Overview

► This past week there was relative quiet after the most recent round of escalation in the Gaza Strip. Monday, the day of Israel's general elections, passed without exceptional incident. A general closure was imposed on Judea and Samaria and lifted Tuesday morning. With the exception of Molotov cocktails and stones thrown at Israeli vehicles driving on the roads, no exceptional events were recorded in Judea and Samaria.

► A delegation of senior Hamas figures headed by Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, visited Russia. They met with the Russian foreign minister and senior officials of the Russian foreign ministry. The issues discussed were the Trump plan, the internal Palestinian reconciliation and contacts for an arrangement held under the shadow of the rounds of escalation in the Gaza Strip. Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah received a formal invitation to visit Russia, and he is planning to accept.

► An IDF force identified a vehicle in the northern Golan Heights whose passengers had apparently been involved in an attempted sniper attack against targets in Israel. The force attacked the vehicle (IDF spokesman, March 1, 2020). In ITIC assessment the vehicle belonged to Hezbollah operatives, part of the effort to a military infrastructure in the Golan Heights (the "Golan Portfolio," revealed by the IDF spokesman about a year ago).

Israel's South

The most recent round of escalation

► During the most recent round of escalation (February 23-24, 2020) 113 rockets and mortar shells were fired from the Gaza Strip at Israel, mainly at the communities near the Gaza Strip and the southern Israeli cities of Sderot and Ashqelon. With the return of relative calm, Israel announced the lifting of the sanctions imposed after the escalation. The fishing zone off the

1 For further information, see the February 27, 2020, ITIC bulletin, "The Tenth Round of Escalation: What Next?" and the March 1, 2020, ITIC bulletin, "The Tenth Round of Escalation from the Perspective of the PIJ."
Gazan coast was reopened and the crossings were reopened to the passage of Gazans who had permits to enter Israel.

- Senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) figures continue to represent the round of escalation as a "success story." They repeatedly stress that they had determined the "rules of engagement" and that their military operatives and infrastructure in the Gaza Strip were not severely hit. Senior PIJ figure summed up the round of escalation as follows:
  - **Muhammad Hamid, a member of the PIJ's political bureau**, claimed the organization's military wing had conducted the campaign "with great wisdom" and had showed Israel what it could expect in the future. He claimed that for the PIJ all the cities in Israel had been options for attack. However, based on "wise assessments," the organization had opted to attack the communities near the Gaza Strip, but were prepared to extend the range and quality of rocket fire should Israel "cross red lines" (Filastin al-Yawm, March 2, 2020).
  - **Ihsan Attaya, PIJ representative in Lebanon**, claimed the most recent round of escalation was a matter of honor for the Palestinian people, and therefore there was no choice but to respond strongly after Israel had used a bulldozer to evacuate the body of a PIJ military operative. He said that according to the PIJ's equation, **any Israel attack, regardless of where it was carried out, would be met with a harsh response** (al-Mayadeen, March 1, 2020).

- The Syrian media reported that Israel's attack in Syria (during the escalation) targeted six PIJ and Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps facilities. Among the targets were a house near the al-Mezza airport which may have belonged to Ikram Aghouri, a member of the PIJ's political bureau. Two PIJ terrorist operatives and two Iranians were killed in the attack (Zaman al-Wassel, March 2, 2020).

### Rocket and Mortar Shell Fire

#### Rocket and mortar shell fire into Israel

- On March 1, 2020, an unsuccessful rocket launch was observed in the Gaza Strip. The rocket fell inside Gazan territory (IDF spokesman, March 1, 2020).
Return march

On Friday, February 28, 2020, The Supreme Authority for the Return Marches and the Struggle Against the Deal of the Century organized a march near the Erez Crossing to protest the Trump plan. Before the march the Authority called on the public to turn out en masse for the event. According to Palestinian reports, several thousand people answered the call. During the event the Authority called on the international community to put a stop to the
Trump plan and intervene to protect the Palestinians. The rally was held with the participation of senior Hamas figure Musheir al-Masri (al-Aqsa, February 28, 2020). After the events the Supreme Authority called on the public to participate in similar events which will be held on March 6, 2020 (Sawa, February 28, 2020).

**Other events**

- On February 27, 2020, IDF aircraft intercepted a UAV which took off from the Gaza Strip and flew west over the Mediterranean Sea (IDF spokesman, February 27, 2020).

**Iranian money for Hamas in the Gaza Strip confiscated**

- On February 27, 2020, Israeli Foreign Minister Naphtali Bennet signed an order for the confiscation of $40 million transferred from Iran to Hamas. The Israeli media reported the money was confiscated from the al-Mutahadoun money changing company in the Gaza Strip, owned by a Gazan businessman named Zuheir Shalmah and his family. The order will limit both the movements of the company's owners in some countries, and the company's financial activities by international financial institutions (N12, Ma’ariv, February 27, 2020).

Zuheir Shalmah, owner of the al-Mutahadoun money changing company (Israeli defense ministry’s spokesman’s unit, February 27, 2020).
In response, the Shalmah family and the al-Mutahadoun company published an open letter stating that the Israeli foreign minister was lying because his ministry’s announcement had no date and did not name the place or nature of the alleged confiscation. The Shalmah family added that their company is a Palestinian commercial venture which operates in accordance with commercial and financial laws. Therefore, the family demands that the relevant international and financial institutions condemn and reject the declaration of the [Israeli] defense minister, because it financially damages Palestinian economy in general and their company in particular (Gaza Now, February 28, 2020).

Right: Logo of the al-Mutahadoun money changing and transferring company. Left: The entrance of the company’s offices in Gaza (Facebook page of the al-Mutahadoun money changing and transferring company, February 12, 2015).

Judea and Samaria

Events

On Friday, February 28, 2020, mass prayers were held in Judea and Samaria as part of the al-Fajr campaign of mass morning prayers. The prayers were held in the Cave of the Patriarchs, on the Temple Mount and in a number of mosques with the participation of several thousand Palestinians. In the meantime, Palestinians in Judea and Samaria continue throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at the Israeli security forces and at civilian Israeli targets. On Monday, March 2, 2020, Israel’s election day, a closure was imposed on Judea and Samaria, which was lifted the following morning, Tuesday, March 3 (IDF spokesman, March 1, 2020).
Other events were the following:

- **March 3, 2020** – Stones were thrown at an Israeli vehicle south of Nablus. No casualties were reported. The vehicle was damaged (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, March 3, 2020).
- **March 2, 2020** – Two Molotov cocktails were thrown at the security fence of the community of Beit El (north of Ramallah). No casualties were reported (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, March 2, 2020).
- **March 2, 2020** – Stones were thrown at an Israeli vehicle in Samaria. No casualties were reported. The vehicle was damaged (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, March 2, 2020).
- **March 1, 2020** – Stones were thrown at an Israeli bus on the Gush Etzion-Hebron road. No casualties were reported (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, March 1, 2020).
- **February 28, 2020** – The Palestinian Red Crescent reported that three Palestinians had been injured during a clash with IDF forces south of Nablus (Wafa, February 28, 2018). The Palestinian media reported that one of the wounded was Khader Adnan, a senior PIJ figure, whose arm was injured (Filastin al-Yawm, February 28, 2020).
- **February 27, 2020** – A Molotov cocktail was thrown at an Israeli vehicle from a passing car south of Nablus. A riot developed and stones were thrown. No casualties were reported. The front windshield of the vehicle was damaged (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, February 27, 2020).
- **February 27, 2020** – Stones were thrown at the security fence west of a community northwest of Jerusalem. A Molotov cocktail was thrown at an IDF force that arrived at the site. No casualties were reported (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, February 27, 2020).
- **February 27, 2020** – Stones were thrown at an Israeli vehicle west of Ramallah. No casualties were reported. The front windshield of the vehicle was damaged (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, February 27, 2020).
- **February 26, 2020** – Stones were thrown at an Israeli vehicle east of Qalqilya. No casualties were reported. The vehicle was damaged (Rescue Without Borders in Judea and Samaria, February 26, 2020).
February 26, 2020 – Israeli security forces secured the entrance of about two thousand Jewish worshippers at the Tomb of Joseph and the Tel Balata archeology site in Nablus (IDF spokesman, February 26, 2020).

Significant terrorist attacks in Judea and Samaria since January 2019

Developments in the Gaza Strip

UNRWA's budget

UNRWA cut its 2020 budget by 10%, $23 million. The budget cut will influence the services the agency provides, especially in education and life in the refugee camps in the Gaza Strip. The unions and popular committees of the refugees in Gaza warned of the consequences of the cuts (Palestinian TV, February 29, 2018). The refugee committee of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) organized a protest rally in Gaza City (Safa, February 3, 2020).

Jamal al-Khudeiri, chairman of the popular committee to lift the siege on the Gaza Strip and a member of the Hamas faction of the Palestinian Legislative Council, appealed to the donor nations and Arab and Muslim states to meet their financial commitments to UNRWA. He claimed that of the two million people living in the Gaza Strip, a million refugees depended on UNRWA aid. He also claimed that the rate of poverty in the Gaza Strip was 80% and of unemployment, more than 60% (Dunia al-Watan, March 2, 2020).

A significant attack is defined by the ITIC as involving shooting, a vehicular attack, the use of IEDs, or a combination of the above. Stones and Molotov cocktails thrown by Palestinians are not included.

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Rebuilding houses destroyed during Operation Protective Edge

Naji Sarhan, deputy minister for public works and housing in the Gaza Strip, held a press conference where he noted the achievements of his ministry in 2019. He announced the completion of 86% of the plans for constructing new housing to replace buildings which had been completely destroyed in Operation Protective Edge (2014). He said an estimated $451 million was necessary to carry out the plan, and promises had been received for close to $370 million. Therefore, to finish construction, $81 million was still necessary. He added that 63% of partially damaged buildings had been renovated, and that $95 million was necessary to renovate an additional 74,000 dwelling units (website of the ministry of public works and housing in the Gaza Strip, March 1, 2020; website of the office of the government information bureau in the Gaza Strip, March 1, 2020).

Muhammad Ziyara, Palestinian Authority minister of public works and housing, announced a project to rebuild more than 270 dwelling units for Palestinians whose houses had been destroyed in Operation Protective Edge. The cost of the project will be $10 million and will be funded by Saudi Arabia through the Saudi Arabian Development Fund (Facebook page of the PA ministry for public works and housing, February 27, 2020).

Preparations for dealing with the Corona virus

A delegation of the PA ministry of health arrived in the Gaza Strip to meet with representatives of the Gazan ministry of health to update them on steps being taken to prevent the spread of the Corona virus (Safa, March 3, 2020).

"Egyptian sources" revealed that senior officials in Egyptian General Intelligence urged the Hamas leadership to send a delegation to Cairo in order to formulate an agreement about coordination with Egypt regarding medical preparations for dealing with the Corona virus. That was done out of concern that the virus would enter the Gaza Strip, which does not have adequate medial services. According to the sources, Israel asked Egypt to appeal to Hamas. It was agreed that Egypt would give Gazans all the support they needed. The sources also reported that Egypt's concerns that Palestinians who recently visited Iran would pass through Egypt on their way to the Gaza Strip, and that Egypt had asked senior Hamas figures to prevent Palestinians from going to Iran (al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 1, 2020).
Hamas delegation visits Russia

A Hamas delegation headed by Isma'il Haniyeh, head of Hamas' political bureau, paid a two-day visit to Russia. Among the members of the delegation were Saleh al-'Arouri, deputy head of Hamas' political bureau, Maher Saleh, responsible for Hamas abroad, and Musa Abu Marzouq, head of Hamas' bureau for international relations. During the visit the delegation met with Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, Mikhail Bogdanov, his deputy, and other senior officials of the foreign ministry. The meeting dealt mainly with the Trump plan and the internal Palestinian reconciliation (Hamas website, al-Quds, March 2, 2020). During the visit the Russian foreign minister stressed Russia's opposition to the Trump plan and the need for internal Palestinian unity (Israeli media).


During the visit the Hamas delegation also visited Moscow's largest mosque, where they were received by the deputy chairman of the Russian Mufti Council, Rushan Abbyasov (website and Facebook page of the Russian Mufti Council, March 3, 2020).

The Hamas delegation at the largest mosque in Moscow (Facebook page of the Russian Mufti Council, March 3, 2020).
In an interview given in Moscow, Isma'il Haniyeh said the main topic discussed with the Russian foreign minister was the Trump plan. He said both sides agreed that the deal is unilateral and that it violates international law. Asked about Hamas’ violation of understandings with Israel, which causes rounds of escalation, Haniyeh said Israel did not need excuses to attack the Gaza Strip. It was Israel, he claimed, that continuously challenged the Gaza Strip by killing senior figures of the various [Palestinian] organizations and compelling the “resistance” to respond. He said that for the past two years Israel had delayed implementing the understandings [for a lull], which showed its lack of seriousness. Regarding Hamas' relations with Iran, he claimed they were strong and strategic, and did not come at the expense of Hamas' relations with other regional countries (RT in Arabic, March 2, 2020).

Before the Hamas delegation’s visit to Russia, it was reported that **PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah had received a formal invitation from the Russian foreign ministry to visit Moscow, and that al-Nakhalah was planning to accept** (PIJ website, March 1, 2020). According to Abd al-Hafiz Nofal, PA representative in Russia, Ziyad al-Nakhalah’s invitation to visit was part of the desire of senior Russian officials to talk to all the Palestinian organizations. He said preparations were being made for a series of in-depth discussions between Russia and Mahmoud Abbas about resistance to the Trump plan (Dunia al-Watan, March 2, 2020).

**Isma'il Haniyeh visits Turkey**

Before going to Russia, Isma'il Haniyeh and a delegation of Hamas political bureau members visited Turkey. They met with wounded Palestinians who had been transferred to Turkey for medical treatment. Haniyeh praised their high morale and the sacrifice they had made for the restoration of the Palestinians’ rights (Hamas website, February 27, 2020).
While in Turkey Haniyeh also met with representatives of KUTAD, the Turkish "Jerusalem and Our History Association" (Kudüs ve Tarihimiz Derneği), headed by Hamas' representative in Turkey, Jihad Yaghmour (KUTAD Twitter account, February 26, 2020).  

Isma'il Haniyeh, center on the podium, at the meeting. At the left is Jihad Yaghmour, Hamas' representative in Turkey (right picture, KUTAD Twitter account, February 26, 2020; left picture, Abdullah Ceylan's Twitter account, February 26, 2020).

Isma'il Haniyeh returns to the Gaza Strip

Isma'il Haniyeh, who has spent a number of months abroad, denied reports he was not planning to return to the Gaza Strip and instead settle in Turkey or Qatar. He said that as part of his role as Hamas leader he traveled to visit the movement's branches abroad but his homeland was Palestine and he lived in the Gaza Strip. He claimed that among the important objectives of his visits to other countries were the discussion of developments related to the Palestinian cause and the strengthening of ties to the various countries (Sputnik, February 25, 2020). Taher al-Nunu, Isma'il Haniyeh's media advisor, said that the Palestinian delegation headed by Isma'il Haniyeh was planning to visit South Africa in April 2020 (al-Andalou News, March 2, 2020).

Hamas delegation visits Egypt

On March 1, 2020, a delegation of senior Hamas figures headed by Rawhi Mushtaha, a member of Hamas' political bureau, arrived in Cairo to meet with senior Egyptian General Intelligence officials (Paldf, March 2, 2020). Before their arrival "Egyptian military sources" reported that Egypt was trying to send the message to all the sides involved that Egypt was mediating between Israel and the Palestinians because of history and geography. The

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3 For Jihad Yaghmour’s activity in Turkey, see the December 24, 2019 ITIC bulletin, "Turkey as a Terrorism-Sponsoring State: Turkey allows Hamas to conduct terrorist activities from its territory, including the handling of terrorist squads in Judea and Samaria and the transfer of funds to Judea, Samaria and the Gaza Strip to finance terrorism."
sources added that the officers in Egyptian General Intelligence who were responsible for the Palestinian issue had sent the Hamas leadership an urgent invitation to Cairo to discuss security issues and the internal Palestinian reconciliation (al-Araby al-Jadeed, February 25, 2020). Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said that the visit was part of ongoing coordination between Hamas and Egypt. He said the delegation would discuss a number of important issues, among them improving the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, stopping [alleged] "Israeli aggression" against the Gaza Strip, and the joint security effort on both sides of the Gaza Strip-Egyptian border (al-Andalou News, March 1, 2020).

Ziyad al-Nakhalah relates to Qassem Soleimani’s involvement in supporting the Palestinians

In an interview (which has not yet been broadcast) PIJ leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah said that the late Qassem Soleimani, the former commander of the Iranian Qods Force, had played an important role in strengthening the capabilities of the "Palestinian resistance." He said Soleimani had always personally handled all the matters concerning Palestine: he was involved in training Palestinian operatives. According to al-Nakhalah, Soleimani’s involvement was so personal that on occasion he would train operatives himself (al-Mayadeen, February 24, 2020).

The Palestinian Authority (PA)

Activity to counter the Trump plan

Before the Hamas delegation went to Moscow, Hussein al-Sheikh, chairman of the authority for civilian matters in the PA, met in Moscow with Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, and his deputy. Lavrov told al-Sheikh that Russia was committed to the two-state solution
within the framework of international law. He added that **there was no way to avoid direct Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, sponsored by the International Quartet** (Wafa, February 27, 2020). Abd al-Hafiz Nofal, PA representative in Russia, said that Russia had offered to hold a meeting in Russia with representatives from all the Palestinian organizations. He also said that given the visit of the Hamas delegation to Russia, there was an opportunity to examine the issue and distance themselves as much as possible from the usual discourse, which so far had not been beneficial (Dunia al-Watan, February 29, 2020).

![Hussein al-Sheikh in Moscow with Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister](Hussein al-Sheikh's Facebook page, February 27, 2020).

**Reactions to Netanyahu's declaration to construct housing in Area A1**

► On February 25, 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered the declaration of a plan to construct 3,500 dwelling units in Area A1. These are two construction plans which were frozen for years and which are would create an Israeli territorial contiguity between Ma’aleh Adumim and Jerusalem (Israeli media).

► The prime minister's order led to a wave of Palestinian protests. The Palestinians strongly condemned the thawing of the project. Saeb Erekat, secretary of the PLO’s Executive Committee, sent a letter to Joseph Borrell, responsible for EU foreign policy, calling for immediate intervention to prevent the Israeli government from carrying out its plans for construction in Area A1 (Wafa, February 26, 2020). He added that *they had lodged a formal appeal with the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague regarding the "settlement project,]* noting that the PA would monitor all Israeli government activity on the issue. He said he hoped that in the near future a criminal investigation would be opened into the activities of senior Israeli officials regarding the settlements and Israel's [alleged] "war crimes" against the Palestinian people (Dunia al-Watan, February 25, 2020).
Other reactions were the following:

- The PA foreign ministry claimed that Netanyahu's advancing the "settlement project" was part of implementing the "deal of the century" and was meant to create a new situation on the ground with the support of the United States. The PA foreign ministry called on the international community not to stop their condemnations in order to preserve a two-state solution in accordance with legal international resolutions (Wafa, February 25, 2020).

- Saleh Rifat, a member of the PLO's Executive Committee, said a meeting would be held by the Palestinian High Committee for Monitoring the ICC to deal with the "colonialist measures" and the matters relating to the "settlement project" as declared by the Israeli prime minister and defense minister (Dunia al-Watan, February 28, 2020).

**Boycotting companies operating in the settlements**

- At a meeting with a delegation of the European Parliament, PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh called on the EU countries to obligate international companies to stop their activities in the settlements and to stop cooperating with companies operating there (Wafa, February 26, 2020).

- In continuation of the PA's activity against Amazon, which, according to the PA, sends packages to residents of the settlements as part of Israel, Sakri Bishar, PA treasury minister, and Khaled al-Asili, PA minister of national economy, sent a memorandum to Amazon with a call to immediately end its "racist policy" supporting the settlement activity, which opposed international law. The two ministers demanded that Amazon immediately stop sending packages and stressed that if Amazon does not respond as desired, "international legal measures will be instituted against it" (Wafa, February 26, 2020).

- In addition, the PA's communications and IT ministry sent messages to Amazon and the Universal Postal Union notifying them of the seriousness of Amazon's actions which, they claim, violate international law and resolutions passed by the Universal Postal Union regarding the rights of the Palestinians to receive mail at their addresses in the state of Palestine delivered by the Palestinian mail service (Wafa, February 26, 2020).

- At the beginning of the weekly PA government meeting, PA Prime Minister Muhammad Shtayyeh also related to the issue, saying that the government condemned Amazon's "racist measure," sending packages to the settlements without charging postal fees, as though they were part of Israel. He said it gave the settlements legitimacy, and at the same time deprived
the Palestinians of a similar service. He said the company had to change its policy immediately (Wafa, February 24, 2020).

### The Northern Arena

- In the northern Golan Heights, between al-Khadir and Majdal Shams, an IDF force identified a vehicle whose passengers had apparently been involved in attempted sniper fire inside Israel. The force attacked the vehicle (IDF spokesman, March 20, 2020). The Syrians claimed the Israeli forces had attacked a civilian vehicle near Kuneitra (Syrian TV, March 2, 2020). According to reports from the region, one of the passengers in the vehicle was a Hezbollah commander (@AZAZ9010Z Twitter account, March 2, 2020). The Khutwa news agency reported that Iranian militia operatives had been wounded in the attack [i.e., operatives belonging to militias supported by Iran] (Khutwa, March 2, 2020).

- In ITIC assessment, the vehicle attacked by the IDF may have belonged to Hezbollah operatives who belonged to the "Golan Portfolio." The Golan Portfolio is a military network which the IDF exposed about a year ago, which Hezbollah began setting up in the Golan Heights in the summer of 2018 (following the Syrian army capture of the Golan Heights from the rebel forces, in which Hezbollah operatives were involved). The network was composed of dozens of operatives living in the villages in the northern Golan Heights who had been given weapons. The objective of establishing the force was to create a possibility for Hezbollah to attack Israel from a Golan Heights front. The network was supported in various ways by Hezbollah's "southern headquarters" in southern Syria, including with rocket fire, logistics and intelligence (IDF spokesman's website, March 13, 2019).

![The vehicle attacked by the IDF](Jisr satellite TV channel, Syria, March 2, 2020).

\(^4\) For further information, see the ITIC March 17, 2019 bulletin, "Ali Mussa Daqduq (Abu Hussein Sajed): portrait of the commander of Hezbollah’s military network in the Syrian Golan Heights ("the Golan Portfolio")."