of its counterterrorist activities, the IDF action on January 15 was a broad operation primarily targeting squads of terrorists launching mortar shells. A number of terrorist squads were attacked on the ground and from the air near the Karni Crossing in the northeastern Gaza Strip and in the Shujaiya and Zeitun neighborhoods of Gaza City.

5. The IDF action killed **18 Palestinians** and wounded about 50. **The vast majority of those killed were armed terrorist operatives** who were killed in battle against IDF forces. Hamas issued a list of the names of 13 terrorist operatives who were killed, all members of its Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, and of four civilians. Among those killed was **Hussam al-Zahar, the son of senior Hamas activist Mahmoud al-Zahar**, who was a field operative in the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades.



**Mahmoud al-Zahar and Ismail Haniya with the body of Hussam al-Zahar (Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades Website, January 16).**

6. **Hussam al-Zahar** was the second son Mahmoud al-Zahar lost. His eldest-born son Khaled was killed on September 10, 2003.<sup>2</sup> The Palestinian media reported that he had undergone military training in the PA and beyond and served in a special unit for securing important members of the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades (Pal-today Website, January 15).



**Poster commemorating “field commander” Hussam Mahmoud al-Zahar. He is wearing a uniform and carrying a rifle (Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades Website, January 16).**

<sup>2</sup> Khaled al-Zahar was killed during an Israeli Air Force attack on Mahmoud al-Zahar’s house in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City, along with al-Zahar’s bodyguard. The building was completely destroyed but Mahmoud al-Zahar was only slightly injured.

7. The Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades Website posting which listed the names of the 13 dead terrorists also mentioned the name of the mosque to which each belonged but not their home addresses. Relating the dead to mosques gives them an air of sanctity, honor and fame, clearly indicating they are *shaheeds*. However, in our assessment, the references to mosques have not only religious importance but also indicate that the mosques also serve as local military headquarters. Islam grants mosques a general function, that is, they are not only houses of worship but provide an accepted framework for social and even military activity. The use of mosques for military purposes has grown because the Palestinians are aware that the IDF hesitates to attack them.<sup>3</sup>



**Funeral in Gaza (Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades Website, January 16).**

## **Rocket and mortar shell attacks**

8. Hamas reacted to the deaths of the 13 terrorist operatives with a massive barrage of rocket and mortar-shell fire aimed at the western Negev towns and villages. During the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> of **January 60 rocket hits were identified in Israeli territory**,<sup>4</sup> most of them in and around Sderot, some of them fired at Ashqelon. In addition, **40 mortar shell hits** were identified.

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<sup>3</sup> For details see our November 26, 2006 bulletin about the terrorists who barricaded themselves in Al-Nasser mosque in Beit Hanoun, "The Palestinian terrorist organizations, have recently made more frequent use of civilians as human shields to protect their bases and operatives. The Palestinian terrorist organizations, aware that the IDF will not deliberately attack civilians, have recently made more frequent use of civilians as human shields to protect their bases and operatives" at [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/html/human\\_shield\\_e.htm](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/human_shield_e.htm) and [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/human\\_shield\\_e.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/human_shield_e.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> As of 4 p.m.

Twenty-eight civilians were wounded, most of them slightly. Among them was a five-year old girl; there was also property damage. One of the rockets hit a high-tension electric pole and there was a blackout in several areas of Sderot for a number of hours.



**Sderot: evacuating the wounded (Al-Jazeera TV, January 15.)**

9. Hamas's terrorist operative wing claimed responsibility for most of the rocket fire. According to the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades Website, 44 Qassam rockets and 75 mortar shells were fired at Sderot, the towns and villages in the area and IDF forces. **It was the first time since the confrontations began in May 2007, the eve of the Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip,** that Hamas claimed responsibility for rocket fire into Israel.

10. After the takeover of June 15 Hamas generally stopped its direct involvement in rocket fire, contenting itself with firing mortar shells at military and civilian targets near the security fence and with encouraging (and even abetting) the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and other terrorist organizations to attack Israel from the Gaza Strip. In the past, when Hamas was involved in rocket fire, there was a sharp increase in the number launched into Israel (May 2007, for example).



- 0801-89 - - 2008-01-15 -  
- حصاد الرد الأولي على "مجزرة حي الزيتون" بإطلاق "44" صاروخ قسام و "75" قذيفة هاون .. مقتل معتصب وإصابة أكثر من عشرة آخرين -

{ قَاتِلُوهُمْ يُعَذِّبُهُمُ اللَّهُ بِأَيْدِيكُمْ وَيُخْرِجُهُمْ مِنْ صُدُورِهِمْ وَيَشْفِ صُدُورَ قَوْمٍ مُؤْمِنِينَ }

بيان عسكري صادر عن

...: كتائب الشهيد عز الدين القسام ...:

حصاد الرد الأولي على "مجزرة حي الزيتون" ليوم الثلاثاء 2008/01/15م

كتائب القسام تستهدف جيش الاحتلال ومعتصبيه بـ "44" صاروخ قسام و "75" قذيفة هاون .. مقتل معتصب وإصابة أكثر من عشرة آخرين

**Hamas's Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades claim responsibility for firing 44 rockets and 75 mortar shells (Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades Website, January 16)**

## Volunteer murdered by Palestinian sniper

11. On the morning of January 15, during the IDF action in the Gaza Strip, an Ecuadorian volunteer, Carlos Andrés Muscara Chavez, 20, was shot to death by a Palestinian sniper while he was working in the fields of Kibbutz Ein Hasheloshah near the security fence. Hamas's Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades also claimed responsibility for the murder (Al-Qassam Website, January 15).

## Hamas reactions

### Mourning and a general strike proclaimed

12. Tens of thousands of Gazans attended the funerals of the Hamas operatives killed by Israel, calling for revenge and escalation of the terrorist attacks. On January 16 Ismail Haniya's Hamas government proclaimed three

days of mourning and a general strike “throughout the homeland” (i.e., including Judea and Samaria).

## Statements from senior Hamas officials

13. **Mahmoud al-Zahar**, who usually makes extreme statements, was vehement in his denouncement of Israel, the United States and the PA:

1) **Blaming the PA for the deaths of the terrorists:** During the funeral he sent the following message to the PA: “Shame on you, you should be humiliated by having murderous Jews and Americans as allies. You, who tried to kill the pilgrims, you who tried to assassinate those who are now dead, will not stain their honor after their deaths” (Pal-today Website, January 15). He told Al-Aqsa TV that the Israel action had been taken “following Bush’s cursed visit,” and that “...those in Ramallah (i.e., Abu Mazen and his followers) conspired against us with Bush and Israel to impose a siege on our people in order to kill them” (Al-Aqsa TV, January 15).

2) **Threats to continue terrorism until the “liberation” of all “Palestine:”** On January 15 he told Al-Jazeera TV that he would adhere to the strategy of the “liberation” of all of Palestine, “from its river [the Jordan] to its sea [the Mediterranean], and from Lebanon to the Egyptian border.” Al-Zahar used Hamas’s media to threaten a response with all the means the Palestinians have at their disposal, “even if not one of us remains alive” (Ramattan News Agency, January 15).



**Mahmoud al-Zahar**  
(Al-Aqsa TV, January 15).

3) **An anti-Semitic message sent to the Arab-Muslim world:** In a telephone interview with Al-Jazeera TV on January 15, he said that “anyone who thinks that the sons of Palestine have found a safe harbor is wrong, and does not know that they [the Jews] killed half of their own

prophets.<sup>5</sup> And that those who come to talk about the ideology of peace are those who carried out all the crimes possible against the Palestinian people.”

14. **Iranian foreign minister Mamuchehr Mottaki** held a telephone conversation with **Mahmoud al-Zahar**, telling him that “the results of President Bush’s visit became apparent very quickly.” Al-Zahar answered that “...all those who collaborated and collaborate with the United States are party to the crimes and will have to answer for them to the Islamic nation” (Fars News Agency, January 16).

15. Other statements made by Hamas activists:

1) **Threats against Israel: Abu Obeida**, Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades spokesman, said that the rocket fire was a message that “the attacks on the settlements<sup>6</sup> would continue.” He “advised” the residents of Sderot to stop pushing Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert to invade the Gaza Strip and threatened that the rocket fire would last longer and reach “other settlements” (PalMedia Website, January 15). **Musheir al-Masri**, Hamas representative in the legislative council, called upon the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades to escalate their rocket fire and increase the threat to the residents of Sderot (PalMedia Website, January 15)



**Abu Obeida threatens Israel: “Sderot will pay a high price, and so will Ashqelon and other places” (Al-Aqsa TV, January 15).**

2) **A demand that the PA stop the negotiations with Israel:** Hamas government spokesman **Taher al-Nunu** held a press conference

<sup>5</sup> Radical anti-Semitic Muslims issue many Islamic-based anti-Semitic publications in which the Jews are referred to as having “killed the prophets.” The claim is based on the interpretations of Muslim religious scholars of Verse 21 of the Surah entitled Aal Imran, which they say deals with the Jews, although Jews are not specifically mentioned. The verse reads “As to those who deny the Signs of Allah and in defiance of right, slay the prophets, and slay those who teach just dealing with mankind, announce to them a grievous penalty” (ISNA English Qur’an Website).

<sup>6</sup> All Israeli cities, towns, villages and kibbutzim are called “settlements” by Hamas. It is the same term used for the settlements in the PA-administered territories, and used to delegitimize the Jewish presence in Israel.

in Gaza City where he demanded that “all negotiations and meetings [between Israel and the Palestinians] quickly cease, and that all forms of security-related collaboration with the occupation end” (Agence France Presse, January 15).

## **Operational lessons learned from the last clashes.**

16. Beyond the threats, accusations and insults hurled at Israel, the PA and the United States, Hamas’s terrorist operative wing reportedly **carried out an investigation** in light of the large number of casualties in its ranks. Ynet correspondent **Ali Waked**, relating to what he had learned from “a Hamas source,” said that the investigation showed that several serious errors had been made. One of them was that Hamas observers had not identified the Israeli force when they were operating on open, exposed ground. As a result the Israeli force surprised the Hamas operatives “and by the time they realized what was happening they were being attacked by heavy artillery and tank fire...” Also examined was the extensive Hamas use of RPGs and the non-use of mortars, which could have hampered the Israel operation (Ynet, January 16).

## **The PA**

17. Senior PA figures, Abu Mazen among them, strongly denounced the IDF action and called it “aggression,” “slaughter” and a “crime.” Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad followed the Hamas government line and also proclaimed a three-day mourning period and a general strike for January 16. All of the above was done with **complete disregard** for the continuous rocket and mortar-shell fire from the Gaza Strip which was the reason behind the IDF counterterrorist activities, and for the fact that most of the dead were **Hamas terrorist operatives** killed in battle, and not innocent Palestinian civilians.

18. The main reactions were:

1) **PA chairman Abu Mazen:** Israel continues its aggression against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip and West Bank. On January 15 “a slaughter was carried out, a massacre against the Palestinian people.” Abu Mazen appealed to Israel and the entire world, saying



that it would be impossible for the Palestinians to remain silent in view of those “crimes” and that “it would not lead to peace” (Palestinian TV, January 15).<sup>7</sup>

**Abu Mazen: “Today we tell the world that [there was a] slaughter of the Palestinian people” (Palestinian TV, January 15).**

2) **PA president Salam Fayyad** denounced the “ugly acts of slaughter carried out by the occupation army against the Gaza Strip which led the deaths of 19 and the wounding of more than 50.”<sup>8</sup> He demanded that the international community take political, legal and moral responsibility and immediately provide protection for “innocent Palestinian **civilians** who are killed every day by aggression and the siege...” (Ma’an News Agency, January 15). [**Note:** He, like Abu Mazen, made no mention of the terrorist operatives who were killed.] He also demanded that the international community, especially the Quartet, the European Union and the United States, exert pressure on Israel to stop its “crimes.” He asked that international human rights organizations go into action immediately to provide Palestinians with the necessary aid (Wafa News Agency, January 15).

3) **Abu Alaa, chief of the negotiating team,** denounced the “acts of slaughter” carried out by the “forces of occupation” on January 15 in the Gaza Strip. Those acts, he said, joined the continuing siege, the daily invasions and the continued construction of the settlements [**Again, no**

<sup>7</sup> That position won Abu Mazen compliments from Hamas. Musheir al-Masri, a member of the legislative council, declared he appreciated Abu Mazen’s position regarding the “massacre” and that Abu Mazen should now stop the negotiations and security collaboration with the enemy (Quds Press Agency, January 16).

<sup>8</sup> Salam Fayyad also ignored the fact that those killed were Hamas terrorist operatives and that the IDF action was the result of continued rocket and mortar fire.

**mention of the rockets and terrorist attacks from the Gaza Strip].** He called for an end to the IDF operations which he said presented obstacles and difficulties for the negotiations. He also said that the Palestinian delegation to the negotiations had demanded that the Quartet and the United States convene a “triple conference” which would monitor the violations and determine who was responsible (Wafa News Agency, January 15).

### **Arab and international spokesman join the denunciation of Israel for having killed Palestinian “civilians” while ignoring the fact that most of them were terrorist operatives**

19. **Arab spokesmen** strongly denounced the IDF action in the Gaza Strip while completely ignoring the fact **that most of those killed were Hamas terrorist operatives** who died in battle against the IDF (as Hamas itself admitted), and in general also ignoring the ongoing terrorist activities which preceded the IDF action. For example:

1) **A spokesman for the Egypt foreign ministry** deplored the “invasion” of the Israeli forces into the Gaza Strip which led to the deaths of **15 Palestinians** (Middle East News Agency, January 15).

2) **The secretary of the Arab League** condemned the “Israeli aggression which claimed many **civilian victims**” (Middle East News Agency, January 15).

3) **The Jordanian government** condemned the Israel actions which led to the death and wounding of **dozens of Palestinian civilians**. Acting foreign minister Nasser Judeh said that “Jordan again rigorously denounces actions taken **against civilians...**” (Jordanian News Agency, January 15).

20. Foreign spokesmen also ignored or glossed over the fact that most of those killed were terrorist operatives involved in terrorist attacks against Israel. For example:

1) **Robert Serry, special UN coordinator for the Middle East peace process** told correspondents that he had received reports of “...a major Israeli incursion into the area [which] left at least **14 people dead** and over 40 injured, **with civilians among the 21 killed...**” and that he “deplored the **killing and wounding of civilians**” UN Website, January 15.

2) **Pascale Andréani, French foreign ministry spokesman**, condemned the many casualties among civilians as the result of the Israeli action, deploring “the numerous victims and wounded **notably among civilians** which resulted from the Israeli incursion...” (Kuwait News Agency, January 15).