



## Another Round of Escalation Following Hamas Rocket Fire at Central Israel

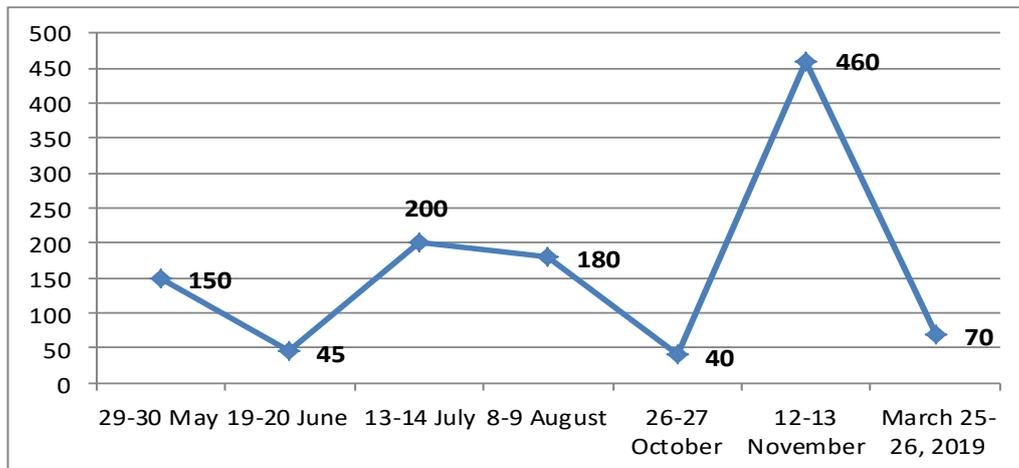
March 26, 2019

### Overview

On March 25-26, 2019, **there was another round of escalation, the seventh** since the "return marches" began on March 30, 2018. It began after a rocket fired by Hamas (which claimed it was fired "by mistake") hit a house in a community north of Tel Aviv (seven people injured). The IDF responded by attacking dozens of targets in the northern and central Gaza Strip, including significant targets. Hamas and the other terrorist organizations fired about 70 rockets and mortar shells at the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip. The rocket fire has stopped, possibly because of pressure from Egypt, which led to a unilateral cessation of fire by Hamas and the other terrorist organizations. **Note:** On the night of March 26, 2019, several rockets were fired by the terrorist organizations at an Israeli community near the Gaza Strip and at the region of the southern Israeli city of Ashqelon. The IDF responded by attacking terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip

- ▶ The rocket fire and the round of escalation following it were **the climax of events this past week, during which there was an increase in violence from Hamas the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip**. The violence included the launching of incendiary and IED balloons into Israeli territory on a daily basis; nightly activities of the Night Harassment Units (which included throwing IEDs); and riots which accompanied the weekly mini-flotilla. The IDF responded with artillery fire and aerial attacks on Hamas terrorist targets.
- ▶ The most recent round of escalation was similar to previous rounds, although in several of the previous rounds more rockets and mortar shells were launched (see graph). This time as well, Hamas determined the beginning and end of the round, and controlled its nature (focusing on the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip and not launching medium- and long-range rockets), to keep from being dragged into a broad military confrontation. The IDF attacked significant targets but it was monitored and done carefully.

## Rocket and mortar shell fire during the rounds of escalation since the beginning of the "return marches" (2018-2019)



► In any event, at the waning of this recent round of escalation, **the situation in the Gaza Strip remains fluid and volatile, and the potential still exists for deterioration into a broad military confrontation** between Hamas (and the other terrorist organizations) and Israel (even though neither side wants one). That is because Hamas continues to **adhere to its strategy of controlled violence, regulating the nature and scope of the violence** in accordance with its interests and changing priorities (for example, lowering the level of violence out of consideration for the Egyptian mediation or raising it when the negotiations face difficulties or in order to channel public anger at the economic situation against Israel). **The next date for raising the level of violence is liable to be this coming Saturday, March 30, 2019, the anniversary of the first "return march" and of the Palestinian Land Day.**

### Direct rocket hit on a house in a community north of Tel Aviv

► The seventh round of escalation from the Gaza Strip began in the wake of a rocket launched on March 25 before dawn from the Gaza Strip at central Israel. Sirens were sounded north of Tel Aviv . **The rocket landed a hit a house** in one of the communities. Seven people were injured, including two small children. The house suffered extensive damage. It was the first siren sounded north of Tel Aviv since Operation Protective Edge (July-August 2014). **The rocket was apparently launched from Rafah, a distance of about 120 kilometers (about 75 miles) from where it landed.**



**The extensive damage done to the house north of Tel Aviv  
(Right: Israel Police Force. Left: Israel Fire and Rescue Services, March 25, 2019).**



**Right: Aerial photo of the house. Left: Hole in the ground caused by the rocket hit  
(Palinfo Twitter account, March 25, 2018).**

► **The IDF spokesman reported that the rocket was launched from a Hamas position in the Rafah region in the southern Gaza Strip** After the attack the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories announced the closing of the crossings from Israel to the Gaza Strip. The fishing waters off the Gaza Strip were also narrowed (IDF spokesman, March 25, 2018). No organization in the Gaza Strip claimed responsibility for the rocket fire. Hamas denied it had launched the rocket. **A source close to Hamas claimed the rocket had been fired by mistake** because of so-called "reasons caused by nature" (al-Hadath TV, March 25, 2019). A senior Hamas figure claimed Hamas had no interest in firing rockets (al-Arabiya Twitter account, March 25, 2019).

► **Immediately after the rocket launch the Gaza Strip prepared for an Israeli response.** Hamas evacuated all its government centers in Gaza City (al-Anba, March 25, 2019). A speech scheduled to be given by Yahya al-Sinwar, head of the Hamas political bureau in the Gaza Strip, to mark the first anniversary of the "return marches," was cancelled (al-Hadath, March 25, 2019). The Supreme National Authority of the Great Return March announced the cancellation of all the activities of the Night Harassment Units (Amad, March 25, 2019). Sources in Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) said they would escalate according

to the extent of the Israeli attack (al-Arabiya Twitter account, March 25, 2019). **Ziyad al-Nakhlah, PIJ secretary general**, warned Israel not to respond, saying that every response would be met with force (Filastin al-Yawm, March 25, 2019).

## Israel's response

► In response to the rocket fire at central Israel the IDF began reinforcing its forces in the region near the Gaza Strip border, sending infantry and armored forces. Areas and roads near the security fence were blocked. It was also decided to stop agricultural work near the fence (IDF spokesman, March 25, 2019). In the afternoon, Israeli Air Force aircraft began attacking targets in the Gaza Strip. In the afternoon, tanks fired artillery at targets in the Gaza Strip. The Israeli Air Force also attacked the port in Khan Yunis.

► According to the IDF spokesman, **dozens of targets were attacked in the northern and central Gaza Strip**. Among them were **military compounds, the shafts of tunnels used to move weapons, military posts and rocket launching positions**. Among the targets attacked were the following (IDF spokesman, March 25-26, 2019):

- ◆ **In the northern Gaza Strip:** a Hamas military facility in Beit Hanoun and a PIJ military compound in Beit Lahia.
  - ◆ **In Gaza City:** Hamas' headquarters in the Sabra neighborhood. The building was used by Hamas' general security, general intelligence and military intelligence. In addition an office of internal security was attacked, as was the office of Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau (in the Rimal neighborhood). According to the IDF spokesman, military meetings were often held in Haniyeh's office.
  - ◆ **In the central Gaza Strip:** an underground PIJ military compound and a Hamas military compound in Deir al-Balah.
- A spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip reported that seven Palestinians were injured in the attacks, five in the northern Gaza Strip and two in Gaza City.



**IDF attack in Gaza City**  
(QudsN Facebook page, March 26, 2019).



**Right: IDF attack on Isma'il Haniyeh's office building** (QudsN Facebook page, March 25, 2019).  
**Left: Aerial phot of Isma'il Haniyeh's office building after the attack**  
(QudsN Facebook page, March 26, 2019).

## Rocket and mortar shell fire

► At around 2100 hours on March 25, 2019, three hours after the beginning of Israel's attacks, the joint operations room of the Palestinian terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip announced they had begun firing rockets, saying "it will be a hot night." According to al-Arabiya TV, Egypt threatened that it would abandon its mediation if the escalation in the Gaza Strip continued.

► Hamas and the other terrorist organizations began firing rockets and mortar shells at Israel. **Most of them targeted the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip**, but sirens were also sounded in the southern Israeli cities of Netivot and Ashqelon. The Iron Dome aerial defense system intercepted some of the rockets; some of them fell in open areas. As of noon, March 26, 2019, approximately **70 rocket launches into Israeli territory had been identified**. No casualties were reported. A house in Sderot was damaged by the direct hit of a rocket that did not explode. Remains of a rocket were found at a construction site in Sderot.



**Firing rockets from the Gaza Strip at Israel  
(QudsN Facebook page, March 25, 2019).**



**Direct hit on a house in Sderot  
(Talking Media Group, March 26, 2019).**

► At around 2200 hours, **apparently in the wake of pressure from Egypt, Hamas and the other terrorist organizations announced a unilateral cessation of the rocket and mortar fire.** Israel continued attacking targets in the Gaza Strip, after which there was again fire from the Gaza Strip. At around 0300 on March 26, 2019, the rocket and mortar fire ended, and so far has not been renewed (as of the afternoon of March 26, 2019).

By 2200 hours, when the terrorist organizations announced a cessation of fire, more than 30 launches had been identified (IDF spokesman, March 25, 2019). Approximately 30 more rockets were launched between then and 0315 hours, and since then there has been quiet on the ground. Political sources in Israel stated that there has been no [formal] decision for a ceasefire.

## Statements

► **Senior Hamas figure Musheir al-Masri** said Israel made a mistake when it chose to attack the Gaza Strip. **Walid Qutati, a member of the PIJ's political bureau,** threatened that the "resistance will respond with all its force to every act of aggression against the Gaza Strip

from within Israeli territory [and target] the [Israeli] communities near the Gaza Strip, Tel Aviv and everything in between." He also claimed they have no interest in a war but the "resistance" [i.e., the terrorist organizations] is prepared to defend the Palestinian people and react to every act of Israeli terrorism against the Gaza Strip.