

November 6, 2008



Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center
at the Israel Intelligence Heritage
& Commemoration Center (IICC)-

Escalation in the Gaza Strip – Update, November 6¹



Remains of a rocket launcher and bloodstains where terrorists were attacked by the Israeli Air Force (Al-Aqsa TV, November 6).

¹ For further information see our November 5 Bulletin entitled "Escalation in the Gaza Strip" at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/ct_e011.pdf.

Situation on the Ground

1. The massive number of rockets and mortar shells fired on the morning of November 5 was followed by occasional rocket fire later in the day. The last one fell in Israel territory at about 2200 hours. Another rocket fell at about 1400 hours on November 6, for a total of **47 rocket and 10 mortar shell hits**. In addition, some of the rockets and mortar shells fell in the Gaza Strip. The attacks did not cause casualties or damage to property, but several civilians were treated for shock.

2. Several Palestinian terrorist organizations fired the rockets and mortar shells, but most were launched by Hamas. The Palestinian Islamic Jihad also participated in the attack, as did the Democratic Front and the Popular Front. Despite the dozens of rockets and mortar shells fired into Israeli territory, apparently Hamas is not interested in an overall escalation, and after the first massive response worked to contain the events, even appealing to Egypt for help in restoring quiet.

2. On the night of November 5 the Israeli Air Force attacked a terrorist squad near al-Mawasi in the central Gaza Strip which was about to fire a rocket into Israel. According to Palestinian sources, the attack killed Ghassan al-Taramasi, a PIJ commander, and wounded a PIJ operative (Pal-today website, November 5).

4. Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak ordered the Gaza Strip crossings, closed on November 5, to remain closed until further notice.

Hamas Reactions

5. Senior Hamas activists denounced the IDF action and justified the rocket and mortar shell fire at Israel, but also said that **Hamas was interested in continuing the lull arrangement**. Conspicuous was the reaction of **Mahmoud al-Zahar**, while those of lesser leaders were more militant:

i) **Khaled Mashal**, head of Hamas's political bureau in Damascus, said that the Palestinians had the right to self defense and that Israel would be responsible for repercussions arising from violations of the lull arrangement (Syrian Arab News Agency, November 5).

ii) **Mahmoud al-Zahar** said that Hamas was not interested in ending the lull arrangement because of “Israeli provocations,” but nevertheless retained its right to protect itself and respond accordingly (Radio Sawt Jihad Islami in Palestine, November 5).

iii) Hamas spokesman **Ayman Taha** said Hamas had accepted the decision to enter the lull arrangement as part of a national consensus with Egyptian sponsorship and initiative. He also said that the attacks were a “natural reaction” to Israel’s actions and that Hamas would not sit idly by in the face of “Zionist crimes.” He noted that **Hamas was still committed to the lull**, but if Israel continued its violations, the arrangement would have to be reexamined (Al-Jazeera TV, November 4).

iv) **Yousef Farhat**, Hamas spokesman for the central district, said that the violation was to be expected “because the Jews do not respect agreements.” He added that “we are telling the whole world that we see ourselves as not bound [by the arrangement] and not committed to any lull in the fighting...” (Radio Sawt Al-Aqsa, November 5). His belligerent rhetoric contradicted the soothing message sent by Mahmoud al-Zahar and other Hamas spokesmen.

6. Interested in keeping the situation from deteriorating, Hamas contacted Egypt to complain about Israeli “violations” and “provocations.” Following the Palestinian appeal, the Hamas leadership held meetings with the Egyptians to examine ways of restoring quiet before the situation went out of control (PNN website, November 5). At the same time, Hamas tried to constrain the other organizations, and said as much to Egypt (Fars News Agency website, November 5). The Egyptians telephoned the general secretary of the Popular Resistance Committees, Abu al-Qassem Dughmush, in an attempt to stabilize the lull (Al-Muqawamah website, November 5).

7. Hamas’s soothing messages were the result of its desire not to broaden the confrontation and end the lull arrangement at the present time. In our assessment, behind Hamas’s current policy is its wish to maintain the relative calm, which allows it to solidify its control over the Gaza Strip, complete its military buildup in preparation for the next round of fighting with the IDF, and continue the national Palestinian dialogue. However, in our assessment the Hamas leadership was ready and willing to sacrifice those advantages if it could have successfully carried out a “strategic operation,” such as abducting another IDF soldier.

The Palestinian Authority

8. PA spokesmen denounced the IDF activity, stressing the need to preserve the lull arrangement. **Saeb Erikat**, chief PLO negotiator, said that the lull violation was a blow to everyone who was trying to get the peace process on track and to achieve security and stability (The Voice of Palestine, November 5).

Israel

9. Spokesmen for Israeli defense stated that the IDF action on the night of November 4 was pinpointed and necessary, carried out to neutralize a specific threat, and that it did not signify the end of the lull. Defense Minister Ehud Barak, at a previously-arranged meeting with the Egyptian ambassador on November 5, said that Israel had every intention of preserving the lull but nevertheless would not tolerate continued terrorist attacks.