Overview

- During an IDF special forces operation in the southern Gaza Strip on November 11, 2018, an exchange of fire developed between the force and Hamas operatives. An IDF lieutenant colonel was killed and another officer was wounded. Seven terrorist operatives were killed, six of them from Hamas' military wing. Hamas' response came in two stages. During the relatively limited first stage, 17 rockets and mortar shells were fired at the communities near the Gaza Strip (November 11, 2018). During the second stage, which began the following day (November 12, 2018), Hamas initiated a massive rocket attack, unprecedented in scope, on Israeli communities and cities in the western Negev. Note: On the afternoon of November 13, 2018, after about 24 hours of exchanges of fire, Israel and Hamas agreed on a ceasefire. Since then, southern Israel has been quiet.

- Hamas' opening shot was a Kornet anti-tank missile attack on a bus carrying IDF soldiers, two of whom were wounded, one seriously. At the same time a massive barrage of rockets and mortar shells targeted the communities near the Gaza Strip, which was later extended to the southern cities of Ashqelon and Netivot. As of noon on November 13, 2018, more than 400 rockets and mortar shells had been fired, about 100 of them intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system. (Note: It was later reported that a total of about 460 rockets and mortar shells had been fired.) One person was killed and about 100 wounded, most of them incurring minor wounds. Heavy damage was done to several civilian buildings by direct rocket hits.

- In response to the rocket attack the IDF attacked about 150 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terrorist targets. The IDF changed its usual mode of response and in addition to area targets it attacked multi-story buildings in the Gaza Strip that were important to Hamas. They included the building of the al-Aqsa TV station, Hamas' most important media outlet, which broadcasts incitement to terrorism; the building used by
Hamas’ military wing and its intelligence; the al-Rahma building, used by Hamas’ military intelligence; and the al-Amal hotel, where Hamas’ internal security force was located.

In ITIC assessment, the current rocket attack is not an isolated event, which can be explained as a response to a covert Israeli operation which got into trouble. Rather, it is an integral result of the situation Hamas created on the ground in the wake of the "return marches" (which began on March 30, 2018). Hamas’ new policy is characterized by controlled violence against Israel. Since the end of May 2018, in addition to the marches, there has also been rocket fire of varying intensity, in most cases as a response to the harm done to rioters along the security fence and to those who carry out arson terrorism attacks.

So far there have been four main rounds of escalation, the most recent of which has been the most serious (a total of about 1,070 rockets fired so far). The rounds of rocket fire have been initiated by Hamas (and on occasion the PIJ), which decides when they begin and when they end (Hamas has declared that it wants to determine the end of the current round of escalation as well, threatening to extend the range of the rocket fire).

In ITIC assessment, the current situation on the ground requires a strengthening of Israel’s power of deterrence to demonstrate to Hamas that it is not worth its while to pursue its new policy, and that it would be preferable to return to the status quo ante of March 29, 2018. When that happens the understandings reached after Operation Protective Edge could be used as an acceptable basis for an arrangement (that is, a complete and total cessation of the violence, including the “return marches,” in return for easing the “siege” on the Gaza Strip and the provision of massive economic support).

The Events that Led to the Rocket Attack

An Israeli security operation that got into trouble in the Khan Yunis region

During an operation carried out by Israeli special forces in the southern Gaza Strip near Khan Yunis an exchange of fire developed between the IDF soldiers and Hamas operatives. The Israeli soldiers were extracted from the Gaza Strip by air. During the event an Israeli lieutenant colonel was killed and another officer was seriously wounded. According to Israeli Chief of Staff General Gadi Eisenkot, the force, whose activities were of great

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1 For further information, see the June 25, 2018 bulletin, "Hamas’ new policy towards Israel: from restraint and calm to controlled violence, creating escalation."
importance to Israeli security, along with the Israeli Air Force fought, bravely and calmly (IDF spokesman, November 11, 2018). Following the events and during the activities to extract the soldiers, Israeli Air Force aircraft carried out at least 40 sorties in the Gaza Strip. At the same time IDF forces in the Southern Command were reinforced and local residents were called on to exercise caution. **Despite the events, the Erez and Kerem Shalom Crossings remained open as usual.**

- During the exchange of fire with the IDF force **seven Palestinian terrorist operatives were killed. Six were from Hamas' military wing**, one of whom was a senior operative. The seventh terrorist was an operative from the Salah al-Din Brigades, the military wing of the Popular Resistance Committees. Among the terrorists killed was **Nur al-Din Muhammad Salameh Barakah, 37, senior Hamas military wing operative in the Khan Yunis area** (Ashraf al-Qidra’s Facebook page, November 12, 2018).

Right: Nur al-Din Barakah, the senior Hamas operative killed in the exchange of fire. Left: The six Hamas terrorist operatives killed in the incident (Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades website, November 12, 2018).

Khaled Quweidar, terrorist operative from the Popular Resistance Committees, killed in the event (Qawm website, November 12, 2018).

**The Palestinian version of the event**

- The media in the Gaza Strip represented the event as an attempt to kill Hamas military operatives that failed when the Israeli soldiers were exposed (Palinfo, November 11,
2018). Following the event the PIJ announced a general call-up of its operatives (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 11, 2018). Hamas cancelled the weekly mini-flotilla and accompanying demonstration in the northern Gaza Strip. In ITIC assessment, in retrospect it can be seen that the presentation of the event and the following activities were carried out in preparation for the rocket attack that would begin the next day.

The day after the incident Hamas' military wing issued an announcement entitled "The Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades prevented a large Zionist enemy activity inside the Gaza Strip." According to the announcement, a "Zionist special force" using a civilian vehicle infiltrated the eastern region of Khan Yunis. An Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades security force found the car suspicious and stopped it for examination. Nur al-Din Barakah, the commander on the ground, came to find out what was happening. When the [enemy] force was exposed an armed confrontation began, during which Nur al-Din Muhammad Barakah and another operative were killed. The Israeli vehicle attempted to escape. They were given air cover and the planes carried out dozens of attacks. A Israeli military helicopter landed near the border fence and extracted the force. At the same time, Israeli warplanes attacked the vehicle used by the force. During a chase and direct confrontation five other operatives were killed (Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades website, November 12, 2018).

Right: The vehicle used by the Israeli soldiers after it was destroyed by the planes (Facebook page of correspondent Hassan Aslih, November 12, 2018). Left: The electronic equipment that had been in the vehicle (QudsN Twitter account, November 12, 2018).
Rocket and mortar shell fire – first reaction

- Hamas' first response to the incident was to fire 17 rockets and mortar shells at the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip. Three rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system (IDF spokesman, November 12, 2018). No casualties were reported. One of the rocket hits was located near a chicken coop on one of the communities in the western Negev. The structure was damaged (western Negev spokesman’s unit, November 11, 2018).

Extensive Rocket Fire Attack on the Western Negev

The opening shot: a Kornet anti-Tank missile fired at an Israeli bus

- On the afternoon of November 12, 2018, a Kornet anti-tank missile was fired at an Israeli bus in the western Negev. The bus was consumed by fire and the soldier guarding it was critically injured. Another soldier incurred minor wounds. According to the Israeli media, the missile was fired a few minutes after all the soldiers left the bus for a briefing.

- After the attack the joint operations room of the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip claimed responsibility for the missile fire. According to the announcement, the attack was in retaliation for the event east of Khan Yunis during which seven operatives were killed. The bus, claimed the announcement, went up in flames and everyone aboard was killed or wounded (website of Hamas' military wing, November 12, 2018).

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2 It was not the first time a Kornet missile from the Gaza Strip was used to attack an Israeli bus. On April 7, 2011, a Kornet missile was fired at a school bus in the western Negev. One child was killed and the driver incurred minor wounds. The Kornet is an advanced, laser-guided anti-tank missile manufactured in Russia and supplied to Hamas by Iran after they were successfully used by Hezbollah against IDF forces in the Second Lebanon War.
The bus in flames after having been hit by a Kornet anti-tank missile fired from the Gaza Strip (Twitter account of Hamas' military wing, November 12, 2018).

A video issued by the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip of the Kornet missile hitting the bus (Palinfo Twitter account, November 12, 2018).

**Massive rocket and mortar shell fire**

Immediately after the anti-tank missile attack a massive rocket and mortar shell attack began, targeting the communities in the western Negev near the Gaza Strip. The joint operations room of the terrorist organizations announced it had fired dozens of rockets at "enemy posts and settlements" in response to the "crime" carried out on November 11 (Twitter account of Hamas' military wing, November 11, 2018).

Heavy barrages were launched throughout the evening and night of November 12 and into the morning of November 13, 2018. Their range was extended to the cities of Ashqelon and Netivot. **By noon of November 13, 2018, more than 400 rockets had been fired** (Note: It was later reported that about 460 rockets and mortar shells were fired.) About 100 were intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system. Most of the rockets fell in open areas. Some scored direct hits on houses. **It was the largest number of rockets launched on one day and the largest number launched to attack Israel since Operation Protective Edge** (See the Appendix). During November 13, 2018, there **was a decrease in the intensity of rocket fire, but it did not completely stop.**
Rockets fell inside cities and communities in the western Negev, and in some instances fell directly on people’s homes: six rockets hit homes of Ashqelon. One man was killed. Eight rockets hit Sderot, two of them hitting buildings, including an industrial structure, and a gas depot caught fire. Two rockets fell in Netivot and four in communities in the western Negev. On the morning of November 13, 2018, a rocket hit was identified in a kindergarten in one of the communities in the western Negev. The kindergarten was empty because educational facilities had been closed for the day. No casualties were reported. The building was extensively damaged.
A direct hit on a house in Ashqelon killed one man, a Palestinian from Hebron. A woman with him at the time was critically wounded. About 100 Israelis incurred minor wounds and were evacuated to hospitals (90 to Barzilai Hospital in Ashqelon and ten to Soroka Hospital in Beersheba. Some of the wounded were treated for shock (spokesmen’s units of Barzilai and Soroka hospitals, November 13, 2018).

During the rocket attack residents of the western Negev were asked to remain near secure areas, and schools were closed. On the morning of November 13, 2018, the IDF relaxed some of the advisory rules for the residents of the communities near the Gaza Strip (IDF spokesman, November 13, 2018).

In response to the rocket fire from the Gaza Strip, IDF tanks, Israeli Air Force aircraft and Israeli Navy vessels attacked terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip. A total of 150 Hamas and PIJ targets were attacked, including area targets and multi-story buildings in the heart of Gaza City. Some of the targets were the following (according to the IDF spokesman, November 13, 2018):

- **A terrorist attack tunnels** in eastern Gaza.
- Four military compounds in Gaza City, Beit Hanoun, Jabalia and Khan Yunis
- **A rocket launching position** in Khan Yunis and a **squad of rocket launchers** in the northern Gaza Strip.
- **Vessels used by Hamas' naval force**, attacked by the Israeli Navy
- **Two PIJ terrorist tunnels in Rafah and four PIJ military compounds.**
- The following buildings in the Gaza Strip were attacked (IDF spokesman, November 13, 2018):
  - The al-Aqsa TV building, owned by Hamas and located in the center of Gaza City. The building was completely destroyed. Al-Aqsa TV broadcasts incitement against the State of Israel and encourages terrorist attacks. (The broadcasts stopped but resumed a short time later from an alternative site prepared by Hamas.)

![Right: The attack on the al-Aqsa TV building (QudsN Twitter account, November 12, 2018). Left: The rubble left after the attack (Shehab Facebook page, November 13, 2018)](image)

- A **building in the center of Gaza City used by Hamas' military force and the military wing's intelligence force**. The building also housed an arms depot.
- **The al-Rahma Building in Gaza City**, used by Hamas’ military intelligence. The building was completely destroyed.

![The rubble left after the attack on the al-Rahma Building, used by Hamas military intelligence (Shehab Facebook page, November 13, 2018).](image)

- The al-Amal Hotel, located in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City. Since the end of Operation Protective Edge it was used by Hamas for military purposes and **the Gaza**
Strip internal security force headquarters was located there. The building was completely destroyed.

The rubble left after the attack on the al-Amal Hotel, headquarters for Hamas’ internal security force (Shehab Facebook page, November 13, 2018).

Attempt to Cross the Fence near the Karni Crossing

- On the morning of November 13, 2018, a number of Palestinian tried to cross the security fence in the area of the Karni Crossing in the northern Gaza Strip. Two of them sabotaged the fence and quickly returned to the Gaza Strip. Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked several suspicious Palestinians near the security fence who had been monitored by IDF surveillance and who had tried to cross the security fence in the northern Gaza Strip into Israeli territory (IDF spokesman, November 13, 2018).

Conduct of the Terrorist Organizations in the Gaza Strip

Activities in the Gaza Strip in view of the escalation

- During the rocket attack, the terrorist organizations opened a joint operations room. Hamas prepared its governmental apparatuses and civilian services for the escalation: the Red Crescent was put on alert. The classes in schools were cancelled (Paldf, November 13, 2018). It was announced that government offices would not be open (Shehab, November 13, 2018). Iyad al-Bazam, spokesman for the interior ministry in the Gaza Strip, said the security apparatuses and police had taken [special] measures in view of the situation (Dunia al-Watan, November 12, 2018). Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, said all hospitals and support units had raised their level of alert in accordance with developments on the ground (Ashraf al-Qidra’s Facebook page, November
12, 2018). Because of the security situation it was decided to postpone the mini-flotilla and its accompanying demonstration planned for Monday afternoon (Shehab Twitter account, November 12, 2018). The Palestinian Authority (PA) minister of health, following instructions from Mahmoud Abbas, ordered medicines to be transferred from Nablus to the Gaza Strip (Ma’an, November 13, 2018).

**Palestinians Killed in IDF Attacks**

- According to a report from the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, IDF attacks killed six Palestinians and wounded 25. *The military wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine* (PFLP) said in a statement that two of those killed were organization operatives (Facebook page of the information unit of the PFLP in the Gaza Strip, November 12, 2018). *The military wing of the PIJ* said two of those killed were organization operatives (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 12, 2018).

**Terrorist Organization Threats to Increase the Range of the Rocket Attacks**

- The joint operations room of the terrorist organizations again warned Israel ("the Zionist enemy") that if it continued its "aggression" the "resistance" would increase the range, depth and intensity of its attacks. In a later announcement the operations room said they intended to increase the range of the attacks in response to Israel's attacks on civilian buildings and institutions, and warned it would expand the attacks [on cities] even further (Twitter account of Hamas' military wing, November 12, 2018).
- Hamas and PIJ spokesmen continue to stress their "deterrent equation" of "blood in return for blood and quiet in return for quiet." After the Israeli Air Force's attack they threatened to widen the scope of the rocket fire:
  - Musheir al-Masri, spokesman for the Hamas faction in the Legislative Council, said the "resistance" operated according to the principle of "kill anyone who tries to kill you." He said the joint operations room had unanimously decided on a new stage in the conflict with Israel. The stage would be expressed by the unity of Palestinian opinion and general support for the "equations" enforced by the "resistance." He said that if Israel did not surrender to the wishes of the "resistance" the range of its response would increase. He also said that it was the "resistance" that would
decide when the campaign began and when it would end (al-Aqsa, November 12, 2018).

- **Abu Obeida, spokesman for Hamas' military wing**, tweeted that the joint operations room had decided, after consultation, to extend the range of the rocket fire. He warned that if Israel continued its aggression, a million Israelis could find themselves within rocket range (Twitter account of Abu Obeida, November 12, 2018). In a later tweet he said that Ashqelon was within range, and warned that if Israel continued attacking civilian structures, **Ashdod and Beersheba would be the next targets** (Twitter account of Abu Obeida, November 13, 2018).

- **Abu Hamza, spokesman for the PIJ's military wing**, said the recent events were "acceptable responses." He warned that in the coming hours something would happen that Israel did not expect and he advised Israelis ("the settlers") living further away than Beersheba and Ashdod to remain in their bomb shelters because attacks on civilian structures in Gaza would lead to a decision to extend the range of "response" (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 13, 2018).

**Contacts for a ceasefire (initial reports)**

- During the rocket fire senior Palestinian terrorist organization figures held contacts in an effort to bring about a ceasefire. **Izzat al-Rishq, a member of Hamas' political bureau**, said Hamas was in urgent consultation with the Arab, Islamic and Western states, and with international organizations, to condemn and restrain the "Zionist escalation." He said the objective of the contacts was to stop the "Zionist aggression" (Palinfo, November 13, 2018).

- **Da'ud Shehab, head of the PIJ's information bureau**, said that despite Israel's excessive use of force, so far the Palestinian "resistance" had the upper hand, and was prepared for any eventuality. Regarding political activity to calm the situation, he confirmed that the Egyptians had held many meetings, and that the Palestinians reacted positively, based on two principles: one, the "resistance" was not the side they had to appeal to, but rather Israel, which was responsible [for the escalation]. The other, an end to [Israeli] aggression and to all forms of the "siege" (Paltoday, November 13, 2018).
PA chairman Mahmoud Abbas, who was visiting Kuwait, cut his visit short because of the events in the Gaza Strip and returned to Ramallah. Before he returned he condemned the "Israeli escalation." He called for international intervention and held talks with regional and international agencies to stop the so-called "Israeli aggression in the Gaza Strip" (Dunia al-Watan, November 12, 2018). Saeb Erekat, secretary of the PLO's Executive Committee, called on the international community to do everything it could to prevent another "slaughter" in the Gaza Strip. He claimed Israel was fully responsible for the deterioration of the situation (Shabakat Quds Twitter account, November 12, 2018).

Note: Muneir al-Jaghoub, head of the information bureau of Fatah's bureau of mobilization and organization, wrote on his Facebook page in response to the rocket fire that the sound of the rockets launched to hurt the enemy, raised morale and made for pride (Facebook page of Muneir al-Jaghoub, November 12, 2018). He wrote that Fatah's position is always to fall into line against the enemy, who does not differentiate between Fatah and Hamas (Facebook page of Muneir al-Jaghoub, November 12, 2018). To his post he added a notice from the PIJ showing a new rocket in a military display held in Gaza City in October 2018.
Statistical Data

Rocket and mortar shell fire during and between the recent rounds of escalation\(^3\) (as of noon, November 13, 2018)

In total of 1,070 rockets and mortar shells

Monthly Distribution of Rocket and Mortar Shell Fire since January 2018

In total of 1,070 rockets and mortar shells since May 2018

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\(^3\)The statistics do not include rockets that fell inside the Gaza Strip.
Annual Distribution of Rocket Hits