Two rockets fired at Tel Aviv from Gaza for first time since 2014 war

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Rocket sirens were triggered Thursday evening in the Tel Aviv area in central Israel, as two rockets from the Gaza Strip were fired at the heart of the country for the first time since the war of 2014, signalling a possible dramatic escalation of violence by terror groups in the Strip just weeks before the Knesset elections.

Residents of Israel’s second-largest city and the surrounding metropolis of Gush Dan rushed to bomb shelters and reported hearing explosions. The rockets both hit open areas, and did not cause casualties. However, five people were treated for shock by paramedics.

Initial reports indicated that the Iron Dome missile defense system was launched to intercept an oncoming rocket. However, the Israel Defense Force said no interception had taken place, and it was not clear whether an interceptor had been launched.

“Two rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip towards Israeli territory. The alert and warning systems operated as required,” the army said. “No interceptions were made by aerial defense systems. No damage or injuries were reported. There are no special instructions for the civilian home front.”

A video purportedly showing an Iron Dome launch which [made the rounds](https://twitter.com/ofircohen5477/status/1106279244517253121)on social media may have been an old clip from 2014.

It wasn’t immediately clear what group in Gaza was responsible for the surprise launch, which occurred on the eve of the weekly Friday mass rally along the Strip’s border.

A Hamas official told the The Times of Israel that the terror group “has no interest in an escalation” with Israel. The official said he “has no idea” who fired rockets toward Tel Aviv.

The Hamas-run Interior Ministry called the rocket fire “outside the national consensus” and said it would exact measures against those behind it.

A senior Israeli official told Channel 13 news that Israel indeed did not believe Hamas was behind the attack, but rather another “organization attempting to sabotage efforts to achieve calm in recent days.”

Initial reports had indicated that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) terror group was responsible for the rocket fire. Hebrew-language media reported that Fajr missiles were launched, which PIJ has in its arsenal.

However, the terror group also denied that it was behind the launch. PIJ spokesman Daoud Shehab called the reports “baseless lies and claims.”

Hamas and PIJ told Egyptian security officials who were in the Strip to discuss a long-term truce that they were not responsible for the rockets, Al-Jazeera reported.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rushed to the Defense Ministry headquarters in Tel Aviv and conferred with senior army officials to discuss a response.

The meeting ended shortly before 1 am Thursday, a Israeli officials said. “Decisions were taken,” the officials added, without elaborating.

A senior defense official told Channel 13 news the Israeli response would be strong but measured, in order to prevent an escalation.

The Home Front Command did not give any special instructions to Israelis and said they could continue to carry on as normal. Tel Aviv Mayor Ron Huldai urged the public to remain calm, but added that public bomb shelters would be opened shortly.

All emergency response organizations in the Tel Aviv area increased their alertness following the incident.

Palestinian media reported that Hamas was evacuating military posts in Gaza in preparation for an Israeli response to the rockets. It also reported that the Egyptian delegation had left Gaza quickly after being instructed to evacuate by the IDF. There was no confirmation of the unsourced reports.

The missile launches come less than a month before the April 9 Knesset elections, and two months before Tel Aviv is due to host the Eurovision Song Contest, a major international event that is expected to draw many thousands of tourists from all over Europe.

It was the first time rockets were fired at Tel Aviv since Operation Protective Edge in the summer of 2014, though launches directed at residents of Israeli communities near Gaza have remain relatively frequent. A rocket fired from Gaza last October fell out at sea across from the greater Tel Aviv area.

The last time projectiles were fired at Israeli territory was last week, when Palestinian terrorists in Gaza fired one mortar shell at the Eshkol region in southern Israel, triggering the Israeli air defenses. There were no injuries or damages caused.

Recent weeks have seen a dramatic increase in the level of violence along the Gaza border, with near-nightly riots and a return of airborne bomb and arson attacks, which had waned in light of a de facto ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas at the end of last year.

In the nightly demonstrations, led by so-called “confusion units,” participants generally set off loud explosives, burn tires and throw rocks at Israeli troops on the other side of the security fence. The Israeli soldiers typically respond with tear gas and, in some cases, live fire.