IDF shells Hamas posts after arson balloon attacks, Gaza border riots

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Israeli tanks shelled Hamas observation posts in the Gaza Strip early Monday morning in response to dozens of arson balloon attacks throughout the day and riots along the border, the Israel Defense Forces said.

The army said the strikes came in response to “arson balloons sent from the Gaza Strip into Israel and the riots along the [border] fence.”

The army did not say how many posts were hit or where they were located. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Sunday night marked the sixth consecutive evening during which Israel launched strikes in Gaza in response to attacks from the Strip.

Hamas-linked al-Resalah news said that Hamas anti-aircraft defenses attempted to respond to Israeli air strikes in the Strip. The IDF did not confirm carrying out any airstrikes.

At least 28 bush fires were started in the south of Israel Sunday, with authorities blaming incendiary balloons launched from Gaza following exchanges of fire between the Israel Defense Forces and Hamas over the weekend.

On Sunday night some 200 Palestinians rioted along the Gaza border, burning tires and setting off explosives, the IDF said.

It was the second night in a row that so-called “nightly confusion units” operated along the Gaza security fence, in a clear uptick in the level of violence and conflict between Israel and terror groups in the Strip. On Saturday night, roughly 800 people participated in the riots.

The IDF said troops used less-lethal riot dispersal weapons to break up the demonstration.

These “confusion units” attempt to disrupt the daily lives of IDF soldiers serving on the border and the residents of Gaza-adjacent Israeli communities by triggering powerful blasts and filling the sky with acrid smoke. These units had ceased functioning in recent months as Israel and Hamas reached an unofficial ceasefire agreement, only to return on Saturday night.

During the day one balloon, which had a package attached to it, landed in the yard of a home in the southern border community of Netivot, police said. Sappers arrived and confirmed the package was an incendiary device.

Bush fires were started in the Kissufim, Be’eri and Ein Hashlosha forests, destroying 80 dunams (20 acres) of wooded land.

Firefighters, assisted by officials from the Jewish National Fund, the Israel Nature and Parks Authorities and local volunteers, were able to quickly respond to the blazes, limiting the damage, the JNF said.

A delegation from Egypt’s intelligence service, which has acted in the past as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, was due to arrive in the Gaza Strip on Monday, Channel 13 news reported.

Citing Palestinian sources, the network said that some of those who have been launching the balloons at Israel received messages on their cellphones from the IDF warning them that because of their activities they have now become a “target for IDF actions.”

Earlier in the day, Defense Minister [Benny Gantz held a situation assessment](https://www.timesofisrael.com/amid-ongoing-cross-border-fire-gantz-pledges-no-peace-in-gaza-until-south-quiet/) meeting, at the end of which he blamed Hamas for the uptick in violence and warned, “The IDF will respond forcefully to any violation of sovereignty until complete quiet is restored in the south.”

“If Sderot isn’t quiet, Gaza won’t be either,” he said, referring to the southern border town which has seen many rocket attacks.

Hamas, meanwhile, blamed Israel for the violence along the Gaza border, accusing the IDF of committing war crimes, after the launching of balloons from the Strip escalated into airstrikes and rocket attacks.

Israeli jets carried airstrikes in the Gaza Strip Saturday night and early Sunday morning in response to rocket attacks and arson balloons launched from the Palestinian enclave at southern Israel.

The raids targeted Hamas sites in the southern Gaza Strip, hitting a rocket storage facility belonging to the terror group, the military said.

In response to the rocket fire and general rise in violence around Gaza, Israel has also decided to fully close off the enclave’s fishing zone until further notice, reports said Sunday morning. The decision was effective immediately.

“The IDF views with severity any terror activity against Israel and will continue to operate as needed against attempts to harm the citizens of the State of Israel or its sovereignty. The terror group Hamas is responsible for all [attacks] perpetrated from and in Gaza, and it will bear the consequences of terror attacks against Israelis,” the military said.

Israel has also shuttered the Kerem Shalom goods crossing, leading the Hamas-run Gaza Energy Authority to warn it will be forced to shut down Gaza’s only power plant Tuesday because of a lack of diesel fuel.