



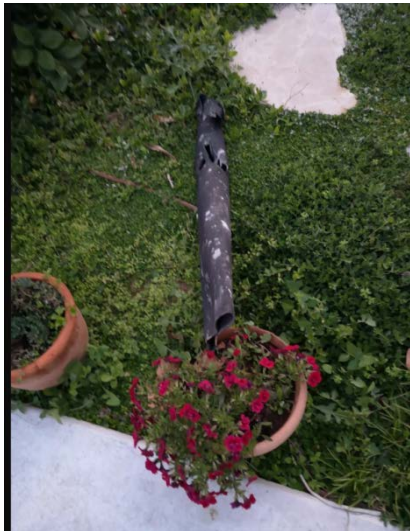
A New Round of Escalation in the Gaza Strip

(Updated to February 24, 2020, 14:00)

February 24, 2020

Overview

On February 23 and 24, 2020, there was another round of escalation in the Gaza Strip. It began on the morning of February 23 when IDF forces killed a terrorist operative from the military wing of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ). He was one of **two Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) operatives placing an IED near the security fence.** The other operative was wounded. The body of the dead operative was removed by the IDF. In response the PIJ fired **35 rockets at the Israeli communities near the border and the southern cities of Sderot and Ashqelon** (as of February 24, 14:00). In response the IDF attacked PIJ targets in the Gaza Strip and the Damascus area in Syria. The escalation has not yet ended.



Right: Fragment of an Iron Dome aerial defense system's intercepting rocket. It fell on the hood of a car in Ashqelon (News from the Field, February 23, 2020). Left: Fragment of an Iron Dome's intercepting rocket. It fell in the front yard of a house in kibbutz Nir Am (Kibbutz Nir Am "security," February 23, 2020).

► As in the previous round of escalation (November 2019), **this time as well Hamas has not fired rockets at Israel.** However, **Hamas has also not exerted effective pressure to restrain the PIJ,** which for months has been behind most of the clashes in the Gaza Strip. Hamas spokesmen have supported the PIJ's activities, justifying them as responses to what they refer to as "Israel's crimes."

- ▶ **The PIJ's current activities (sniper fire, placing IEDs and rocket fire) have been carried out in the face of apparent progress in efforts to reach a lull understanding.** The rockets were fired even after on Friday, February 21, 2020, the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories announced **unprecedented measures to ease the situation in the Gaza Strip as part of the understandings.** The measures included increasing the fishing zone off the Gaza Strip coast to 15 nautical miles and giving permits to 7,000 Gazan businessmen to enter Israel. In addition, Mohammed al-Emadi, the chairman of the Qatari Committee for the Reconstruction of Gaza, who arrived on February 20, 2020 for another visit to the Gaza Strip, announced Qatar was increasing the funds provided to the Gaza Strip to \$120 million, to be distributed to 120,000 needy families (al-Akhbar, February 22, 2020).
- ▶ The IDF response to the rocket fire focused on attacking PIJ targets in the Gaza Strip and an attack on PIJ targets in Syria south of Damascus. As in the previous round of escalation in November 2019, **Israel avoided attacking Hamas targets, thereby continuing to differentiate between the two terrorist organizations** (while Hamas did not participate in the round of escalation). Israel maintained the differentiation despite its stated policy of regarding Hamas as responsible for everything that happens in the Gaza Strip, including terrorist attacks on Israel.
- ▶ The PIJ's conduct once again indicates that **the organization has its own agenda and policies**, inspired by Iran. They include **attacking Israel near the security fence** and readiness to escalate the situation with rocket, disregarding Hamas' interests. Its **agenda is different from that of Hamas**, which tries, with Egyptian mediation, to profit from the advantages of a lull arrangement with Israel. Therefore, at present Hamas is not eager to initiate new rounds of escalation, which are liable to cause the situation to deteriorate. At the same time, for various internal and external reasons, **Hamas does not restrain the PIJ from carrying out its agenda and policies. As a result Hamas finds it difficult to promote a stable, sustainable arrangement**, even though the advantages of such an arrangement are clear to Hamas.

IED Placed near the Security Fence Triggers the Escalation

- ▶ On the morning of February 23, 2020, IDF forces identified two Palestinians approaching the security fence in the southern Gaza Strip (east of Khan Yunis). **The two placed an IED near**

the fence. The IDF forces shot at them, **killing one and seriously wounding the other.** The wounded terrorist was evacuated to the Gaza Strip by Palestinians. According to the IDF spokesman **the two were part of a PIJ terrorist squad which in recent months had twice placed IEDs near the security fence** (IDF spokesman, February 23, 2020).



Right: Two Palestinian Islamic Jihad operatives place an IED near the security fence. Left: The IED placed near the fence (IDF website, February 23, 2020).

► The Palestinian media reported that an IDF bulldozer reached the site of the incident, lifted the body of the terrorist on its blade and took it to Israel territory "in a humiliating way" (Shehab, February 23, 2020; Palinfo, February 23, 2020; Facebook page of journalist Muthana al-Najar, February 23, 2020). Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, reported that two Palestinians were shot in the leg by IDF forces as they tried to take the body away from the IDF (Palinfo Twitter account, February 23, 2020). The IDF reported that a bulldozer was used because of **concerns that the body might be booby-trapped with IEDs that could be detonated by remote control to attack IDF soldiers.** According to the IDF the bulldozer was armor-plated and accompanied by a tank and additional forces in order to secure the removal of the body (Haaretz, February 24, 2020).



The body of the terrorist operative lifted by the blade of the bulldozer (Shehab Twitter account, February 23, 2020).

► The PIJ's military wing announced the death of **Muhammad Ali Hassan al-Na'im, 27**, from its Khan Yunis brigade. According to the announcement he was killed in "a barbaric Zionist crime in eastern Khan Yunis" (Jerusalem Brigades website, February 23, 2020).



Muhammad Ali Hassan al-Na'im
(Jerusalem Brigades website, February 23, 2020).

► Placing the IED was another in a series of terrorist attacks carried out by the PIJ against IDF forces near the security fence. For example, on February 19, 2020, an IDF force identified a **PIJ sniper squad** which shot at IDF forces in Israel territory from the Khan Yunis area. IDF forces returned fire (IDF spokesman, February 19, 2020).

Palestinian reactions to the IDF's removal of the body of the terrorist operative

The removal of the operative's body with IDF heavy equipment was condemned by Palestinian spokesmen, who called it a "war crime" without mentioning that the operative placed an IED near the security fence to attack IDF soldiers. The terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip issued a joint statement condemning what they called "Israeli abuse of the body of a shaheed," and stressing that they were committed to defending the Palestinian people and restraining Israel's [alleged] crimes and aggression (Filastin al-Yawm, February 23, 2020). The PIJ issued a statement claiming Israel had carried out "flagrant aggression" by harming and abusing the body (PIJ website, February 23, 2020).

► The social networks were flooded with videos and pictures of the IDF's removal of the body. Many social network users condemned it, calling it "violent and uncivilized." Some of them criticized Hamas and its restraint forces which, they said, could have prevented the incident. Many users called for rocket fire against Israel in response. Senior Palestinian figures and spokesmen responded with rage at the treatment of the body. Operatives in the Gaza Strip threatened reprisals. Some of the responses were the following:

◆ **PIJ spokesman Musab al-Brim** condemned "Israel's abuse" of the body of the shaheed and threatened that the "trigger fingers" would avenge the shaheeds as they had avenged them in the past, by shelling Tel Aviv (Filastin al-Yawm, February 23, 2020).

◆ **Spokesman for the PIJ's military wing Abu Hamza** said that the "invasion and wild infiltration" of Israel and its attack on a military wing fighter inside the Gaza Strip was "aggression" whose consequence Israel would have to bear (Twitter account of Abu Hamza, February 23, 2020).

◆ **Senior PIJ figure Ahmed al-Mudallal** stressed that they would not ignore Israel's [so-called] "crime." He said they would let the joint operations room of all the organizations act against Israel using the language it understood (alresala.net, February 23, 2020).

◆ **Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum** condemned Israel and said Israel would be responsible for the consequences. He said the [alleged] "crimes and violation" would not cause the Palestinians to surrender and would not break their resolve, but rather would increase their determination to "resist" the "occupier" in every way and form of the "resistance," regardless of the [number of] victims (Dunia al-Watan, February 23, 2020; alresala.net, February 23, 2020).

► **Fatah and the Palestinian Authority (PA) also responded to the incident without mentioning that the PIJ operative whose body was removed by Israel was placing an IED to attack IDF soldiers.** Their responses were the following:

◆ **The PA's foreign ministry** condemned what it called Israel's "abuse" of the body of a shaheed. He claimed that such sights, which were difficult to watch, proved that the declarations of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about the IDF's moral principles were lies (Wafa, February 23, 2020).

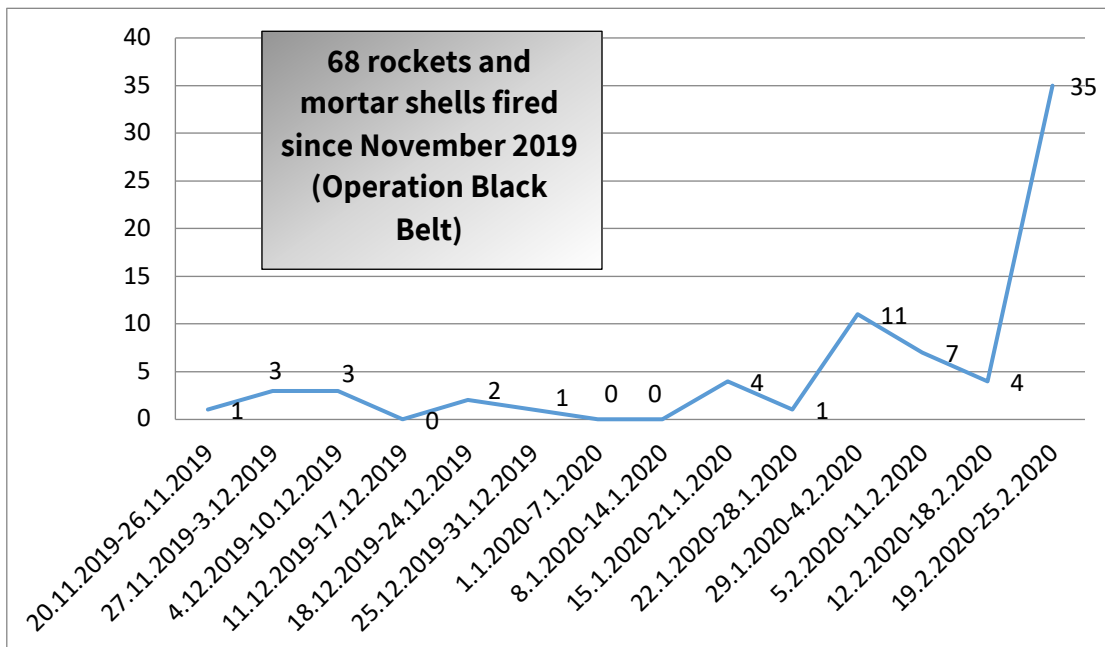
◆ **Saeb Erekat, secretary of the PLO's Executive Committee**, said that Israel continued killing Palestinians illegally. He said an investigation into the matter had to be begun (Saeb Erekat's Twitter account, February 23, 2020).

◆ **Fatah spokesman Hussein Humeil** condemned the "crime" carried out by the IDF forces in eastern Khan Yunis when they used a bulldozer to remove the body of the shaheed, and called it a "war crime" (Wafa, February 23, 2020).

Rocket Fire – February 23 and 24, 2020

So far there have been two rounds of rocket fire in the current round of escalation. One was on the evening of February 23, 2020, in which **21 rockets** were fired. The second round was on the afternoon of February 24, 2020, in which (as of 14:00) **14 rockets** were fired into Israeli territory. **Twenty-five of the rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system**. All the rockets were fired at the Israeli communities near the Gaza Strip and at the southern cities of Sderot and Ashqelon. The rocket fire continues.

Weekly distribution of rocket and mortar fire since November 20, 2019



First round of rocket fire – February 23, 2020

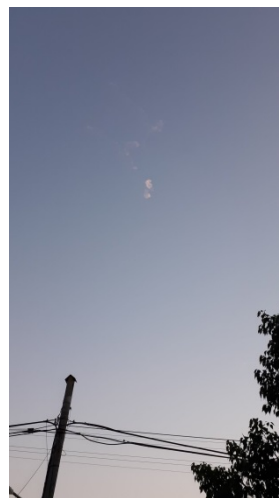
► On the afternoon of **February 23, 2020**, terrorist operatives in the Gaza Strip began firing rockets into Israeli territory. They attacked the regions of Ashqelon, Sderot and the

communities near the Gaza Strip. On February 23, 2020, **21 rocket launches** were identified. The Iron Dome aerial defense system intercepted 13.

► Two women incurred minor injuries and were evacuated to a hospital for medical treatment. One was injured while running to a secure area and the other was treated for shock (Barzilai Medical Center spokesman's unit, February 23, 2020). One of the rockets landed near a house in Sderot, causing damage (Sderot municipality spokesman's unit, February 23, 2020).



Palestinian video of rockets fired from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory (Palinfo Twitter account, February 23, 2020).



Rockets intercepted in the skies over Ashqelon (Twitter accounts of Davis S and liorayubi, February 23, 2020).



Right: Fragment of an Iron Dome aerial defense system intercepting rocket. It fell on the hood of a car in Ashqelon (News from the Field, February 23, 2020). Left: Fragment of an Iron Dome intercepting rocket. It fell in the front yard of a house in Kibbutz Nir-Am (Kibbutz Nir-Am newsletter, February 23, 2020).

► **The PIJ's military wing claimed responsibility for the rocket fire**, stating it was in response to the death of Muhammad al-Na'im (the terrorist operative who placed an IED near the security fence) and the abuse to his body.

Second round of rocket fire – February 24, 2020

► **On the afternoon of February 24, 2020** the second round of rocket fire began after a period of tense calm. Two volleys of rockets were fired at the western Negev: one volley of six rockets and another of eight rockets. As of 14:00, **14 rockets have been fired, 12 of them intercepted by the Iron Dome aerial defense system** (IDF spokesman, February 24, 2020). One of the rockets landed in a playground and another in the front yard of a house, both in Sderot. One woman was treated for shock. A vehicle was damaged in the parking lot of Kibbutz Nir Am.



Playground in Sderot damaged by rocket fire (Israel Police Force spokesman's unit, February 24, 2020).



Rocket fragment found in a yard in Sderot (Israel Police Force spokesman's unit, February 24, 2020).



**Right: Rocket fragments found near an Israeli HMO facility in Sderot (HMO, February 24, 2020).
Left: A fragment of a rocket intercepted by the Iron Dome fell on a vehicle in the parking lot of Kibbutz Nir Am close to the Gaza Strip, shattering the rear windshield (Kibbutz Nir Am "security," February 24, 2020).**

Israel's Response to the Rocket Fire

Targets attacked by the IDF in the Gaza Strip

► In response to the rocket fire on February 23, 2020, IDF aircraft attacked PIJ targets, among them underground infrastructures, sites in the Rafah area for storing raw materials used in the manufacture of rockets, headquarters of the Khan Yunis brigade and a training facility for attacking tanks and storing military equipment used by the PIJ's naval force in Khan Yunis. In the northern Gaza Strip a squad attempting to launch rockets into Israel was attacked, as well as an underground facility in al-Bureij (IDF spokesman, February 24, 2020).



**Israeli Air Force attacks the Gaza Strip in response to the rocket fire
(Palinfo Twitter account, February 24, 2020).**



**PIJ target in western Khan Yunis destroyed in Israeli Air Force attack
(Palinfo Twitter account, February 24, 2020).**

- ▶ The Palestinian government information bureau in the Gaza Strip reported **that IDF planes had carried out more than 34 sorties to attack in the Gaza Strip, focusing on Rafah, Khan Yunis and Beit Lahia**. It reported that four civilians had been wounded and that buildings close to the targets had been damaged (website of the government information bureau in the Gaza Strip, February 24, 2020). In addition, there was reportedly anti-aircraft fire at the planes (Shehab Twitter account, February 23, 2020).
- ▶ Ashraf al-Qidra, spokesman for the ministry of health in the Gaza Strip, reported that four Palestinians had arrived at the Shifaa medical center after having been wounded in an attack on the al-Tufah neighborhood in Gaza City (Ashraf al-Qidra's Twitter account, February 23, 2020).
- ▶ On **February 24, 2020**, in response to the additional rocket fire, an IDF helicopter attacked PIJ terrorist targets which included a military facility in Khan Yunis used for training and storing weapons.

Targets attacked in Syria

- ▶ **In addition to the attacks in the Gaza Strip, IDF aircraft attacked PIJ targets in the Adilia region south of Damascus, Syria.** According to the IDF spokesman, **the site attacked is a PIJ research and development center for adapting weapons to local production facilities in Syria and the Gaza Strip.** Every month, the site manufactures tens of kilograms of rocket fuel and carries out technical training for organization operatives, including operatives from the Gaza Strip (IDF spokesman, February 23, 2020).
- ▶ According to a "Syrian army source," Israeli Air Force aircraft which were beyond Syrian airspace attacked the Damascus region with guided missiles. The attack was carried out in several waves. According to the source, when the missiles were discovered air defense systems were activated which successfully deflected some of the missiles and destroyed most of the others (Sana, February 24, 2020).
- ▶ The Syria Human Rights Observatory reported that the attacks targeted PIJ and Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps sites a few miles from the Damascus airport. One of the missiles targeted a site where there were IRGC officers, PIJ operatives and Syrian army officers. The Observatory reported that at least six people were killed in the attack, two PIJ operatives and four Iranian-affiliated operatives, one of whom held Syrian citizenship (Syria Human Rights Observatory website, February 24, 2020).



**Syrian army anti-aircraft fire
(Sana, February 24, 2020).**

- ▶ The PIJ's military wing announced that **Ahmed Mansour, 23, and Salim Ahmed Salim, 24, both organization operatives, had been killed in the attack in Damascus.** According to the announcement, "Zionist aggression" against Damascus was carried out after Israel ("the enemy") had not been successful in coping with the fighters of the Jerusalem Brigades on the battlefield [i.e., in the Gaza Strip] (Jerusalem Brigades website, February 24, 2020). Jerusalem

Brigades spokesman Abu Hamza tweeted that the "Zionist aggression" in Damascus and the deaths of the two Jerusalem Brigades operatives would not remain without response, and that the account had not yet been settled (Jerusalem Brigades website, February 24, 2020).



**Jerusalem Brigades terrorist operatives killed in the attacks in Damascus
(Jerusalem Brigades website, February 24, 2020)**