



**Intelligence and Terrorism  
Information Center at the Israel  
Intelligence Heritage &  
Commemoration Center**

**December 25, 2008**

**Escalation in the south: more than 60 rockets and mortar shells fired at the cities of Ashqelon, Netivot, Sderot and other population centers in the western Negev. Hamas claims responsibility for most of the attacks.**



**Adults comforting children terrified by rocket attack in Ashqelon (Amir Cohen for Reuters, December 24).**



**Family in front of its ruined house in the village of Tequma, not far from the city of Netivot (Gil Cohen Magen for Reuters, December 24).**

## Overview

1. On December 24, five days after the lull arrangement ended, the cities of Ashqelon, Netivot and Sderot, the towns and villages near the Gaza Strip, the crossings and IDF bases were subjected to a massive rocket and mortar shell attack. At least **60 rockets** and mortar shells were fired, most of them by **Hamas**. It was the heaviest barrage in since the lull arrangement went into effect six months ago. Dozens of civilians were treated for shock and there was extensive property damage.

2. Hamas's excuse for the attack was the killing of three of its operatives, shot by IDF forces to prevent them from placing an IED near the village of Netiv Ha'asara, north of the Gaza Strip, on the evening of December 23. In our assessment, however, Hamas's real purpose behind the barrage (and behind threats to **increase** the number of shells fired and to resume **suicide bombing attacks**) was to change the rules of engagement in the post-lull period. As part of the change, Hamas's intentions are to **restrict** Israel's freedom of action and response by exacting a high price every time the IDF successfully prevents a terrorist attack, and to force Israel to open the Gaza Strip crossings even when all the terrorist organizations bombard Israel with rocket and mortar shell fire.

3. Hamas has again demonstrated that to carry out its terrorist policy **it is prepared to sacrifice the basic interests of the Gaza Strip civilians**. That has been illustrated by the attacks on the crossings, which are lifelines for the Gazans, through which Hamas demands supplies be delivered and which are the exit points for Palestinians with humanitarian issues. (Note: On December 24, mortar shells were fired at the **Kerem Shalom crossing** and on December 25 the **Erez crossing** suffered a direct mortar shell hit.)

## Events on the Ground

4. On the evening of December 23 an IDF force prevented a terrorist squad from **placing an IED** close to the village of Netiv Ha'asara, near the northern Gaza Strip border. The incident began when an IDF patrol saw three armed terrorists placing an IED near the border security fence. The force attacked, and during the exchange of fire the IED was detonated and a hand grenade was thrown at the soldiers. No IDF soldier was wounded; the three terrorists were killed. Weapons were found nearby, including assault rifles, extra magazines and grenades (IDF Spokesman's website, December 24). Hamas announced that the three were its operatives (Al-Qassam website, December 24).



**Weapons found near the three terrorist operatives killed while placing an IED near the village of Netiv Ha'asara (IDF Spokesman, December 24).**

5. A continuous barrage of rocket and mortar shell fire began on the night of December 23 and continued until the evening of December 24. It covered the area from Ashqelon, north of the Gaza Strip, to Kerem Shalom, at the Strip's southern tip. On December 24, **30 rocket hits were identified** in Israeli territory and **30 mortar shells** were fired:

i) **City of Sderot and region around it:** One rocket landed in the center of the city, sending four residents into shock. During the day a number of rockets landed in the industrial zone, one of them hitting a factory; two workers were treated for smoke inhalation.

ii) **City of Netivot and the region around it:** A number of rockets, including a standard **122mm Grad** rocket, were used to attack Netivot and the region around it. One rocket landed in Netivot; no casualties were reported. Another hit a factory in the city; two workers were treated for shock. A house in the village of Tequma, close to Netivot, sustained a direct hit. Two people in the house were treated for shock and there was extensive property damage.



**A rocket that landed in Netivot (Photo by Yehuda Peretz, December 24, reprinted courtesy of the Israel Project).**

iii) **City of Ashqelon and the region around it:** A number of rockets landed in Ashqelon and in the industrial zone south of the city, including a standard **122mm Grad** rocket. One rocket hit a house; 11 residents were treated for shock.



**A terrified child and a house which sustained a direct hit, both in Ashqelon (Photos by Yehuda Peretz , December 24, reprinted courtesy of the Israel Project).**

iv) **Villages near the Gaza Strip:** Villages near the Gaza Strip were also targeted by rocket and mortar shell fire. Two mortar shells fell on a factory in the village of Nahal Oz, sending 30 people into shock. Shortly thereafter another rocket hit the factory, sending two more people into shock.

v) **IDF bases:** On December 24 rockets and mortar shells attacked IDF bases near the border security fence. Six mortar shells hit the base near the village of Nahal Oz, causing property damage.

vi) **The Gaza Strip crossings:** A number of mortar shells were fired at the Kerem Shalom crossing and fell near the village of Kerem Shalom. Taking responsibility for the attack via the Al-Qassam website, Hamas specifically said the shells targeted the crossing, that is, the crossing through which supplies are delivered to the Gaza Strip. On December 25 a mortar shell hit the Erez crossing in the northern Gaza Strip, through which Palestinians with humanitarian issues customarily pass. No casualties were reported; there was damage to property.

6. **Hamas** claimed responsibility for **most** of the rocket fire and mortar shell fire.<sup>1</sup> The Popular Resistance Committees and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine also claimed responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> This was the first time since Hamas announced the end of the lull arrangement that it claimed responsibility for rocket fire. Until now it had found it sufficient to fire mortar shells and allow the other terrorist organizations to carry out the intensive rocket attacks on Israel.

## The Gaza Strip crossings

7. The rocket fire also targeted the **crossings** between Israel and the Gaza Strip, which serve the humanitarian interests of the Gazan civilian and through which food, fuel and other commodities are delivered. On December 24 at least ten mortar shells were fired at the **Kerem Shalom** crossing, through which Egypt was planning to send a convoy of trucks carrying supplies. (Note: On December 21, senior Hamas figure **Ayman Taha** told a Reuters correspondent in the Gaza Strip that the organizations operating in the Gaza Strip, acceding to a request from Egypt, had agreed to lay down their arms for 24 hours to allow supplies to be delivered) (Al-Jazeera TV, December 22).

8. On December 25 a mortar shell landed directly on the Erez crossing as Palestinians leaving the Gaza Strip for medical treatment in Israel and a group of Christian pilgrims were passing through. The shell penetrated the roof of the transit hall and landed in an open area near where the pilgrims were waiting. It fell apart as it hit and did not explode. There were no casualties, but property damage was reported (Ynet, December 25).

9. **The attacks prevented goods from being delivered through the crossings.** Before the attacks, the Israeli defense minister had deliberated with his deputy and other security personnel, and decided that despite the tension of the last few days, Israel would allow a limited amount of equipment to be delivered into the Gaza Strip through the crossings. However, the massive rocket and mortar shell attacks carried out a few hours before the supplies were supposed to pass into the Gaza Strip led the government to decide not to deliver them and to leave the crossings closed (Ynet, December 24).

## Responses

### Israel

10. The response of the **IDF**, which was limited by difficult weather conditions, **included two aerial attacks on rocket launchers.** On the afternoon of December 24 the Israeli Air Force attacked a rocket launcher near **Khan Yunis** in the southern Gaza strip. In the evening, combat helicopters attacked a squad in the southern Gaza strip which had previously launched mortar shells into Israeli territory (IDF Spokesman's website, December 24). Hamas announced the death of an Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades operative who had fired a mortar shell into Israel (Al-Qassam website, December 25). On December the Gaza Strip media reported four Palestinians had been wounded, **one of them a photographer for Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV** (who had apparently been embedded in the squad to **document** the attack.)

11. On December 24 Israel's Security Cabinet met to discuss an Israel response to the attacks. According to a report in the Israeli morning newspaper Haaretz, a number of military options were proposed. It stated that actions would be taken gradually, chiefly from the air, to destroy "assets" belonging to the Hamas administration and military-terrorist wing. The Cabinet ministers agreed with the prime minister, defense minister and foreign minister to authorize a date for the attacks. Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni is supposed to update Egyptian Prime Minister Hosni Mubarak on the Cabinet's decision and inform him that Israel will only enter into another lull arrangement on its own terms (Barak Ravid, Avi Issarcharoff, Yanir Yagna and Yair Ettinger for Haaretz, December 25).

## Hamas

12. As Hamas operatives were carrying out massive rocket and mortar shell strikes against Israel, the movement's spokesmen waged a propaganda assault to represent them as a response to Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip. Several Hamas spokesmen said that Hamas had not abandoned the possibility of continuing the lull arrangement, while others threatened that Hamas would not hesitate to increase the rocket and mortar shell fire and put more populated Israeli locations in the line of fire (statements inspired by announcements made by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah during the second Lebanon war).

13. Some of the statements made by Hamas were the following:

i) **Ismail Radwan**, senior movement figure, condemned the "Israeli attacks" on the Palestinian people and placed responsibility for the results on Israel. He also said that the "resistance" [i.e., the terrorist organizations] had to respond with all the means at their disposal to the "aggression" which was part of an Israeli attempt to smash Hamas's resolve and make it agree to a new lull arrangement on Israeli terms (Al-Bayan website, December 24).

ii) **Fawzi Barhoum**, speaker for the Hamas faction in the Palestinian Legislative Council, said that the Israeli government would bear the results of the escalation in the Gaza Strip because it continued "doing stupid things" to the Palestinians. He added that the fire was part of defending the Palestinian people against "continued Zionist crimes." He also warned that an IDF attack on the Gaza Strip would not be a walk in the park (Palestine-info website, December 24).



Fawzi Barhoum: "An attack on the Gaza Strip will not be walk in the part..." (Al-Jazeera TV, December 24).

iii) **Musheir al-Masri**, also a Hamas spokesman in the Palestinian Legislative Council, said that the rockets which had been launched were **only the first message** and threatened to extend the attacks **beyond what had been carried out so far**. He guaranteed that Israel would "be hit in a way it had never been before," and that he was not afraid of Israel threats. The population of the villages bordering on the Gaza Strip, as well as Sderot and Ashqelon, would not be secure "as long as Palestinians are not secure" (Filastin al-'An website, December 24).

iv) **Ayman Taha**, senior Hamas figure, said that if the "siege" continued and the crossings remained closed, Israel would pay a high price, because the Palestinian people were not tired of the "resistance" [i.e., the continuation of Palestinian terrorism] (Radio Monte Carlo, December 24).

v) **Abu Obeida**, Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades spokesman, said that the Brigades, "as promised to the Palestinian people, have taken it upon themselves to respond and to resist the [Israeli] aggression using means that will frighten the Zionist occupation." He said that Israel had not expected such an attack, and that "our undertaking is the resistance [i.e., a campaign of violence directed against Israel] and not the lull arrangement." He also stated that all Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades options were open, including **suicide bombing attacks**, although that did not mean one would be carried out tomorrow or the next day (Al-Aqsa TV, December 24).



PIJ flyer: "We have more [rockets]" (Saraya al-Quds Website, December 25, 2008)

## The Palestinian Authority

14. Mahmoud Abbas told a press conference held with Qatar's foreign minister that the situation in the Gaza Strip under "siege and aggression" made him very sad. He demanded that Israel end its "aggression" and that the Palestinian organizations stop firing rockets from the Gaza Strip. He called for a permanent and comprehensive cease fire for the sake of Palestinian interests (Wafa News Agency, December 24).