

The escalation between Israel and Hamas

May 2021



What has happened so far?

Between Sunday evening and Wednesday morning, over 1000 rockets were fired by Hamas and Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza at Israeli towns and cities, killing five civilians. It includes the largest barrage on the Gush Dan / Tel Aviv metropolitan area in the country's history, as well as dozens of rockets fired at Beersheva, Ashkelon, Ashdod and other communities in the south. On Sunday evening, rockets were fired at Jerusalem and the Knesset was evacuated. The IDF estimates that approximately 850 rockets have managed to reach Israel, with another 200 landing inside the Gaza Strip itself. This morning, a sixth civilian was killed by an anti-tank missile on Kibbutz Netiv Ha'asara close to the Gaza border.

In response, as part of Operation Guardian of the Walls, Israel has carried out over 500 sorties on targets in Gaza, aimed at neutralizing Hamas terror infrastructure and the organisation's operatives. The PIJ's rocket manufacturing and storage facilities have reportedly been damaged. Hamas headquarters and military intelligence and R&D – located in high rise buildings in Gaza – have also been hit (following IDF warnings to civilians to evacuate the area). On Tuesday night, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowing to continue striking “with full power” and Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi warning Hamas and PIJ will pay a heavy price.

As of Wednesday noon, the Hamas-run health ministry said the death toll in Gaza is 43, with Israel saying it has killed at least 18 terrorist operatives. These include the Head of the Hamas Military Intelligence Security Department, the Head of the Military Intelligence Counter Espionage Department, the Commander of the Anti-Tank Unit and the PIJ's Commander of the Rocket unit.

Following tension in Jerusalem and Israeli-Hamas escalation, internecine violence and rioting have spread into mixed Jewish-Arab cities of Acco, Ramle, Lod, Jaffa, as well as the Arab city of Ul Am-Fahm. An Israeli-Arab man was shot and killed in Ramle, during a reported attack against Jewish targets. A state of emergency has been declared in Lod after synagogues and cars were torched.

The international community has urged the sides to de-escalate. Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged Israel and the Palestinians to “step back from the brink” and for both sides “to show restraint”. UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab wrote that rocket attacks “must stop” and called for “an end to targeting of civilian populations”. US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Hamas must end the rocket attacks “immediately”, adding: “All sides need to de-escalate.” US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan spoke on the phone with his Israeli counterpart and expressed “serious concerns” over the clashes in Jerusalem. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, two Gulf Arab countries that recently normalised relations with Israel have also expressed concern over the ongoing clashes.

Why now?

The rocket barrage began after weeks of ongoing tension in Jerusalem, including clashes between police and rioters on the Temple Mount. The explosive religious/national cocktail centred on Jerusalem – always a potential flashpoint for generating anger and uniting Palestinians and the Arab world – as well as Hamas seeking to tap into and co-opt popular frustration regarding the postponement of Palestinian elections are the main factors behind the current violence.

Violence in Jerusalem

Ramadan is often a more sensitive period when tension around issues regarding the Temple Mount / Haram al-Sharif are heightened. Several clashes took place during the first weeks of Ramadan between Palestinian rioters and Israel Police. A recent phenomenon of “tik tok attacks” where young Arabs have filmed attacks on ultra-Orthodox Jews and posted clips on social media raised Jewish ire. The now-delayed eviction of several Palestinian families in the Sheikh Jarrah

neighbourhood in East Jerusalem also caused major protests.

Some Israeli responses to Palestinian violence in Jerusalem escalated tensions. The emergence of far-right politicians in the Religious Zionist Party following the March 2021 elections has emboldened Jewish nationalists to counter demonstrate against Palestinian violence over the past month, which resulted in several clashes between the sides. Moreover, specific decisions by police – such as placing barriers at Damascus Gate, or blocking buses of worshipers from entering Jerusalem – increased Palestinian anger toward the Israeli authorities as well as the Palestinian sense that Muslim Holy Places in Jerusalem were under threat (though some of those stopped were also planning to join the rioting.)

Nevertheless, the Israeli government did take specific steps to prevent the situation from escalating. The Supreme Court delayed a discussion over the eviction of Palestinian families from Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, in the hope that the parties to the legal dispute would find a satisfactory resolution. The police also decided to prevent Jews from visiting the Temple Mount on Jerusalem Day, and changed the highly charged Jerusalem Flag March from its regular route to steer clear of Damascus Gate and the Old City's Muslim Quarter. Furthermore, the political echelon chose not to respond heavily to a barrage of rockets from Gaza on April 23-34 in the hope that calm would be restored.

Election postponement causes anger and a political vacuum filled by Hamas

The postponement of elections by Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Mahmoud Abbas caused deep resentment and anger on the Palestinian street. Abbas had raised expectations that elections were to be held for the first time in over 15 years. Abbas' claim that he was forced to postpone them due to Israel refusal to let Palestinian residents of Jerusalem vote in the city meant that Palestinian anger was directed toward Jerusalem and the Israeli authorities. (For more on this see [BICOM Briefing The postponement of the Palestinian Elections](#))

Abbas' decision provided an opportunity for Hamas to step up its leadership role in the Palestinian national movement. With Abbas' legitimacy further eroded, Hamas sought to ignite the flames in Jerusalem and the West Bank with the intention of weakening the PA and proclaiming itself the 'defender of Jerusalem' and of national Palestinian rights. Hamas flags were seen during the protests on the Temple Mount. Promoting the myth that al-Aqsa Mosque was under threat by Jewish extremists, Hamas issued a call to Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to escalate violence in light of alleged plans of "Temple Mount groups" to enter the compound on the 28th day of Ramadan – Monday 10 May.

Heating up the West Bank. Hamas' encouragement also seems to have led to attacks in the West Bank. On 2 May, one Israeli teenager was killed in a drive-by shooting attack at the Tapuah junction in the West Bank, with reports that two of the gunmen were officers in Fatah's intelligence branch. Hamas and the PIJ praised the attack, which they claimed was a direct response to Israel's "aggression" against the holy places in East Jerusalem. On 7 May, in an unusual daylight shooting attack, three Palestinians opened fire toward an IDF Border Police base on the northern edge of the West Bank.

The consolidation of the Jerusalem-Gaza axis

Yet Hamas also sought to draw a direct line between events in Jerusalem and a response from Gaza. On 4 May, Hamas' armed wing said Israel that it would pay a "heavy price" if it were to evict families from Sheikh Jarrah with Mohammed Deif, Hamas' Chief of Staff, warning "The Qassam Brigades will not stand idly by in the face of attacks on the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood." Hamas also believed that, especially in light of Israel's sensitive political crisis and post-election coalition building, it could control any escalation. The ultimatum Deif gave to Israel on Sunday afternoon – that it must remove all forces from the Temple Mount and Sheikh Jarrah by 6pm – also reflects this Gaza-Jerusalem axis. Hamas Political Bureau Director Ismail Haniyeh celebrated the

organisation's policy by describing it as "victory in the war for Jerusalem" adding that "the Zionist occupation forced us to act against its actions in el-Aqsa Mosque" and that "Gaza responded to Jerusalem's call."

What are Israel's military aims?

Israel is targeting Hamas' military infrastructure to seek to restore deterrence. On Monday, the Israeli security cabinet approved three goals for the IDF: first, to prevent and disrupt rocket fire as much as possible; second, to weaken Hamas's military wing, its members and infrastructure; and third, to deliver a major blow to Hamas's armament project, which was accelerated in the last few months while it was relatively quiet in the south.

In the international arena, Israel will seek to hold multiple dialogues with the US and key allies in the West and in the region to gain legitimacy for its right to defend itself and to make clear who is responsible for the violence, both in Jerusalem and in the south.

Looking ahead

Israel-Hamas violence looks set to continue for the next 48 hours at least. Key parameters that will point towards escalation or an incoming ceasefire will be the range of rockets fired from Gaza, as well as numbers of casualties sustained on both sides.

Not just moving back the clock. In light of Hamas' attempts to take a more central role in the fight against Israel, Israeli decision makers may choose to try and strike a significant blow against the organisation before a ceasefire comes into force. Analysts have pointed out that certain Hamas strategies – such as using a new Sajil missile which takes a horizontal flight path to evade Iron Dome, or trying to over-power Iron Dome by firing dozens of missiles at once – will be studied carefully by Hezbollah and Iran. In this context, Israel may feel it strategically crucial to achieve a military 'knockout' against Hamas. Such a policy might also seek to restore the balance of power between the PA and Hamas to its previous pre-election postponement levels.

The medium to long term Israeli strategic approaches and dilemmas towards Gaza have not changed. Full scale war remains unlikely, with Israel loathe to invade and reoccupy the Strip or to pay the military and civilian price of toppling Hamas' rule. Moreover, a long-term agreement (or Hudna) also remains unlikely with the two sides far apart in their basic positions. In light of this, once the current limited military operation is over and a ceasefire is reached (likely through Egyptian and Qatari mediation), Israel and Hamas will continue to be faced with the same dilemmas as before: how to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and advance projects in Gaza without strengthening Hamas; preventing a Hamas takeover in the West Bank; and weakening the Gaza-Jerusalem link Hamas is so eager to emphasise.

Cover Photo: A bus directly hit by a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip, in Holon, central Israel, on 11 May 2021.
Photo by Noam Revkin Fenton, Flash90.

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