



The Meir Amit Intelligence and
Terrorism Information Center

March 23, 2011

Escalation continues in Israel's south: One Grad rocket falls near the city of Ashdod and two hit Beersheba¹



Grad rocket fired from the Gaza Strip
(Hamas' Filastin al-'Aan website, March 23, 2011).



122mm Grad rocket hits Beersheba
(Photo by Yehuda Lahiani courtesy of NRG, March 23, 2011).

¹ Supplement to the March 16-22 Weekly Summary, updated on the afternoon of March 23.

Overview

1. Over the past few days the Palestinian terrorist organizations operating in the Gaza Strip continue escalating their attacks on Israel's south: **Rockets were fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad at the city of Ashdod, the first rocket attack on the city since Operation Cast Lead, and at the city of Beersheba.** The rockets were fired several hours after the IDF attacked a rocket squad in the Shuja'iyya area of Gaza City, unintentionally hitting a house and killing four civilians.
2. The current escalation began on March 19 when **exceptional barrages totaling 49 120mm-mortar shells targeted villages in the western Negev,** fired simultaneously from a number of sites in the Gaza Strip. **Following the attacks, the most serious since the end of Operation Cast Lead,** Israeli aircraft attacked a series of terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip.

Events of the past 24 hours

3. **The current round of escalation began on the afternoon of March 22 when a number of mortar shells fell in the western Negev.** In response to those and the general increase in attacks, IDF forces fired artillery at the sources of the mortar shell attacks from the Shuja'iyya neighborhood in the eastern part of Gaza City. One of the shells unintentionally hit a house, killing four Palestinians, two of them children, and wounding about 20.
4. The initial IDF investigation indicated that the IDF attack targeted the source of the mortar shell fire but unintentionally harmed several uninvolved civilians. IDF sources apologized and said no escalation had been intended. Israel offered medical care to the wounded and repeated that **it had no intention of causing the situation to deteriorate** (IDF Spokesman, March 22, 2011).
5. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu expressed his regret that innocent civilians in the Gaza Strip were unintentionally hit as a result of the IDF shelling. He emphasized that **it had been carried out in response to Hamas fire at Israeli civilians.** "It is regrettable that Hamas continues to intentionally rain down dozens of rockets on Israeli civilians as it uses civilians as human shields. While the State of Israel has no intention of bringing about deterioration of the situation, the IDF will continue to take determined action to defend Israeli citizens" (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, March 22, 2011).
6. In response to the unintentional killing of Palestinian civilians, on the evening of March 22 **a rocket was fired at the southern Israeli city of Ashqelon.** It landed in an open area outside the city.

7. Two hours later (19:30 hours) **Israeli aircraft attacked a squad of terrorist operatives preparing to launch rockets from the Zeitoun region in eastern Gaza City**. The four squad operatives were killed. **It was the same squad which had launched the Grad rocket at Beersheba on February 23, 2011** (IDF Spokesman, March 23, 2011). The Palestinian media reported that **the squad belonged to the PIJ's Jerusalem Brigades**. One of the terrorists killed was **Adham al-Harazeen**, a senior PIJ military operative (PIJ Paltoday website, March 22, 2011).



Four senior operatives of the PIJ's Jerusalem Brigades killed in the IDF attack (Saraya al-Quds website, March 22, 2011).

Rocket fire targeting Ashdod and Beersheba

8. **At around 23:00 hours on the night of March 22 a rocket landed in an open area south of the southern Israeli city of Ashdod**. There were no casualties and no damage was done. **It was the first rocket to target the city since Operation Cast Lead**. The PIJ's Jerusalem Brigades claimed responsibility for the attack as a response to the killing of its operatives earlier in the evening (Jerusalem Brigades website, March 23, 2011).

9. Immediately after the attack, **Israeli aircraft struck the rocket launching site in northern Gaza Strip from which the rocket had been fired**. Another strike was carried out in the late morning.

10. **At 5:30 on March 23 a Grad rocket hit a residential neighborhood in the southern Israeli city of Beersheba**. One civilian sustained minor injuries and was taken to the hospital, and three others were treated for shock. Damage was done to property. **The Palestinian Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack as a response to the killing of its operatives the previous evening** (Jerusalem Brigades website, March 23, 2011).

11. In response, on the night of March 23 Israeli aircraft struck a terrorist operative in the northern Gaza Strip in the area from which the Grad rocket was launched at Beersheba (IDF Spokesman, March 23, 2011).



Left: House in Beersheba which took a direct hit. Right: Shrapnel from the rocket (Photos courtesy of Israel Channel 10 TV, March 23, 2011).

12. **At 9:35 on March 23 another rocket landed in Beersheba**; the Palestinian Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility (Jerusalem Brigades website, March 23, 2011). **Half an hour earlier seven mortar shells were fired at the western Negev** (website of the military wing of the Popular Resistance Committees, March 23, 2011).

Responses of the terrorist organizations and the Palestinian Authority

Overview

13. Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Palestinian Authority represented the escalation as "Israeli aggression" and called on the international community to intervene to stabilize the situation.

14. On March 21, the interior ministry of the de facto Hamas administration declared an emergency situation, evacuating most of the operatives manning the positions and posts of its security services. A ministry spokesman said that the security networks would continue maintaining order and providing services for civilians (alresalah.net website, March 23, 2011).

Hamas

15. Referring to the deterioration of the situation, **Ismail Haniya**, head of the de facto Hamas administration in the Gaza Strip, said that Israel justified its aggression with "empty excuses." He said the Hamas administration's foreign ministry had updated Arab and European countries on the escalation and asked for support (Hamas' Safa News Agency and Palestine-info websites, March 22, 2011). It was also reported that Ismail Haniya sent a communiqué to Khaled Mashaal demanding that Hamas' political leadership take a stand on the escalation in the Gaza Strip (Al-Kawfiya press, March 22, 2011).

16. Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades spokesman **Abu Obeida** said that Israel's recent "aggressive acts" had reached a peak. He said that out of a commitment to the "national consensus" the lull in the fighting had been maintained for a certain period, but that it was impossible to maintain unlimited restraint. He claimed that the mortar shell fire had been aimed at military targets (Hamas' Safa News Agency, March 22, 2011). **Note: The claim was false. The 49 mortar shells fired by the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades intentionally targeted population centers.**

17. Hamas spokesman **Sami Abu Zuhri** held a press conference at which he denounced the killing of the civilians in Shuja'iyya. He said the Israel claim that the attack had been directed at an armed squad was false. He claimed that there were no armed operatives in the area, only civilians (Hamas' Al-Aqsa TV, March 22, 2011). Another Hamas spokesman, **Ismail Radwan**, also said Israel was responsible for the escalation because Israel believed only in "violence and terrorism" (Sawt al-Aqsa website, March 22, 2011).

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad

18. The PIJ issued a press release accusing Israel of responsibility for killing children. According to the release, the current so-called "crime" was another in a series of crimes committed against the Palestinians. In addition, it claimed, responding to aggression with a lull would not serve the interests of the Palestinian people, and the "resistance" [i.e., violence and terrorism] should be maintained and supported, and its capabilities to respond to "the crimes of the occupation" should be strengthened (PIJ Paltoday website, March 22, 2011).

19. **Jerusalem Brigades spokesman "Abu Ahmed"** said that the Jerusalem Brigades would respond in the near future (a statement made before the rocket attacks on Ashdod and Beersheba). He said that **era of "responding" by targeting Sderot and Ashqelon had ended**. He added that the "resistance" [i.e., terrorist organizations] of today were not those of 2007 and 2008 [i.e., before Operation Cast Lead], but were "very different," and the difference would be felt on the ground. The "resistance," he said would "use a method it is very familiar with but does not talk about" (PIJ's Jerusalem Brigades Paltoday website, March 22, 2011).

The Palestinian Authority

20. Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad said that Israel's "aggressive activities" against the civilians in the Gaza Strip were an escalation that had to be ended immediately. He said that the situation demanded the immediate intervention of the international community (Wafa News Agency, March 22, 2011). **He ignored the recent escalation in rocket and mortar shell fire from the Gaza Strip, unprecedented since Operation Cast Lead.**