



Deterioration of the security situation along the Gaza Strip border (updated to August 17, 2020)

August 17, 2020

Overview

At the beginning of August 2020, after about six months of relative quiet,¹ **Hamas initiated a wave of violence from the Gaza Strip, renewing the use of its strategy of controlled violence against Israel.** So far, the current wave of violence focuses mainly on the **daily launching of IED and incendiary balloons.** During the nights of August 15 and 16, 2020 the balloon launchings were **accompanied by riots at the border fence.** Balloon terrorism and the riots **were waged by designated units of Hamas** and the other terrorist organizations specializing in such patterns of violent activity.



Incendiary balloon clusters launched into Israeli territory from the northern Gaza Strip (Facebook page of photojournalist Majdi Fathi, August 13, 2020).

► The deterioration of the security situation began with **a rocket launched at Israel's southern city of Sderot on August 2, 2020,** at a time when many residents were watching a movie at the city's new drive-in. The rocket attack was followed by a renewal of balloon terrorism. The IDF responded by attacking Hamas targets and exerting other pressure (see below). On August 16, 2020, **several rockets were fired,** one damaging a house in Sderot. They were fired to demonstrate that Hamas and the other terrorist organizations are obliged to protect the balloon launchings and to warn Israel not to overreact. (In addition, a similar message was sent by firing eight rockets towards the sea during daylight hours.) The violence along the Gaza Strip **border continues** (as of the morning of August 18, 2020).

¹ A period exploited by Hamas to deal (so far successfully) with the Covid-19 crisis.

- ▶ In ITIC assessment **the Hamas-initiated wave of violence is intended to exert pressure on Israel to gain humanitarian and economic concessions as part of the lull agreement**, and to make it easier for Palestinians to enter and exit the Gaza Strip ("lifting the siege"). Another objective is to use the violence to exert pressure **to prolong the receipt of the financial donations from Qatar**, which are supposed to come to an end in August 2020. Hamas' goal is to gain those concessions from Israel **by using an amount of force** that will not lead to a broad military confrontation, which, in ITIC assessment, Hamas has no interest in.
- ▶ In response to Hamas' violence, **Israel gradually increased its responses**, which included aerial attacks, especially on Hamas' military facilities; preventive shooting at units launching balloons (which Israel refrained from in the past); closing the Kerem Shalom Crossing to merchandise; stopping the delivery of fuel to the Gaza Strip and restricting the fishing zone off the Gaza coast. Israeli Defense Minister Benny Ganz and IDF Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi said the continuation of the violence along the border will lead to a harsh Israeli reprisal, even at the expense of an escalation. On the other hand, spokesmen for Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) warn of an "explosion." **Despite the belligerent statements, it seems that so far the responses of both sides have been relatively restrained, although an escalation will still be possible if Hamas continues its provocations.**
- ▶ On August 17, 2020, an Egyptian delegation arrived in Gaza and met with senior Hamas figures to calm the situation and stabilize the lull understandings discussed last year. Qatar is also expected to contribute to attempts to stabilize the situation (as stated by Mohammed al-Emadi, chairman of Qatar's National Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza, aljazeera.net, August 11, 2020). Egyptian mediation and Qatari financial assistance may **eventually bring a temporary cessation of Hamas' use of its strategy of controlled violence, although the end is not yet in sight.**²

² For further information, see the December 12, 2019 bulletin, "Hamas's perception of the lull agreement with Israel, recently discussed in Cairo." The main stumbling blocks to stabilizing the situation in the Gaza Strip are **Hamas' ideology and strategy. Hamas seeks a minimal, short-term agreement that will enable it to receive humanitarian assistance and practical measures to ease the [so-called] "siege,"** such as easing measures at the crossings, increasing the volume of merchandise passing through the crossings, increasing the number of Gazans working in Israel. At the same time, Hamas keeps reiterating that as far as it is concerned it has no intention of accepting large amounts of money for economic projects in return for a long-term agreement. Senior Hamas figures have repeatedly made it clear that **its military buildup and the fight against Israel are its top priorities**, even at the expense of economic development and the welfare of the population.

Balloon Terrorism

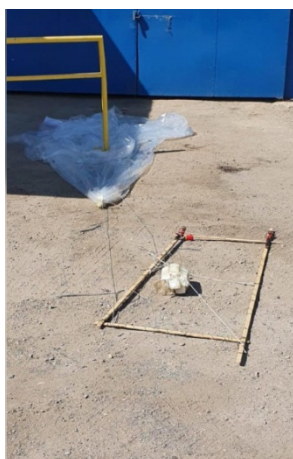
Overview

Hamas recently initiated a new wave of incendiary and IED balloon launchings into Israeli territory. Most of the balloons caused fires near the Gaza border, but some caused them in distant locations (the southern cities of Arad, Netivot, Ofakim and Beersheba³). Most of the clusters launched were incendiary balloons. The current wave began on August 6, 2020, initially causing isolated focal points of fire, but as the number of launchings increased, **between 20 and 30 focal points of fire were located and extinguished every day** (as of August 17, 2020). Several thousand acres of fields and nature reserves have been burned. In several instances the fires burned inside communities near the border, destroying agricultural equipment. Thus balloon terrorism has become another form of Hamas' violent activity disrupting the daily lives of Israelis living near the Gaza Strip.



Right: Fire set by incendiary balloon near the security fence of an Israeli community in the western Negev. Left: IED balloon located in the field of an Israeli community in the western Negev (Twitter account of Matan Tsur, August 10, 2020).

³ On August 16, 2020, incendiary balloons were located in the yards of houses in Beersheba and Netivot. No casualties or damage were reported (Ma'ariv, August 16, 2020).



IED balloon that landed in the industrial zone of the southern Israeli city of Arad (Israel Police Force spokesman's unit, August 6, 2020).

- ▶ Incendiary and IED balloon-launching is part of Hamas' strategy of controlled violence against Israel. In the past balloon terrorism accompanied the return marches, and was sometimes implemented without them. **It ended in March 2019, and was renewed for a short time during the first half of January 2020,⁴ but again stopped until the present wave.**
- ▶ The balloon launches and the fires they cause are widely covered by the media in the Gaza Strip, which **smugly report the physical damage they do and their harm to the morale of the population in the western Negev.** Senior figures in Hamas and the other terrorist organizations often note that launching balloons is "**a legitimate way**" of **exerting pressure on Israel** to end the "siege" and force it to implement the lull understandings. **They claim the Palestinians have the "right"** to use all the means at their disposal. Hamas spokesmen also note their preparedness to protect the balloon launchers from Israeli reprisals.

⁴ When Hamas' decision was made in January 2020, dozens of balloons landed in Israeli territory. At the time, most of them were IED balloons (as opposed to the current wave, during which most of them are incendiary balloons). Then as well, most of the balloons landed in the western Negev, but some of them traveled greater distances (several balloons reached Ashdod, the area around Beersheba, Sde Boker and the Beit Shemesh region).



Right: Fire in an Israeli community set by an incendiary balloon launched from the northern Gaza Strip (Twitter account of Matan Tsur, August 10, 2020). Left: A balloon cluster that landed in an IDF base (Twitter account of Matan Tsur, August 12, 2020).

The designated networks participating in balloon terrorism

In ITIC assessment **the current wave of balloon terrorism has been planned and organized by Hamas, joined by the designated networks of the other terrorist organizations.** In the past a joint operations room was established for those networks. However, its activity apparently came to an end when the balloon launches stopped in March 2019. Hamas seems to have given the networks a green light to renew their launchings, with loose coordination between them.

► The designated networks which claimed responsibility for the recent incendiary and IED balloon launchings into Israel are the following:

- ◆ **The Sons of al-Zawari unit in eastern Khan Yunis and Rafah** (affiliated with Hamas).



From a video posted by the Sons of al-Zawari in eastern Khan Yunis the network's Facebook page (Right: August 15, 2020. Left: Left: August 13).

- ◆ **Ahfad al-Nasser** (belongs to the Popular Resistance Committees).



Ahfad al-Nasser operatives launch incendiary balloons from the al-Bureij refugee camp (Twitter account of photojournalist Ashraf Abu Amra, August 14, 2020).

◆ The Barak unit (belongs to the PIJ).



Baraq unit operatives launch incendiary balloons, August 16, 2020 (Shams News, August 16, 2020).

◆ The Sons of al-Qoqa units (affiliated with the Popular Resistance Movement)



From a video documenting the Sons of al-Qoqa launching of balloons from the central Gaza Strip (YouTube, August 14, 2020).

- ◆ **The Sword of Jihad units** (belongs to a network calling itself the Sword of Islam Battalions).
- ◆ A network calling itself the **Waad al-Tahrir units**.

Riots near the Border

As part of the violence, **Hamas initiated riots near the border at night for the first time since April 2019**. The riots are waged by designated networks called the Night Harassment Units, which were established by the various terrorist organizations during the return marches. The objective of the riots is to disturb the sleep of the residents of the Israeli communities near the border, lower their morale and keep the IDF forces busy at night. The rioters use various measures, from burning tires and sounding sirens to throwing Molotov cocktails and IEDs at IDF forces. **Hamas represents the violence as "popular resistance activity" defending the rights of the Palestinians** (Hamas website, August 16, 2020).

- ▶ **The riots have been accompanied by a media campaign which includes psychological warfare.** The Night Harassment Units presented Israel with an "ultimatum:" if Israel did not "lift the siege" they would begin their activities along the border on August 15, 2020. They also claimed that Israel's responses to the balloons were "playing with fire."
- ▶ **On August 15 and 16, 2020, their threat was carried out: on the night of August 15 several hundred Palestinians rioted near the fence east of Gaza City.** They burned tires, threw firecrackers and used laser lights to dazzle IDF soldiers. The IDF responded with riot control measures. The ministry of health in Gaza reported that two Palestinians had been wounded and brought to Shifaa Hospital. **On the night of August 16 Palestinians again rioted near the security fence.**



Right: Rioters near the security fence (Palinfo Twitter account, August 15, 2020). Left: Rioters burn tires (Twitter account of journalist Hassan Aslih, August 15, 2020).



Right: An IED detonated near the fence by operatives of the al-Qassem Units, the Night Harassment Units of the DFLP (Paldf, August 15, 2020). Left: Operatives of the Night Harassment Units of the Sword of Jihad Units (Telegram channel and the Sword of Jihad Units, August 15, 2020).



Right: Exploiting the night harassments to condemn the UAE. The caption reads, "al-Qassem Units." According to a poster to the Paldf forum, the sign was created by the Night Harassment Units of the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP). (Right: Paldf, August 15, 2020; Left: Palinfo Twitter account, August 15, 2020).

Rocket Launches

The recent violence was accompanied by rocket fire at the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip. In ITIC assessment, the launching on August 16, 2020 was meant to illustrate the commitment of Hamas and the terrorist other organizations **to protect the balloon launchers and to send Israel a message to moderate its responses** (see below).

► The following were the main events:

- ◆ On the evening of **August 2, 2020**, a rocket was fired at the southern Israeli city of Sderot. No organization claimed responsibility. In retrospect it was the opening shot of the wave of violence along the Gaza Strip border. The rocket was fired when many Sderot residents were watching a movie at the city's new drive-in. It was intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system; no casualties were reported. A car was damaged by shrapnel from the rocket (Sderot municipality spokesman, August 2, 2020).



Car in the southern city of Sderot damaged by rocket shrapnel (Twitter account of Almog Boker, August 2, 2020).

- ◆ At around one in the morning on **August 16, 2020** several rockets were fired at Israel. Two were intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system. **One exploded near a house in Sderot.** A man was injured by flying glass and two women were injured while running to a shelter. Two other women were treated for shock. The house was damaged (Israel Police Force, August 16, 2020).



The damage to a house in Sderot (Right: Twitter account of Almog Boker; Left: Israel Police Force spokesman's unit, August 16, 2020).



**The house in Sderot damaged by a rocket
(Twitter account of journalist Hassan Aslih, August 16, 2020).**

► On **August 10, 2020**, the Palestinian media reported that the "resistance" [apparently Hamas] had fired a number of test rockets towards the sea as part of "**improving [its] military capabilities.**" **Eight rockets** were reportedly fired, five in one barrage (al-Ra'i, August 10, 2020). Hamas often fires test rockets towards the sea. However, the timing was exceptional because of the relatively large number fired during daylight hours with people watching. Sources in Gaza reported **the rockets were fired to send a message to deter Israel and inform it that the "resistance" [i.e., the terrorist organizations] was prepared to escalate its violence if Israel responded forcefully to the balloon launches** (al-Akhbar, Lebanon, August 11, 2020).

Israel's Responses

Israel reiterated that it regards Hamas as responsible for every event that takes place in the Gaza Strip. The continuation of balloon terrorism led the IDF to toughen its responses, including, attacks responding to the balloon launches. Israel then took additional measures, including **closing the Kerem Shalom Crossing to merchandise and fuel, and restricting and finally closing the fishing zone.**

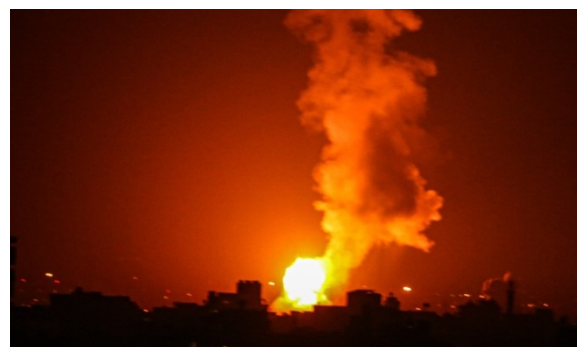
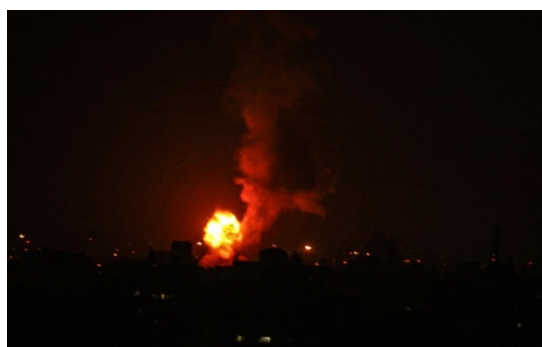
IDF attacks on terrorist targets

► Following the launching of incendiary balloons, IDF aircraft attacked terrorist targets in Gaza, **mainly those belonging to Hamas' military wing.** According to the IDF spokesman, among the targets were Hamas military facilities above and below ground, including a rocket-storage facility and observation posts. **The IDF also fired shells at balloon-launching squads.** During the attacks carried out on **August 12, 2020**, a missile accidentally fell from a helicopter on an Israeli community in the western Negev. It did not explode. The IDF is investigating the event (western Negev spokesman's unit, August 12, 2020).

► On August 16, 2020, after rockets were fired at Sderot, the Palestinian media reported that [in reprisal] Israeli Air Force aircraft attacked Hamas' **al-Qadisiya post** (in western Khan Yunis). Reportedly, at least eight missiles were fired at it, and a fire broke out (Shehab, August 16, 2020; Dunia al-Watan, August 16, 2020). The Palestinian media also reported other attacks, including an attack on the **Asqalan** observation post of Hamas' naval force (in Beit Lahia), and a post belonging to Hamas' **restraint force** (in the eastern part of the al-Zeitoun neighborhood in eastern Gaza City) (Dunia al-Watan, August 15; Palinfo, August 16, 2020).



Attack on Hamas' al-Qadisiya post
(Twitter account of photojournalist Ashraf Abu Amra, August 16, 2020).



Attack on Hamas' Asqalan post
(Twitter account of photographer Da'ud Abu al-Kas, August 16, 2020).

► **On the morning of August 17, 2020**, the IDF spokesman reported that IDF tanks had attacked Hamas observation posts in response to the launching of IED and incendiary balloons and the riots along the border fence.

Missile accidentally falls on school

► **Iyad al-Buzum, spokesman for the ministry of the interior in Gaza**, reported that a missile fell from an IDF aircraft on an UNRWA elementary school in the al-Shati refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip, causing damage. He said the students were evacuated from the building (Hamas website, August 13, 2020). The students staged a protest demonstration (Shehab Twitter account, August 13, 2020). It was also reported that in an attack on al-Bureij

two children were slightly injured, and that a woman and child were injured in Beit Hanoun (August 15, 2020). Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said that attacking local residents, including women and children, was a serious escalation and a red line. He added that Israel would bear responsibility for its actions (Hamas website, August 15, 2020).



Damage done to the UNRWA school (Palinfo, August 13, 2020).

Kerem Shalom Crossing closed

► In view of the continued balloon launchings, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Ganz announced **the closing of the Kerem Shalom Crossing to the delivery of merchandise, with the exception of humanitarian assistance and fuel, beginning on August 11, 2020.** The Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) said that launching balloons and violating the quiet would first and foremost harm the Gazans. He said Hamas bears responsibility for every event that takes place in the Gaza Strip. Two days later, on August 12, 2020, as balloon terrorism continued, **it was decided to stop the delivery of fuel to Gaza.**

► Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said closing the Kerem Shalom Crossing was a "genuine crime" which would worsen the difficult economic and humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip. He said Israel was fully responsible for the consequences of the continuation of the "siege" (sabaq24, August 11, 2020). Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum called Israel's closing the Kerem Shalom Crossing "aggressive behavior" and a continuation of its criminal acts against the millions of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip (Hamas website, August 11, 2020).

Fishing zone restricted

► On August 12, 2020, Israel announced **the narrowing of the fishing zone off the Gaza Strip coast from the customary 15 nautical miles to eight,** as part of its response to the launching of IED and incendiary balloons. Four days later, after rockets were fired at Sderot, the COGAT announced **the immediate closure of the fishing zone until further notice.** The

decision went into effect on the morning of August 16, 2020 (spokesman for the COGAT, August 16, 2020).

Statements from Hamas and the PIJ

Hamas, the PIJ and other terrorist organizations praised the launchings of incendiary and IED balloons. They called them a "**popular activity**" of "young Palestinians" determined to continue the "popular resistance" [i.e., popular terrorism]. A public announcement was made stressing **the preparedness of the [terrorist] organizations to protect the balloon launchers and to respond every time Israel attacks them.** They demanded that Israel lift the "siege" on the Gaza Strip, **otherwise the situation could to lead to an explosion.**

► A selection of statements:

- ◆ **Isma'il Radwan, senior Hamas figure,** said Hamas was in constant contact with Egypt to compel Israel to lift the "siege." He warned of the consequences of the ongoing escalation against the Palestinians caused by the tightening of the siege, and said Israel would be responsible for the outcome (al-Quds, August 12, 2020).
- ◆ **Musheir al-Masri, senior Hamas figure,** claimed that the events on the Palestinian side of the border were "a popular expression of resistance to the continuation of the Israeli siege." He said urgent measures were necessary to break the siege, **otherwise matters might explode.** As to the arrival of an Egyptian delegation in Gaza, he said they welcomed every effort to break the Israeli siege, but any attempt to calm the situation without the Israeli occupation's lifting the siege would fail (Ma'an, August 16, 2020).
- ◆ **Ahmed al-Mudallal, senior PIJ figure,** claimed Israel was responsible for the deterioration of the situation in Gaza, especially because it imposed a "chokehold siege." He said the increasing pressure on the Palestinians, including those in Gaza, would lead to an explosion. He said that event along the border were young Palestinians "letting off steam to exert pressure on the Zionist enemy" [sic] to lift the siege (sabaq24, August 10, 2020).
- ◆ **Da'ud Shehab, PIJ spokesman,** said the "resistance" would continue using all means necessary to respond to Israel's aggression. He added that Israel's threats did not scare the Palestinian people and would not cause them to stop resistance activity.

He claimed Palestinians found the siege unacceptable and therefore popular activity would continue. He added that Israel had recently been finding excuses, such as the Covid-19 crisis, to avoid implementing the understandings (PIJ website, August 12, 2020).

◆ **Fawzi Barhoum, Hamas spokesman**, condemned "Israeli aggression." He claimed the residents of **Gaza had the right to escalate their struggle against Israel**. He added that Israeli "aggression" and harming women and children was dangerous. He said the "resistance" was prepared to restrain Israel and lift the siege of Gaza (al-Aqsa TV, Hamas website, August 15, 2020).