



**Escalation in the Gaza Strip:  
Massive rocket fire at Israel after the targeted killing of a  
senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad military commander  
(Updated to 14:00, November 12, 2019)**

November 12, 2019

## Overview

Before dawn on November 12, 2019, Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked a building in the Sajaiya neighborhood in the northern Gaza Strip. **Bahaa Abu al-Atta, the commander of the northern brigade of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and his wife were killed in the attack.** ( For a portrait of Bahaa Abu al-Atta, see **Appendix A**). In addition, Syrian and Palestinian media reported that **a building in the al-Mazzeh neighborhood of Damascus was also attacked. The son of senior PIJ figure Akram al-Ajouri was killed in the attack.** Senior figures of the PIJ and other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip threatened revenge, **linking the attacks in the Gaza Strip and Syria to each other.**

► Immediately after Bahaa Abu al-Atta was killed PIJ operatives fired barrages of rockets at Israel. **Initially rockets were fired at the south, but a short time later rockets targeted central Israel.** As of noon, November 12, 2019, about **150 rockets had been fired.** Several dozen civilians were treated for shock or minor injuries. In addition, houses in the southern Israeli cities of Sderot and Netivot were damaged. The roads near the Gaza Strip were closed and the trains in the southern Negev stopped running. The commander of the Israeli Home Front ordered the closing of schools and of non-vital places of employment in southern and central Israel. **In response to the rocket fire the IDF attacked PIJ targets in the Gaza Strip.**



**Death notice issued by the PIJ for Bahaa Abu al-Atta. "[We are] ready" appears in large print (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 12, 2019).**

► So far **most of the rockets were launched by the PIJ**, while Hamas and the other organizations stood on the sidelines, in contradiction of their belligerent rhetoric and public

expressions of solidarity. However, if the round of escalation continues, **other organizations, including Hamas, may carry out their threats and join the rocket fire (thereby increasing its scope and lethality)**. **Note:** So far, as of the morning of November 13, 2019, Hamas has still not joined the rocket fire.

## Targeted Killing of Bahaa Abu al-Atta: Overview

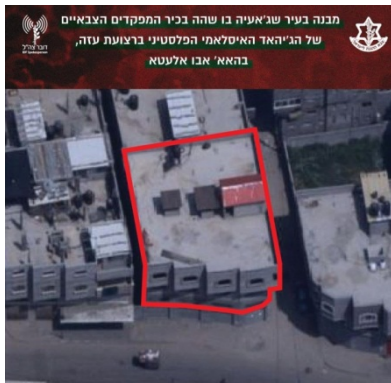
### The Gaza Strip

► In a joint Israeli security forces' operation, before dawn on the morning of November 12, 2019, a building was attacked in the Sajaiya neighborhood of Gaza City where Bahaa Abu al-Atta, commander of the PIJ's northern brigade, was staying. According to a report from the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, Bahaa Abu al-Atta and his wife were killed, and two Palestinians were injured (al-Aqsa and Ashraf al-Qidra's Twitter account, November 12, 2019). It was the first time since Operation Protective Edge (2014) that the IDF carried out the targeted killing of a senior PIJ military wing commander.

► According to the IDF spokesman, **Bahaa Abu al-Atta was a "ticking bomb" and was planning, in the coming days, to fire rockets at the Israelis communities near the Gaza Strip.** In addition, **he planned to carry out sniper attacks, infiltrations into Israeli territory and the launching of quadcopters.** The IDF spokesman said the attack was based on precise intelligence and carried out as **a pinpoint preventive strike to remove a threat to Israel**, not a return to Israel's policy of targeted killings. However, he added, the IDF was prepared **to continue operating against anyone who tried to harm Israel's security** (IDF spokesman, November 12, 2019). **Nadav Argaman, head of the Israel Security Agency**, said that Bahaa Abu al-Atta had not accepted the understandings agreed on with Hamas. He said, **"We reached the bed he slept in and his little room. He had recently been hiding in various safe houses...he had acted like a wanted man from the last barrage of rocket fire<sup>1</sup> until last night"** (Ynet, November 12, 2019).

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<sup>1</sup> Nadav Argaman was referring to the PIJ's rocket fire at Sderot and the western Negev communities on October 31 and November 1, 2019.



**Right: The house where Bahaa Abu al-Atta lived in the Sajaiya neighborhood in eastern Gaza City (QudsN Facebook page, November 12, 2019). Left: Aerial photo of Bahaa Abu al-Atta's house (IDF spokesman, November 12, 2019).**

► The PIJ's military wing announced the death of the commander of the northern Gaza Strip region and one of the most prominent members of its military council. According to the announcement, Bahaa Abu al-Atta (Abu Salim) and his wife were killed in their house in the Sajaiya area of eastern Gaza City. **The military wing announced it was raising the level of alert and calling a general mobilization of its operatives and units.** It stressed that the organization's response would match "the extent of the crime" carried out by Israel (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 12, 2019). The funeral of Bahaa Abu al-Atta and his wife was held in the morning on November 12, 2019. The cortège left from the Shifaa hospital, went past Bahaa Abu al-Atta's house and to the al-Amri mosque (Dunia al-Watan Twitter account, November 12, 2019).



**Bahaa Abu al-Atta, commander of the PIJ's military wing in the northern Gaza Strip (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 12, 2019).**



**The funeral held for Bahaa Abu al-Atta in Gaza  
(Facebook page of Gazan journalist Hassan Aslih, November 12, 2019).**

## An Attack in Damascus

- ▶ In addition to the attack in the Gaza Strip, the Syrian media reported that a residential building had been attacked in the western Damascus neighborhood of al-Mazzeh. According to reports, among those killed was **the son of Akram al-Ajouri, a senior PIJ figure**.
- ▶ The PIJ issued a formal statement that the house of Akram al-Ajouri, a member of the organization's "external" political bureau, had been damaged and that one of his sons had been killed (al-Mayadeen, November 12, 2019). **Senior PIJ figure Khaled al-Batash** accused Israel of carrying out the attack and linked it to the attack in the Gaza Strip (see below). **Note:** Information about the attack and Akram al-Ajouri can be found in **Appendix B**.

## PIJ Rocket Fire at Israel

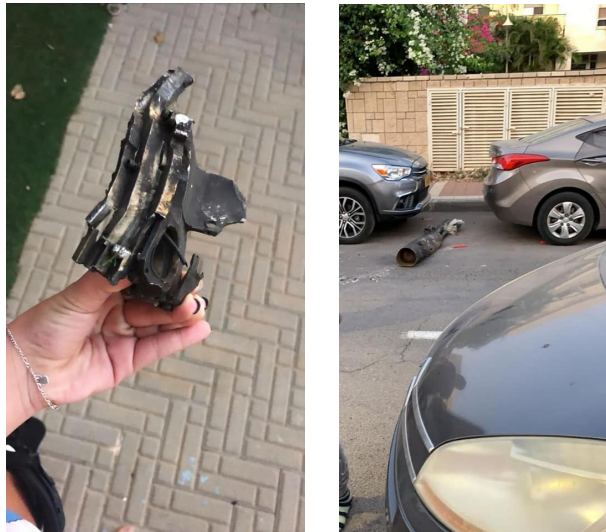
- ▶ Immediately after the death of Bahaa Abu al-Atta had been made public the PIJ's military wing announced the general mobilization of all its operatives to respond to the killing. The military wing said the response would be unlimited and it would match the level of the "crime" Israel had committed (Paldf, November 12, 2019).
- ▶ A short time after Bahaa Abu al-Atta was killed Jerusalem Brigades operatives launched several barrages of rockets at Israel, **initially at Israel's south**. After a short time **the range of the rockets was extended to include central Israel**. By 14:00 on November 12, 2019, **about 150 rockets** had been fired at Israel. About 70 of them were intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system (IDF spokesman, November 12, 2019).



**Rockets fired at Israel from the Gaza Strip  
(Facebook page of Gazan journalist Hassan Aslih, November 12, 2019).**

► **The main events were the following:**

- ◆ **The first barrage was before 06:00** – rockets were launched at **Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip and the southern cities of Ashdod, Gedera and a number of communities in the Lachish region (east of Ashqelon)**. The PIJ's military wing announced that its operatives had launched the rockets (Dunia al-Watan Twitter account, November 12, 2019).



**A rocket hit east of the southern Israeli city of Ashdod  
(Palinfo Twitter account, November 12, 2019).**



**A rocket that hit a community in the western Negev (western Negev spokesman's unit, November 12, 2019).**

- ◆ At around **07:00** the range of the rockets was extended and rockets were launched at **the central Israeli cities of Rishon LeTzion, Holon, and Tel Aviv.**
- ◆ At around **10:00 rockets were launched at the south-central city of Gan Yavne.** One rocket fell on the main highway, where many vehicles were in transit. One man was injured by shrapnel. Several vehicles were damaged.



**Right: A rocket hits highway #4 at the Gan Yavne Junction (Netivei Israel, November 12, 2019).  
Left: The site of the rocket hit at the Gan Yavne Junction (Israel Police Force's spokesman's unit, November 12, 2019).**

- ◆ **By the afternoon rockets had also been launched at the central city of Modi'in (near Ben-Gurion International Airport) and the southern city of Netivot.**



**Right: A house in the southern Israeli city of Sderot that took a direct rocket hit. Left: A house in the southern Israeli city of Netivot that took a direct rocket hit (Palinfo Twitter account, November 12, 2019).**

## Israelis injured

► An eight-year-old girl collapsed in her home in Holon when the sirens were sounded. After she was resuscitated she was transferred to a hospital in critical condition. Medical teams also cared for several dozen people who had incurred minor injuries. They included people injured by shrapnel, who had fallen while running for shelter and who were treated for shock. Several houses in Netivot and Sderot took direct hits.

## Israel's Response to the Rocket Fire

► **The IDF deployed for a broad response to the rocket fire.** Reinforcements were sent to the south and additional Iron Dome batteries were deployed. The commander of the Israeli Home Front ordered the schools to be closed in Israel's south and center, non-vital places of work were shut down, and the railroads in the south stopped running. In light of the escalation, a meeting of the political-security cabinet was held (Israeli media, November 12, 2019). After the meeting, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi said in a joint statement that Israel had no interest in an escalation, but would do everything necessary to defend itself (Walla, November 12, 2019).

► In response to the rocket fire Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked two terrorist operatives from the PIJ's rocket unit in the northern Gaza Strip (IDF spokesman, November 12, 2019). The Palestinian media reported that the Israeli Air Force had attacked a motorcycle in the western part of Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip and that both riders had been killed (Dunia al-Watan, November 12, 2019).

► In the afternoon, after the political-security cabinet meeting, and after several Israeli attempts to calm the situation, **the IDF began attacking additional PIJ targets in the Gaza Strip**. Among the targets attacked were a number of operatives of the PIJ's rocket-firing unit in the northern Gaza Strip who were engaged in preparing to fire rockets (IDF spokesman, November 12, 2019).

## The Main Reactions in the Palestinian Media

### Overview

**Senior PIJ figures and spokesman were quick to blame Israel and threaten revenge.**

Somewhat later they were joined by the joint operations room of all the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip and by spokesmen of the various organizations. The main message was that **Israel had committed a crime that would not be ignored** and that it would be responsible for the consequences, including **rocket fire deep into Israeli territory**. Some of the spokesmen, including from Hamas, said that **the blow to the PIJ was a blow to all the organizations, and therefore they all had to respond**. Some of them linked the **targeted killing in the Gaza Strip to the attack in Damascus**. However, **despite the rhetoric about inter-organization solidarity, the PIJ carried out most of the rocket fire, while Hamas did not join** (although that can change).



**Cartoon calling for the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip to continue firing rockets at Israel: "Be happy, mother of the shaheed" (Facebook page of Alaa al-Laqta, November 12, 2019).**

### The main PIJ media reactions

► Immediately after the attack **the PIJ said in an announcement that Israel had committed a "crime" which was "aggression" and "a declaration of war" against the Palestinian**

**people.** Israel, said the announcement, had crossed "all the red lines" (PIJ website, November 12, 2019).

► **Senior PIJ figure Khaled al-Batash** said Israel's actions **in Syria and the Gaza Strip** were "a declaration of war" against the Palestinian people and the declaration of an ongoing confrontation with the "resistance." He **said they would not permit Israel to change the rules of engagement** [in Arabic, "rules of the resistance"] and Israel would pay the price for the killing [of Bahaa Abu al-Atta] (Filastin al-Yawm, November 11, 2019). At the funeral held for Bahaa Abu al-Atta, Khaled al-Batash said that the Jerusalem Brigades were not alone in the battle, and that **all the organizations of the "Palestinian resistance" stood shoulder-to-shoulder with them.** He added that the "resistance" would avenge the blood of the shaheeds and teach Israel a harsh lesson (Dunia al-Watan, November 12, 2019; Twitter account of the Paltoday channel, November 12, 2019).

► **PIJ spokesman Da'ud Shehab** said that Israel's actions were **"a declaration of war" against the Palestinian people regardless of where they were.** He said that a confrontation with Israel had begun (Filastin al-Yawm, November 12, 2019).

► **PIJ spokesman Musab al-Brim** said that there would be no more discussion about any kind of mediation for a lull. He said it was too early to talk about mediation or the renewal of understandings for a lull, and that the right to respond had been given to the military forces on the ground (Dunia al-Watan, November 12, 2019).

## Hamas reactions

► **Hamas said in a statement** that the path of jihad and the "resistance" would continue and grow in strength, and that the killing would not be passed over in silence. Hamas said Israel would bear responsibility for all the consequences of a military escalation and the attack on a senior PIJ figure (Paldf Twitter account, November 12, 2019).

► **Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum** said that the killing of Bahaa Abu al-Atta and the attack in Syria were a serious escalation of the situation facing the Palestinian "resistance" and the Palestinian people. He said the "resistance" would respond with great force and not permit Israel to break the rules of engagement ("the equation"). He added that the **response would come from all the organizations** (al-Mayadeen, November 12, 2019).

► **Senior Hamas figure Isma'il Radwan** said Israel would bear responsibility for the events. He said that the killing of the heads of the PIJ would not harm the path of the "resistance," and that **they would avenge the blood of their commander, his wife and family** (Filastin

al-Yawm, November 12, 2019). On another occasion he said that **a blow to the military wing of the PIJ was a blow to the military wing of Hamas because the two are united**. He also said that the joint operations room would lead the response (al-Mayadeen, November 12, 2019).

### Palestinian Authority (PA) reactions

► **Mahmoud Abbas' office** condemned "Israel's ongoing crime" against the Palestinian people in the Gaza Strip. He claimed the "crime" **had led to the "death of a civilian [sic] and his wife, and the wounding of their children"** when their home in the Sajaiya neighborhood was attacked. He said Israel ("the occupation government") was fully responsible for the deterioration of the situation in the Gaza Strip, and called on the international community to force the Israeli government to stop its "aggression" immediately and to provide urgent protection for the Palestinians wherever they may be found (Wafa, November 12, 2019).

► **Ibrahim Milhem**, spokesman for the PA government, said that killing the commander of the PIJ's northern brigade was "organized terrorism" carried out by Israel. He said Mahmoud Abbas was in contact with friendly states to stop Israel's "aggression" (Dunia al-Watan, November 12, 2019).

### Other reactions

► **The joint operations room of all the terrorist organizations** in the Gaza Strip issued a mourning notice for Bahaa Abu al-Atta and said that the operations room would provide a painful response to the "Zionist crime" against a "resistance" leader. The notice said Israel was fully responsible for its "crime."

► **Popular Resistance Committees spokesman (i.e., the Iran-led countries and proxies) Abu Mujahed** said that the killing in the Gaza Strip and the killing of the son of a PIJ operative in Syria were the opening shots of a battle that the "Palestinian resistance" was duty bound to deal with. He said an escalation with the PIJ was **an escalation with all the organizations in the Gaza Strip and with the "resistance axis"** [i.e., the Iran-led terrorist organizations] (al-Mayadeen, November 12, 2019).

## Appendix A

### Portrait of Bahaa Salim Abu al-Atta (Abu al-Salim)

► **Bahaa Salim Abu al-Atta (Abu al-Salim)** was born in the Sajaiya neighborhood of Gaza City on November 25, 1977. He went to school in Sajaiya and studied of a BA in sociology. He was married to Asmaa (who was killed with him) and had five children: Salim, 19; Muhammad, 18; Isma'il, 15; Fatma, 14; and Liyan, 10.



**Bahaa Abu al-Atta**  
(al-Hadath, November 4, 2019).

► Bahaa Abu al-Atta joined the ranks of the Jerusalem Brigades, the PIJ's military-terrorist wing, at the beginning of 1990. He was detained a number of times by the PA's security services because of his activity in the organization. He rose through the ranks until he became **the commander of the northern brigade and one of the senior figures of the organization in the Gaza Strip**. As soon as he was appointed commander, he reorganized the ranks and **commanded the rounds of escalation in the Gaza Strip**. Three attempts were made on his life, the last unsuccessful one during Operation Protective Edge (PIJ website, November 12, 2019).

► According to the IDF spokesman, Bahaa Abu al-Atta was in fact the commander of the Jerusalem Brigades' northern brigade, but actually **his influence on the PIJ went beyond the northern Gaza Strip. According to the IDF spokesman he was behind most of the attacks from the Gaza Strip carried out by the PIJ during the past year**. He was responsible for the rocket fire attack on Sderot in August 2019<sup>2</sup> and the barrage of rockets

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<sup>2</sup> During August 2019 rockets were fired several times at Sderot and the western Negev communities without any organization's claiming responsibility.

fired at the beginning of November 2019.<sup>3</sup> **Bahaa Abu al-Atta planned to attack Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip with rocket fire in the near future and trained squads for sniper fire, infiltrations into Israeli territory and the launching of quadcopters** (IDF spokesman, November 12, 2019). According to Nadav Argaman, head of the Israel Security Agency, **during the past year Bahaa Abu al-Atta generated most of the terrorist attacks from the Gaza Strip**. He initiated, planned and carried out many terrorist attacks and did not, like Hamas, accept the conditions of the understandings (Walla, November 12, 2019).

► Proof of a status higher than that of a local military commander was his participation in the delegation of senior PIJ figures that visited Egypt in October 2019 and met with Egyptian General Intelligence officials (Shehab, October 17, 2019). During the visit various issues were discussed and the delegation reached an agreement with Egyptian General Intelligence to release Palestinians who were imprisoned in Egyptian jails (al-Hadath, October 17, 2019). In addition, Bahaa Abu al-Atta's name was mentioned as one of the members of the Jerusalem Brigades' military council (al-Hadath, October 17, 2019).



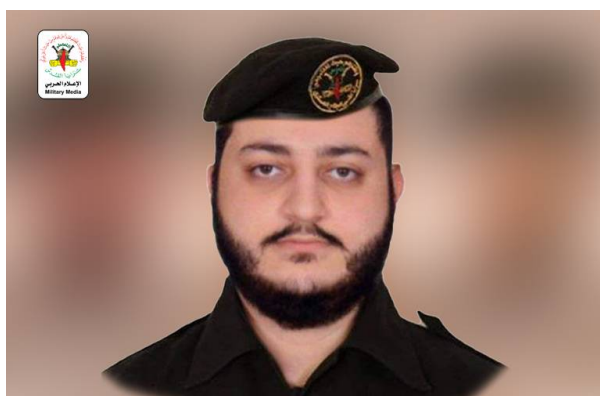
**Right: Khaled al-Batash and Bahaa Abu al-Atta at the Rafah Crossing. Left: Nafez Azzam, Khaled al-Batash and Bahaa Abu al-Atta receive the PIJ operatives released from an Egyptian jail (Twitter account of the Russia Today correspondent in the Gaza Strip, October 17, 2019).**

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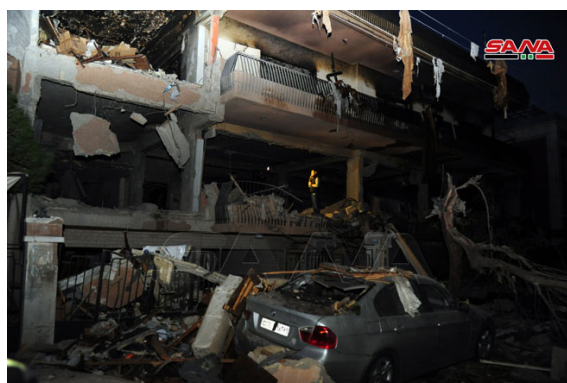
<sup>3</sup> On October 31 and November 1, 2019, rockets were fired at Sderot and the western Negev communities without any organization's claiming responsibility and without any excuse. In the assessment of Israeli security forces Bahaa Abu al-Atta was behind the rocket fire.

## Appendix B

The PIJ's military wing announced the death of two of its operatives in the attack **in Damascus on the house of Akram al-Ajouri**, a member of the PIJ's political bureau. According to the announcement, his son, **Muaz Akram al-Ajouri, and Abdallah Yusuf Hassan, a resident of Damascus, were killed in the attack** (Jerusalem Brigades website, November 12, 2019). **Palestinian figures linked the targeted killing of Bahaa Abu al-Atta with the attack in Damascus.**



**Muaz Akram al-Ajouri, son of Akram al-Ajouri**  
(Jerusalem Brigades website, November 12, 2019).



**The ruins of the house of Akram al-Ajouri in the Mazzeh neighborhood in Damascus**  
(Sana, November 12, 2019).

► **Senior PIJ figure Akram al-Ajouri** was born in the Gaza Strip. He had three sons, one of whom, Muaz, was killed in the attack in Damascus. At the end of September 2018 **he was elected to the PIJ's political bureau** as on behalf of the external [leadership] . **He was head of the PIJ's "external" military department. He was also in charge of the organization's finances. Al-Ajouri is close to Iran and has close relations with Qassem Soleimani, the commander of the Qods Force and with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah** (Ma'an, November 12, 2019; al-Alam TV, November 12, 2019).



**Akram al-Ajouri (Right: Twitter account of ham0oud94693977, November 12, 2019. Left: Twitter account of Bilal Abd al-Rahman, November 12, 2019).**