



May 18, 2008

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

**A Grad rocket fired from the Gaza Strip hit a crowded shopping mall in Ashqelon, injuring 100 people, seven of them critically. Recently rocket fire has increased, in all probability prompted by Hamas's desire to force Israel into accepting the lull in the fighting on Hamas terms.**

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Damage caused by the rocket (Adi Israel for IsraelNewsPhotos.com, May 14).

## The attack

1. A few minutes before 18:00 (6 p.m.) on May 14 a rocket was fired from the Gaza Strip at Ashqelon. It hit the Hutzot Mall, located in the center of the city. Most of those wounded were on the top floor at the time, where a doctor runs a clinic. About 100 people were injured, seven of them critically, including a mother and her two-year old daughter.<sup>1</sup> The building sustained substantial damage.

2. The rocket was a standard 122mm Iranian? Grad model. On the morning of May 15 another rocket of the same type was fired at the city of Netivot, landing in an open field. There were no casualties and no damage was done.



Evacuating the wounded (Adi Israel for IsraelNewsPhotos.com, May 14).

## Claiming responsibility

3. A number of Palestinian terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip claimed responsibility for the rocket attacks, some of which recanted a short time later. The most important were the following:

- i) **The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command** (Ahmad Jibril's organization): In a rare military announcement, the PFLP-GC claimed joint responsibility with the Popular Resistance Committees and said that the hit had been well-planned (Free translation: they closed their eyes, pressed the button and hoped the thing wouldn't land in the Gaza Strip) and the date chosen to coincide with

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<sup>1</sup> On the morning of May 15, after undergoing operations, the condition of the critically wounded patients improved.

Israel's Independence Day celebrations (Al-Alam TV, May 14). The organization conducts almost no activity in the Gaza Strip.

ii) **Palestinian Islamic Jihad – Jerusalem Battalions:** The PIJ posted a claim of responsibility on its Website and removed it shortly thereafter. Somewhat later the PIJ posted its congratulations to those who had carried out the attack without naming the organization responsible (Jerusalem Battalions Website, May 14).

iii) **The Popular Resistance Committees – Salah al-Din Brigades:** The organization claimed it had fired an improved Nasser 4 rocket. PRC spokesmen later denied having fired the rocket and congratulated the PFLP-GC on the attack (Jerusalem Battalions Website, May 14).

4. Spokesmen for the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades, Hamas's terrorist-military wing, also congratulated the PFLP-GC. Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said that the attack came in retaliation for Israeli activity and that the actions of the Palestinian organizations were "legitimate resistance."

## The Israeli response

5. In response to the Palestinian attack on Ashqelon the Israeli Air Force struck armed squads in the Gaza Strip, killing three Hamas terrorist operatives and wounding five. In addition, a PIJ operative was killed and three were wounded (Palestinian media, May 14). The IDF also fired artillery at Beit Lahia in the Gaza Strip, a focal point for rocket launchings.

6. **Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert**, referring to the attack at the beginning of his speech at the Presidential Conference, said that what had happened at Ashqelon was unacceptable and intolerable and that the Israeli government would take all the necessary steps to stop the rocket fire (Prime Minister's Website, May 15). On May 15 (not April, right?) Defense Minister Ehud Barak visited the site of the rocket hit. He said that Israel would not allow such a situation to continue for long and that the government would shortly do what was necessary to prevent such attacks (Ynet, May 15).

## Conclusion and evaluation

7. In our assessment, the extensive rocket and mortar shell fire attacking the western Negev population centers is part of Hamas's plan to pressure Israel into accepting the lull in the

fighting from a position of strength and on its own terms. It is also possible that the Grad rocket attack was linked to President Bush's visit to Israel and Nakba Day.<sup>2</sup>

8. The rocket which hit the mall was a standard 122mm Grad rod of the type found in Hamas's possession and regularly fired at Ashqelon (there have been over 30 identified Grad rocket hits in Ashqelon over the past two months). Thus, in our assessment, Hamas may have been behind the attack, even if other terrorist organizations claimed responsibility for it. In any case, Hamas praised the attack, which served its objectives.

9. In our assessment, the rocket was manufactured in Iran.<sup>3</sup> In view of the Grad's extended range, the large quantity of explosives in its warhead (18 kg, almost 40 lbs), and its fragmentation effect upon hitting, it causes far more damage than the rockets manufactured in the Gaza Strip. In addition, Ashqelon has a population of over 120,000, and its buildings are more congested than those of Sderot and the other western Negev population centers, which increases the rocket's potential for inflicting casualties and property damage.

10. In summation, the attack on Ashqelon is part of the intensive rocket fire of the past few weeks and part of the rising trend of rocket attacks (enough), marked by an increase in both the number of attacks and the quality of the rockets fired, which has brought both Ashqelon and Netivot into range. The methodical rocket and mortar shell attacks increased the number of casualties: since January 2008 three Israelis have been killed by rocket fire and two by mortar shell fire, compared with two killed in 2007.

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<sup>2</sup> The anniversary of the founding of the State of Israel, called "Catastrophe Day" by the Palestinians.

<sup>3</sup> For further information see our April 9, 2008 Bulletin entitled "Hamas's military buildup in the Gaza Strip (Updated April 2008)," pp. 27-33, at [http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam\\_multimedia/English/eng\\_n/pdf/hamas\\_080408.pdf](http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hamas_080408.pdf)