



The Most Recent Round of Escalation from the Perspective of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad

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Overview

- ▶ On February 23-24, 2020, there was another round of escalation in the Gaza Strip, the tenth since the return marches began (March 30, 2018). The latest round, like the one before it, was **initiated and conducted by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) without Hamas participation**. During the round the PIJ fired 113 rockets and mortar shells at the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip and the southern Israeli cities of Sderot and Ashqelon. In response the IDF attacked PIJ targets in the Gaza Strip and Syria.
- ▶ Senior PIJ figures represented this round of escalation as **a more significant achievement** than the ninth round (November 2019, following the killing of Bahaa Abu al-Atta). That was because the ninth round began with Israel's targeted killing of a senior PIJ commander, while **this time it was the PIJ that dictated the rules of engagement without paying a high price**: The PIJ **initiated the round, decided how it progressed and determined when it ended** (Jerusalem Brigades website, February 24, 2020). In addition, during the latest round the PIJ did not suffer losses, with the exception of the operative who placed the IED near the border fence before the round and two operatives who were killed during the attack in Syria (In the previous round 15 PIJ operatives were killed and substantial damage was done to its infrastructures). Apparently, this time no significant damage was done to its infrastructures.
- ▶ On the other hand, the PIJ's **independent attack policy again demonstrated the ongoing difficulties in its relations with Hamas** (and in ITIC assessment with Egypt as well, which mediates the contacts for an arrangement). In both of the two latest rounds, which were initiated and conducted by the PIJ, **Hamas abstained from participating in the rocket fire. Hamas proved it was not prepared to allow the PIJ (and Iran) to drag it into a broad military confrontation with Israel** at an inconvenient time, when it could harm Hamas' contacts for an arrangement.

► So far the PIJ seems to be aware that its independent actions might create problems for its relations with Hamas and this time it might have overstepped its bounds.¹ In ITIC assessment, the PIJ also paid **a military-operative price** for its independent actions: **the PIJ's rocket fire attacking Israel was less effective than the rounds of escalation in which its capabilities were combined with those of Hamas** (evidenced by the large number of Iron Dome aerial defense system interceptions and the lack of Israeli fatalities).

In ITIC assessment, **in PIJ perspective the advantages of the latest round of escalation were greater than the disadvantages**: Hamas enabled it to continue its independent policy by not directly confronting the PIJ; in the Gaza Strip the PIJ did not suffer fatalities in the fighting and the response of the Gazan population was sympathetic (shocked when the body of the terrorist being evacuated with a bulldozer). **That is liable to encourage the PIJ (with Iranian support) to continue an independent attack policy against Israel, continue challenging Hamas and its policy**. That position was reflected by **PIJ military wing spokesman Abu Hamza**, who said that the latest round of escalation was not the last, and that the PIJ's military wing would continue to spearhead the "resistance" and struggle against Israel (al-Quds al-Yawm, February 25, 2020).



Award presented for a propaganda achievement: journalist Muthana al-Najar (right) receives an award from Nafez Azzam, a member of the PIJ's political bureau, for exposing the removal of the body [of the PIJ terrorist who placed an IED and was killed, which triggered the latest round of escalation] (Jerusalem Brigades website, February 25, 2020).

¹ As opposed to the previous round of escalation, after which PIJ operatives expressed their anger with Hamas (a delegation of senior Hamas figures was thrown out of Bahaa Abu al-Atta's mourning tent), so far no protests against Hamas' lack of participation in the latest round of escalation have been identified.

Statements from Senior PIJ Figures about the Results to the Tenth Round of Escalation

Senior PIJ figures and spokesmen conducted a propaganda campaign after the tenth round of escalation (which they call "the courage of the faithful") to glorify the PIJ's capabilities. They downplayed the challenge their policy presents for Hamas and did not deal with the military-operative difficulties posed by the PIJ's independent policy. The main statements were the following:

► **Abu Hamza, spokesman for the PIJ's military wing**, summarized the latest round of escalation in the following way (al-Quds al-Yawm, February 25, 2020).

- ◆ **Type of fighting:** The fighting squads of the PIJ's military wing attacked "with all their force and resourcefulness." **They forced a curfew on the settlements near the Gaza Strip and on cities in Israel:** "The houses, streets and factories were empty and the only sounds were sirens and rocket fire."
- ◆ **Participation of Hamas and other organizations in the fighting:** Despite the fact that in this round of escalation (as the previous one) the PIJ battled alone, Abu Hamza praised the Palestinian organizations and their military wings, saying they were in constant contact with the PIJ.²
- ◆ **Firm stance of the residents of the Gaza Strip:** Abu Hamza praised the firm stance of the Palestinian people, despite its suffering.
- ◆ **Nature of the next campaign:** Abu Hamza said that **the latest round was not the last** and emphasized the establishment of the strong equation of "an attack in return for an attack, blood in return for blood." He also said that the **PIJ's military wing would continue** to spearhead the "resistance and struggle" and that the jihad and all its activity would continue.

² Abu Hamza avoided mentioning that Hamas did not participate in firing rockets.



Abu Hamza speaks at a ceremony in Khan Yunis at the end of the latest round of escalation (Jerusalem Brigades website, February 25, 2020).

► **PIJ spokesman Mus'ab al-Brim** said that the "Palestinian resistance in general and the Jerusalem Brigades in particular" had become a deciding force in the campaign: "They chose the means with the objective of defending the Palestinian people and **they have the last word.**" He also said that the PIJ aspired to reorganize the forces based on the "the principle of weapons and public support" (al-Quds al-Yawm, February 24, 2020).



Musab al-Brim, PIJ spokesman in the Gaza Strip (Dunia al-Watan TV, February 25, 2020).

► **Yusuf al-Hasseineh**, a member of the PIJ's political bureau, said the organization's military wing had **responded in a responsible way to the "crime"** [i.e., the killing of the terrorist who placed the IED and evacuating his body with a bulldozer] **and to the killing of the two Jerusalem Brigades operatives in Damascus.** He claimed the PIJ had a **new "deterrent equation" with Israel, according to which the "resistance," especially the Jerusalem Brigades, would respond to every Israeli "act of aggression" or "crime"** (website of the al-Ghad channel, February 25, 2020; al-Ghad, February 25, 2020).

► On another occasion **Yusuf al-Hasseineh** said the PIJ's military wing was fulfilling a religious, moral and national obligation when it responded to the "crime" Israel committed against the military wing operative in Khan Yunis. He said the latest round of escalation had

proved the **strength of the ties and unity of the Palestinian public regarding the option of "resistance."** It also revealed, he said, the level of preparedness of the Jerusalem Brigades and **its ability to respond with force** and wage a fully responsible campaign with total preparation (Paltoday, February 26, 2020).

► PIJ spokesman Musab al-Brim said the Palestinian "resistance" and the PIJ's military wing had become a decisive factor. They chose the means for defending the Palestinian people and had the last word. He said the PIJ's military wing adhered to the principle of "an eye for an eye" (al-Quds al-Yawm, February 24, 2020).

► **Walid al-Qutati, a member of the PIJ's political bureau in the Gaza Strip,** said the campaign (which they call "the courage of the faithful") established the equation between the "resistance" and Israel. He said "the resistance in the West Bank is more important than the resistance in the Gaza Strip," and called for resistance [i.e., attacks] to the "deal of the century" in every way possible (Filastin al-Yawm, February 29, 2018).

► **A senior PIJ military wing figure** (whose name was not mentioned) said in an interview that the "resistance," especially the PIJ's military wing, had gained considerable experience in various fields, as a result of the rounds of escalation against Israel. Today, he said, the PIJ's military wing was applying that experience and would know how to choose the most appropriate time to exploit its capabilities for strike against Israel. He said the experience it had gained allowed the [PIJ] to choose to carry out the round of escalation **at a time that was sensitive and significant for Israel** [i.e., on the eve of Israel's general elections] (al-Istiqlal, February 27, 2018).