



The Tenth Round of Escalation in the Gaza Strip: What Next?

February 27, 2020

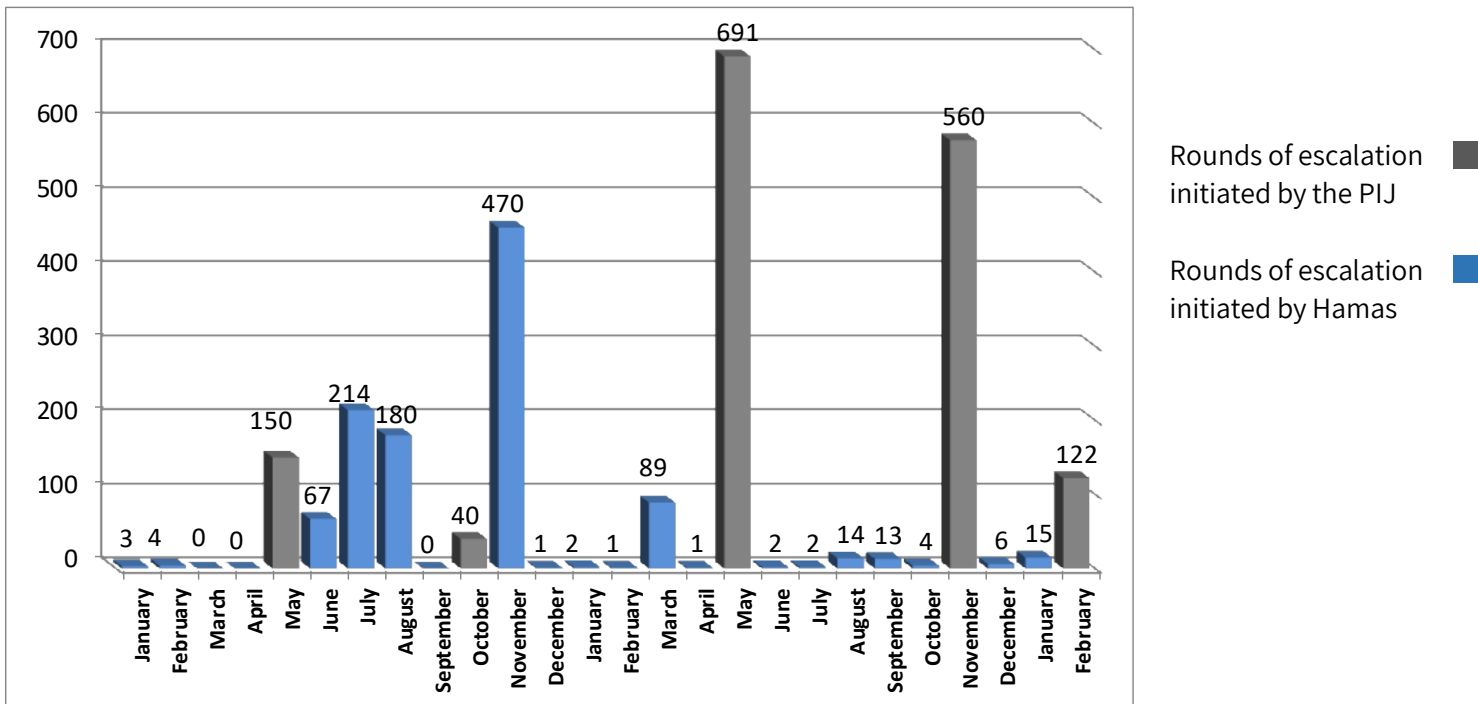
Overview of the Tenth Round of Escalation

On **February 23 and 24, 2020**, there was another significant round of escalation in the Gaza Strip,¹ **the tenth since the beginning of the return marches** (March 30, 2018). It was instigated by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in retaliation for the IDF's killing of one of its operatives who was placing an IED near the border security fence and the subsequent removal of his body with an IDF bulldozer. During the round of escalation **113 rocket and mortar shells were fired** at the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip and at the southern Israeli cities of Sderot and Ashqelon. In response the IDF attacked PIJ terrorist targets in the Gaza Strip and Syria. Two PIJ operatives were killed in the attack near Damascus; no operatives were killed in the attacks on the Gaza Strip. Near midnight on February 24, 2020, the PIJ announced it had completed its retaliation for the death of its operatives. When the rocket fire ceased the IDF stopped attacking in the Gaza Strip.

► An analysis of the tenth round of escalation and a comparison with the previous rounds reveals four main characteristics:

◆ **The three most recent rounds of escalation were initiated by the PIJ after the killing of its operatives and in all three rounds the PIJ played the main role: The tenth round of escalation** was initiated by the PIJ after the killing of an operative who was placing an IED near the border fence. The **ninth round of escalation** (November 12-14, 2019) was triggered by the PIJ after the targeted killing of Bahaa Abu al-Atta, a senior PIJ commander. **The eighth round of escalation, the most massive** so far (May 4-6, 2019) followed **PIJ sniper fire**. The IDF responded by hitting Hamas targets. The following day Israel was attacked by massive, unprecedented Hamas-PIJ rocket fire.

¹ The ITIC defines a significant round of escalation as an event between the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip and the IDF during which more than 40 rockets and mortar shells are fired into Israel. In addition to significant rounds of escalation there is sporadic rocket fire, in most cases lone rockets but in some instances as many as 15.



◆ **Hamas abstained from joining the rocket fire in the two most recent rounds of escalation, which were conducted almost exclusively by the PIJ.** That was unlike Hamas' previous conduct, when it joined the PIJ-initiated rounds of. Hamas abstained from joining the fighting even though it publicly supported the PIJ and despite internal criticism, which in ITIC assessment did not pose a significant challenge to Hamas.

◆ **Hamas did not exert effective pressure on the PIJ to keep it from sporadic rocket fire or to prevent rounds of escalation.** The PIJ's rocket fire policy **contradicts Hamas' current interest in promoting a lull arrangement** which will ease the hardships of the Gazan civilian population and the "siege." However, despite its interests, **Hamas abstains from using its superior military-security capabilities against the PIJ**, for various internal and external reasons (see below).

◆ **Israel differentiates between Hamas and the PIJ:** Since Hamas refrained from joining the rocket fire, **during the two most recent rounds of escalation the IDF attacked only PIJ targets in the Gaza Strip and Syria.** The IDF avoided attacking Hamas targets despite the fact that Israel regards Hamas as sovereign in the Gaza Strip and responsible for all events that occur there. Israel's abstention from attacking Hamas helps Hamas return to "routine" contacts for an arrangement but may possibly lower Hamas' motivation to effectively enforce its policy of restraint.

The two most recent rounds of escalation clearly **illustrated the difficulties facing Hamas and Israel**: in ITIC assessment it is in the interests of both sides to continue promoting contacts for an arrangement and to avoid actions that could lead to a broad military confrontation. However, **Hamas' not taking effective measures (at least so far)** to suppress the PIJ's independent policy and calm the situation make it difficult to establish a **stable, sustainable arrangement**. Israel is interested in calm, but the PIJ's provocations and Hamas' weakness **are liable to leave Israel no choice and to push it into a broad military confrontation, regardless of its fundamental preference for a lull**.

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Its Attack Policy

► The PIJ is a radical, belligerent, Islamist, Palestinian terrorist organization which seeks the destruction of the State of Israel through a violent struggle and on principle is opposed any political agreement. Its leader is Lebanon-based **Ziyad al-Nakhalah**, who was chosen for the position at the end of September 2018. Of all the Palestinian terrorist organizations, **the PIJ has the closest relations with Iran**, receiving generous support that includes money and weapons. That has enabled the PIJ to establish its position as the second most important terrorist organization in the Gaza Strip after Hamas, but also **makes the PIJ dependent on Iran**, facilitating Iran's advancing of its interests in the Palestinian arena.



Ziyad al-Nakhalah (right) with Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC's Qods Force, who was killed by the Americans in a targeted killing. The picture was taken at a ceremony held for the 10th anniversary of the killing of senior Hezbollah terrorist commander Imad Mughniyeh (Mehr News Agency, February 15, 2018).

► The Israeli media's description of the PIJ as a "minor organization" is incorrect. **That is because it has extensive military and civilian infrastructures in the Gaza Strip** which include **rockets** (among them medium-range rockets that can reach the center of Israel) and

attack tunnels. The PIJ also has a **media network** (a satellite TV station operated from Beirut, and a radio station and news agency based in the Gaza Strip) and a **network of social services** (which also deals with indoctrinating with younger generation with the PIJ's radical Islamist anti-Israeli ideology). At the end of Operation Pillar of Defense Ziyad al-Nakhalah effusively praised Iran for its aid, saying that "...**the weapons used by the resistance, even the weapons used by Hamas, are Iranian, from the [first] bullet to the [last] missile. And even what is manufactured locally [in the Gaza Strip] is in reality Iranian...**" (al-Hayat, November 18, 2012).



Right: Notice on the PIJ's Jerusalem Brigades website. The Arabic reads, "By means of the al-Fajr (a medium-distance Iranian rocket that can reach Israel's center] victories will be created." **Left:** A picture on the Jerusalem Brigades website showing PIJ operatives carrying an al-Fajr rocket.²

► During the two years since the beginning of the return marches, in most instances the PIJ has coordinated its activities with Hamas, which is the dominant organization in the Gaza Strip. However, in several instances **the PIJ has independently initiated attacks in defiance of Hamas, possibly directed by Iran.** The first PIJ independent initiative, after Ziyad al-Nakhalah became head of the organization, was the October 26-27, 2018, round of escalation, in which 40 rockets and mortar shells were fired at the western Negev and Ashqelon. According to the PIJ the attack was in response to the killing of five return march participants. It ended with a unilateral ceasefire announced by the organization. Rounds of escalation initiated by the PIJ and ongoing sporadic attacks between the rounds have **increased during the past six months to the point where it would seem that the PIJ has its own independent attack policy, showing less and less consideration for the interests of Hamas, Egypt and the local Gazan population.**

² From the ITIC January 20, 2013 bulletin, " Iranian support for the Palestinian terrorist organizations Iran supports the military buildup of Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip and seeks to rebuild their military capabilities after Operation Pillar of Defense, especially their rocket-launching networks.

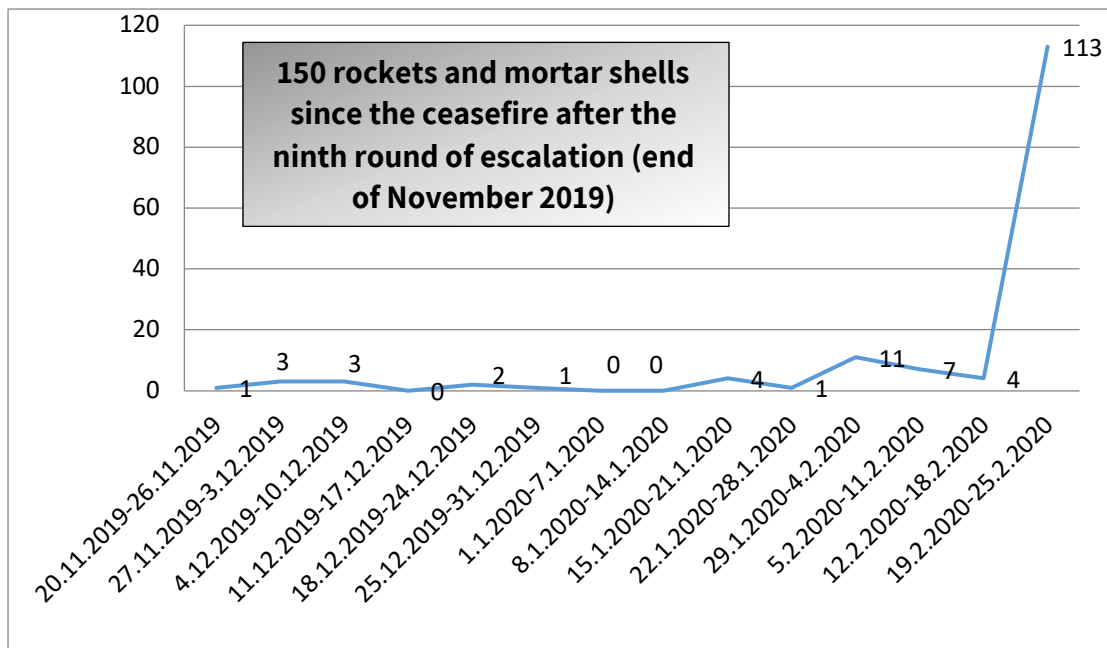
► **The PIJ's independent attack policy has the following characteristics:**

◆ **The PIJ attacks the IDF near the border security fence** with sniper fire, by placing IEDs, and apparently also by throwing Molotov cocktails and IEDs at Israeli forces. The IDF spokesman reported that PIJ terrorist squad that placed the IED near the fence (which triggered the tenth round of escalation) **had placed two others** in recent months.



Right: Two PIJ operatives place an IED near the border security fence. Left: The IED placed by the two terrorists (IDF spokesman's website, February 23, 2020).

◆ **Sporadic rocket and mortar fire into Israel has been carried out almost every week since the targeting killing of Bahaa Abu al-Atta (November 12, 2019) and the most recent round, for a total of 63 rockets and mortar shells.** Since no organization claimed responsibility for the attacks it is difficult to determine the extent of the PIJ's involvement in them, **but in ITIC assessment it has played a significant part.**



◆ **The PIJ's readiness to initiate escalation after the killing of its operatives involved in ongoing terrorist attacks near the border fence.** The rounds of escalation were meant to foster an image of the organization's leading the fight against Israel and to prevent Israel from responding to Hamas provocations. The PIJ has shown readiness to respond to the killing of its operatives with rocket fire and to trigger escalations even when it is clear that Hamas' interests may be harmed (for example, the most recent round of escalation was initiated only two days after Israel announced unprecedented gestures as part of the understanding).

► For a considerable period of time **the PIJ's independent attacks have severely disrupted the contacts for an Israeli-Hamas arrangement mediated by Egypt.** Consideration for the needs of the Gazan population, whose economic situation urgently needs improvement, dealing with the humanitarian hardships and facilitating exit from and entrance into the Gaza Strip are important considerations **influencing mainly Hamas**, which, as sovereign in the Gaza Strip, is responsible for the needs of about two million people. Those are not considerations for which the PIJ would be willing to restrain itself. **Other considerations, internal and external (Iranian influence) are what determine how the PIJ acts** (even if it does not publicly admit it).

► **The balance between the successes and failures of the PIJ's strategy in the two most recent rounds of escalation, from the PIJ's perspective, is, in ITIC assessment, mixed:**

◆ **On the one hand**, the PIJ successfully created a belligerent atmosphere in the Gaza Strip which improves its status with Hamas and some of the Gazan population, increases the prestige of its leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah, and increases the PIJ's status with Iran. **Militarily-operatively**, during the most recent round of escalation the PIJ was again able to establish the rules of engagement, that is, when the escalation began, what its scope was and how it ended. In both rounds the PIJ proved its ability to launch massive rocket fire into Israel without Hamas participation. In the ninth and tenth rounds the organization successfully disrupted daily life in the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip and in the western Negev cities. In the ninth round daily life in Israel's center was affected, causing economic damage and lowering the morale of the Israeli population.



Ziyad al-Nakhalah, PIJ leader, during the ninth round of escalation, claiming that Israeli schools were closed and institutional and industrial activity was restricted, proving that all the cities in the center of Israel received the PIJ's message, sent by long-range rockets (al-Mayadeen YouTube channel, November 13, 2019).

◆ **On the other hand, in the internal Palestinian arena, the striking gap between the PIJ and Hamas** was publicly displayed. Hamas abstained from participating in the ninth and tenth rounds, proving it was not prepared to allow the PIJ (and Iran) to drag it into a broad confrontation with Israel. Hamas' position is supported by Egypt, which has the capability to exert pressure on the PIJ (for example, by preventing the entrance and exit of senior PIJ figures from the Gaza Strip). **Militarily-operatively**, the PIJ experienced several failures: the PIJ rocket fire into Israel in the two most recent rounds of escalation was **far less effective** than the rocket fire of the rounds of escalation in which the PIJ and Hamas' capabilities were combined (reflected in the number of Iron Dome aerial defense system interceptions and the absence of Israeli fatalities). In addition, Israel initiated target killings of senior PIJ commanders and in the two most recent rounds attacked PIJ targets in Syria, thereby establishing new rules of engagement.

Hamas Policy

► Hamas, which is main power center in the Gaza Strip, seeks, in ITIC assessment, a **minimalist, short-term arrangement** (a few years). Within the framework of such an arrangement Hamas strives to achieve significant humanitarian and economic aid combined with practical steps to ease the "siege" (such as easing passage through the crossings, opening the Rafah Crossing, increasing the volume of the goods delivered through the crossings, increase the number of Gazans working in Israel). In return **Hamas may agree to a relative lull controlled more effectively** (as was the case during the three and a half years between Operation Protective Edge and the beginning of the return marches).

► However, as far as Hamas is concerned, **it is not a question of a complete cessation of violence, but rather a decrease in the level of violence to the necessary minimum.**

Hamas intends to apply limited violence whenever Israel, from Hamas' perspective, does not provide the remunerations it desires. **The Hamas model for an arrangement**, in ITIC assessment, is **the ceasefire agreement that ended Operation Protective Edge** (August 26, 2014). The agreement, which was **based on the understandings at the end of Operation Pillar of Defense** (November 22, 2012), included facilitating the passage of people and merchandise through the crossings; the delivery of humanitarian aid and equipment necessary for the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and increasing the fishing zone.³ On the other hand, at the end of Operation Protective Edge there was no agreement about the fundamental core issues, such as a long-term ceasefire, disarming the Gaza Strip or constructing an airport or naval port. In ITIC assessment those matters are currently not on the agenda.

► The PIJ's policy of independence inspired by Iran and Iran (to which it is tied) **harm the Hamas attempts to reach an arrangement mediated by Egypt.** That was obvious in the most recent round of escalation, which the PIJ initiated. The organization began firing rockets **two days after Israel announced unprecedented gestures** for the Gaza Strip within the framework of understandings for an arrangement (increasing the fishing zone off the Gazan coast to 15 nautical miles and issuing 7,000 permits to businessmen for entry into Israel). In addition, Qatar announced it would increase the money it distributed to the Gaza Strip to \$12 million, and would continue the distribution of payments through the end of 2020. **In the wake of the escalation Israel closed the crossings and shut down the fishing zone**, but reopened them when the round of escalation came to an end and quiet was restored.

► **It can be asked why Hamas does not use force to restrain the PIJ.** In ITIC assessment there are two reasons:

- ◆ **The internal Palestinian reason:** The PIJ is not a minor organization but rather strong and has considerable capabilities. Every forceful action against it will involve violence and the loss of life. That will cause the Gazan population to protest and weaken Hamas at a time when it is calling for Palestinian unity for the sake of the

³ For further information, see the announcement about the ceasefire in Ra'i al-Youm, London, August 26, 2014.

campaign against the Trump plan. In ITIC assessment, in a scenario in which Israel implements significant measures that will impact on the Gazan population, or on the other hand, dealing a strong military blow to Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, may increase Hamas' legitimacy to act against the PIJ.

◆**The external reason:** Hamas, especially its military-terrorist wing (the Izz al-Din Qassam Brigades), is dependent on Iran (weapons, money, political support). Iran seems willing to continue supporting Hamas despite the difficulties in their relations because it is interested in strengthening the Gazan front against Israel. A violent confrontation between Hamas (with Egyptian backup) and the PIJ will cause **additional difficulties in Iran-Hamas relations and may have a negative effect on Iranian support for Hamas and increase Hamas' external isolation.**