

International

# Israel accuses Syria and Iran of ordering Gaza rocket fire

## Barrage of rockets trigger extensive retaliatory strikes

**GAZA:** The Israeli army accused the Syrian government and Iran yesterday of ordering Palestinian militants in Gaza to fire dozens of rockets into southern Israel, and threatened to retaliate wherever it chose. The barrage of rockets, which began late Friday and continued into yesterday morning, triggered extensive retaliatory strikes by Israeli aircraft against Gaza that risked escalating into a wider conflict.

Islamic Jihad, the Palestinian militant group that launched the rockets, said yesterday lunchtime it had agreed to an Egyptian-brokered truce with Israel to cease hostilities. The new flare-up came hours after six Palestinians died in renewed clashes on the Gaza-Israel border even as the territory's Islamist rulers Hamas said Egypt was seeking to negotiate a return to calm.

"The rockets that were launched against Israel... we know that the orders, incentives were given from Damascus with the clear involvement of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force," Israeli army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus told journalists, referring to the Guards' foreign operations unit. At least 39 rockets have been fired at southern Israel by the Islamic Jihad group since late Friday, with 17 of them intercepted by air defences and the rest hitting open ground, the army said. Israeli aircraft carried out extensive retaliatory strikes, targeting approximately 90 sites belonging to the territory's Islamist rulers Hamas. It also struck eight Islamic Jihad targets, the army said.

### Retaliation against Syria, Iran

Conricus said that Israel held Hamas responsible for the fire, even though it was carried out by Islamic Jihad at the behest of Syria and its ally Iran. "We hold Hamas responsible for everything coming from Gaza," he said. Conricus said Israel would also retaliate against the Syrian government and Iran's Quds Force, and would choose where. "Part of the address by which we will deal with this fire is also in Damascus and the Quds Force," he said. "Our response is not limited geographically."

The armed wing of Islamic Jihad, the second largest militant group in Gaza, initially threatened to continue and expand its rocket fire. But yesterday afternoon, the group's spokesman announced an immediate ceasefire, saying Egypt had negotiated a truce with Israel. "A comprehensive ceasefire agreement was reached which came into force immediately in exchange for a halt to the Israeli aggression,"

Islamic Jihad spokesman Dawoud Shihab said. Israeli security officials refused to comment on any truce, but confirmed there had been no fire from either side since the Islamic Jihad announcement.

### Truce deal progress

The biggest rocket barrage from Gaza in months came despite talk of progress towards an Egyptian-brokered deal to end months of often violent protests along the border in return for an easing of Israel's crippling 11-year blockade. On Sunday, Israel reopened the people and goods border crossings with Gaza and on Wednesday renewed the flow of Qatar-funded fuel to the Palestinian enclave, in an indication of its confidence that Hamas would rein in violence.

The Friday border marches however drew 16,000 protesters, some of them clashing with Israeli soldiers. Five Palestinians were shot dead by Israeli fire in separate incidents along the border fence, the Gaza health ministry said. A sixth died when a hand grenade he was holding exploded accidentally, witnesses said. There were no reports of deaths in Gaza as a result of the Israeli air strikes, which continued until late yesterday. In Gaza City, a four-storey building was completely destroyed, AFP correspondents reported. The Israeli army said it was a major headquarters of Hamas.

### 'Embarrasses Hamas'

Israel has fought three wars since 2008 with Hamas and its allies, including Islamic Jihad, and Egypt and the United Nations have been leading diplomatic efforts to avert a fourth. Saleh an-Nami, a political analyst in Gaza, said the rocket fire would weaken Hamas's efforts to reach a long-term truce and showed it was unable to impose its position on other factions. "It embarrasses Hamas in front of regional and global mediators that are intervening to achieve a truce," he told AFP.

Palestinians have gathered for protests along the border at least weekly since March 30. At least 213 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli fire in Gaza since the protests began, according to figures collated by AFP. The majority have died during protests, while smaller numbers have been killed by air strikes or tank fire. One Israeli soldier was shot dead by a Palestinian sniper over the same period. The protesters are calling to be allowed to return to lands their families fled or were expelled from in the 1948 war that accompanied Israel's creation. They are also protesting against the Israeli blockade. — AFP



**GAZA:** Mourners carry the body of 19-year-old Palestinian Nassar Abu Taim, who was killed the day before amid clashes following a protest at the Israel-Gaza border fence, during his funeral in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. — AFP

## Europe support against US 'rare victory' for Iran

**TEHRAN:** President Hassan Rouhani said yesterday that the divisions between the US and Europe over renewed sanctions on Iran were a "rare historical victory" for the Islamic republic. "If this time last year, we had stated that America would stand against the great nation of Iran... and Europe would stand with Iran and against America, the overwhelming majority of us... would have said that this was pure optimism," Rouhani told lawmakers in a televised address.

"The political victory of the great nation of Iran over the past months is a rare victory in history." EU countries have fiercely opposed the decision by US President Donald

Trump to abandon their landmark 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and reimpose sanctions—the last of which will return on November 5. Rouhani was addressing parliament for a special session to approve four new ministers covering the portfolios of economy, transport, labor and industry.

He acknowledged Iranians were feeling the economic strain, saying: "All of us understand people are suffering and under pressure. People's lives, in particular those on a fixed income, are very difficult." But he insisted there were sufficient reserves of basic commodities and foreign currency to weather the storm, even after a record-breaking plunge in the rial over the summer and imminent sanctions on its crucial oil industry. "We cannot tell our people that because of America's pressure, we cannot do anything. This answer is not acceptable. We cannot tell people that because there are problems with selling our oil, we are unable to manage the country," he said. He criticized foreign media reports that costs were soaring, despite Iran's own central bank showing food and drink prices had risen 46.5 percent in the year to September. — AFP

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