



The Escalation in the Gaza Strip: What Next? (updated to June 4, 2018)

June 4, 2018

Overview of the Situation on the Ground

The two-month escalation in the Gaza Strip continues, the first of its kind since Operation Protective Edge. The escalation has been the result of Hamas' changing its policy and rules of engagement with Israel, in force since the end of Operation Protective Edge. **Hamas initiated violent, organized "popular activity," including massive attempts to penetrate into Israeli territory, attacks against IDF forces along the border fence and flying incendiary kites into the western Negev.** In addition, as of last week there have been **rocket and mortar attacks on the communities near the Gaza Strip and in the western Negev** (carried out particularly by the Palestinian Islamic jihad (PIJ) and Hamas). In the wake of the shelling, the IDF broadened the scope of its responses to Hamas and PIJ terrorist attacks, but **that was not sufficient to halt the escalation, which continues.**

► The two main sides in the escalation are **Hamas and Israel**. So far **two stages** of escalation can be observed:

◆ **The first stage was mainly characterized by violent "popular" demonstrations and riots, organized by Hamas and accompanied by attempts to penetrate into Israeli territory (March 30 – May 29, 2018):**

- During the two months since March 30, every Friday, and sometimes during the week, Hamas has organized **demonstrations and riots of thousands to tens of thousands** of Gazans along and near the border fence. **The rioters employ extreme violence** and have repeatedly tried to penetrate into Israeli territory. **The IDF prevented them** by using riot control measures and, when necessary, firing shots. During the riots more than 100 Gazans have been killed, **more than 80% of them belonged to or were affiliated with terrorist organizations, mostly Hamas.**
- **During the first stage of the escalation Hamas did not fire rockets or mortar shells, and successfully enforced the policy on the other terrorist**

organizations (including the so-called "rogue" organizations). In ITIC assessment that was done to preserve the false narrative of a "peaceful popular resistance" for international public opinion, and to exploit propaganda advantages. However, throughout the first stage of the escalation, **under cover of the demonstrations and riots, IEDs were placed on the border fence and terrorist operatives, mainly from Hamas' military wing, who manned the front lines of the rioters, attempted to break through the fence and enter Israeli territory.** In addition, **hundreds of incendiary kites have been flown into the western Negev**, causing fires and burning almost 2.25 thousand acres of agricultural fields and forests.¹

◆ **The increase in attacks against the IDF along the fence created the dynamic that led to the second, current stage of escalation. During the second stage (so far) there have been two rounds of rockets and mortars shelling Israel (alongside the continuing violent "popular activities" organized by Hamas):**

- The events of the second stage peaked on **May 14 (Nakba Day)**, during which **more than 60 rioters were killed** (80% of whom were Hamas operatives, an admission made by senior Hamas figures). Hamas made political and propaganda capital in the international community, **but failed to gain operative achievements on the ground (such as succeeding in organizing a mass incursion of Gazans into Israeli territory or harming IDF soldiers).** Therefore, **Hamas escalated its attacks along the border.** Many squads, **mostly of Hamas operatives**, were sent to the border where they sabotaged IDF equipment, placed IEDs, attempted to cross the border and on occasion shot at IDF forces. **The instigated attacks led to increased responses from the IDF, followed by Hamas and PIJ rocket fire. At the same time, Hamas continues to lead violent "popular activity" at the border.**
- So far, during the second stage, **there have been two rounds of rocket and mortar shelling against Israel. The first round** occurred on May 29, 2018. Most of the fire was carried out by **PIJ operatives** who were joined by operatives from

¹ Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman reported that as of June 4, 2018, about 600 kites had been flown from the Gaza Strip, 400 of which were intercepted and **about 200 of which reached Israeli territory.** The kites caused 198 fires, **burning about 2.25 thousand acres of agricultural fields and forests** (Haaretz, June 5, 2018).

Hamas. **They fired more than 150 rockets and mortar shells, a number unprecedented since Operation Protective Edge.** In response the IDF attacked dozens of Hamas and PIJ targets. **The second round**, which has been more limited, began on June 2 and continued on June 3, 2018, when several rockets and mortar shells were fired at the communities near the Gaza Strip. **The fire was apparently carried out by a Fatah faction** (according to its announcement) **while Hamas turned a blind eye.** It should be noted that in the past, including during the first stage of the escalation, Hamas has shown that it can effectively enforce its policies on the other organizations if it chooses to.

What comes next?

The first, more significant round of escalation ended with an informal ceasefire following Egyptian contacts with Hamas and the PIJ. Both organizations reported that they had agreed "to confirm the understandings reached in the ceasefire of 2014" [i.e., the ceasefire that ended Operation Protective Edge]. **However, Hamas' fundamental policy has not changed because the violent "marches" to the border fence with the intention of entering Israeli territory and their attendant attacks against the IDF and Israeli communities have not stopped. The continuation of the riots and attacks has created a situation that is both volatile and fluid, during which there may be a rapid transition to additional rounds of rocket and mortar shell fire at Israel and increasingly strong responses from the IDF. The coming dates for potential escalation are Naksa Day, June 5 (which marks the defeat of the Arab states in the Six Day War) and Jerusalem Day, June 8 (a day initiated by Iran to mark solidarity with Jerusalem).**

► More than two months after the beginning of the "return marches," in ITIC assessment **the Hamas-led escalation in the Gaza Strip will continue. There are three possible scenarios for the future:**

- ◆ **Scenario 1 – The current terrorism and violence will continue without leading to a broad military confrontation:** the violent, Hamas-orchestrated "popular" marches will continue, along with attacks against the IDF at the fence (IEDs, shooting attacks, etc.). In addition, incendiary kites will be flown into Israeli communities near the border and rocket and mortar shell fire may continue, in greater or lesser degree at varying times (increasing, for example, when terrorist operatives or significant terrorist assets are hit by the IDF). In ITIC assessment, **Hamas aspires to monitor and control**

the violence to keep it from leading to a broad military confrontation but will try to exhaust Israel, focus on drawing international and Arab attention to the Gaza Strip, and encourage the Arab-Muslim world and the international community to provide significant economic aid to the Gaza Strip. In such a scenario, Hamas' brinksmanship will create a volatile situation which may lead to a broad military confrontation (Scenario 2).

◆ **Scenario 2 – The dynamic of escalation may lead to a broad military confrontation:** Such a confrontation, even if the various sides involved are not interested in one, may include extensive rocket and mortar shell fire at the communities near the Gaza Strip and possibly at the Israeli heartland. That would lead to strong IDF responses attacking meaningful "assets" of Hamas and the other organizations, possibly including targeted killings. That scenario **may, in ITIC assessment, end with an IDF ground operation in the Gaza Strip, even if both Israel and Hamas are not interested in one.**

◆ **Scenario 3 – An arrangement that would lead to a long-term calm on the ground:** Such an arrangement would commit Hamas to a complete cessation of the "return marches," of its attempts to penetrate into Israeli territory, of attacks along the border fence and of rocket and mortar shell fire attacking Israel. From the point of view of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations, that would be **a return to lull in the fighting and the rules of engagement on the ground that ended Operation Protective Edge.** In return, in ITIC assessment, Hamas would aspire to **significantly improve the economic situation in the Gaza Strip** with Arab and international economic aid, the opening of the Rafah crossing, an increase in the volume of the passage of merchandise between Israel and the Gaza Strip and an end to the sanctions the Palestinian Authority (PA) imposed on Hamas and the Gazans. **However, in ITIC assessment, it is very doubtful that in such an arrangement Hamas would agree to stop its military buildup and switch its priority to the economic rehabilitation of the Gaza Strip.**

Two Rounds of Rocket and Mortar Shelling into Israeli Territory

The events leading to the first round of rocket and mortar fire

► **Towards the end of May 2018** there was a significant increase in the intensity of the attacks on the IDF accompanying the violent "return marches" which began on March 30, 2018. **On May 26, 2018**, an IED was placed near the security fence in the southern Gaza Strip. It was hidden under wire cutters and neutralized by an IDF force. **In response, on May 27, 2018, IDF forces fired a number of tank shells at an observation post in the southern Gaza Strip.** The post looked out over the area where the IDF had been placed (IDF spokesman, May 27, 2018). **The PIJ's military wing reported the death of three of its operatives and publicly promised retaliation** for their deaths (website of the Jerusalem Battalions, May 27, 2018).



Right: The three PIJ terrorist operatives killed on May 27, 2018. In response the PIJ fired rockets and mortar shells into Israeli territory (website of the PIJ's military wing, May 27, 2018). Left: Hamas terrorist operative killed on May 28, 2018 (Twitter account of Hamas' military wing, May 28, 2018).

► **On May 28, 2018, three Palestinians were seen trying to cross the security fence in the northern Gaza Strip.** IDF forces detained two of them, and the third escaped. During the chase the soldiers were shot at. The two detainees were found to be in possession of knives, wire cutters and accelerants. No casualties were reported. In response IDF tanks fired at a nearby observation post, **killing Masoud Ahmed al-Radhi', a Hamas terrorist operative** (website of Hamas' military wing, May 28, 2018).

► Following the deaths of the operatives, the PIJ and Hamas fired **heavy barrages of rockets and mortar shells at the communities near the Gaza Strip.** In response the IDF attacked, mainly from the air, dozens of Hamas and other terrorist organization targets. It was the **most extensive round of fighting since Operation Protective Edge (2014).** Most of

the rockets and mortar shells were fired by the PIJ and Hamas. Other organizations also claimed responsibility but their weight, in ITIC assessment, was secondary. **The IDF responded with extensive attacks on Hamas and PIJ targets, destroying a tunnel that penetrated into Israeli territory.**

The first round of shelling (May 29-30, 2018)

► On **May 29, 2018**, at around seven in the morning, thirty mortar shells were fired into Israeli territory. **One landed near in a kindergarten shortly before the children were expected to arrive.** In the barrage, a civilian was wounded by shrapnel. **The mortar shells were fired by the PIJ in retaliation for the death of the three operatives on May 27, 2018.**



Right: The remains of a mortar shell launched into Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip (Shehab Facebook page, May 29, 2018). Left: The yard of a kindergarten in one of the communities near the Gaza Strip after being hit by a mortar shell (Twitter account of Hamas' military wing, May 29, 2018).

► In the afternoon **Israel responded to the shelling with Israeli Air Force attacks on Hamas and PIJ targets. According to the IDF spokesman, more than 35 targets in seven compounds were hit.** Among the targets hit were locations where weapons were stored, naval targets and terrorist headquarters targets. During the attacks **the IDF destroyed a Hamas tunnel in the southern Gaza Strip in the region of the Kerem Shalom crossing.** The tunnel was intended for two purposes: to smuggle weapons and merchandise between the Gaza Strip and Egypt, and as a terrorist tunnel penetrating into Israeli territory. The IDF spokesman reported it was **the tenth Gaza Strip tunnel the IDF had neutralized since October 2017, and the second in the Kerem Shalom area** (IDF spokesman, May 29, 2018).



Right: The terrorist tunnel penetrating into Israeli territory attacked on May 29, 2018. Left: The location of terrorist tunnels neutralized by the IDF since October 2017 (IDF website, May 30, 2018).

- During the Israeli Air Force **attack an additional barrage of rockets and mortar shells was fired at Israel. In addition to the mortar shells, 107mm rockets were fired.** Four Israelis were wounded by shrapnel, three of them IDF soldiers. **At that point operatives from Hamas military wing also began firing rockets.**



Rocket fire documented in a video produced by Hamas' military wing (website of Hamas' military wing, May 30, 2018)



Rocket fire documented in a video produced by the PIJ's military wing (website of the PIJ's military wing, May 30, 2018).

- **On the night of May 29, 2018, rocket and mortar shell fire attacking Israel continued.** During a heavy barrage at around 0100 hours, **one of the rockets hit the stadium of the southern Israeli city of Netivot.** Another hit a house in one of the communities in the western Negev. No casualties were reported. Property damage was reported. **Most of the rockets and mortar shells were intercepted by the Iron Dome Aerial Defense System.** According to the

IDF, **most of the rockets and mortar shells had been fired by timer and not by squads of terrorists**, making it difficult for the IDF to locate the operatives responsible for the fire before or after the attacks (IDF spokesman, May 30, 2018).

► **In response to the continuing rocket fire, Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked 25 additional targets in the Gaza Strip.** In the attacks military equipment and security facilities belonging to Hamas and the PIJ were destroyed. Among the targets attacked were warehouses where drones used for terrorist purposes were stored, a lathe for making rockets, advanced naval weapons, military compounds, training camps and locations for the manufacture of weapons (IDF spokesman, May 30, 2018). However, **there were no casualties during the first round.**



Aerial photographs of targets attacked in the Gaza Strip (IDF Twitter account, May 30, 2018).

Palestinian description of the IDF's attacks

► **The Palestinian media reported that in the first wave of attacks the IDF hit posts belonging to the PIJ's military wing.** Among the targets mentioned were the Fajar and Arafat posts in Deir al-Balah; the Buraq post in Nuseirat; the Malik post in the Nuseirat refugee camp; the Tishrin post and the naval post in western Gaza City. In addition, **posts belonging to Hamas' military wing were attacked**, among them the Bader post in western Gaza City and the naval force post in western Khan Yunis (Khabar and Arabi21, May 29 2018).

► A Hamas military wing "military correspondent" reported that **six military posts in the Gaza Strip and a so-called "commercial tunnel"** [i.e., a tunnel for the smuggling of weapons and merchandise] **on the Gaza Strip-Egypt border had been attacked** (Twitter account of Hamas' military wing, May 29, 2018). It was also reported that the second wave of Israeli attacks included a target near the new port northwest of Khan Yunis; a naval post in western Khan Yunis; targets in the al-Sajaiya neighborhood of Gaza City; a post of Hamas'

military wing in eastern Jabalia and the al-Jidar post in Beit Lahia (almayadeen.net, May 29; qudsnet, May 29 and 30, 2018).



Posts attacked by the IDF (Facebook page of, date photojournalist Hani al-Sha'er, May 30, 2018)



Post attacked by the IDF (QudsN Twitter account, May 30, 2018).

Claims of responsibility for rocket and mortar shell fire

- ▶ On May 29, 2018, the military wings of Hamas and the PIJ issued a **joint claim of responsibility entitled "A shelling in return for a shelling and blood in return for blood."** It was intended to send the message of the **new "rules of engagement" with Israel that the terrorist organizations are trying to establish.**
- ▶ The announcement claimed joint responsibility for the firing of dozens of mortar shells. **It claimed the Palestinians would not allow Israel to "impose new equations."** It also **claimed it was Israel that had begun the "round of aggression"** and accused Israel of attacking "jihad fighters and our military posts" during the previous 48 hours. According to the announcement, **"all options will be open to the 'resistance,' a shelling in return for a shelling and blood in return for blood, and we will adhere to that equation, whatever the price"** (websites of the military wings of Hamas and the PIJ, May 29, 2018).
- ▶ **Most of the rockets and mortar shells were fired by Hamas and the PIJ, however, other terrorist organizations also claimed responsibility:** the military wing of the **Resistance Committees/Salah al-Din Brigades** announced it operatives had fired "dozens" of rockets and mortar shells at the communities and posts near the Gaza Strip (website of the

Resistance Committees, May 29, 2018). **Other terrorist organizations** issued claims of responsibility, among them the National Resistance Battalions, the military wing of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP); the Salah al-Din Battalions; the Abd al-Qadr al-Husseini Battalions and the Battalions of Ayman Jawda. However, in ITIC assessment **all of the above organizations played a minor role in rocket and mortar shell fire against Israel.**



Right: Picture from the website of Hamas' military wing referring to the rocket fire (Twitter account of Hamas' military wing, May 28, 2018). Left: The same picture one day later with a Hebrew caption ("A shelling in return for a shelling, blood in return for blood").

Other events in the first round of shelling

- ▶ On the evening of May 29, 2018, the Israeli electric company announced **the supply of electricity to the Gaza Strip had been disrupted by mortar shell hits on installations involved in supplying electricity to the Gaza Strip.** Some of the equipment was damaged and three (of ten) power lines to the southern Gaza Strip were inoperative.
- ▶ During the events the IDF halted a **Palestinian boat** sailing from the Gaza port to Cyprus for **propaganda purposes.** The boat was halted by the Israeli Navy with 18 passengers aboard. No extraordinary event was recorded. The IDF brought medical professionals to deal with the sick and disabled aboard. The ship was towed to an Israeli Navy base in the southern coastal city of Ashdod (IDF spokesman, May 29, 2018). The passengers aboard the ship were returned to the Gaza Strip.

Fragile, informal ceasefire ending the first round of shelling

The first round of shelling ended with an informal, fragile agreement for a ceasefire, achieved with Egyptian intervention. In ITIC assessment, the agreement was achieved because both Hamas and Israel wanted to prevent a deterioration in the situation on the ground that would lead to a broad military confrontation. In addition, the Egyptians were concerned that the continued firing of rockets and mortar shells would spin out of control and accelerate the deterioration of the situation on the ground. However, the ceasefire was supposed to go into effect at midnight, May 30, 2018, but did not. The Palestinian terrorist organizations continued firing rockets and mortar shells and the IDF continued its response. **Thus the implementation of the ceasefire was delayed twice and went into effect on May 30, 2018, at 0400 hours (Ma'an, May 30, 2018). In ITIC assessment the ceasefire is doomed to fail because it did not include the "return marches" and their accompanying violence and terrorism.**

- ▶ After issuing a joint claim of responsibility, **PIJ spokesman Da'ud Shehab** said that in light of the Egyptian contacts with the PIJ and Hamas, it had been decided to **confirm the understandings of the ceasefire of 2014**. He said that according to the "understandings," the Palestinian organizations **would "adhere to the agreement to a lull in the fighting as long as the Israeli occupation adhered to it."** Asked if the agreement included Hamas, he said that **all the organizations were committed to it** (Agence-France Presse, May 29, 2018).
- ▶ When the agreement went into effect, **Khalil al-Haya, a member of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip**, issued a statement. He said that after the "resistance" had successfully halted the "[Israeli] aggression" and **prevented changes in the rules of engagement**, and after many attempts at mediation, **an agreement had been reached to return to "the understandings of the ceasefire" in the Gaza Strip**. He said the "resistance organizations" [i.e., Hamas and the other terrorist organizations] would be committed to the understandings as long as the "occupation" [i.e., Israel] was committed to them (Hamas movement website, May 30, 2018).



From the website of Hamas' military wing. The Arabic reads "Loyalty to the shaheeds," the name given to the first round of shelling by the Palestinian terrorist organizations. The pictures are of Hamas and PIJ operatives killed in IDF attacks on terrorist organization posts and during the riots held during "return marches" (website of Hamas' military wing, May 30, 2018).



"A shelling in return for a shelling and blood in return for blood"
(website of the PIJ's military wing, May 29, 2018).

The second, more limited round of shelling (June 2-3, 2018)

Rocket and mortar shell fire

► Three days after the ceasefire that ended the first round of shelling, **several rockets and mortar shell were again fired at Israel**. In the early evening hours of June 2, 2018, two mortar shells were fired at communities in the western Negev. One was intercepted by the Iron Dome and the second fell inside the Gaza Strip. In response IDF forces fired two shells at an observation post in the southern Gaza Strip. **Afterwards more mortar shells as well as rockets were fired at the southern Israeli city of Sderot and at several nearby villages**. Later, rockets were fired at the western Negev.

The Ahmed Abu al-Rish Battalions (a terrorist group affiliated with Fatah) claimed responsibility for firing two 107 mm rockets at communities in the western Negev (Facebook page of the information office of the Ahmed Abu al-Rish Battalions in the central Gaza Strip; and the website of the information and culture commission of **the Muhammad Dahlan faction**, June 3, 2018). Palestinian sources in the Gaza Strip claimed the shellings were carried out by "rogue organizations." However, in ITIC assessment the rockets were fired when **the organizations assumed that given Hamas current policy of allowing such fire, Hamas would turn a blind eye.**

The IDF's response

► In response Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip. Among them were ten terrorist targets in three compounds, including sites for the manufacture of weapons and a military compound. Also attacked from the air were five Hamas naval force targets in the northern Gaza Strip (IDF spokesman, June 3, 2018).

Palestinian responses

► The Palestinian media reported the Israeli Air Force had attacked the al-Waha post in western Beit Lahia, the Eyn Jalut post in Khan Yunis and another post in Rafah. It also reported attacks on the al-Yarmouk post in the eastern part of the Sajaiya neighborhood in Gaza City and the Arin post in the Nuseirat refugee camp, near the power plant (websites of the military wings of Hamas and the PIJ, June 3, 2018).



Israeli Air Force attack on western Beit Lahia (Shehab Facebook page, June 3, 2018).