



Arson Terrorism: A new method devised by Hamas during the "return marches" to attack the communities near the Gaza Strip and disrupt their daily lives

June 18, 2018



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Overview

The phenomenon of "arson terrorism" using kites, which began on a small scale during the third week of the violent "return marches," **has gathered momentum during the past few weeks, led by Hamas. In addition to incendiary kites, the use of helium balloons with flammable substances attached began, and later kites and balloons with IEDs attached.** For Hamas, the advantage of helium balloons is that they can penetrate deep into Israeli territory and cause more damage than kites. Arson terrorism peaked on **Saturday, June 16, 2018, when dozens of incendiary kites and balloons caused 25 fires** which destroyed thousands of acres of crops, agricultural fields and natural forests.



**Fires in the western Negev near the Gaza Strip border
(Facebook page of the "incendiary kites and balloons unit," June 17, 2018).**

► **Hamas**, which orchestrates and directs the "return marches," **is also involved in launching incendiary kites and balloons into Israel and encourages their extensive use in what it calls the "popular resistance."** Hamas and the other terrorist organizations are

fully aware of the economic and psychological damage caused by arson terrorism. They consider the kites a cheap, available and effective tool which does not endanger the residents of the Gaza Strip, and **for which Israel does not have a suitable remedy.**



Hamas notice boasting of fires near the Gaza Strip caused by incendiary kites and balloons on Friday, June 15, 2018. The Arabic reads, "24 fires broke out near the Gaza Strip, caused by incendiary kites and balloons (Paldf Facebook page, June 16, 2018).

► So far **more than 800 incendiary kites and balloons** have been launched, **causing about 1,000 fires** in the communities near the Gaza Strip, destroying crops, natural forests and nature reserves. According to the Israel Fire and Rescue Authority, so far firefighters have dealt with **412 fires. For 75 continuous days, there has been an average of approximately 11 cases of arson per day. More than 25,000 dunams** (more than 6,100 acres) of agricultural land and forests were set on fire. In addition to the physical and financial damages caused by the arson attacks, daily life in the communities along the Gaza Strip has been disrupted.

The Israeli security forces have tried **to intercept the incendiary kites with technological measures (drones) but without effective results.** Therefore, in the wake of the accumulating damages, **Israeli Air Force aircraft recently carried out a series of warning attacks on the squads launching incendiary kites and balloons.** On June 16 and 17, 2018, the IDF fired shot near launch squads. On the night of June 17, 2018, **the IDF stepped up its response and attacked nine Hamas targets, regarding Hamas as responsible for arson terrorism.** In response three rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip, two of which fell inside Israeli territory. **Stepping up responses clearly indicates the potential for escalation caused by Hamas' policy of brinkmanship.**

The development of the use of kites and balloons as weapons

► The phenomenon of arson terrorism began with a few kites launched during the third week of the "return marches" (April 13, 2018). Since then **arson terrorism has been continuously carried out, become more efficient and gathered momentum**. In addition to incendiary kites the Palestinians have begun to launch **helium balloons with attached flammable substances**. The "advantage" of such balloons is that they can fly much further into Israeli territory than kites and there is **a greater likelihood that they will fall in Israeli territory and cause damage**.



One of the first kites launched towards Israel with a Molotov cocktail tied to its tail. It fell inside the Gaza Strip (IDF spokesman, April 13, 2018).

► The damage caused by the incendiary kites and balloons to fields and nature reserves and the burning of crops and trees near the Gaza Strip has had considerable media coverage. That **led Hamas to the conclusion** that it was a successful way to harm Israel and cause economic and psychological damage with cheap, readily available means. In addition, the damage could be done without endangering the residents of the Gaza Strip and without a suitable Israeli response. **Thus the "success," in Hamas' eyes, of arson terrorism gave Hamas an operational response to its failure to cause masses of Gazans to penetrate Israeli territory or harm IDF soldiers during the "return marches."**



Palestinians prepare an incendiary kite east of Gaza City (Palinfo Twitter account, May 4, 2018).

► In light of the "success" of the incendiary kites and balloons the Palestinians "improved" them by **attaching IEDs or hand grenades to their tails, which were supposed to detonate in Israeli territory**. For example, on June 10, 2018, police demolitions experts were summoned to deal with an accelerant device attached to a kite. The kite was found by children in one of the communities near the Gaza Strip. According to a police spokesman, it was apparently an anti-personnel device. On Friday, June 15, 2018, **police demolitions experts were summoned to the western Negev where they detonated a balloon with an IED attached**. The balloon was located by passers-by. No casualties were reported. The police issued a warning to the public not to touch kites or balloons because they might contain explosives (Haaretz, June 17, 2018).

► **Launching incendiary kites and balloons into Israeli territory is not limited to the Friday marches, and continues throughout the week**. Even when there is a significant decline in the number of participants in the "return marches" and public interest wanes, **the launchings continue, and have even been institutionalized with the establishment of networks "specializing" in the field**. For example, **on Saturday, June 16, 2018, more than 25 fires broke out** in Israeli territory near the Gaza Strip, caused by kites and balloons.



Palestinians launch Incendiary balloons (Palinfo, June 14, 2018).



A masked Palestinian prepares an incendiary kite
(Facebook page of the "Supreme authority of the great return march," June 8, 2018).

Propaganda impact

► The Hamas media and other bodies affiliated with Hamas have been recruited to wage a propaganda campaign to accompany the launching of kites and balloons. The campaign is directed at **both Palestinian target audiences and the Israeli public**. One of its objectives is to glorify the image of the operatives who participate in networks called the "**al-Zouari units**" or the "**the units of the sons of al-Zouari**," named for Tunisian aeronautical engineer Muhammad al-Zouari, who worked for Hamas and was killed in Tunisia.¹ The campaign also emphasizes messages Hamas wants to promote, such as the "right of return," "Jerusalem is the capital of Palestine," and solidarity with the shaheeds killed during the "return marches."

Hamas propaganda messages



Kites bearing pictures of shaheeds. Right: A picture of Razan al-Najar, killed in one of the "return marches" (Facebook page of the "Supreme authority of the great return march," June 8, 2018).

¹ On December 15, 2016, the killing of Muhammad al-Zouari in a drive-by shooting was reported. He was 49 years old, an engineer, and came from a religious family in Sfax, eastern Tunisia. After he finished his studies and served in the army, he earned a civilian pilot's license and was employed as a pilot by Tunisair. He was fired because of his activity in the Tunisian Islamist al-Nahda party and fled to Sudan. In 1991 he went to Syria and joined Hamas military-terrorist wing, **where he developed unmanned aerial vehicles and hang-gliders for Hamas**.



Model of a kite in the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. The upper inscription reads, "[Nakba Day] is our date." The lower inscription reads, "The land [is] ours and Jerusalem [is] ours."

- As part of the campaign, the kites and balloons are accompanied by **psychological warfare to frighten Israelis in general and those living near the Gaza Strip in particular.** For example, a "the incendiary kites and balloons unit" held a press conference on June 15, 2018, and **threatened that 5,000 incendiary kites and balloons would be launched** (a number fabricated for propaganda purposes). An "ultimatum" was also given to Israel: the government had a number of days to lift the "siege" of the Gaza Strip. If it were not lifted, they would cause the Israelis living near the Gaza Strip to live under a "siege of incendiary balloons." **They warned Israel not to harm the launchers, claiming the "resistance" [i.e., the terrorist organizations] stood behind them and protected them.**



Facebook profile picture. The upper inscription reads, "the sons of al-Zouari," the Tunisian aeronautics engineer and operative of Hamas' military wing. The bottom inscription reads, "the incendiary kites and balloons unit" (the "unit's" Facebook page, June 15, 2018).



The "incendiary kites and balloons unit" holds a press conference (the "unit's" Facebook page, June 14, 2018).

Involvement of Hamas operatives in launching kites: Iyad Muhammad al-Baz Abu Musheir as an example

Hamas is careful not to link itself directly to arson terrorism in order to prevent Israel from retaliating and to represent the arson attacks as "popular resistance." Therefore, there are no unequivocal indications linking the "incendiary kites and balloons unit" to Hamas. However, **the case of Iyad Muhammad Abu Musheir, an operative in Hamas military police, clearly shows that Hamas operatives are directly involved in arson terrorism.**

- **Iyad Muhammad al-Baz Abu Musheir**, who consistently participates in the "return marches," posted notices to his Facebook page about the activities of the "al-Zouari unit," the "incendiary kites and balloons unit." He also posted a link to the official Facebook page of the "incendiary kites and balloons unit" (Facebook page of Iyad Muhammad, June 16, 2018). He maintains two Facebook pages, one for Iyad Muhammad al-Baz Abu Musheir and the other for Iyad Muhammad. On his Facebook pages he identifies himself as an operative in Hamas' military police in the Gaza Strip. He has posted pictures of himself with senior Hamas

figures, among them Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, and Yahya al-Sinwar, head of Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip, as well as Mahmoud al-Zahar and Fathi Hamad.



Right: Iyad Abu Musheir in a military police uniform with the hashtag, #I_return (Facebook page of Iyad Muhammad, March 29, 2018) (the #I_return hashtag is used by many organizers of the "return marches"). Left: Iyad Abu Musheir with Yahya al-Sinwar (Facebook page of Iyad Muhammad, June 8, 2018).



Right: Iyad Abu Musheir participates in a "return march" (Facebook page of Iyad Muhammad, April 6, 2018). Left: Iyad Abu Musheir with friends in the "return tent" in eastern Gaza City (Facebook page of Iyad Muhammad al-Baz Abu Musheir, May 28, 2018).

- On June 8, 2018, he posted pictures of incendiary kites and signs to his Iyad Muhammad al-Baz Abu Musheir Facebook page. The signs had the names of Israeli communities, and were **signed "the sons of al-Zouari (the kites and balloons unit).**



The signs on the kites read, "You are within the range of the kites of the sons of al-Zouari: [the Israeli communities of] Be'eri, Re'im, Kissufim. [signed] The sons of al-Zouari, central [Gaza] Strip (Facebook page of Iyad Muhammad al-Baz Abu Musheir, June 8, 2018).

- On June 10, 2018, Abu Musheir exchanged the profile picture on his Iyad Muhammad al-Baz Abu Musheir Facebook page for a picture of a masked kite launcher. The ITIC compared the pictures of Abu Musheir on his Facebook pages with the person in the picture wearing a black shirt and white mask, and concluded they are the same person.



- Some of Abu Musheir's postings about incendiary kites mentioned **the names of friends**. One of his friends is **Osama Z. Abu Dalal**, who also posted a link to the Facebook page of the "incendiary kites and balloons unit," as well as notices about the kites. He wrote on his Facebook page that he worked in the ministry of the interior in Gaza and was an advisor on international law. Another friend is **Abu Mu'az Abu Zino**, a Gazan, **who also posted notices about the "al-Zouari unit" and the "incendiary kites and balloons unit."**



Friends of Iyad Abu Musheir. Right: A picture from the Facebook page of Osama Z. Abu Dalal, June 16, 2018. Left: A picture from the Facebook page of Osama Z. Abu Dalal, June 14, 2018

Israel's response

Arson terrorism has caused serious material damage and disrupted the daily lives of Israelis living near the Gaza Strip. About 25,000 dunams (more than 6,100 acres) of fields and forests have been burned so far. The houses in the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip are under threat of incendiary kite and balloon arson. According to the Israel Fire and Rescue Authority, so far firefighters have dealt with **412 fires**. **For 75 continuous days, there has been an average of approximately 11 events per day, rising to 21 on Fridays** (data from the Israel Fire and Rescue Authority). The cost of extinguishing the fires so far has been about two million shekels (about \$550,000). The Administration of the Property Tax Compensation Fund has estimated that property damage so far is about seven million shekels (about \$1,925,000) (Haaretz, June 17, 2018).



Right: Fire in an Israeli wheat field near the Gaza Strip caused by an incendiary kite (Palinfo Twitter account, June 2, 2018). Left: Scorched fields in the western Negev, the result of incendiary kite fires (Shehab Facebook page, June 4, 2018).

- ▶ Initially Israel did not respond to arson terrorism, but when the number of fires and the extent of the damage increased **attempts were made to develop a technology to neutralize them, primarily by using drones**, which intercepted many kites and kept them from reaching Israeli territory. According to Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, as of June 5, 2018, **about 600 incendiary kites had been flown towards Israel**, 400 of them intercepted and about 200 reaching Israeli territory (Haaretz, June 5, 2018). However, the drones were ineffective because **the large number of kites that did enter Israeli territory caused substantial material and psychological damage**.
- ▶ Another measure taken by Israel was **to enact legislation to deduct the cost of the damage caused by the fires from the tax funds collected by Israel and transferred to the PA**. On June 11, 2018, the Foreign Affairs and Security Committee of the Israeli Knesset unanimously passed a law that would allow deductions to be made from the funds collected by Israel for the Palestinians. The sums deducted are PA payments to the families of terrorists and the cost of the damages caused by arson terrorism. However, it is doubtful if that will deter Hamas from continuing to encourage arson terrorism because collected funds go directly to the PA.
- ▶ **Recently, as arson attacks have gained momentum, Israel changed its policy of response:** Israeli Air Force aircraft fired shots, mainly warning shots, at squads of Palestinians launching kites and balloons. Care was taken not to hit the Palestinians launching them. IDF sources reported that at this stage the Israeli Air Force's activity has been meant as a warning and that the army is ready for the possibility that Hamas will focus its efforts on launching more kites and balloons. The sources also reported that **Israel's response would be harsher**

if the use of helium balloons with explosive devices continued (IDF spokesman, June 17, 2018).

► Israeli Air Force aircraft attacks were the following:

- ◆ **June 14, 2018** – Aircraft fired warning shots at a squad preparing incendiary balloons in the southern Gaza Strip. Later the IDF spokesman reported that aircraft had attacked **a location in the southern Gaza Strip where Palestinians prepared incendiary kites and balloons** (IDF Twitter account, June 14, 2018). The Palestinian media reported that a UAV had fired a missile at a group of young Palestinians in the eastern part of the al-Bureij refugee camp who were launching kites and balloons from a "return camp." Two and a half hours later Israeli aircraft shot at another group of Palestinians preparing to fly kites, and damaged a water reservoir in a "return camp." No casualties were reported (Palinfo, June 14, 2018).



**Documentation of damages caused by the Israeli attack
(Facebook page of Abu Mu'az Muhammad Zino, June 14, 2018)**

- ◆ **June 15, 2018** – Israeli Air Force aircraft fired warning shots at a squad launching IED balloons and at a vehicle in the southern Gaza Strip. Aircraft also attacked a Hamas observation post in the northern Gaza Strip near a location from which incendiary and IED balloons were launched (IDF Twitter account, June 15, 2018). The Palestinian media reported that two missiles were fired as warning shots at Palestinians launching incendiary kites in eastern al-Bureij. One of them hit a motorbike. No casualties were reported (Filastin al-A'an, June 15, 2018).



Motorbike attacked by Israeli Air Force aircraft (Filastin al-A'an, June 15, 2018).

◆ **June 16, 2018** – Israeli Air Force aircraft fired close to where **a squad was launchings Incendiary balloons in the southern Gaza Strip** (IDF Twitter account, June 16, 2018). The Palestinian media reported that two Palestinians had been wounded, one of them seriously, in an attack in the eastern part of the al-Bureij refugee camp (Filastin al-A'an, June 16, 2018).

◆ **The night of June 16, 2018** – Israeli Air Force aircraft **attacked the vehicle of one of the heads of the squads launching incendiary and IED kites and balloons** (IDF website, June 17, 2018). The Palestinian media reported that a civilian vehicle had been attacked near the al-Murabitin mosque in the Sajaiya neighborhood of Gaza City. The vehicle was burned but no casualties were reported (Shehab agency, June 17, 2018).



The vehicle attacked in eastern Gaza City (Shehab, June 17, 2018).

◆ **June 17, 2018** – Israeli Air Force aircraft **fired at a squad launching Incendiary balloons** in the southern Gaza Strip (IDF spokesman, June 17, 2018).

◆ **The night of June 17, 2018 – The IDF intensified its response. Israeli Air Force fighter planes attacked nine targets in two Hamas facilities** and a Hamas facility for the manufacture of weapons in the northern Gaza Strip. The Palestinian media reported the planes had attacked the "Bader post" of Hamas' military wing in western Gaza City and the "Boat post" in northern Gaza City. No casualties were reported (al-Jazeera, Shabakat Quds and Dunia al-Watan, June 18j, 2018).