

Political

update: Rocket attacks, 13 March

Key points:

- **Over 7,000 rockets and mortars have been fired into Israel since 2001**
- **Increased range of Katyusha rockets puts over 190,000 Israeli civilians at risk of attack**
- **Increased pressure on Israeli government to protect citizens from rocket attacks from Gaza**

Rocket and Mortar attacks

- Rocket and mortar attacks against Sderot and the Western Negev began in January 2001. Since then over 7000 rockets and mortars have been fired killing 25 Israelis, injuring 620 people and thousands are suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome as a direct consequence of the attacks.
- Since Hamas' violent takeover of Gaza in June 2007, the frequency of rocket attacks rose by 150% to more than 250 rockets and mortars a month. This means, on average one rocket is fired at Israel every three hours.
- In 2008 alone over 600 rockets and mortars have been fired from Gaza.
- Foreign Secretary David Miliband issued a statement condemning the rocket attacks against Israel calling them "terrorist acts" on Sunday (2 March). He said the attacks:

"...should be seen for what they are - an attempt to break the political process by breaking the will of those committed to peace. That cannot be allowed to happen...Israel's right to security and self-defence is clear and must be reiterated and supported."

- The UN Undersecretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, John Holmes, visited the town of Sderot during his first visit to the region in his current post on 17 February. During the visit he made a statement to the press condemning the attacks saying:

"...there's no justification for it. They are indiscriminate, there's no military target... We just need to keep on saying to the people in Gaza, to the Hamas leadership, they have to stop these rockets."(17/2/07)

- Amnesty International recently condemned the indiscriminate rocket attacks on Israeli towns and cities and has called for those responsible to be held to account. In a statement released on Monday (3 March), it said that Palestinian armed groups who launch frequent rocket attacks from Gaza into Israel:

"...not only show a callous disregard for the lives of Israeli civilians but also expose the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip to the danger of Israeli attacks." (03/03/08)

Range

- Most of the rockets fired at Israel are locally manufactured in Gaza and have a maximum range of approximately 12.5km.

- Palestinian militants have recently used Iranian-produced Katyusha rockets, which are smuggled into Gaza from Egypt and have a maximum range of 20.5km. The Katyusha rocket places the Israeli cities of Ashkelon (110,000), Netivot (27,000) and Sderot (23,000) within range of rocket fire from Gaza - meaning that nearly 190,000 Israeli civilians (which amounts to around 2% of the population overall) are at risk of attack.

Sderot

- The southern city of Sderot is a primary target, drawing around 35% of the total rocket attacks from Gaza – with 90% of Sderot residents experiencing a Qassam rocket falling on their street or one adjacent.
- The continued attacks have an accumulated psychological impact on the population who now live under the threat of daily rocket and mortar shell attacks. 28% of adults and 30% of children in Sderot suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of the incessant attacks. Around 70% of Sderot residents suffer from *signs* of post traumatic stress (PTS). In children, that figure rises to 94%, where symptoms often include sleeping difficulties, nightmares, sweating, development regressions, bed wetting and fear of the outside.
- The education system in Sderot has been severely affected by the rocket attacks. About 60% of the schools in Sderot do not have complete protection or buffers for their classrooms. In the past year, 1,100 children have moved to study in schools outside of Sderot because of fear of attack. Due to the massive Qassam rocket fire from Gaza, approximately 100 officers and soldiers have been accompanying children to schools and kindergartens on a regular basis.
- The increasing casualties, psychological trauma and constant fear of attack has forced over 4000 of the 24,000 residents of Sderot to leave the city. The number of residents who left peaked in the summer of 2007, when there was a significant increase in the extent of the rocket fire. According to the Sderot municipality, some 3,000 residents abandoned the city during those months.

Protests

- Hundreds of Ashkelon residents demonstrated on 1 March in front of the Ashkelon homes of Internal Security Minister Avi Dichter and Minister of Religious Affairs Yitzhak Cohen. The demonstrators protested the on-going rocket salvos on Ashkelon and the government's inability to stop the Qassam fire.
- Hundreds of Sderot residents protested in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem against the government's inability to stop Qassam rocket strikes on their city on 12 February. The protestors blocked streets in central Tel Aviv while hundreds of protesters gathered outside the Prime Minister's office in Jerusalem.

Israeli response

- Palestinian militants use Qassam rockets because they are easy to manufacture, their components are cheap and readily available, and it is simple to transport and operate them. Because of these factors, Israeli officials have had difficulty shutting down the Qassam-making factories located throughout the Gaza strip.
- The IDF notes that 97% of the Qassam rockets are launched from densely populated civilian areas in Gaza, which greatly limits the IDF's ability to respond to the terrorists as civilians surround rocket launching pads. A pertinent example is the case of a militant cell launching rockets at Israel from within a UN-run school building in Beit Hanoun on 29 October 2007.

