Gaza militants target Israel with party balloons bearing bombs

March 8, 2020

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The Washington Post

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/gaza-palestinian-balloon-bombs-israel/2020/03/08/d2069346-54d5-11ea-80ce-37a8d4266c09_story.html>

The moment Merav Hania's daughter stopped loving kindergarten came when a cluster of colorful orbs floated toward her playground during recess.

“Balloons!” said a pleased young Emma, her mother recalled. But another child, one who had heard the warnings from local police, knew better: “That’s a bomb!”

In recent months, hundreds of booby-trapped balloons — sometimes bearing the messages “I Love You” and “Happy Birthday” along with small improvised explosives dangling by a string — have descended on this and other communities downwind of the nearby Gaza Strip, according to Israeli police.

Most land in open countryside, and none has yet caused injury or death, something a local police commander described as a miracle bound to give way to a tragedy. Residents know the balloons are not as dangerous as the rockets long fired by militant groups in Gaza that send whole neighborhoods scrambling for bomb shelters. Israel’s military regularly unleashes powerful bombardments on Gaza in reprisal for those rockets.

Still, the escalation of this drifting menace — one of the ways in which militants in Gaza keep up a low-intensity armed resistance to Israel’s 14-year blockade of the Palestinian enclave — has taxed police departments, disrupted daily life and taken a psychological toll on those who live within reach of the Gaza breeze.

 “They are terror balloons. There is no other name,” said Chai Fahima, head of the police bomb-disposal squad for this district just east of Gaza, where each landing can close streets and send families running for cover. “Their purpose is to terrify. But if it explodes near a person, near a child, it can kill.”

At Emma’s playground, teachers rushed the children inside, where they sheltered as a police robot detonated the small object strung to the sagging inflatables. Emma, who heard the blast, stayed home for two days and hasn’t been at ease at school since, her mother said.

“Our children have learned to be scared of balloons,” said Hania, who owns a party-supply store full of helium-filled hearts and stars. “It’s crazy standing here saying that, but that’s the life we live now.”

The explosive-laden balloons are the latest iteration of war-fighting in the decades-old conflict. A previous low-tech aerial assault took the form of flaming kites, which burned thousands of acres of Israeli farmland and nature reserves. They were launched after Israeli military snipers shot Palestinians protesting at Gaza’s border with Israel.

Israel blocks West Bank exports as trade tensions rise, along with towers of unsold produce

Outside the police station in nearby Ofakim, Fahima laid out some of the 15 to 20 inflatables that land in the district or are reported flying over it every day. Among them was a crumpled unicorn, a flaccid bunch of red birthday balloons and a plastic bag that had been inflated and fitted with a payload.

“Some are decoys, and some are designed to kill,” Fahima said.

People have been trained by police warnings, and even a children’s poem written by the Israeli military, to be wary of balloons and any boxes, books or soccer balls they may drop.

Of the balloons reported each day, about a third carry explosives of some kind, Fahima said, from small homemade packets to powerful munitions. Pulling out his phone, he showed a photo of a rocket-propelled grenade head his team had defused a day earlier.

A number of the balloons bear crude, smoldering fuses, some meant to detonate a charge, others meant to burn through a cord and release an explosive payload, bombardier-style.

Fahima unfolded a blue paper featuring Hebrew and Arabic script. “Zionist, you have no place in the country of Palestine,” read one of the notes commonly found attached to the inflatables or their cargo. “We will send you to your death.”

The aerial onslaught, including rockets and balloons, emerged as a political issue in the run-up to the March 2 general election, Israel’s third in less than a year. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s rivals, including former army chief Benny Gantz, hammered the current government’s handling of the threats facing communities close to Gaza.

“The people who send these want us to live in fear,” said Tzahi Cohen, commander of the Netivot police district.

One of the militants who send the balloons is a 30-year-old Gaza man who spoke on the condition he be identified only as Abu Malek. Sitting in a sparse house in Gaza’s Bureij refugee camp — in a living room lined with sleeping pads, a wood fire casting flickering shadows on two Palestinian flags — he played down the danger posed by the hundreds of balloons for which he takes credit.

 “We are not intending to kill children,” he said. “From our experience, it has never hurt a child on the other side. Our aim is to break this siege.”

He says he is part of a loose cell of young men launching balloons, one of at least 10 groups he said he knows of. Although he said his cell is not linked to any of the militant factions operating in Gaza, most political observers say the cells take orders from these groups, primarily Hamas, which governs Gaza.

Abu Malek said he scrounges the items needed for the inflatables. When proper balloons are in short supply, he uses sheets of taped plastic, rubber gloves or, as a last resort, bouquets of inflated condoms.

 “Balloons are best — they go farther,” he said. Given the prevailing winds off the Mediterranean, a balloon released from a rooftop in Bureij can fly over Gaza to the nearby towns, or across Israel’s Negev desert. Israeli police report finding the devices at the Dead Sea, 50 miles away.

Abu Malek said explosives are easy to make or buy, even military munitions. “Anything is possible to obtain,” he said.

Militants have been injured assembling the bombs, he said, but he considers it worth the risk to maintain pressure on Israel in the pursuit of freedom for Gaza. Analysts say the aerial assault is an experiment born of poverty and has been surprisingly effective in the face of Israel’s overwhelming military advantage.

Behind the scenes, Hamas has been negotiating a deal with Israel to ease life in the enclave, including reported agreements to widen the offshore zone where Gazans can fish and to increase the number of Gazans permitted to work inside Israel.

Hamas has largely halted rocket attacks as the talks have progressed, although another group, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, launched a recent fusillade. But the balloons have continued to soar.

Launching balloons “is a way for them to go to their base and say they did not give up the fighting that is at the core of their existence,” said Shimrit Meir, a Palestinian affairs analyst and columnist for the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper. “This is how they feel dialogue should be conducted, not just in some hotel rooms in Cairo, but on the battlefield.”

Taher Nounou, an adviser to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, said militants were newly motivated by “rage” over President Trump’s recently released Middle East peace plan. But while Hamas officials have denied they have control over those sending the armed inflatables, Nounou predicted the skies over Israel would clear when Israel fulfills its recent reported promises.

“The balloons didn’t kill anybody,” said Nounou. “But if we see commitment from them, there will be no need for balloons.”