



## Operation Shield and Arrow May 9-13, 2023

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** On May 9, Israel initiated a direct attack on the senior commanders of Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza while ignoring Hamas, its third such attack since November 2019. The operation was Israel's response to an escalation of rocket and mortar fire by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, an escalation that was itself a response to the death of a senior member of the group's West Bank branch while on hunger strike in an Israeli prison. Hamas, the sovereign ruler of Gaza, preferred, as in the two previous bouts between Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, to sit the fight out, choosing instead to maintain the ceasefire to which it agreed after Operation Guardian of the Walls in May 2021.

Operation Shield and Arrow, which took place on May 9-13, 2023, was the third major bout of fighting between Israel and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad organization based in Gaza. The previous bouts were Operation Black Belt (November 12-14, 2019) and Operation Breaking Dawn (August 5-7, 2022). There have also been numerous skirmishes over the decades since the organization was first established in Gaza.

### **Palestinian Islamic Jihad**

Established in the early 1980s, a few years before Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad was the first Palestinian organization to espouse a religious rather than a secular-nationalist ideology (most secular factions espoused variants of socialism) as the

basis for the conflict with the Jews. It was based on the organization and ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was founded in Egypt in 1928. The faction's founders were Palestinian students who studied at a Brotherhood-dominated university in Egypt in the 1970s.

However, whereas mainstream Muslim Brotherhood ideology argues that the first order of business is to "clean our own house of sinners" and only then take the fight to non-Muslims, suggesting that the war against the Jews should wait until the Muslim nation is "pure", Palestinian Islamic Jihad believes the war against the Jews takes precedence.

Interestingly, in the violent intra-Muslim struggle between radical Shiism and radical Sunnism, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, though Sunni, has generally supported Iran, which is the leader of the radical Shiite movement. In return it receives funds, weapons, training, and other forms of support from Tehran.

Among Palestinians (all of whom are Sunni), the Hamas movement (the official local branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood) has won the most adherents and is therefore the larger of the two. Hamas was originally founded as a social welfare organization designed to help the poor and provide religious education to Palestinians. It turned to terrorism a few years after Palestinian Islamic Jihad (the first Hamas terrorist attack was in December 1987).

The signing of the Oslo Accords in autumn 1993 was regarded by both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad as a betrayal of the ultimate goal of the Palestinian cause, which is the total elimination of the State of Israel. Both organizations escalated attacks on Israel until forced to de-escalate by the Israeli response coupled with that of the secular Fatah faction that had become the government of the Palestinian Authority as a result of the Accords.

Fatah viewed the religious movements as threats to its political domination of the Palestinians. This fear was proven well-founded in January 2006, when, in the only genuinely democratic elections ever conducted by the Palestinian Authority, Hamas won the majority of seats in the Palestinian parliament (58% to Fatah's 33%, with the rest divided by other parties; Palestinian Islamic Jihad did not participate). Fatah refused to hand over power and a low-intensity civil war developed between Fatah and Hamas that reached a climax in summer 2007. In that clash, Fatah won the West Bank and Hamas won Gaza. The Palestinian Authority thus split into two political entities, each ruled by one faction.

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad power base, like that of Hamas, has always been in Gaza, though, again like Hamas, it has covert cells operating in the West Bank (in addition to overt political personnel). In Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad military forces number approximately 10,000 compared to approximately 40,000 for Hamas. Palestinian Islamic Jihad uses its West Bank cells to attack Israelis while bypassing Israel's formidable defense system along the Gaza border. They are also a means of diverting Israel's counter-operations away from Gaza and into Fatah-controlled areas.

Both Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad accept considerable financial and military aid from Iran, despite being religious Sunnis who believe Shiites are heretics. They follow the principle that the enemy of my Jewish enemy is my friend, at least for the time being. However, in 2012, Hamas supported a rebellion in Syria that was being led by religious Sunni groups against a Shiite-Alawi alliance, and Iran cut off support. Palestinian Islamic Jihad preferred to maintain Iranian backing. This resulted in an increase in Palestinian Islamic Jihad's strength relative to Hamas over the past decade, though it remains much smaller.

### **Israeli security policy vis-à-vis Gaza**

On the political level, what makes the three Israeli operations different from other major escalations in fighting between Israel and Gaza are the facts that Hamas ignored Palestinian Islamic Jihad's demands that it join the fighting and that Israel focused its offensive solely on Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In all the other escalations and during the constant skirmishes between Israel and Gaza, both Hamas and Israel acted differently.

Ever since summer 2007, both Hamas and Israel have viewed Hamas as the sovereign authority in Gaza. Israel's official Routine Security policy since the early 1950s states that irrespective of the identity of attackers (who are usually Palestinian), any attacks on Israel emanating from the territory of another state is the responsibility of that state. That state's government is responsible for preventing those attacks, and if it does not do so, Israel's retaliation will be aimed at the state rather than searching for and focusing on the actual attackers.

The goal of retaliation operations is to deter repeat attacks. This is true even if the attackers are not official representatives of that state but "guests" residing there or passing through. In some cases, however, Israeli governments have acknowledged that the host state was incapable of stopping the attackers using its territory and has conducted operations aimed directly at the attackers residing in those states,

or at their bases abroad. Examples of these digressions from official policy are Israeli attacks on Palestinian organizations based in Jordan or Lebanon and on Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria (though Syrian targets are often struck as well in order to compel the Syrian regime to pressure Hezbollah and Iran to reduce their anti-Israeli activity conducted from its territory).

Another digression is of course the signing of peace treaties, which Israel has done with Egypt and Jordan. These states are expected, as part of their treaty obligations, to prevent would-be attackers from exploiting their territory to act against Israel. Failures to do so are usually not for lack of trying and therefore are handled by diplomacy rather than military means.

Israel's policy vis-à-vis attacks from Fatah-controlled areas in the West Bank is more complex and nuanced. In most cases, Israeli security forces and Fatah-controlled security forces of the Palestinian Authority cooperate. However, Fatah often deliberately fails to prevent attacks or uses proxies to conduct attacks for which it later denies responsibility. In the latter cases, Israel conducts raids into Fatah-controlled areas targeting the perpetrators themselves. Fatah-controlled security forces are ignored, and if they attempt to intervene, they are attacked too.

As Hamas is the *de facto* sovereign of Gaza, Israel has applied the policy of attributing it with responsibility no matter who attacks Israel from Gaza. In every such case, Israeli forces strike Hamas assets. This concept has become so clear that in one instance in which Hamas was operating against an attempt to set up a branch of ISIS in Gaza, the ISIS group fired rockets at Israel and publicly stated they were doing so because Hamas was attacking them. In that incident, the Israeli response was to deliberately strike an empty target belonging to Hamas, thus signaling: "This is a special case. Do not think you can exploit rival proxies against us in the future."

Why, then, did Israel act differently in the three cases of attacks from Gaza by Palestinian Islamic Jihad?

There are probably two major reasons:

- a) Ever since Operation Protective Edge (July 8-August 26, 2014), Hamas has sharply reduced its attacks on Israel. On some occasions when it seemed to be re-escalating it was struck again. In May 2021, Hamas initiated a major escalation, resulting in Operation Guardian of the Walls. That operation caused Hamas severe casualties and destroyed important assets. Since then, the group has almost completely halted attacks on Israel from Gaza,

preferring to operate against Israel only via its cells in Fatah-controlled areas of the West Bank. It has even, in some cases, acted to reduce attacks by other groups. Israeli leadership probably wishes to reward Hamas for “good behavior”. Attacks against Hamas assets continue for the sake of maintaining deterrence, but only on a small scale.

- b) Palestinian Islamic Jihad is the second most powerful group in Gaza. Inflicting too many casualties on Hamas and causing too much damage to its assets could change the balance of power between the two. So long as Hamas is the “better behaved” of the two and is better capable of compelling less aggressive behavior from the other factions in Gaza, Israel prefers that it stay in power.

### **Hamas’s decision not to participate**

Hamas’s decision not to participate in the response to the three operations Israel launched against Palestinian Islamic Jihad was probably based on the same two reasons, though of course from its own point of view:

- a) Hamas does not currently wish to fight Israel (residual deterrence from the casualties and assets lost in Operation Guardian of the Walls). Hamas is unwilling to be dragged into a confrontation by any other faction without prior agreement.
- b) The Hamas leadership understands that the weakening of Palestinian Islamic Jihad helps them maintain their hold on power in Gaza.

### **Operation Shield and Arrow**

Over the past year and a half there has been a drastic escalation in the number of attacks on Israel emanating from Fatah-controlled areas in the West Bank. In 2015, there were 2,558 terrorist attacks against Israelis (the majority in the last three months of the year). The number of attacks in 2016-2020 varied from 1,320 to 1,582 per year. However, in 2021, the number of attacks surged to 2,135 and in 2022 to 2,613. In the first four months of 2023 there were approximately 675. From February 2023 till April 2023, 50 Israelis were killed and 177 wounded by Palestinian terrorists.

The Fatah-controlled Palestinian Authority has reduced its operations against Palestinian perpetrators of violence against Israelis. The majority of attackers over the past year have been Fatah proxies, whether organized in new groups (such as the Lion’s Den) or operating as “lone wolves” – i.e., individuals who have been incited to attack Israelis by official propaganda (Fatah-controlled news media,

religious sermons, and school education programs) but are not officially affiliated with any organization.

Israel responded by stepping up counter-terrorist operations in the West Bank. In Operation Breakwater, Israeli forces began to routinely enter sovereign Palestinian areas in raids to arrest or kill terrorists identified by Israeli intelligence who the Palestinian security forces refused to arrest. Most of these raids face violent resistance involving firearms, grenades, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and so on.<sup>1</sup> The Israeli raids have gradually captured or killed numerous Palestinian Islamic Jihad personnel (as well as many other terrorists).

A particularly successful operation against a Palestinian Islamic Jihad cell in August 2022 set off an escalation of rocket fire from Gaza to which Israel responded with Operation Breaking Dawn. What set off the latest bout of fighting in Gaza was the death of an incarcerated Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader (captured on February 5, 2023) who conducted an 86-day hunger strike demanding his release.<sup>2</sup> Following his death on May 2, 2023, Palestinian Islamic Jihad fired 104 rockets from Gaza into Israel, 14 of which fell inside Gaza. Five Israelis were wounded by a rocket that penetrated the Iron Dome defensive system.

Israel responded with aerial strikes and artillery fire on Hamas military installations in Gaza – strongpoints near the border, a weapons factory, a training ground, and a weapons storage facility. One Palestinian living near one of the Hamas positions was killed. Five other Palestinians were wounded, though there is information that they were struck by a Palestinian rocket that fell inside Gaza. The Palestinians continued to fire rockets and mortar bombs into Israel over the coming days, though at a much reduced rate. According to some reports, Palestinian Islamic Jihad was preparing a second massed strike that was to include more rockets fired at Israeli villages and towns as well as guided anti-tank missiles to be fired at Israeli farmers or cars driving near the border with Gaza. There are eight Israeli villages within a couple of kilometers of the border and in some places, the main road connecting them is exposed to view from locations within Gaza, as are most of the agricultural fields of these and half a dozen other villages.

Israel responded tit-for-tat with a small number of airstrikes. Apparently the decision for a much stronger response was made on May 3 or 4, but the action was deferred to await sufficient intelligence and catch the targets when a minimum number of Palestinian civilians were in the line of fire. The response chosen was a direct strike on several Palestinian Islamic Jihad commanders.

The Israeli attack began at approximately 02:15 am on May 9. Within minutes, three senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad commanders were killed, as well as five members of their families and five of their neighbors.

Over the next five days, till the final ceasefire on May 13, Palestinian Islamic Jihad fired approximately 1,500 rockets and mortar bombs towards Israel. Of these, 291 fell inside Gaza, some in residential areas causing Palestinian civilian casualties (four killed and an undisclosed number wounded), and 29 fell into the Mediterranean. Of the 1,139 rockets and mortar bombs that entered Israel, approximately 679 missed the residential areas they were aimed at and fell around them. Israeli anti-rocket systems determined that 460 rockets were a threat to residential areas and managed to intercept 439. A number of launch attempts were foiled when launch teams were sighted and attacked by Israeli aircraft. Also, an anti-tank missile team that approached the border to fire into an Israeli village was spotted and hit by Israeli aircraft.

Israel responded with three more strikes that killed senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad personnel and strikes on approximately 450 other targets belonging to the group: rocket launchers (about 800 rockets were destroyed before launch),<sup>3</sup> mortars, command posts, weapon production sites, weapon storage sites, and some forward combat positions near the border.

### **Casualties**

Inside Israel, rockets that penetrated the Iron Dome defense system killed one Israeli civilian and one Palestinian from Gaza working in Israel (about 20,000 Gazans work inside Israel). About 25 Israelis were wounded, as were five more Palestinian workers from Gaza (including the brother of the man who was killed).

All together, 21 members of Palestinian Islamic Jihad were killed and an undisclosed number wounded. Ten Palestinian civilians were killed accidentally by Israeli attacks and four Palestinian civilians were killed by rockets fired by Palestinian Islamic Jihad that fell inside Gaza. A total of approximately 190 Palestinians were wounded but it has not been reported how many were combatants and how many civilians, nor how many were wounded by Palestinian Islamic Jihad rockets that fell inside Gaza.

The six senior Palestinian Islamic Jihad commanders who were killed were the head of the military council, the chief of operations, the commander of the northern district, the commander of the southern district, and the commander and deputy commander of the group's rocket forces.

The fighting in Gaza did not halt Israeli operations in the West Bank, and 35 terrorists were arrested in those operations.

### **What next?**

Only time will tell if the Israeli military success will be translated into a long-term ceasefire with Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza. The group's casualties were not catastrophic for an organization with approximately 10,000 personnel, but with six commanders killed plus two commanders killed in Operation Breaking Dawn nearly 10 months ago (together with at least 10 other combatants in that operation), its military leadership has been mauled. They have also lost a considerable portion of their weaponry and their weapons manufacturing infrastructure, though they still have enough to renew the fighting.

Meanwhile, the goal set by Palestinian Islamic Jihad in both the escalations – to deter Israel from continuing Operation Breakwater in the West Bank – has not been achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> The son of one my cousins, serving in an infantry unit, was wounded in one such skirmish.

<sup>2</sup> The Israeli Prison Service petitioned the courts to allow it to force-feed him, but the judge ruled that it was the person's prerogative to not eat if he did not wish to.

<sup>3</sup> Many launchers are placed in small camouflaged pits, each of which can have 8 to 10 rockets ready to be fired by remote control.