



The eighth round of escalation, the most intensive and severe since the return marches began (Updated to 1500, May 6, 2019)

May 6, 2019

Overview¹

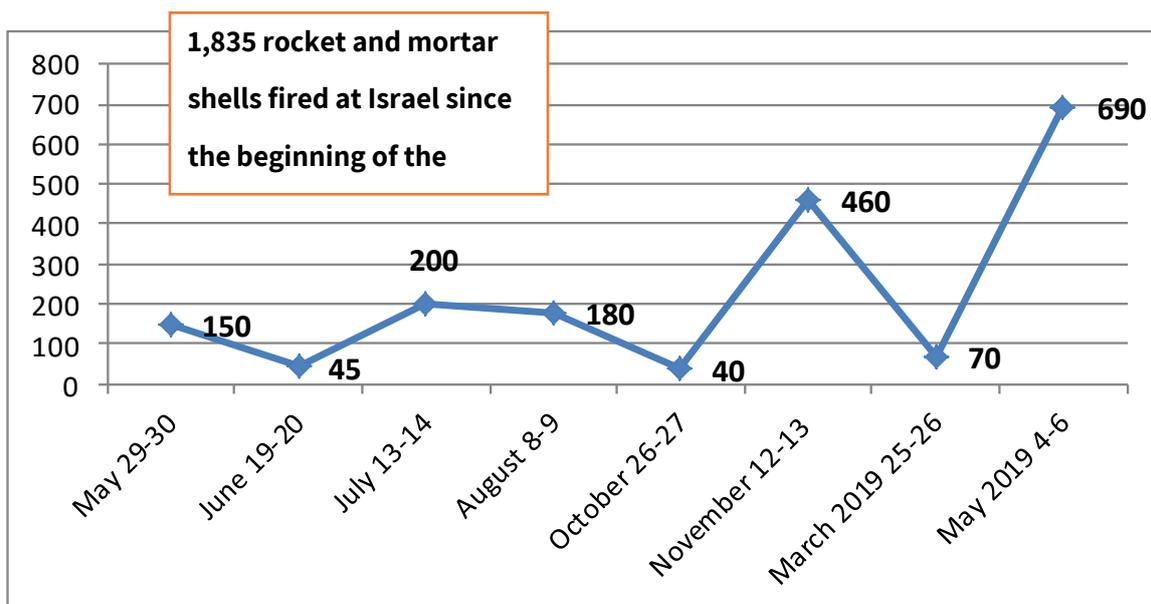
On the morning of May 6, 2019 **the eighth round of escalation, which had lasted for two days, came to an end.** It began following Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) sniper fire targeting IDF soldiers. The IDF responded by attacking Hamas targets, killing two operatives of its military-terrorist wing. The following day a massive barrage of rockets and mortar shells began, which gradually expanded to cities up to 40 kilometers from the Gaza Strip, including Ashqelon, Ashdod, Qiryat Gat, Qiryat Malachi and Beersheba.. **During the round of escalation 690 rockets and mortar shells were fired at Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip. In response the IDF attacked more than 350 targets in the Gaza Strip, including targets of high value for the terrorist organizations.** During the events **four Israelis were killed** and 123 were wounded (most of them treated for slight injuries and shock). In addition, **27 Palestinians were killed, most of them (16) were identified as terrorist operatives,** half of them PIJ operatives.

- ▶ The ceasefire was reached through **intensive Egyptian mediation.** As in the past, it can be assumed it was accompanied by understandings, primarily economic support for the Gaza Strip and opening the crossings. However, so far the ITIC does not have any details about the understandings accompanying the ceasefire. A "senior Palestinian" said that they included restoring the fishing zone to 15 nautical miles, improving the supply of electricity and fuel, and removing restrictions on Gazan imports and exports (issues agreed on in the past).
- ▶ The most recent round of escalation again illustrated that **since the beginning of the return marches the rounds of escalation have become increasingly more intensive and severe.** During the past year the number of rockets and mortar shell hits in Israel reached **more than 1,800 and the number increases with every round of escalation.** Apparently, this time as well, **the ceasefire does not indicate the end of the rounds of escalation.** That is because it does not provide solutions for the basic issues between Israel and Hamas;

¹ Update of the interim report issued on May 5, 2019.

because the PIJ (with Iranian backing) is expected to continue its efforts to cause deterioration on the ground and prevent an arrangement from being reached; and because the **return marches, which are a catalyst for violent events**, are not about to come to an end (insofar as is known, Hamas and the other terrorist organizations insist that they continue).

Rocket and mortar fire during the rounds of escalation in the past year



Main events of the most recent round of escalation

- On May 3, 2019, snipers in the southern Gaza Strip shot at IDF forces. The snipers, operatives from the PIJ's military-terrorist wing, operated behind return march demonstrators who were near the fence. One IDF soldier was seriously wounded and another slightly wounded. In response to the sniper fire the IDF attacked two Hamas posts (IDF spokesman's Twitter account, May 3, 2019). The attack killed two operatives of Hamas' military wing and seriously wounded two others² (IDF spokesman, May 3, 2019).
- Beginning on the morning of May 4, 2019, Israel was attacked by a massive barrage of rockets and mortar shells fired from the Gaza Strip. The IDF responded by attacking terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip on land and from the air and sea. **During the two days of escalation the IDF attacked 350 terrorist targets, most of them belonging to Hamas and the PIJ.**

² Two additional Palestinians were killed during the return march on May 3, 2019).

► At 0430 on May 6, 2019, after two days of intensive fighting, Palestinian sources reported that a ceasefire had gone into effect. **At 0700 the IDF spokesman announced the lifting of alert restrictions for the home front** and in effect, the stopping of the fighting in Israel's south. On the other hand, a correspondent for al-Ghad TV in the Gaza Strip reported that at 0430 the ceasefire had gone into effect. Since then, quiet has been preserved and routine life has begun to be restored. The government offices and banks in the Gaza Strip reopened, and on May 7, 2019, the schools in the Gaza Strip will reopen (al-Ghad TV, May 6, 2019)



Nifin Eslim, from the al-Ghad TV station in the Gaza Strip, reporting on the quiet and return to daily life after the most recent round of escalation (al-Ghad TV, May 6, 2019).

► **In the most recent round of escalation, the eighth since the beginning of the return marches, 690 rockets and mortar shells were fired at Israel, about 400 fell in open areas and about 200 in inhabited areas.** About 86% of the rockets targeting inhabited areas were intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system, but since barrages of rockets were fired at the same time it was difficult to close the skies hermetically (IDF spokesman, May 5, 2019).

Analysis of the rocket fire

► The massive barrages of rockets and mortar shells were fired by Hamas, the PIJ and other terrorist organizations. They ended after midnight on May 5, 2019. During the two-day escalation **690 rockets and mortar shells were fired (during Operation Protective Edge an average of 150 rockets and mortar shells were fired daily)**. The Iron Dome aerial defense system intercepted more than 240. Most of the rocket fire was directed at civilian targets. Many of them fell near buildings and public institutions.³

³ **Note:** Musa Abu Marzouq, a member of Hamas' political bureau, falsely stated that the "resistance" [i.e., the terrorist organizations] adhered to international law and that as opposed to Israel, did not attack civilian targets (Musa Abu Marzouq's Twitter account, May 5, 2019).



Launching rockets at Israel from the Gaza Strip (Palinfo Twitter account, May 5, 2019). The picture at the right shows at several rockets launched at the same time.

► The following is an analysis of the rocket fire:

- ◆ Unlike the previous rounds, **barrages of scores of rockets were launched simultaneously**. The number of launches was **unprecedented**.
- ◆ The **range of the targets was gradually increased**. Besides the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip, barrages of rockets were launched at communities in **the northern Negev and the southern coastal plain** (Rehovot, Gedera, Ashdod, Beersheba).



Rockets fired from the Gaza Strip land in Ashdod (Palinfo Twitter account, Shehab, May 5, 2019).

- ◆ At the same time as rocket and mortar shells were fired at the communities near the Gaza Strip, **barrages were deliberately fired at city centers** (Beersheba, Ashdod, Qiryat Gat, Ashqelon) **to attack the civilian population**.

◆ **Hamas and the PIJ did not launch rockets at the central region of Israel (the Tel Aviv area),** despite their threats. Apparently they were saving that stage for the continuation of the round or for one of the next rounds.

◆ The PIJ said it would use its Badr 3 rockets, which it claims have **particularly destructive capabilities.**



Hamas notice for the beginning of Ramadan shows a crescent moon firing a rocket (Shehab Facebook page, May 6, 2019).

Other events on the ground

► In addition to the rocket and mortar shell attacks, **Hamas tried to attack IDF ground forces with drones.** The attacks were prevented by the IDF (IDF spokesman, May 5, 2019).

► **A Kornet anti-tank missile was launched at a civilian Israeli vehicle at a junction near the southern city of Sderot.** The vehicle was hit and the driver was killed. A nearby bus carrying soldiers was not hit. Hamas' military wing claimed responsibility for hitting a jeep of IDF soldiers with a guided missile. The attack was documented in a video issued by the wing (Sawt al-Aqsa, May 5, 2019).



The Israeli vehicle hit by a Kornet anti-tank missile fired from the Gaza Strip (Shehab Facebook page, May 5, 2019).

► In addition to launching rockets and mortar shells, **Hamas tried to attack Israel's cyberspace**. The attempts were prevented before the plan could be implemented. As part of the IDF's preventive actions, Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked the al-Ghussein building in Gaza City where Hamas' cyber network operated, destroying its operational capabilities (IDF spokesman, May 5, 2019).



The al-Ghussein building in Gaza City after it was attacked from the air. (Shehab Facebook page, May 5, 2019). The building was used by Hamas' cyber unit.

Israelis killed and wounded

► **The most recent round of escalation took the lives of four people**, more than any previous round (three people killed by rockets and the fourth when an anti-tank missile hit his vehicle). **More than 123 people were wounded**. Among them, eight were critically or seriously wounded and 115 slightly wounded. All those killed and wounded were **civilians** with the exception of two soldiers (wounded by a mortar shell near Sderot). There was extensive property damage.

► The following are the circumstances of the fatalities:

- ◆ On the night of May 4, 2019, a man was killed when a rocket fell in his front yard.
- ◆ On May 5, 2019, a man was killed and two were wounded, one of them seriously, by shrapnel from a rocket that fell near a factory in the industrial zone south of Ashqelon.
- ◆ On May 5, 2019, a man was killed when an anti-tank missile hit his vehicle at a junction near Sderot.
- ◆ On the evening of May 5, 2019, a man was killed when a rocket fell in the yard of his house in Ashqelon.

Palestinians killed and wounded

Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, reported that **27 Palestinians had been killed. As usual, he did not provide information about their identity, but an ITIC examination revealed that 16 of them were terrorist operatives.** He reported that **154 Palestinians had been wounded** (Ashraf al-Qidra's Facebook page, May 6, 2019). An ITIC examination of the 16 terrorist operatives killed revealed that **eight of them were Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorist operatives; four belonged to Fatah; two belonged to Hamas** (one was an operative of a network calling itself "the defenders of al-Aqsa"); **one was a woman officer in Hamas' internal security force and one was an operative from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP).** Seven of the Palestinians killed were apparently civilians (including a child and a baby) who were near targets when they were attacked.

► The Hamas ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip issued orders to residents for conducting themselves during the escalation. They were instructed to stay away from sites that had been attacked lest the attacks be renewed, not to touch suspicious objects, and not to gather in hospitals, in order to allow the medical teams to perform their duties. They were also instructed not to answer telephone calls from unidentified callers and not to issue information about the activities of the "resistance" or sites from which rockets were launched (Dunia al-Watan, May 5, 2019).

IDF response

As long as the rocket and mortar fire continued, the IDF continued and expanded its attacks on terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip. **The IDF attacked more than 350 terrorist targets, most of them belonging to Hamas and the PIJ.** On May 5, 2019, the IDF attacked terrorist infrastructures and buildings housing terrorist organization offices. In addition, the houses of operatives were attacked, and a number of targeted killings were carried out. **A large number of the targets attacked were located inside the civilian population.** In addition to the aerial attacks, IDF tanks operated near the border and attacked mainly squads launching rockets and mortar shells.



IDF attack on Gaza (Palinfo Twitter account, May 5, 2019).

► Among the targets attacked were (IDF spokesman, May 6, 2019):⁴

- ◆ **The office of Tawfiq Abu Na'im, the Hamas minister of the interior and head of the security forces in the Gaza Strip. The office was located in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City.**⁵ Iyad al-Bazam, spokesman for the ministry of the interior in the Gaza Strip, said **Israel had destroyed the headquarters of the internal security forces' leadership** (Dunia al-Watan Twitter account, May 5, 2019). The IDF also attacked the house of Abdallah Abu Na'im, Tawfiq Abu Na'im's son (Palinfo Twitter account, May 5, 2019).



Right: Attack on Hamas' internal security compound in the Rimal neighborhood of Gaza City (IDF spokesman's website, May 5, 2019). Left: Attack on the house of Abdallah Abu Na'im, son of Tawfiq Abu Na'im (Palinfo Twitter account, May 5, 2019).

- ◆ **A seven-story building** that hid Hamas fighting tunnels in the al-Furqan neighborhood of Gaza City. Hamas took control of the building while it was being

⁴ This completes the list of targets attacked that was published in the ITIC bulletin issued on May 5, 2019.

⁵ Tawfiq Abu Na'im was imprisoned in Israel and released in the Gilad Shalit prisoner exchange deal. After his release he joined the Hamas leadership in the Gaza Strip and became head of the security forces.

constructed and dug a **branching tunnel system underneath it**. The building is near a school in the heart of a civilian neighborhood.



Attack on a seven-story building which hid a branching tunnel system (IDF spokesman's website, May 5, 2019).

- ◆ **The office of a Hamas military wing battalion commander** in the center of Khan Yunis.
 - ◆ **Military compounds and training camps** belonging to Hamas and the PIJ.
 - ◆ **Sites for the manufacture of weapons**, including sites inside operatives' houses.
 - ◆ **A training facility** in Jabalia used by Hamas' naval forces
 - ◆ **Boats** belonging to Hamas' naval force.
- On the afternoon of May 5, 2019, the IDF's attacks were extended to include the **targeted killing of a terrorist operative**. He was **Hamed Ahmed Abd al- Khoudary**, 34, who was killed while driving his car. According to the IDF spokesman, al-Khoudary was **an important money-changer in the Gaza Strip** who was responsible for **transferring currency from Iran to the terrorist organizations**. He had two money-changing companies which have been on Israel's list of terrorist organizations since June 2018. Through his companies and with the help of money changers abroad he transferred large amounts of currency from Iran to the military-terrorist wings of Hamas and the PIJ, and to other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip (IDF spokesman, May 5, 2019). Hamas' military wing issued a mourning notice for him calling him a commander of its ranks (Radio Sawt al-Aqsa Twitter account, May 5, 2019). The Palestinian media reported he was the commander of a platoon in the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades, Hamas' military-terrorist wing (al-Hadath, May 5, 2019).



Right: Hamad al-Khoudary (Ghaza al-'An Twitter account, May 5, 2019). Left: Al-Khoudary's vehicle, was attacked by the IDF (Palinfo Twitter account, May 5, 2019).

Terrorist organization activity in the Gaza Strip

► **Most of the rocket and mortar fire at Israel was carried out by Hamas and the PIJ.** The so-called "joint operations room" coordinated the attacks. It issued announcements about the attacks on Israel and occasionally also updated information about the increase in the range of rocket and mortar fire after Israeli attacks. For example, the joint operations room announced the rockets fired at Ashqelon and Beersheba were in retaliation for the continued Israeli attacks on buildings in the Gaza Strip.

► In the meantime, the PIJ's military wing said that in retaliation for Israel's attacks they had attacked Israeli cities and villages with new rockets with **particularly destructive capabilities** which were being used for the first time (Sawa, May 5, 2019). Later that evening the military wing issued a video showing a rocket called the Badr 3. According to the video, the rocket had high destructive capabilities, had been used in "recent events" and had been fired at Ashqelon (al-Jazeera, May 5, 2019).



Pictures from a PIJ video about its manufacture of Badr 3 rockets. According to the PIJ, they were used in the most recent round of escalation (Jerusalem Brigades website, May 6, 2019).

Egyptian mediation for a lull

► **Behind the scenes intensive ongoing contacts were held for a ceasefire, mediated by the Egyptians.** Before the ceasefire, **Isma'il Haniyeh**, head of Hamas' political bureau, said that a return to the lull was possible, and that its preservation depended on an Israeli commitment to completely stop firing at the Gaza Strip, especially at the participants of the return marches, and its commitment to immediately lift the "siege" of the Gaza Strip. He added that if Israel did not live up to those commitments, the confrontations would continue (Sawa, May 5, 2019). PIJ spokesman **Da'ud Shehab** said talks and meetings were being held with the Egyptian leadership in Cairo, and that there was a possibility a lull could be reached, but Israel would have to pay a high price and commit to the understandings (Paltoday, May 5, 2019),

► On the evening of May 5, 2019, Palestinian sources hinted that the Egyptian-mediated **talks had begun to bear fruit** and that in the coming hours it would be possible to achieve a lull. According to the sources, the Palestinians insisted on a full Israeli commitment to stop its aggression and lift the "siege" (al-Mayadeen, May 5, 2019). Initially it was reported that the ceasefire would go into effect at 2400. However, Israel denied the reports and continued carrying out aerial attacks on terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip. Rocket and mortar fire at Israel also continued. It was later reported that the ceasefire would go into effect at 0430, but the announcement was not official. **At 0700 the IDF spokesman announced the lifting of the alert restrictions. As of 1500 no official information has been released about the terms the two sides agreed on.**

► Regarding the negotiations between the sides, Hashem Zaqut, a correspondent for al-Jazeera in the Gaza Strip, reported that the terrorist organizations had rejected Israel's offer of merely quiet in return for quiet. They posed a number of conditions, including opening the crossings, stopping the harm done to fishermen and to the demonstrators at the return marches. He reported that Israel insisted on putting a stop to the return marches, but the organizations completely rejected the idea (aljazeera.net, May 6, 2019).

► A number of other Palestinians related to the conditions for the ceasefire reached between Israel and the Gaza Strip:

- ◆ A "senior Palestinian" reported that the ceasefire was achieved on the condition that it be mutual and simultaneous, and that Israel implement the understandings for lifting the "siege" of the Gaza Strip. That included restoring the fishing zone from six to

15 nautical miles, completing the improvements in the supply of electricity and fuel, and making it easier to import and export merchandise.

◆ Senior Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP) figure Wisam Zaghbur said the ceasefire agreement included the stopping of Israeli "aggression" against the Palestinians and Israel's commitment to implement measures to ease the "siege," among them the opening of the crossings (Agence France-Presse, May 6, 2019).