



News of the Israeli-Palestinian Confrontation November 15-30, 2006

The IDF leaves the Gaza Strip ...



Following an understanding reached for a ceasefire, the IDF pulled its forces out of the Gaza Strip: IDF tanks redeploying in Israel after the pullout (Eliana Aponte/Reuters, November 27)

...and the Palestinian security forces deploy to prevent rocket launchings.



Palestinian security forces deployed in the Gaza Strip after an understanding regarding a ceasefire was reached. Their ability and willingness to confront the terrorist organizations is uncertain (Al-Arabiya TV, November 26).

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Main points

- The focus of the past two weeks was an unwritten understanding for a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. It was reached in a phone conversation between Palestinian Authority chairman Abu Mazen and Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert, and began on November 26. According to the understanding, the Palestinians will stop firing Qassam rockets and carrying out other types of terrorist activities from the Gaza Strip, and the IDF will remove its forces from the Strip and stop its counterattacks.
- Despite the understanding, the Palestinian terrorist organizations continued sporadic rocket fire at Sderot and other western Negev population centers. The IDF, on the other hand, pulled its forces out of the Gaza Strip and so far has exercised restraint and not responded to the rocket fire.
- In the political arena, in a speech given during a memorial service for David Ben-Gurion on November 27, the Israeli prime minister sent a conciliatory message to the Palestinians. He called upon them to implement the road map and enter into a dialogue with Israel which would lead to a viable Palestinian state with defined borders. He made it clear that Israel would be willing to pull out of the PA-administered territories, release numerous Palestinian prisoners and assist the PA with its economic rehabilitation. Abu Mazen's response was positive, saying that Olmert's stand was a "positive initiative," and expressed his willingness to discuss its details with Israel. Hamas spokesmen, on the other hand, rejected the possibility of recognizing Israel and threatened a third intifada within a year if their demands were not met.

Ceasefire in the Gaza Strip

- Contacts between Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and PA chairman Abu Mazen on the one hand, and between Abu Mazen and PA prime minister Ismail Haniya and the Palestinian terrorist organizations on the other, led to an unwritten understanding regarding a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. The understanding became effective as of November 26, 2006, at 06:00 (6 a.m.).¹

- The understanding was reached by telephone in a call made by Abu Mazen to Ehud Olmert on the night of November 25. Abu Mazen said that he had reached a comprehensive ceasefire understanding in the Gaza Strip with the Palestinian terrorist organizations which would include the cessation of rocket fire, suicide bombing attacks and the digging of tunnels. He asked that the IDF stop firing and pull its forces out of the Gaza Strip. The two agreed to continue the dialogue to reach a cessation of violence in Judea and Samaria.

- Following the conversation, Prime Minister Olmert consulted with the Israeli Minister of Defense and Chief of Staff, and it was decided that Israel would comply with Abu Mazen's request to pull the IDF out of the Gaza Strip. The decision was implemented before dawn on November 26, and since then the IDF has stopped its operational activities, despite the fact that sporadic Qassam rocket fire continues (See below).

¹ One Arabic word for "ceasefire" is *hudna*, but the Palestinians prefer not to use it because it is an Islamic term which refers to a written agreement in force for a prescribed period of time, with a clear, legal definition which binds both sides. The Palestinian terrorist organizations prefer to describe the Olmert-Abu Mazen understanding as a "lull [in the fighting]," *tahadiyah*, a secular term referring to a situation with no binding legal standing and which does not necessarily refer to a complete cessation of violence. The ceasefire reached with Abu Mazen in March 2005 was also referred to as a "lull," and while it did bring about a temporary reduction of terrorist attacks until the end of the year, attacks did not cease. That was principally because the Palestinian terrorist organizations, led by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, sought to use deadly terrorist attacks to sabotage it.

Hamas and other terrorist organizations interpret the ceasefire

- From the beginning, Hamas and the other Palestinian terrorist organizations have their own interpretation of the ceasefire, which bears no resemblance to that presented by Abu Mazen. They have reduced it to refraining from firing Qassam rockets, (also only partially implemented) and at the same time demand unilateral restrictions be placed on the IDF's targeted killings and counterterrorist activities in Judea and Samaria (with no commitment on their part to refrain from carrying out terrorist attacks there.)

- Their interpretation was expressed by the Hamas prime minister and spokesman:
 - ✿ Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya said that the organizations had agreed to stop the rocket fire and called upon Israel to stop its activities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Reuters and AP, November 24 and 26).

 - ✿ A Hamas government spokesman announced that Ismail Haniya had met with representatives of the organizations and that they were willing to stop rocket fire from the Gaza Strip, "if Israel [would] commit itself to abstaining from all types of aggression...including assassinations, invasions and the demolition of buildings" (Palestinian News Agency in Gaza, November 25).

Difficulties with enforcing the ceasefire

- Following the understanding, on November 26 Palestinian security forces (National Security and police) deployed in the northern and southern Gaza Strip and began patrolling the main roads. **They did so in an attempt to ensure the cessation of rocket fire into Israel as Abu Mazen had committed himself.** According to Palestinian security sources, 13,000 members of the security forces were deployed.



Palestinian security forces deployed to preserve the ceasefire (Al-Arabiya TV, November 26)

- It is extremely doubtful whether the security forces have the capability and willingness to obey Abu Mazen and enforce the understanding. Their operational competence is low in comparison with that of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations, their motivation is low because they have not been paid for months² and the Hamas government is not willing to use force to impose the ceasefire.

- In that context, Khaled Abu Hilal, spokesman for the Palestinian interior ministry, was asked if he was familiar with Abu Mazen’s order to detain anyone who tried to launch rockets. He answered that the interior minister would not transmit such an order and that the position of the government and the interior ministry was clear: “The interior ministry will not function as a police force against the branches of the resistance [i.e., the terrorist organizations]. We believe in dialogue...” (Interview with the BBC, November 26).

The Palestinian terrorist organizations violate the ceasefire; the IDF practices restraint (as of November 30)

- Since the ceasefire understanding went into force, the Palestinian terrorist organizations have occasionally fired rockets at Sderot and the western Negev. Unless they stop completely, Israeli civilians may be wounded, which might end the ceasefire understanding.

² Demonstrations of security service personnel whose salaries have not been paid still continue.

- The main violations of the understanding as of the morning of November 30:

- ✿ Between 06:00 and 10:30 on the morning of November 26 the terrorist organizations launched six rockets. In the afternoon of November 27 two rockets were fired from the area around Beit Hanoun. On November 28 two more rockets were fired from the northern Gaza Strip. November 29 was quiet. However, during the first four days of the “ceasefire” ten rockets were fired at Sderot and the western Negev. No one was injured and no damage was done to property. Fatah, the PIJ, Hamas and the Popular Resistance Committees all claimed responsibility for the rocket fire, saying they were in retaliation for IDF counterterrorist activities in the West Bank.

- ✿ So far, Israel has adopted a policy of restraint and the IDF has not responded to the rocket attacks. However, in our assessment the IDF cannot be expected to practice restraint for an unlimited period of time and if Qassam rocket fire continues the IDF will have to respond to protect the security of the citizens of the State of Israel.

A conciliatory message from the Israeli prime minister to Abu Mazen, and Palestinian responses

- From the first, the Palestinian terrorist organizations, each of which has the operational capabilities and sometimes the motivation to test the ceasefire, had their own interpretations of the understanding and voiced their reservations. Apparently both the government of Israel and Abu Mazen are aware of its limitations and fragility, however both expect that it will create a process which will strengthen and prolong the ceasefire.
- A step intended to encourage such a positive process was taken by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who sent a conciliatory message to Abu Mazen and the Palestinians in general. In a speech he gave on November 27 at Sde Boker in the Negev, marking the 33rd anniversary of the death of David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s first prime minister, he appealed to the Palestinians, saying the following:

✿ “If a new Palestinian government is established, which will be committed to the principles of the Quartet, implement the road map and bring about the release of Gilad Shalit, I will invite Abu Mazen to meet with me immediately to conduct a real, open, genuine and serious dialog...In accordance with the road map you will be able to establish a independent, viable Palestinian state, with territorial contiguity in Judea and Samaria, a state with full sovereignty and defined borders.”

✿ “The borders of the State of Israel will also be defined...[and] will be different from the territories currently under Israel’s control...The government of Israel will be willing to release numerous Palestinian prisoners, including ones sentenced to lengthy prison terms, to increase the trust between us...The cessation of terrorism and violence will enable us will enable us to offer you a measures which we will coordinate between us to ease the distress of the Palestinian population and improve the quality of its life...We can assist you to formulate a program for the economic rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip and the regions in Judea and Samaria...”

■ Ehud Olmert’s remarks were met with contradictory responses:

✿ Abu Mazen, during a visit to Jordan, described the proposals as a “positive initiative” and expressed his willingness to discuss its details with Israel. He added that on November 30 he expected to meet with Condollezza Rice, the American Secretary of State, to reach an understanding about the “lull” (Radio BBC, Al-Arabiya TV, November 28).

✿ Hamas spokesmen responded to Olmert’s speech with suspicion and even negatively. For example, Hamas government spokesman Ghazi Hamad said that Olmert’s remarks were vague because they contained no clear reference to the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and because he ignored the “right of return,” the “heart of the Palestinian problem” (Al-Arabiya TV, November 27). Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya said that the Palestinians’ minimum conditions were “the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and the return of the Palestinian refugees” (Pal-media Website, November 27).

Khaled Mashaal: the threat of a third intifada within a year

■ As opposed to the conciliatory tone taken by the Israeli prime minister and the PA chairman, Hamas again raised the threat of a renewal of violence and a terrorism campaign (the soldier-called “intifada”) if its demands were not met, while rigidly refusing to moderate its fundamental positions toward Israel.

■ On November 25, in an interview with Al-Jazeera TV, Khaled Mashaal (head of Hamas’s “political bureau” in Damascus) stated that he was allowing a period of six months for meeting his demand that a Palestinian state be established within the 1967 borders (with no willingness to recognize the State of Israel in return). He warned that the continuation of the “international siege” of the PA and the demand for implementing the road map would strengthen Hamas rather than weakening it, and that the final outcome of the process was liable to be the collapse of the PA and the outbreak of a third intifada.

■ On November 26, in an interview with the Egyptian satellite channel, Khaled Mashaal again expressed his willingness to give diplomatic activity up to a year to succeed (“Today I said six months, you want more than six months, take eight months, even a year...”), however, “if diplomacy does not succeed,” there will be an intifada, or in other words, “an escalation of the resistance” (Egyptian satellite TV, November 26).

■ At the same time, Hamas spokesmen in the PA-administered territories again made it clear that Hamas had no intention of recognizing Israel, as demanded by the international community. One spokesman, Fawzi Barhoum, said there was nothing new about Khaled Mashaal’s remarks about the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and that they did not imply recognition of the “Zionist entity.” Non-recognition of Israel was, he said, one of Hamas’s fundamental positions, and that even Palestinian children repeat it day and night (Hamas Website, November 28). Another spokesman, Musheir al-Masri, also stated that the “two-state solution” was not on Hamas’s agenda under any condition (Reuters, November 28).

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad: Will it try to sabotage the lull this time as well?

- During the previous “lull” the PIJ, which is directed from Damascus, was the terrorist organization most active in its efforts to carry out suicide bombing attacks in Israeli cities to sabotage the lull. The attacks were carried out by the organization’s infrastructure in Samaria and brought in their train vigorous antiterrorist actions on the part of the Israeli security forces.

- This time as well the organization has signaled that it will not participate in the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. During the first hours the PIJ launched rockets and its senior officials conditioned their willingness to fulfill the terms of the lull on the cessation of IDF activity in the West Bank (with no commitment from them to stop their terrorist activities). For example:
 - ✿ Ramadan Abdallah Shalah, the organization’s general secretary in Damascus, expressed his reservations regarding the lull because it was partial and related only to the Gaza Strip. He said that it had to include both the Strip and the West Bank, because the organization would adhere to it only if Israel ceased its activities in both places (Al-Jazeera TV, November 26).

Muhammad al-Sa’adi, a senior PIJ operative in Samaria, demanded that the terrorist organizations oppose any ceasefire which did not include the West Bank. He even threatened that his organization would carry out “suicide bombing attacks in the heart of the Zionist cities” and that the suicide bombers would be sent from the West Bank cities (PNN Website, November 27).

Important Events On the Ground

Qassam rocket fire at the western Negev continues

- Until the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip was announced on November 16, massive Qassam rocket fire continued to be aimed at the populated areas of the western Negev. A total of 157 hits were identified in Israeli territory during November, ten of them after the ceasefire went into effect (as of the morning of November 30). That signifies an almost three-fold increase in rocket fire in comparison with October. The rockets killed two Israeli civilians and wounded 22. After the ceasefire understanding was reached, and since November 26, there has been a decrease in rocket fire, although it has not stopped completely.

An attempted suicide bombing attack against IDF forces in the Gaza Strip is foiled

- On November 23 an IDF force on the outskirts of the Jabaliya refugee camp saw a female suicide bomber carrying an explosive charge approaching them. The suicide bomber, a 57-year old woman sent by Hamas, came close to the force and blew herself up. Four IDF soldiers were slightly injured. It was the first time a woman of that age had been sent to carry out a suicide bombing attack.



The suicide bomber reading her “will” before leaving for the attack
(Al-Aqsa TV, November 23)

Judea and Samaria

Explosives laboratory exposed in Nablus

- On November 25 the Israeli security forces uncovered a large weapons laboratory in Nablus. Among other things, three belts with compartments for explosive charges were found, as well as toys for hiding explosives. A jacket with a double lining and chemicals used in the manufacture of explosives were also found.



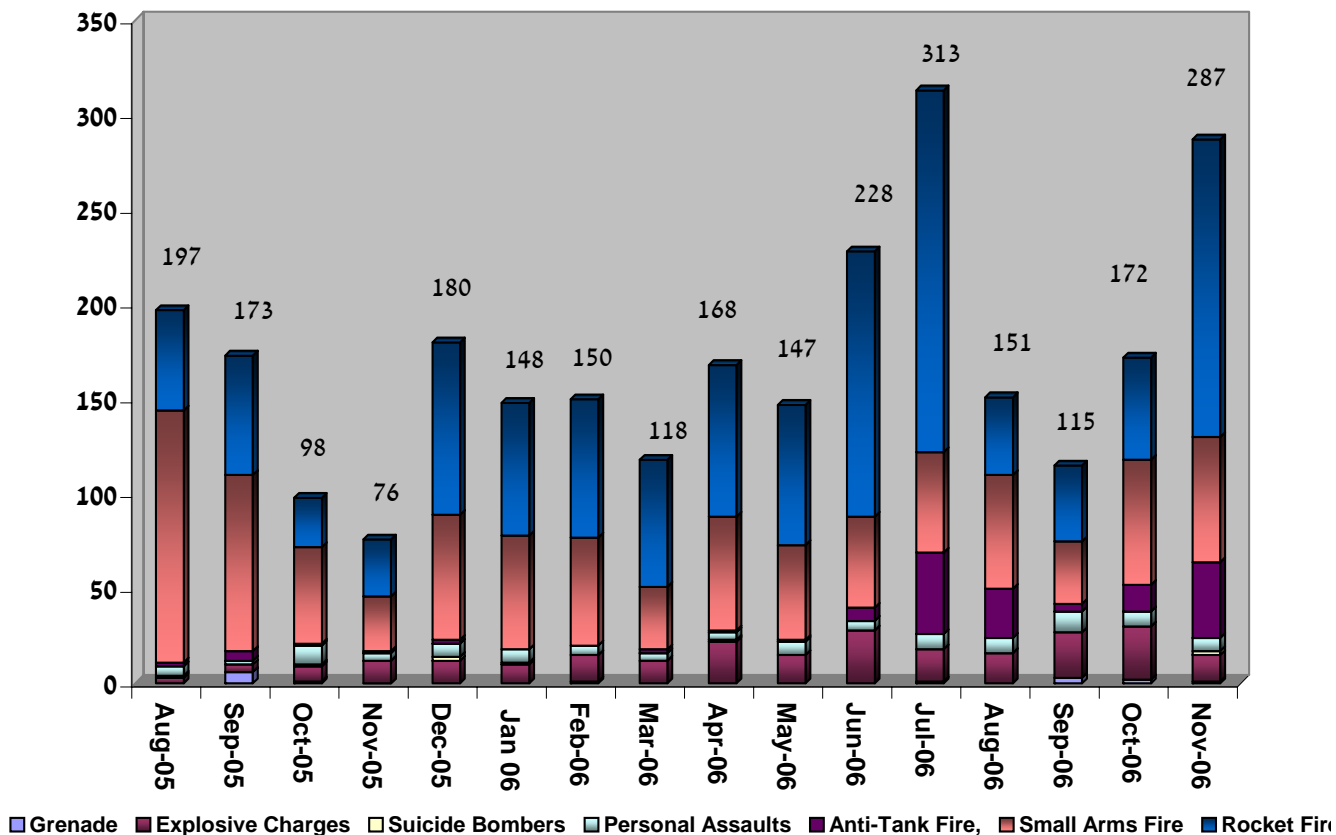
Toys used to hide explosives, found in a laboratory in Nablus (Photo courtesy of the IDF spokesperson, November 25)

Detentions in Judea and Samaria

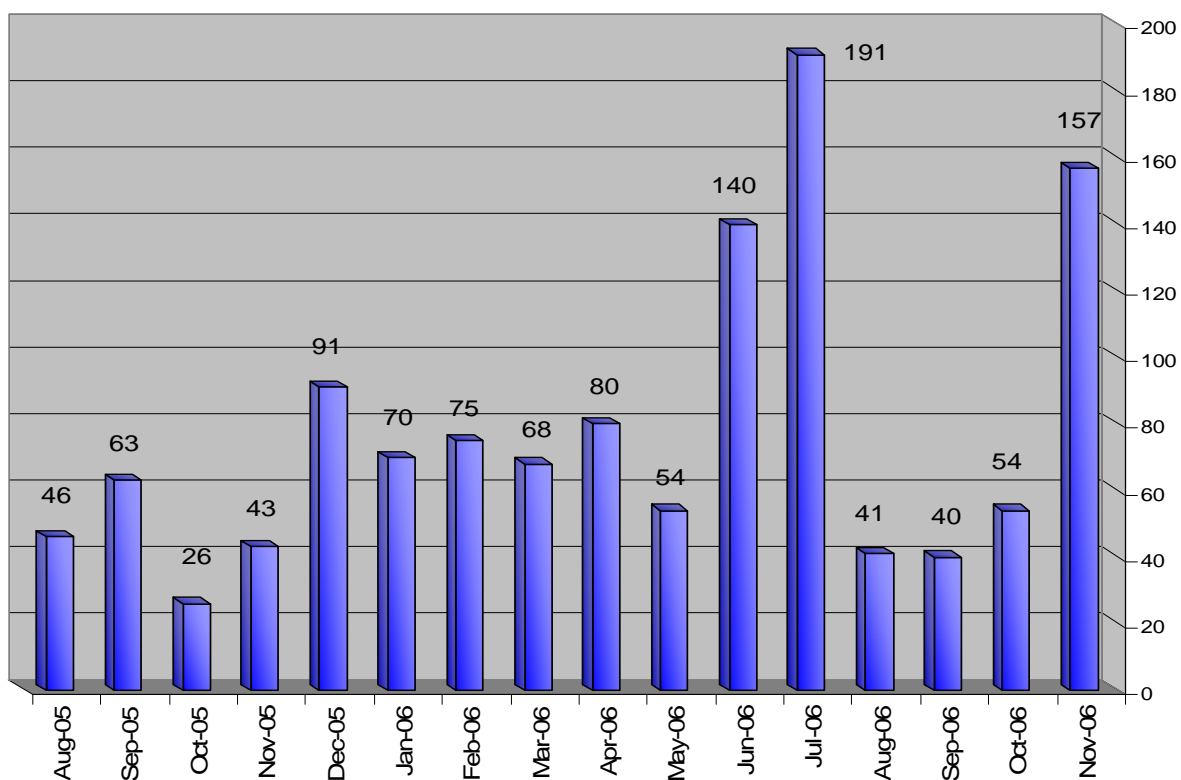
- The IDF continues its counterterrorist activities in Judea and Samaria, including:
 - ✿ On November 22 four PIJ operatives were detained in Qabatiya, south of Jenin, two of them senior operatives. They were all involved in planning terrorist attacks in Israel. During the detention process there was an exchange of fire between the soldiers and the terrorists.
 - ✿ On November 25 an IDF force detained a terrorist-operative in the Qalandia refugee camp, near Ramallah. For a long time he had been involved in planning and carrying out terrorist attacks in the Samaria region.

Statistical Data

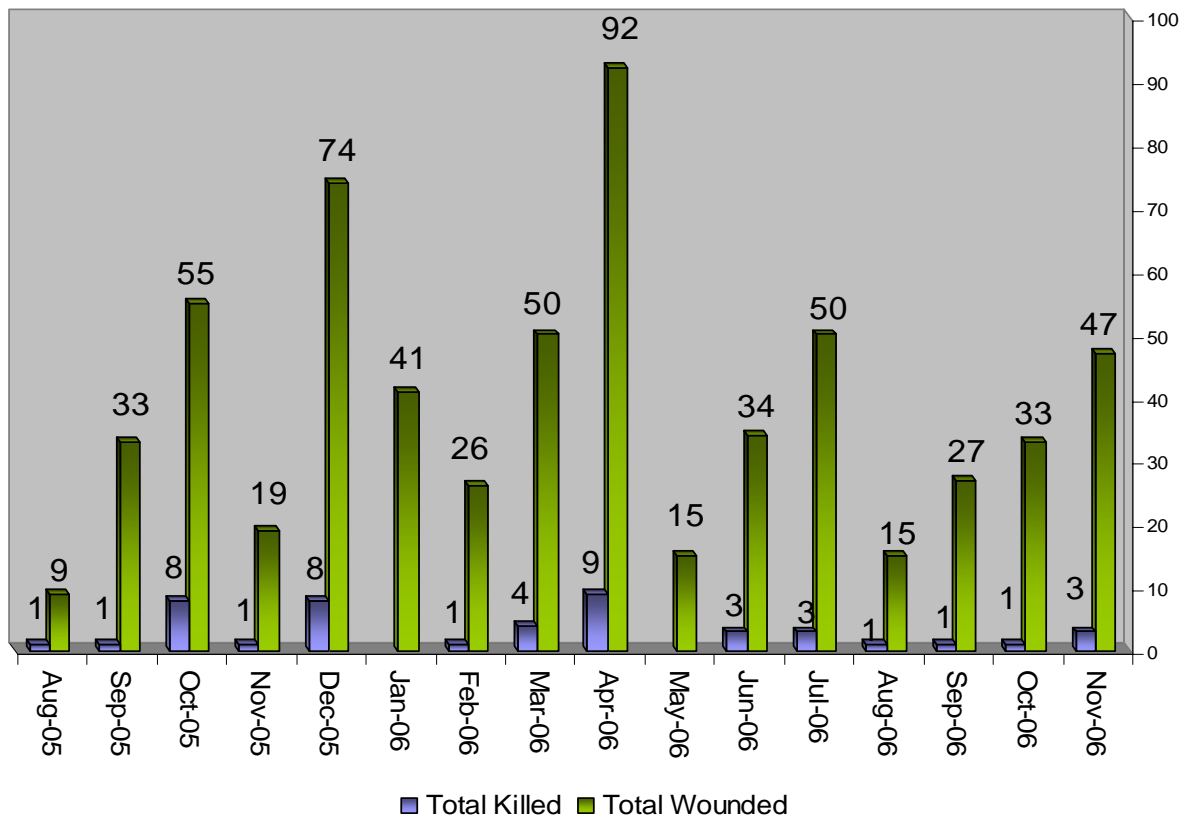
Monthly distribution of attacks



Monthly distribution of rocket hits



Monthly distribution of Israeli casualties



The Internal Palestinian Arena

Difficulties in establishing a National Unity Government

- The negotiations for the establishment of a Palestinian national unity government, which seemed to have accelerated, were again stalled by disagreements regarding fundamental issues and matters concerning the distribution of government portfolios (especially the Interior Ministry and the Treasury).
- Interviewed on November 23 by the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, Abu Mazen said that the new government would be established only when the following three conditions were met: the release of all senior Hamas members detained by Israel since June 2006, the continuation of the cease fire (the “lull”) signed in Cairo in March 2005, and the release of the abducted Israeli soldier, Gilad Shalit. In the meantime, prime minister Ismail Haniya has left for a series of visits to the Arab states, signaling that Hamas does not intend to rush into establishing a national unity government. Abu Mazen publicly announced that negotiations with Hamas had come to a dead end.