



Political

***Update:* Israel launches air strikes at Hamas affiliated targets in the Gaza Strip; rockets continue to be fired at Israel - 31 December**

Key points:

- Over 170 rockets and mortars were fired at Israel by Hamas between 19 December (end of the ceasefire) and 26 December.
 - Since the 27 December, Israel has launched air strikes at over 500 key Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip. These targets include the office of the Hamas Prime Minister as well as the majority of weapon smuggling tunnels in and around Gaza.
 - The majority of those killed are members of Hamas' paramilitary groups or affiliated to the terrorist organisation. Palestinian officials have put the number of those killed at 374; the UN states that at least 62 of those killed are civilians.
 - Four Israelis have been killed and dozens more have been injured by Palestinian rocket and mortar fire from Gaza since 27 December.
 - Prior to the Israeli strikes, Hamas declared the six month ceasefire was over while Israel expressed a desire to continue it. Along with other Palestinian militant groups Hamas responded to the end of the ceasefire by increasing the number of rocket, missile and mortar attacks launched at Israel.
 - For the first time Hamas has fired rockets which have reached Israeli towns and cities as far as Ashdod, Ofakim, Yavne, Kiryat Malachi and Be'er Sheva. Hamas is firing Iranian Grad-Katyusha missiles which can reach as far as 40 km inside Israel. Approximately 860,000 Israelis are now in range of rocket fire – over 10 percent of the population.
 - Israel's Cabinet met on Wednesday (31 December) and decided that the military operation in Gaza will continue.
 - The Israeli Prime Minister's spokesperson has made it clear that Israel's operation is defensive and that there is no intention to reoccupy Gaza.
 - Khaled Meshaal, Hamas leader in Syria has called for Palestinians to wage a new intifada - or uprising - against Israel.
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Latest Developments

- Over 170 rockets and mortars were fired at Israel by Hamas between 19 December (end of the ceasefire) and 26 December.
- In the early hours of Saturday morning (27 December), Israel launched air strikes on targets affiliated with Hamas' terrorist organisation. The targets included:
 - Hamas command centres;
 - Hamas training camps;
 - various Hamas installations, including rocket manufacturing facilities and storage warehouses.
- Israel's Defence Minister Ehud Barak set out on Saturday (27 December) the three objectives of the offensive:
 - dealing Hamas a forceful blow;
 - fundamentally changing the situation in Gaza; and
 - bringing the cessation of rocket attacks against Israeli citizens.
- The Israeli Air Force has struck over 500 Hamas targets. These include the offices of the Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniya located in Gaza City. Prime Minister Ismail Haniya's office was the centre for planning, support and financing of terrorist activities against Israel. The Finance Ministry, Foreign Ministry, Labour Ministry and the Construction and Housing Ministry have also been targeted.
- The Israel Air Force has also attacked dozens of tunnels in the Rafah (Gaza – Egypt crossing) area which form part of the tunnel network used by the Hamas terror organisation. Tunnels along the northern and southern Gaza strip, Grad and Kassam rocket launchers, rocket launching cells, rocket launching sites, weapons manufacturing facilities, Hamas outposts and armed terror operatives have also been targeted.
- These tunnels are used for smuggling weapons as part of Hamas' terror activity in the Gaza Strip. The tunnel network is also used for the passage of militants from Egypt to the Gaza Strip and back. These tunnels play a major role in supplying Hamas with the means of strengthening its ability to carry out terror.
- In an interview on Al Jazeera television on Sunday (28 December), Khaled Meshaal, Hamas leader in Syria said:

“We have called for a military intifada against the enemy. Resistance will continue through suicide missions.” (28/12/08)
- Ruth Shalev, Israel's Ambassador to the UN told the Jerusalem Post on Tuesday (30 December) that what Israel needs is:

“A commitment and assurance that Hamas will not shoot any rockets and will not fire on Israeli citizens any more.” (30/12/08)
- Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's spokesman, Mark Regev, said on Tuesday (30 December) that

“The operation is defensive. It is not designed to do anything but protect southern population of Israel. Israel has no intention whatsoever to reoccupy the Gaza strip. We did not leave in 2005 to go back in. Last week we called for Hamas to ceasefire. It was Hamas that deliberately torpedoed that, Hamas publicly tore up the understanding. If it would have been possible to maintain the old quiet, imperfect as it was - that would have been our preference. Hamas made that impossible.” (30/12/08)

- The majority of those killed are uniformed members of Hamas’ paramilitary groups. Among the dead are believed to be a number of senior Hamas officials, including Tawfik Jabber, the commander of Hamas’ police force in Gaza; his adjutant, Ismail al-Ja’abri, commander of the defence and security directorate; and Abu-Ahmad Ashur, Hamas’ Gaza central district governor.
- Since Israel launched its operation on 27 December, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad have fired over 200 rockets, missiles and mortar rounds at Israeli towns bordering Gaza. These included the launching of Iranian made Grad-Katyusha missiles that are able to reach a range of 40 km inside Israel.
- Israel’s Cabinet met on Wednesday (31 December) and made clear that the military operation in Gaza will continue.
- Israeli towns and cities as far as Ashdod, Ofakim, Yavne, Kiryat Malachi and Be’er Sheva have been hit for the first time. One of the first rockets to hit Be’er Sheva struck a kindergarten and another struck a school on Wednesday (31 December) morning.
- Be’er Sheva, the capital of the Negev has a population of 185,000 and is almost 40 km (24 miles) from the Gaza Strip. Ashdod is one of Israel largest cities with a population of 200,000. The city also includes one of the country’s major sea ports and the second-largest power plant in Israel.
- Approximately 860,000 Israelis are now in range of rocket fire – over 10 percent of the population.
- Four Israelis have been killed and dozens more have been injured by Palestinian rocket and mortar fire from Gaza since Saturday (27 December).
- Hamas still retains thousands of rockets and mortar rounds and may use these in the coming days. Approximately 6,700 reserve Israeli Defense Forces’ troops have been called up and ground forces are deployed outside the Gaza Strip.

Humanitarian Aid into Gaza

- Prior to Hamas’ escalation of rocket fire in November 2008, Israel was providing close to 4,000 trucks of aid a month to Gaza, along with fuel and electricity.
- About 180 trucks bearing medical supplies, basic food commodities and other humanitarian goods as well as 10 ambulances were transferred into the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom crossing in Israel from 28-30 December.
- Three humanitarian aid agencies are sending goods into the Gaza Strip: United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNWRA), World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). All three agencies were notified on Saturday evening (27 December) that they would be allowed to send truckloads of supplies into the region.

Recent events that led to Israeli military action on 27 December

- Since Israel's disengagement from Gaza in August 2005, over **5,500** rockets, missiles and mortar shells have hit Israel.
- During the six month ceasefire (19 June – 19 December), **436** rockets, missiles and mortars shells were fired at Israel.
- Between Hamas announcing that they would not renew the ceasefire (19 December) and Israel launching its military operation in Gaza (27 December), over **170** rockets, missiles and mortar shells were fired at Israel by Hamas and other Palestinian militants groups including Palestinian Islamic Jihad.
- On Friday morning (19 December), the Hamas Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades officially declared that the six month ceasefire with Israel was over. More than 40 rockets and mortars were fired at southern Israel from the Gaza Strip over the weekend (20-21 December).
- Israel submitted a protest letter to the UN Secretary-General and President of the UN Security Council regarding the increased escalation of rocket fire from Gaza on Monday (22 December).
- Israel submitted a second protest letter to the UN on Wednesday (24 December).
- Israeli President Shimon Peres visited Sderot in southern Israel on Wednesday (24 December) and called for an end to rocket attacks from Gaza.
- Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in an interview to the Arabic TV Channel Al Arabiya on Thursday (25 December) made clear that if Hamas did not stop the rocket fire, Israel would respond militarily. Olmert in an appeal to the people of Gaza said:

“I say to you in a last-minute call, stop it. Stop it. You the citizens of Gaza, you can stop it. I know how much you want to get up in the morning to quiet, to take your children to kindergarten or school, the way we do, the way they want to in Sderot and Netivot.”
(25/12/08)

- Egyptian Foreign Minister Aboul Gheit harshly censured Hamas on Saturday (27 December), placing responsibility for the Israeli operation on Hamas. Aboul Gheit said that Egypt had repeatedly cautioned against continuing the situation and that whoever did not listen (Hamas) should assume responsibility and not blame others. He said that Israel had publicly warned that continued rocket fire would lead to military action. The Egyptian Foreign Minister added angrily that prior to Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni's arrival in Egypt on Thursday (25 December), 60 rockets were fired at Israel in a direct attempt to foil Egypt's efforts to achieve quiet.
- A projectile fired by Palestinian militants fell short of its target in Israel on Friday (26 December), striking a house in northern Gaza and killing two schoolgirls. No Palestinian group claimed responsibility for the attack.

International responses to the situation in Gaza and southern Israel

- The UK has pledged £6.9m in emergency aid for Gaza and the Prime Minister has called for an urgent ceasefire in Gaza (31 December).
- The Foreign Secretary, the Rt Hon David Miliband MP said on Monday (29 December) that both sides in the Middle East conflict were going through a “very

dangerous and very dark moment” to which the only solution was a comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and the Arab world.

- In a Downing Street statement, the Prime Minister said on Monday (29 December) that only “peaceful means” could secure a lasting solution to the dispute between Israel and Palestine. He called upon Gazan militants to end their rocket attacks and asked Israel to “meet its humanitarian obligations”.
- On Monday (29 December) UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon demanded that Israel and Hamas halt their acts of violence, take all necessary measures to avoid civilian casualties, and that Israel keep open all border crossings necessary for the continued provision of humanitarian supplies to Gaza.
- The Czech Republic, which takes over the EU presidency on 1 January, defended Israel’s strikes against Hamas. Czech Foreign Minister said on Tuesday (30 December):

“Let us realize one thing: Hamas increased steeply the number of rockets fired at Israel since the ceasefire ended on 19 December. That is not acceptable any more.” (30/12/08)

- EU Foreign Ministers met in Paris on Tuesday (30 December) and called for an “immediate and permanent ceasefire”. The statement also makes clear that an EU Ministerial Delegation will visit the region soon. France’s Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said that “the return of the truce and an end to violence should happen as quickly as possible.”
- The Quartet (US, UN, EU and Russia) also issued a statement on Tuesday (30 December) calling for a ceasefire “that would be fully respected”.
- The Arab League will hold an emergency meeting in Cairo on Wednesday (31 December) to discuss the situation in Gaza and southern Israel.

Background

- Israel withdrew all military and civilian presence from Gaza in August 2005.
- In the first four months of 2008, the rate of rocket attacks was one every three hours.
- Since the start of 2008, there have been over 2,600 identified rocket and mortar shells fired at Israel. That is approximately seven rockets per day in 2008.
- Since 2001, the total number of identified rocket and mortar shells hits has been 8,205.
- Close to 9,000 Gazans received permits to enter Israel for medical treatment in the first half of 2008.
- Hamas used the six months of the ceasefire to build up its strength, develop and produce weapons and train terrorist operatives, preparing for the period after the calm. Hamas can call on 15,000-20,000 fighters.
- 24 Israelis have been killed and hundreds more have been injured by Palestinian rocket and mortar attacks since 2001.
- Hamas continue to hold hostage Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit who has been in captivity for over two and a half years.