In Second Day of Gaza Flare-up, Islamic Jihad Fires Hundreds of Rockets as Israel Pounds the Strip

November 14, 2019

Haaretz

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-in-gaza-flare-up-s-second-day-islamic-jihad-barrages-israel-idf-pounds-the-strip-1.8125501>

Gaza factions launched massive rocket barrages at Israel for the second straight day Wednesday, a day after Israel assassinated a top Islamic Jihad commander, Baha Abu al-Ata.

At around 11:15 P.M. a massive barrage of rockets reached as far north as Rehovot and Gedera. Around an hour before the barrage, [Islamic Jihad](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-islamic-jihad-1.5599123)leader Ziad al-Nakhalah spelled out his group’s conditions for a cease-fire. Speaking to Beirut-based Al-Mayadeen TV, he demanded an end to Israeli targeted killings of militants and [Gaza](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-gaza-1.5599001) border protesters, as well as measures to ease the Gaza blockade.

He added that Egypt had launched mediation efforts immediately after the killing of Abu al-Ata. "There is a draft agreement for the truce and we expect an answer [from the Israelis] tonight," he said, adding that "Egypt is taking positive steps to promote a cease-fire."

Rockets were fired at Israel into the night, with alarms in Ashkelon and towns near the Gaza Strip.

A 70-year-old woman suffered light-to-moderate wounds earlier in the day from broken glass when her home in Ashkelon was hit by a rocket. The Magen David Adom rescue service said it had treated 63 people for injuries linked to the rocket attacks since the launches began Tuesday. Most were lightly hurt, though a girl in Holon lost consciousness and was hospitalized in serious condition, the service said.

Schools remained closed in southern and central Israel, keeping a million children at home, and many workplaces in the south were also closed. The Home Front Command said schools in the Gaza border region would remain closed Thursday, but schools could open north of Ashdod.

The air force continued its strikes in Gaza against Islamic Jihad targets. As of Wednesday night, 24 Palestinians had been killed in addition to Abu al-Ata and his wife, “most of them from Islamic Jihad,” [the army](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-idf-1.5598943) said. The dead included a father and his two sons age 7 and 24.

Two of the Islamic Jihad operatives killed were preparing to launch antitank missiles at Israel from northern Gaza, the army said. Other targets included a factory that makes warheads for long-range rockets, a military headquarters and a munitions storage site. The navy attacked a vessel belonging to Islamic Jihad, as well as a marine training facility.

The army said it had deployed a commando unit to secure communities along the Gaza border against possible infiltrations. Israel is believed to be avoiding [Hamas](https://www.haaretz.com/misc/tags/TAG-hamas-1.5598922) targets in an effort to prevent that organization from joining the fight. Hamas’ intervention would significantly change the nature of the fighting, as the group’s military capabilities are far greater than Islamic Jihad’s.

Around 360 rockets had been fired at Israel from Gaza between Tuesday morning and 5:30 P.M. Wednesday, the army said, with the Iron Dome defense system intercepting around 90 percent of the missiles. One rocket fell near a factory in the Sha’ar Hanegev region, home to the city of Sderot. There was light damage but no one was hurt. A rocket fell near a kibbutz dining hall in the Eshkol region but no one was hurt.

Meeting with a delegation of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee Wednesday night, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu distinguished between Israel’s actions in Gaza and Islamic Jihad’s attacks.

“The most basic principle of international humanitarian law is differentiating between combatants and noncombatants,” he said. “You can cross that line accidentally, but you can’t cross it deliberately. If you deliberately target civilians, that’s a war crime.”

Earlier, before a situation assessment with Defense Minister Naftali Bennett, military chief Aviv Kochavi, Shin Bet security service chief Nadav Argaman and National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat, Netanyau said he hoped the Gaza campaign would be as short as possible.

“We are not bent on escalation but we will do whatever is necessary to restore the quiet and security to the residents of Israel, including the residents of the south,” he said. “I think that we are on the right track.”

After the meeting, Bennett warned the factions in Gaza that they were targets. “We are in the second day of our Gaza campaign; the achievements are good but the road is still long ahead of us,” he said.

“We must make every terrorist aware that they are carrying a ticking timer on their back; it’s their decision whether to continue engaging in terrorist activity and thus put an end to their lives, or to stop. We hope Islamic Jihad will not decide to put Gaza residents in danger.”

An Egyptian official told Haaretz that efforts were underway to reach a cease-fire, but they were unlikely to bear fruit Wednesday night. UN Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov condemned the “indiscriminate launching of rockets and mortars against population centers” and added that the United Nations was working to “urgently de-escalate.”

The French Foreign Ministry issued a statement calling for the two sides to restore the quiet and respect international humanitarian law by protecting civilians. “France supports the attempts at a mediation by UN Mideast envoy Nickolay Mladenov as well as Egypt’s,” the ministry said.

Senior Palestinian officials said the relative calm overnight Tuesday was due to intensive mediation talks, led by Hamas, to reach a cease-fire. According to people in the Hamas-affiliated factions, the group demanded a significant easing of the blockade on the Strip, while Israel only offered calm for calm, which led to the resumption of rocket fire early Wednesday. Sirens were heard early in the day as far east as Latrun and Beit Shemesh.

An Islamic Jihad spokesman, however, said Wednesday that it was too early to discuss mediation efforts. “We respect every effort invested by the Arab world,” he said. “Nevertheless, we are sending Israel a message and once we finish, it will be the time to speak about calm.”

Late Tuesday night, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence condemned the rocket fire, writing on Twitter: “The United States condemns the barrage of rockets on Israeli civilians. It’s clear Hamas & Palestinian Islamic Jihad put violence ahead of bettering the lives of the people of Gaza. America strongly affirms Israel’s right to defend itself.”

Abu al-Ata, the Islamic Jihad commander, was said to have been behind many recent attacks on Israel.