

Newsletter Wednesday August 15, 2018

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Hezbollah is now stronger than Israel, Nasrallah declares

"No one should threaten us with war. ... We are not scared or worried about war and we are ready for it and we will be victorious," says Hezbollah leader, adding that Israel and the U.S. are "mistaken" if they think sanctions will lead to riots in Iran.

News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah delivers a broadcast speech in Beirut, Tuesday |
Photo: Reuters

Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanon's Hezbollah, declared on Tuesday that his organization was stronger than ever and would "very soon" celebrate victory in Syria, where its Iran-backed militia has been fighting alongside Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Speaking on live television on the anniversary of a 2006 war Hezbollah fought with Israel, which regards Iran as its biggest foe and Hezbollah as the top threat on its borders, Nasrallah said that "The resistance in Lebanon today, in its possession of weapons and equipment and capabilities and members and cadres and ability and expertise and experience, and also of faith and determination and courage and will, is stronger than at any time since its launch in the region."

Video: Reuters

He added that Hezbollah is not scared of a possible war with Israel.

"No one should threaten us with war and no one should scare us by war," he said. "We are not scared or worried about war and we are ready for it and we will be victorious."

"Israel is rebuilding itself today, in view of the defeat in 2006, including re-examining its doctrine of war, on the basis that its enemy is serious and capable," he went on to say.

"Since 2007 the Israelis have threatened to go to war, but at the same time Hezbollah has become immensely stronger," Nasrallah continued.

Israel has repeatedly targeted Hezbollah in Syria, where the group and its Iranian ally have played a key military role in fighting rebels alongside Assad's forces, backed by massive Russian air power.

Assad now controls most of Syria, although a swathe of the northwest remains in rebel hands, and U.S.-backed Kurdish forces control the quarter of the country east of the Euphrates river.

Israel has demanded that Iran leave Syria and said last year it had carried out airstrikes there to stop Iranian weapons shipments to Hezbollah.

Last month, Assad and his allies recaptured the area bordering the Israeli-Golan Heights, while avoiding a wider escalation involving Israel, Iran and Hezbollah.

Concerns about such an escalation rose sharply in May, when Israel said it launched its heaviest attack on Iranian targets in Syria since the Syrian war began in 2011, prompting retaliatory rocket fire in the days that followed.

In his address Tuesday, Nasrallah also predicted that the recently reinstated U.S. sanctions against Iran and Hezbollah will not have major effects on them and will not lead to a regime change in Tehran.

He said Israel and the Trump administration are "mistaken" if they think the sanctions will lead to riots in Iran.

Last week the U.S. began restoring sanctions that had been lifted under a 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and six world powers, which U.S. President Donald Trump withdrew from in May.

The administration says the renewed sanctions are meant to pressure Tehran to halt its alleged support for international terrorism, its military activity in the Middle East and its ballistic missile programs.

"Iran has been facing sanctions since the victory of the Islamic Revolution in 1979," Nasrallah said. "He [Trump] is strengthening the sanctions but they have been there since 1979 and Iran stayed and will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the victory of its revolution."

Speaking about Washington's renewed sanctions, Nasrallah said: "I can tell you and I have accurate information they are building dreams, strategies and projects that Iran will head toward chaos and the regime will fall. This is illusion, this is imagination and has nothing to do with reality."

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| Israel renews commercial goods traffic to Gaza as calm holds

In sign of easing tensions, Israel reopens Kerem Shalom commercial crossing with Gaza Strip, expands Gaza's fishing zone from 6 to 9 nautical miles • Defense minister: As long as Israel's residents enjoy security, calm, inhabitants of Gaza will benefit.

Ariel Kahana, Lilach Shoval, Nikki Guttman, Erez Linn, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

A truck carrying goods arrives at the Kerem Shalom border crossing in the Gaza Strip, Wednesday | Photo: Reuters

Israel allowed commercial goods back into the Gaza Strip on Wednesday, in a sign of an easing of tensions as neighboring Egypt pursued a long-term ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

But the prospect of an agreement between Israel and the terrorist group prompted concern within Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's right-wing government that Hamas would take advantage of any respite from fighting to build up its rocket arsenal.

At Israel's Kerem Shalom commercial crossing with Gaza, consignments of fruits and vegetables, fuel and construction material moved into the territory of two million people on Wednesday morning.

Israel announced on Tuesday it would lift the commercial goods ban it imposed on July 9 in response to the launching by Palestinians of incendiary balloons across the frontier.

Israel and Hamas have come close to serious conflict in recent weeks after four months of violence along Gaza's border following Hamas-organized riots there.

Last week, Palestinian terrorists fired scores of rockets into southern Israel and Israeli aircraft struck more than 150 targets in Gaza before Egypt mediated a de facto ceasefire.

There have been fewer reports in recent days of such incidents, which have burned large tracts of agricultural land and forests in southern Israel.

Israel also expanded Gaza's fishing zone in waters under Israeli naval blockade, from 6 to 9 nautical miles.

Prior restrictions on the import of commercial goods that Israel says could also be used for military purposes remained in effect, a Palestinian border official said. He said they included balloons and tires.

"As long as the residents of Israel enjoy security and calm, you, the inhabitants of Gaza, will benefit," Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said in remarks broadcast on Army Radio. "If violence resumes, you will be the first to lose."

In a statement issued via the Facebook page of Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories Brig. Gen. (res.) Kamil Abu Rokon, Lieberman said he differentiates "between the Hamas leadership and the ordinary residents of Gaza. That is why I decided to open the Kerem Shalom border crossing and expand the fishing limit back to nine miles, in a clear message to the residents of the [Gaza] strip: Quiet pays off and violence does not. Gaza's residents have something to gain when Israeli citizens enjoy quiet and security, and something to lose when the quiet is violated.

"Gaza has the potential to become the Singapore of the Middle East. It will be good for Gaza's residents and good for Israel and the entire region," he said.

Lieberman noted that prior to the 1993 Oslo Accords, "Some 90,000 Gazans worked in the State of Israel, and some 80,000 factories operated in the Erez and Karni industrial zones." He said the for the sake of Gaza's residents, "we hope that all of Hamas' and the international community's budgets are directed toward your welfare and the development of the [Gaza] strip, instead of terror."

As for talk of a long-term cease-fire, Lieberman said they would require a guarantee of the return of the remains of two Israeli soldiers killed in the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict and two civilians, both suffering from mental illnesses, who crossed into Gaza in 2014 and 2015 and were captured by the terrorist group.

Comprehensive Truce

Egypt and the United Nations have been trying to broker a comprehensive truce to prevent more fighting and to ease the deep economic hardship in Gaza.

According to Palestinian media reports, nearly all of the details for the truce, said to be limited to a cessation of hostilities, have been finalized. The proposed ceasefire agreement will not include the repatriation of the bodies of IDF soldiers, the demilitarization of Gaza or the return of the Palestinian Authority's rule over Gaza, according to reports. Both Lieberman and the Prime Minister's Office have refused to provide details.

While the United States has been making efforts to reinstate the Palestinian Authority in Gaza for a while now, a National Security Council official told Israel Hayom their priority was to restore calm at the border.

The official said that "the United States is interested in seeing an end to the fighting, with or without a role for the Palestinian Authority."

Israeli cabinet ministers have spoken out against the call for the Palestinian Authority to be restored to power in Gaza.

Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz, a member of the Diplomatic-Security Cabinet, told Israel Hayom, "Any attempt to restore Abbas to Gaza and connect Gaza to the Palestinian

Authority in Judea and Samaria via a 'secure corridor' that will traverse Israel will present a direct threat to the security of Israel and the demographic balance between Israel and the Palestinians.

Hamas officials said Palestinian factions were in Cairo to discuss terms for a ceasefire with Israel, whose security cabinet was due to consider the issue later in the day.

Education Minister Naftali Bennett, who heads the Habayit Hayehudi party in the governing coalition, put Netanyahu on notice that his faction would vote against an agreement with Hamas.

"This 'quiet' will give Hamas total immunity so that it can rearm itself with tens of thousands of rockets," Bennett said in a statement.

He also blasted Lieberman's decision to reopen the border crossing, which he called a "prize for four months of terrorism" that would allow Hamas to rearmament ahead of the next round of fighting.

"During Operation Protective Edge, Lieberman opposed the Bennett plan for the destruction of the terror tunnels. Had we listened to him, we would be dealing with a terrible and mass-casualty attack in the south of the country," he said.

At the same time, Bennett said he would oppose a ground operation in Gaza and that his party would "introduce a plan to rein in Gaza terror, without sending in ground forces to Gaza and by exacting a price from Hamas."

In a statement, Lieberman's Yisrael Beytenu party retorted, "As usual, Minister Bennett is running to the media with empty slogans. He would be better off focusing on the escalating violence in the schools."

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Newsletter Tuesday August 14, 2018

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Israel-Hamas cease-fire deal 'virtually done,' paper reports

Israeli minister confirms report indicating that PM Benjamin Netanyahu met with Egyptian President el-Sissi in May to discuss provisions of a cease-fire agreement in Gaza • Israeli lawmakers bristle at one stipulation: that the PA retake control of Gaza.

Ariel Kahana, Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi in New York in 2017 | Photo: Avi Ohayon / GPO

After a two-day lull in violence along the Gaza Strip-Israel border, the Los Angeles Times quoted a senior Israeli official Monday as saying that a cease-fire agreement with Hamas, the Islamist organization that rules Gaza, is "virtually done."

Following a spike in border violence last week, when Gaza terrorists fired some 180 projectiles at Israeli communities and Israeli airstrikes bombed dozens of Hamas terror targets in Gaza, Israel's Defense Ministry said Monday that two days of "complete calm" on the border have led to possible easing of the closure of the Kerem Shalom commercial border crossing.

On Tuesday, Finance Minister Moshe Kahlon confirmed a Channel 10 news report that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had met with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi in Egypt in May to discuss a long-term cease-fire in the Gaza Strip.

Channel 10 said that Netanyahu and el-Sissi discussed easing the Israeli-Egyptian blockade on Gaza, rehabilitating Gaza's infrastructure and terms for a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas.

Video: Reuters

El-Sissi reportedly said that Israel, Arab states, and the international community should press Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to reassume control of Gaza.

Hamas ousted Abbas' Fatah party from power in Gaza in a coup in June 2007, an event that dissolved the tenuous Palestinian unity government that had been in place since the 2006 Palestinian election, in which Hamas defeated Fatah.

The report also said the two leaders discussed the repatriation of the bodies of two fallen IDF soldiers and the release of two Israeli captives believed to be held in Gaza. They also discussed U.S. President Donald Trump's much-anticipated plan for a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, which has yet to be unveiled.

Speaking to Army Radio on Tuesday, Kahlon said he had known about the meeting and that "everything that happens in Gaza will be done with Egyptian mediation and involvement."

Meanwhile, Israeli cabinet ministers are speaking up against the call for the Palestinian Authority to be restored to power in Gaza.

Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz, a member of the Diplomatic-Security Cabinet, told Israel Hayom, "Any attempt to restore Abbas to Gaza and connect Gaza to the Palestinian Authority in Judea and Samaria via a 'secure corridor' that will traverse Israel will present

a direct threat to the security of Israel and the demographic balance between Israel and the Palestinians.

"It's obvious that this matter must be discussed and decided by the cabinet. Israel must have a clear policy on Gaza, [of] separating the citizens of Gaza and Israel and drawing a clear security border between Israel and Gaza."

Another Likud minister said, " Hamas will never forgo its control of Gaza, so proposals like this one are unrealistic."

Other ministers noted that less than a year ago, the cabinet rejected any possible contact between Israel and a Palestinian unity government that included Hamas. A unity government would have to be in place for the PA to retake control of the Gaza Strip.

In October 2017, the cabinet passed a decision that Israel would not conduct diplomatic negotiations with a Palestinian government of which Hamas was a part unless a number of conditions were met, including: Hamas must recognize Israel and stop its terrorist activity; Hamas must disarm; the bodies of fallen Israeli soldiers and the Israeli captives being held in Gaza must be returned; the PA must be placed in full charge of security in Gaza, including control of the border crossings and responsibility for preventing weapons smuggling; the PA must continue to eradicate Hamas terrorist infrastructure in Judea and Samaria; Hamas must cut ties with Iran; and humanitarian aid and supplies must be transferred to Gaza through the PA and the mechanisms established for that purpose.

Newsletter Monday August 13, 2018

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Defense minister: War with Hamas is just a matter of time

PM Benjamin Netanyahu: Our aim is to restore tranquility to the residents of the south, which will be fully achieved • Hamas deputy returns to Cairo to continue talks on emerging agreement with Israel • Gaza hospitals run out of chemotherapy medication.

Ariel Kahana, Lilach Shoval, Gadi Golan, Erez Linn and Israel Hayom Staff

Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and IDF Chief Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot at the Gaza Division base, Monday | Photo: Defense Ministry

"The next round of fighting with Hamas is just a matter of time," Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said Monday, during a tour of the IDF's Gaza Division base near the Gaza Strip-Israel border.

Less than a week after the latest spike in cross-border violence, Lieberman was joined by IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eizenkot in voicing his gratitude and respect for the IDF soldiers on the front lines.

"I want to express my appreciation to the determined and motivated commanders and soldiers who are doing sacred work to ensure the safety of the citizens of Israel," he said.

Referring to the violent weekly Gaza border demonstrations that began in late March, Lieberman said that "since the start of the 'March of Return' events, Hamas' death toll has reached 168, with 4,348 wounded. Dozens of terrorist infrastructure targets have been destroyed. The question of the next round of fighting is not 'if' but 'when.' I am convinced that we will do whatever needs to be done, the way it needs to be done."

Responding to critics who claim that Israel's policy of restraint is too lenient with Hamas and other Gaza terrorist groups, Lieberman said, "Our policy is a powerful, responsible security policy. Responsible defense tactics are not shaped by internet commenters, newspaper headlines or public opinion. We are prepared and we know what to do and how to do it."

Meanwhile, amid relative calm over the last 24 hours in the border area, the Diplomatic-Security Cabinet convened on Sunday to discuss the recent tensions.

Earlier Sunday, speaking ahead of the weekly cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the current round of hostilities has not ended.

"We are in the midst of a campaign against Gaza terrorists. Blows are being exchanged; it won't stop with one punch," Netanyahu said.

"Our demand is clear: We want a full cease-fire. We will not accept anything less. To this point, we have destroyed hundreds of Hamas military targets, and in every round of attacks the IDF exacts another heavy price from Hamas.

"I won't reveal our operational plans here, but they are ready. Our objective is to restore tranquility to the residents of the south and the Gaza border – which will be fully achieved."

Meanwhile, after four months of fires being caused daily in Israeli forests, fields, groves and orchards by incendiary kites and balloons launched from Gaza, Sunday marked the first day in which the Israel Fire and Rescue Services said no blazes had been caused by Palestinian arson.

Also on Sunday, the Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba issued a statement indicating that the condition of a Thai farm worker severely wounded in a mortar shell attack last week was improving.

Meanwhile, Hamas deputy leader Saleh Arouri visited Cairo on Saturday night to continue talks on an emerging agreement with Israel that is being mediated by the Egyptian government. They also discussed inter-Palestinian reconciliation.

Arouri was joined by other senior Hamas officials after it was reported on Friday that U.N. special Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov had visited the Gaza Strip.

The Health Ministry in Gaza said Sunday it had been forced to stop providing chemotherapy treatment to children with cancer because of a lack of medicine.

A ministry spokesman said, "80% of cancer medication has run out in Gaza, and therefore it's not practically possible to implement the relevant procedures for chemotherapy treatment. Chemotherapy treatments will cease early this week, and the situation endangers the lives of hundreds of sick people."

Newsletter Sunday August 12, 2018

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'They want to turn Israel into Palestine,' PM says after Arab nation-state law protest
Thousands of Israeli Arab and Jewish opponents of nation-state law gather in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, wave Palestinian flags and decry law as "racist" • PM Netanyahu: Protest proves the law is necessary to protect Israel's nature as the Jewish homeland.

Dan Lavie, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

Israeli Arabs hold a Palestinian flag during a protest against the nation-state bill at Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, Saturday | Photo: AP

A week after the Druze community and supporters of the Druze gathered in Rabin Square in Tel Aviv to protest the nation-state law, the same plaza outside city hall turned red, green, black and white on Saturday night as thousands of Israeli Arabs turned out to demonstrate against the law, waving Palestinian flags and chanting, "In spirit and blood we will redeem Palestine."

The title of Saturday night's protest was "The nation-state law will be overturned – yes to equality."

Video: Reuters

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tweeted footage of the protest and wrote: "There is no greater testimony that the nation-state law was necessary. We will continue to fly the Israeli flag proudly and sing [the national anthem] 'Hatikva' with great pride."

Speaking ahead of the weekly meeting of the coalition faction heads Sunday, Netanyahu said, "Last night we were given clear proof of the defiance against the very existence of the State of Israel, which is why the nation-state law is necessary."

"We've seen how the Palestinian flag was flying in the heart of Tel Aviv. We heard the calls to "redeem Palestine in spirit and blood. Many protesters want to repeal the Law of Return, do away with our flag and our anthem – they want to do away with Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and turn it onto an Israeli-Palestinian state."

This, Netanyahu stressed, "is exactly why we enacted the nation-state law. The individual rights of Israeli citizens are well-anchored in other Basic Law and regular laws. Now it is clearer than ever that we needed the nation-state law to ensure Israel's future as the nation-state of the Jewish people. We enacted this law and we will preserve it," he said.

Flying of Palestinian flags in Tel Aviv 'a disgrace'

Protester Laila al-Sana, 19, from a Bedouin village in the Negev, said, "The law legitimizes racism," said. "It's very important to show we are here, to resist," she said.

"When I heard about the law I felt I should defend my hometown, our land, the land of my ancestors," 68-year-old Sheikha Dabbah said at the rally.

Gideon Markowicz

Protesters demanding the nation-state law be repealed, Saturday

Gila Zamir, 58, a Jewish resident of Haifa, said, "I feel ashamed that after 70 years I have to underscore my nationalism instead of being generous toward all those who live here."

Aataf Basha, a resident of the Bedouin town of Rahat, told Israel Hayom he thought the law was "discriminatory and fascist, divisive and discriminatory. It won't help the Netanyahu government. We need to go hand in hand: Druze, Jews, and Arabs – it doesn't matter what your ethnicity, we need to oppose Netanyahu.

"This is a delusional law. After 70 years of living together, suddenly there's a problem of nationality?" Basha said.

Omar Sultan, from the Arab city of Tira in central Israel, said he was protesting to send a message to Netanyahu.

"This law is against us, against the Arabic language, against peace, against our future in this land, we are the real people of this land, we can't agree on this law," he said.

The sight of Israeli citizens unfurling Palestinian flags and marching to "redeem Palestine" drew harsh comments from politicians.

A number of politicians were on the ground with the marchers, including Knesset members from the Joint Arab List, Meretz, and Zionist Union MK Mickey Rosenthal, who attended despite party leader Avi Gabbay's explicit instructions to Labor MKs not to take part in the protest.

Rosenthal tweeted that "what worries me most are the Zionist Union members who are afraid to stand up proudly against this campaign of incitement, lest they be publicly or politically eaten alive [for it]. I'm taking part in the protests not in support of its organizers, but because I believe that there is no Zionism without democracy and no democracy without equality."

Zionist Union MK Robert Tivieev called the Palestinian flags on display at the protest "a disgrace."

Joint Arab List MK Jamal Zahalka said, "We oppose this law and demand that it be overturned entirely. The addition of the word 'equality' won't save it and it [the law] will carry the seeds of racism in any form."

According to Zahalka, "Anyone who is satisfied with the amendment [adding the word 'equality'] wants to add an element of hypocrisy to it, nothing more."

Joint Arab List leader Ayman Odeh said, "This is the first time that tens of thousands of Arabs have come to Tel Aviv with Jewish democratic groups. They came to say this is not the end of the demonstrations, but the first serious demonstration against the nation-state law."

Culture and Sports Minister Miri Regev said that former Prime Minister Yithak Rabin "is surely turning in his grave over the fact that the Left supports Arabs who flew Palestinian flags in Rabin Square. I find that outrageous. I plan on asking Attorney General Avichai Mendelblit [to weigh in on the matter] because we cannot agree to Palestinian flags flying in central Tel Aviv."

Science and Technology Minister Ofir Akunis said, "If anyone still had any doubt about why the nation-state law was necessary, the images from the protest are clear proof that Israel needs the law."

"In the fact of the subversives who question that Israel is the national state of the Jewish people, with a blue and white flag and 'Hatikva' [as the national anthem], Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People is one of the most important laws enacted in Israel in the past few years," Akunis said.

Jerusalem Affairs and Heritage Minister Zeev Elkin, one of the authors of the law, echoed Akunis, saying, "As I said this week in the Knesset: When [MK] Ahmad Tibi and [MK] Hanin Zoabi oppose the nation-state law together with these protesters with their Palestinian flags and calls of 'in spirit and in blood...', I understand why they're doing it. They truly oppose Zionism and the fact that Israel is the state of the Jewish people and was established as such by the U.N. But [Yesh Atid leader] Yair Lapid and [Zionist Union MK] Tzipi Livni? Why do they oppose it?"

Intelligence Minister Yisrael Katz added, "Ahmad Tibi and Ayman Odeh and their friends are protesting the Jewish nation and in favor of an Arab-Palestinian nation. It's not

the wording of the law that bothers them, it's the existence of Israel as a Jewish and democratic state."

Newsletter Friday August 10, 2018

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| Hamas says Gaza cease-fire reached; Israel denies claim

Cabinet orders IDF to take "forceful action" against Hamas in wake of massive rocket salvo • In first since 2014, rocket fired at Beersheba • U.S. "fully supports Israel's right to defend itself" • Israeli envoy to U.N.: Security Council must denounce Hamas.

Gadi Golan, Ariel Kahana, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

The Iron Dome defense system engaging rockets launched from Gaza towards the southern city of Sderot | Photo: Reuters

Israel on Friday denied claims by Hamas, the terrorist organization ruling the Gaza Strip, that a cease-fire has been reached following a day of near-constant fire on Israeli communities near the border and Israeli strikes on Hamas asset in the coastal enclave.

Hamas officials said late Thursday that their truce with Israel came into effect on 11:45 p.m., ending an intense two-day burst of violence that had pushed the region closer to war.

Hamas' Al Aqsa TV reported that the Egyptian-brokered deal has taken hold "on the basis of mutual calm." It said the deal was mediated by Egypt and other unidentified regional players.

The Gaza-based Islamic Jihad terrorist group, however, also denied agreeing to a truce with Israel, but nevertheless, the Israel-Gaza Strip border seemed quiet on Friday morning.

During the latest round of violence, the fiercest seen in the sector over the past few weeks, Hamas fired over 180 projectiles at Israeli border-adjacent communities and the Israeli Air Force targeted some 150 Hamas positions in Gaza.

Reuters

Smoke billows over the Gaza Strip following an Israeli strike on a Hamas terror target
A Thai farm worker in her 20s sustained serious injuries when a rocket struck a packing facility in the Eshkol Regional Council on Thursday morning. Another employee was lightly hurt and at least 20 others were wounded in separate incidents.

On Thursday afternoon, a Grad rocket hit an open area in Beersheba, 22 miles from Gaza, triggering sirens in the southern city for the first time since the 2014's Operation Protective Edge. No injuries or damage were reported in the incident.

Hamas denied firing the rocket at Beersheba, an assertion backed by the IDF. On Thursday evening, Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the incident.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu convened a special session of the Diplomatic-Security Cabinet on Thursday evening to discuss the volatile situation on the border.

The cabinet ordered the military to take unspecified "forceful action" against Hamas and the other terrorist groups in Gaza. The IDF has since reinforced the units deployed along the border, with defense officials saying the military was ready for any scenario.

Sources at the Prime Minister's Office said that Hamas, via Egyptian officials and U.N. Middle East envoy Nickolay Mladenov, had been asking for a cease-fire since Thursday morning, but Israel continued to strike terror targets in Gaza.

Senior Jerusalem officials stressed that Thursday's operation was not the beginning of a military campaign in Gaza, but rather was meant to deal Hamas a serious blow and generate deterrence.

Israel had Hamas have fought three wars over the past decade, in 2008, 2012 and 2014.

Following the rocket fire on Beersheba, the IAF struck a five-story building in northwest Gaza. Gaza's Health Ministry said 20 people were wounded in the strike on the premises, which housed both a Hamas internal security office and what Palestinian media called "a culture and sciences center."

Hamas denounced the "barbaric" attack as an Israeli attempt to undermine the Egyptian mediation efforts.

Reuters

A Gaza City building leveled by an Israeli strike, Thursday
In a series of tweets, the IDF said, "IAF fighter jets targeted a five-story building in the Rimal neighborhood in northern Gaza. Hamas' internal security forces used the building for military purposes.

"Hamas' internal security unit is responsible for all security operations carried out inside Gaza, and is considered to be an executive branch of Hamas' political leadership. The building served as the office of active unit members. A significant part of the unit's members are also Hamas military operatives."

IDF Spokesperson Brig. Gen. Ronen Manelis told reporters that the military was "determined to restore calm to southern Israel. Hamas is the one pushing for an escalation.

We have struck over 150 targets, some highly strategic and important. This policy will intensify until such time as calm is restored."

Manelis stressed that "there is no comparison between the damage we have inflicted on Hamas and the damage it has caused us. The group has sustained hundreds of casualties and it has lost multiple assets, including tunnels.

"After four years of preparations, our abilities opposite Gaza are at their peak. If we need to launch a military campaign it will be clear-cut and decisive," he said.

At the United Nations, Israeli Ambassador Danny Danon urged the U.N. Security Council to condemn Hamas militants for what he called "the unprovoked terrorist attack" on southern Israel.

The United States State Department issued a statement saying it was monitoring the situation in Gaza closely.

"We've been watching this as it has been unfolding, and it's a very concerning situation that has taken place in Gaza," State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said at a press briefing.

"Overall, we condemn the launching of missile attacks into Israel and call for an end to the destructive violence. We've seen reports that 180 or so rocket attacks have taken place, shot from Gaza into Israel, and we fully support Israel's right to defend itself and to take actions to prevent provocations of that nature," she stressed.

Pressed by a reporter who insisted that the current escalation was not started by Hamas, Nauert replied, "I'm not going to get into how this thing started. Let's not forget that Hamas bears ultimate responsibility for the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza. It's a tremendous concern of ours."

Newsletter Thursday August 9, 2018

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As 180 rockets pound Israel, IAF hits scores of Gaza targets

Thai farm worker seriously hurt in Israeli town • Three killed in Gaza • Palestinian official says Hamas willing to end violence if Israel reciprocates, says rocket fire a response for Israeli "crimes" • Spike in violence comes amid cease-fire efforts.

Lilach Shoval, Gadi Golan, News Agencies and Israel Hayom Staff

An Israeli airstrike in Gaza early Thursday | Photo: Reuters

Israeli jets bombed dozens of targets in the Gaza Strip as Palestinian terrorists fired more than 180 rockets and mortar shells into Israel in a fierce burst of violence overnight Wednesday and well into Thursday, despite efforts to broker a truce to end months of simmering violence.

A Thai farm worker in her 20s sustained moderate to serious injuries in Israel's Eshkol Regional Council when a rocket struck a packing facility there Thursday morning. Another employee was lightly hurt and at least 20 others were wounded in separate incidents.

The Soroka Medical Center in Beersheba issued a statement Thursday saying, "The woman's condition has improved, she is conscious and breathing independently. She is still hospitalized in the ICU. The other victim from the same incident has been released."

Three people were reported killed in the Gaza Strip: a member of Hamas, the Islamist terrorist group that rules Gaza, as well as a pregnant woman and her 18-month-old child. At least five civilians were wounded, local medical officials said.

Most of the rockets fired into Israel struck in open and unpopulated areas, with only a fraction hitting communities along the Gaza border. Six projectiles exploded in the southern Israeli city of Sderot and one rocket directly hit a home in the Hof Ashkelon Regional Council.

Israel's Iron Dome rocket defense system intercepted some 30 projectiles headed for populated areas.

A Palestinian official said on Thursday that armed groups in Gaza would stop the latest round of fighting with Israel if Israel ceased its attacks on the enclave.

Speaking at a joint command center in Gaza, the official said the territory's militant groups had been "responding to crimes" committed by Israel - a reference to Tuesday's IDF tank shelling that killed two Hamas gunmen.

"Factions of the resistance consider this round of escalation over as far as we are concerned, and the continuation of calm depends on the behavior of the occupation," the official said, using militant factions' term for Israel.

The Israeli military declined to comment on the official's remarks.

The flare-up comes as Egypt is trying to broker a long-term cease-fire between the two sides.

The latest fighting has stayed within familiar parameters. The rocket fire from Gaza has not targeted Israel's heartland and the Israeli military said its airstrikes were limited to Hamas installations.

Likud minister Yuval Steinitz, a member of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's inner cabinet, told Israel Radio before the Palestinian official's comments that Israel was "not eager to enter a war" but would make no concessions to Hamas.

Kulanu minister Yoav Gallant remarked that "whatever is needed to be done to defend our civilians and soldiers will be done, no matter the price in Gaza."

Netanyahu was due to hold a security cabinet meeting later in the day after consultations with security officials.

Rocket warning sirens sounded almost nonstop in the southern Israeli town of Sderot and other border communities from sunset on Wednesday. Many residents have reinforced rooms in their homes where they can take shelter.

Ambulance sirens echoed through the night in Gaza, where families huddled at home as powerful explosions shook buildings. The Israeli military said its aircraft struck more than 150 facilities belonging to Hamas.

U.N. Middle East envoy Nikolay Mladenov said in an overnight statement: "I am deeply alarmed by the recent escalation of violence between Gaza and Israel, and particularly by today's multiple rockets fired towards communities in southern Israel."

He said the United Nation has engaged with Egypt in an "unprecedented effort" to avoid serious conflict, but cautioned that "the situation can rapidly deteriorate with devastating consequences for all people."

Gaza has been controlled by Hamas for more than a decade, during which time it has fought three wars against Israel, the latest in 2014.