34 rockets fired from Lebanon at Israel in worst barrage in years; Hamas blamed

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/rocket-warning-sirens-sound-in-israel-towns-on-lebanese-border/>

Thirty-four rockets were fired from southern Lebanon on Thursday afternoon, with 25 intercepted by the Iron Dome air defense system over northern Israel, the military said. At least three people were injured and several buildings were damaged.

In the evening several mortar shells impacted near the northern town of Metula, not causing any injuries or damage.

Israel blamed Lebanon-based Hamas forces for the afternoon attacks, with Israeli official sources saying it would not have been carried out without Hezbollah’s consent. Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh is currently in Lebanon.

The Israel Defense Forces said five of the rockets landed inside Israel, and most of the rest were downed by Iron Dome. The impact sites of four others were not yet clear.

The barrage was the largest number of rockets fired from Lebanon since the 2006 war, during which thousands of rockets were launched at Israel. In August 2021, Hezbollah fired 19 rockets at northern Israel.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, and a Hezbollah source told the Al-Arabiya network that it was not behind the rocket fire, blaming Palestinian groups based in the area.

Lebanese security officials said the rockets had been fired from the area of a Palestinian refugee camp.

The IDF backed up that assessment, with spokesman Daniel Hagari telling reporters later Thursday that Hamas was behind the rocket fire.

The terror group is based in Gaza but has been gradually establishing a presence in Lebanon over the past several years with a nod from Hezbollah.

In a briefing with reporters, Hagari noted that the attack came following two consecutive nights of clashes between police and Palestinians at Al-Aqsa Mosque on Jerusalem’s Temple Mount. [Footage](https://twitter.com/DeiaaHaj/status/1643380011406094336?s=20) from the first night of troops beating apprehended worshippers was shared widely on Palestinian social media.

Hagari said the IDF was looking into Iranian involvement in the attack, but insisted that it was carried out by Hamas.

Hamas was also behind the past two days of rocket fire from Gaza, he said.

Hagari added that while the IDF had identified a “convergence of the arenas,” the West Bank has remained relatively calm.

The Thursday salvo also came just hours after Hezbollah said it would support “all measures” Palestinian groups may take against Israel after two nights of clashes at the flashpoint Al-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

It also came a day after Hamas leader Haniyeh arrived in Beirut for what Hamas sources called a “private visit.” Other Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad leaders were also reported to be in Lebanon.

A Hamas source told AFP that Haniyeh had canceled a visit to the southern Lebanese city of Sidon scheduled for Thursday afternoon due to the “developments.”

The source added that Haniyeh was set to meet with Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad hailed the rockets from Lebanon as “a heroic operation against the Israeli crimes in the Al-Aqsa Mosque.”

Incoming rocket sirens first sounded in the towns of Betzet and Shlomi in the Western Galilee close to the border with Lebanon. The Israel Defense Forces said one rocket was identified and intercepted by the Iron Dome. Shortly afterward, sirens continued to sound in other towns across the area.

Footage circulating online showed trails of smoke from Iron Dome interceptor missiles. Reports said all 34 missiles were fired within the space of 30 minutes.

The Magen David Adom rescue service said one man was lightly injured by shrapnel and a woman was hurt running for a bomb shelter. The Galilee Medical Center in Nahariya said it was treating two people lightly hurt by shrapnel, including one of the patients brought in by the MDA.

A 26-year-old man, a resident of Yanuh Jat, was lightly hurt after being hit by shrapnel while driving a motorcycle near Shlomi, the hospital said.

The second man, a 19-year-old from Fassuta, was hit by shrapnel while driving in the village.

Both were in stable condition, the hospital added.

The rockets caused damage to several buildings and vehicles and sparked several fires.

A bank in a Western Galilee shopping mall sustained heavy damage, where locals said the area would have been teeming with people were it not for the Passover festival, and a building used to store agricultural equipment was destroyed on Moshav Betzet.

Several towns and cities in the north said they were opening public bomb shelters and hospitals were on emergency footing.

Later Wednesday evening, several mortar shells landed near the northern Israeli town of Metula, local officials said.

In a statement to residents, the Metula security team said explosions that sounded in the area were likely mortar impacts. Incoming rocket sirens did not sound, and there are no reports of injuries or damage in the suspected attack.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was being briefed on the incidents that came on the first day of the Passover festival and would hold an assessment with military and security leaders, his office said.

Defense Minister Yoav Gallant has “been briefed on the details of the recent security events on Israel’s northern border, and has given initial directives to the IDF Chief of the General Staff and the wider defense establishment,” his office said.

Foreign Minister Eli Cohen said the attack was deliberately launched as Israelis celebrated Passover and said Israel would “take all necessary measures to defend our country and people.”

He also called on the international community to “issue a clear statement against those responsible.”

The Foreign Ministry instructed its missions around the world to make clear to the international community that Israel will respond to Wednesday’s rocket barrage and expects countries to issue a clear condemnation of the attack against it.

After coming under fire for refusing to convene the security cabinet for nearly two months, Netanyahu’s office said the high-level panel would meet at 8:30 p.m. local time to deliberate Israel’s response.

Hadash-Ta’al MK Ahmad Tibi says he believes a viral video clip of police officers “brutally beating worshipers” at Al-Aqsa Mosque on Tuesday night was a major cause for the rocket fire against Israel.

“This video is viral in the entire Islamic world,” he tells Channel 12. “I assess that this clip led to rocket fire. Whoever gave the order for officers [to act that way] bears responsibility and is a fool.”

Likud MK Danny Danon said Israel’s response to the afternoon barrage of rockets from Lebanon must be “disproportionate.”

“We don’t need to absorb [these rockets]. We need to respond in a language our enemies understand – the language of strength.”

“We should shock these terrorist organizations,” Danon continued, acknowledging that such a response by Israel could drag the region into a wider conflict but said, “What are we preparing the IDF for, if when dozens of rockets are fired into Israeli territory we do not react?”

A senior Hezbollah official says “the Israeli effort to harm the Al-Aqsa Mosque and harm our holy sites will set the region on fire.”

The comments to the Hezbollah-linked al-Manar TV by Hezbollah Executive Council chief Hashem Safi al-Din come shortly after a barrage of 34 rockets were fired at Lebanon from Israel.

The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon called for restraint.

“The current situation is extremely serious. UNIFIL urges restraint and to avoid further escalation,” said the force which patrols the border area between the two countries that are technically still at war.

The United States said ally Israel has the right to defend itself after a barrage of rockets from Lebanon.

“Our commitment to Israel’s security is ironclad. We recognize Israel’s legitimate right to defend itself against all forms of aggression,” State Department spokesman Vedant Patel told reporters.

“We condemn the launch of rockets from Lebanon and Gaza… and we recognize Israel’s legitimate right to defend itself against all forms of aggression.”

The suspected rocket attack came as tensions ran high after days of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip, clashes at Al-Aqsa as well as a suspected Iranian drone launched from Syria earlier in the week.

Following those incidents, Hezbollah appeared to suggest it could also enter the fray.

“Hezbollah forcefully denounces the assault carried out by the Israeli occupation forces against the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound and its attacks on the faithful,” Hezbollah said in a statement.

“Hezbollah proclaims its full solidarity with the Palestinian people and the resistance groups, and pledges that it will stand with them in all measures they take to protect worshipers and the Al-Aqsa Mosque and to deter the enemy from continuing its attacks,” the group said.

Global concern has mounted after Israeli police clashed with Palestinians inside Islam’s third-holiest site Tuesday night, sparking an exchange of rockets and air strikes with terrorists in Gaza, with fears of further escalation.

The fighting raised fears of a wider conflagration. Similar clashes two years ago erupted into a bloody 11-day war between Israel and Hamas. Hezbollah’s warning raised the specter of an even wider conflict.

Hezbollah has close ties with Hamas, which rules Gaza, and with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad group, which is also based in the coastal enclave.

In the summer of 2006, Israel and Hezbollah fought a war in Lebanon that killed about 160 Israelis, most of them soldiers, and nearly 1,200 Lebanese, among them hundreds of Hezbollah fighters, according to the Israeli army.

Terrorists in the Gaza Strip [fired a number of rockets](https://www.timesofisrael.com/warning-sirens-activated-in-southern-israeli-towns-hours-after-gaza-rocket-fire/) for a second day early Thursday morning, setting off rocket warning sirens in Israeli communities near the border, the military said.

Rockets have intermittently been fired from Gaza at Israeli communities since clashes broke out at Al-Aqsa Tuesday overnight. Israel has struck targets in the Strip in response. There have since been further rounds of violence at Al-Aqsa as well as clashes in a few Arab Israeli communities.

The unrest came amid concerns of a potential escalation during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which frequently sees a spike in Israeli-Palestinian tensions, and coincides this year with Passover and Easter. Passover began on Wednesday evening. The first two weeks of Ramadan had passed by relatively smoothly.

Since Ramadan began March 22, scores of Muslims have repeatedly tried to stay overnight in the mosque, a practice that is typically permitted only during the last 10 days of the monthlong holiday.

On Tuesday the crowd, largely comprised of youths, barricaded itself inside the mosque armed with firecrackers, clubs and rocks. Israeli police entered nightly to evict the worshipers and the scene erupted in violence. Police stormed the mosque to remove those present by force, including beatings that reportedly left dozens bloody. Some of the Palestinians in the mosque threw stones and firecrackers, and hundreds were detained.

The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Judaism and is revered as the location of both ancient Jewish temples. The compound is Islam’s third-holiest site and is managed by Jordan, as part of a delicate arrangement with Israel.

Tens of thousands of worshipers visit Al-Aqsa throughout the Ramadan month, regularly leading to a spike in tensions with Israel and violence.

The Gaza-ruling Hamas denounced the Tuesday police raid on the mosque as an “unprecedented crime” and called on Palestinians in the West Bank “to go en masse to the Al-Aqsa Mosque to defend it.”