Rocket/Mortar

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MAY
16:51 UTC

Israel & Palestinian Territories SITUATION UPDATE: Downtick in rocket attacks from Gaza Strip recorded between May 17-18; hostilities may conclude over coming days, situation to stay volatile

Executive Summary

- There has been a significant downtick in rocket attacks launched from the Gaza Strip towards Israel over the past 24 hours. Given the extensive diplomatic efforts by the international community to end the current conflict, Operation “Guardian of the Walls” is expected to draw to a conclusion over the coming days, potentially in the coming 48 hours.
- However, this is far from conclusive as many factors can dictate an intensification in hostilities. Furthermore, the final 24 hours prior to a ceasefire and the period thereafter will be particularly volatile as neither side seeks to appear to be weak or to be caving to the other’s demands.
- The High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel announced a general strike in Israel’s Arab sector that is currently being observed on May 18. Given the currently heightened ethnic tensions within the country, the strike may prompt further protests in Israel’s mixed cities over the coming hours, which are liable to turn unruly.
- The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in the Jordan Valley on May 18. This is notable given the rarity of such incidents, with the last similar interception recorded in February 2018.
- On May 18, Hamas and Fatah declared a “Day of Rage” and urged Palestinians to clash with Israeli forces in the West Bank on May 18. As a result, an uptick in unruly protest activity and “lone-wolf” militant attacks has been recorded, especially in the West Bank and East Jerusalem on May 18.
- **MAX Security has strong on-ground capabilities in Israel, including secure transportation, provision of safe havens, and contingency consultation and planning. Contact us at operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434.**



Please be advised:

General Developments:

- The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) stated that between 19:00 (local time) on May 17 and 07:00 on May 18, 90 rockets were launched from the Gaza Strip towards Israel. Approximately 20 rockets fell within the Gaza Strip. No specific data on the number of rockets fired has been released since then.
- The IDF's Home Front Command extended the restrictions on movement in southern and central Israel until 18:00 on May 19. A maximum of ten people are allowed to gather in open spaces and up to 100 people are allowed to gather in buildings. Schools will continue to remain suspended. Employees should go to work only in places with designated bomb shelters.
- Israel has announced that it opened the Kerem Shalom border crossing on May 18 for several hours to allow for the transfer of fuel, food, and medicine into the Gaza Strip. However, following the firing of several mortars from the Gaza Strip towards the crossing during the afternoon hours of May 18, the IDF has suspended the entry of aid trucks.
- The High Follow-Up Committee for Arab Citizens of Israel announced a general strike in Israel's Arab sector that is currently being observed on May 18 to condemn the IDF's operation in Gaza and intercommunal tensions in Israel. Several Israeli Arab bus drivers did not show up for work on May 18, which resulted in disruptions to public transportation.

Diplomatic Statements

- The US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, has stated that no evidence has been provided by Israel for its claims that Hamas operated in the building that housed journalists from a prominent France-based news agency and other media outlets in Gaza City.

- On May 17, the Jordanian King Abdullah II stated that “repeated Israeli provocations against Palestinians are the reason for the ongoing escalation in the region”. The Jordanian Parliament also unanimously voted for the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador to Amman.
- The US announced that during a phone call between President Joe Biden and Prime Minister (PM) Benjamin Netanyahu, Biden affirmed that he “supports Israel’s right to defend itself against indiscriminate rocket fire”. Biden also expressed his support for a ceasefire.
- In parallel to Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh’s reported willingness for a ceasefire with Israel, Egypt has asked Israel not to increase the intensity of its strikes in the Gaza Strip, per a May 18 report.

Gaza Strip

- The IDF announced that it targeted several Hamas positions in the Gaza Strip during the overnight hours of May 17-18. This included the targeting of several rocket launchers as well as 65 militants in the enclave.
- The IDF shot down an explosive-laden unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that was launched from the Gaza Strip towards Israel during the morning hours of May 18. The IDF also attacked nine militant underground tunnels and rocket launchers in the Gaza Strip.
- During the afternoon hours of May 18, the IDF identified an anti-tank guided missile (ATGM) militant squad in Khan Younis and attacked it before it was able to launch a projectile into Israel as well as neutralized a Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) squad in central Gaza before it could launch rockets into Israel.
- The IDF announced during the afternoon hours of May 18 that it had attacked 15 senior Hamas commanders’ houses in the Gaza Strip over the past 24 hours. This included the house of the deputy commander Hamas’ northern brigade in Gaza City, the houses of two company commanders in Hamas’ reserve battalion in Khan Younis and Draga.

Southern Israel

- During the early morning hours of May 18, rockets were fired towards multiple Israeli cities surrounding the Gaza Strip. One direct hit was reported against a house in **Sha’ar Hanegev Regional Council**. No casualties were reported.
- On May 18, several barrages of mortar shells were fired towards the cities surrounding the Gaza Strip. One hit was recorded near the **Erez border crossing**, lightly wounding one IDF soldier.
- Another direct hit was recorded at a packaging plant located in the **Eshkol Regional Council’s Ohad**, which resulted in the death of two individuals, while two others were severely wounded and six lightly wounded.
- Reports indicate that a rocket fired from the Gaza Strip during the afternoon hours of May 18 hit a building in **Ashdod**.

Northern Israel

- During the evening hours of May 17, two suspects, who took part in a Pro-Palestinian protest along the **Israel-Lebanon border**, sabotaged the border fence in an attempt to cross into the Manara area. The IDF stated that the suspects moved away from the fence after the IDF fired several warning shots into the air.
- The IDF stated that six rockets were launched from Rashaya Al Foukhar, located north of Kfar Choub in southern Lebanon, towards the **Misgav Am** area in Israel during the late night hours of

May 17. All of the rockets landed within Lebanese territory. No casualties or material damage was reported as a result of the attack. According to the IDF spokesperson, the rockets were fired by Palestinian factions not connected to Hezbollah.
- On May 18, the IDF Spokesperson announced that a UAV that crossed the Jordanian border into **Emek HaMaayanot** was shot down."



Central Israel

- During the morning hours of May 18, the Israeli government approved a 48-hour extension of the emergency situation in **Lod** that will remain in effect until the morning hours of May 20.

Old City, Jerusalem

- During the afternoon hours of May 18, clashes were reported between Palestinian protesters and Israeli police at the **Damascus Gate**. Subsequently, eight Palestinian protesters were arrested for hurling rocks and fireworks at the police.

East Jerusalem

- A pipe bomb was reportedly thrown at a house in the **At-Tur** neighborhood on May 18. No casualties were recorded.

- During the afternoon hours of May 18, clashes between Palestinians and Israeli police were reported in **Sheikh Jarrah**. Israeli police reportedly used stun grenades to disperse the protesters.



West Bank

- Fatah and Hamas declared a “Day of Rage” and urged Palestinians to clash with Israeli forces in the West Bank on May 18.
- During the evening hours of May 17, an attempted shooting attack was recorded in **Halhul**, near **Hebron**, against IDF soldiers. No casualties were reported.
- During the morning hours of May 18, the IDF neutralized a Palestinian militant who attempted to carry out a multi-pronged attack using explosives, an automatic weapon, and a knife in West Bank’s **Hebron**. No Israeli casualties were recorded.
- As of the evening hours of May 18, violent protests have been witnessed in about 25 hotspots in the West Bank, including large-scale protests in **Ramallah**, at the time of writing.
- At least one Palestinian has reportedly been killed, and two IDF soldiers wounded during an exchange of gunfire between the IDF and some Palestinians during a violent riot at the al-Bireh checkpoint, near **Ramallah**.

Assessments & Forecast:

Israel & Gaza Strip

1. There has been a downtick in rocket attacks launched from the Gaza Strip towards Israel over the past 24 hours. This is illustrated by the IDF’s report that 90 rockets were launched from the enclave towards Israel during a 12-hour period from 19:00 on May 17 to 07:00 on May 18. Although the military is yet to release more updated data, this figure represents a significant downtick in the number of rockets fired by militant factions in the Gaza Strip during the current ongoing conflict with Israel. This is shown by the fact that 190 rockets were fired from the enclave during the same time period on consecutive days on May 16 and May 17. Furthermore, for

significant periods during the morning hours of May 18, no rockets were fired into Israel.
2. The reduced rocket launches, and the limited range of the attacks, are indicative of both Hamas' and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) decreased resolve and desire to continue their respective involvement in the current conflict with Israel. It underscores their preference for a ceasefire at this stage, due to the significant damage inflicted on their militant infrastructure. This can be attributed to the IDF's persistent bombardments targeting the militant factions' rocket launching facilities and the homes of senior personnel. This is evidenced by the IAF airstrikes in the Gaza Strip during the evening of May 17, in which it successfully targeted a number of rocket launchers aimed at multiple cities, including Tel Aviv. The significant damage inflicted upon the militant factions' rocket launching and production facilities has likely driven both groups to utilize their shorter-range, albeit equally lethal, mortars rather than longer-range rockets to attack central Israel. This is in an attempt to preserve their remaining rocket arsenal in the event of a more prolonged conflict. Rockets, when fired in a volley of dozens or hundreds of projectiles, can overwhelm and circumvent Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system and reach far greater ranges within Israel, thus causing more significant disruptions to the country and impacting far more citizens, which raises its profile. The groups' current preference to use mortars is evidenced by a mortar barrage fired towards the Eshkol region in southern Israel on May 18, in which two foreign workers were killed.
3. Both groups do however still possess a large number of short to medium range rockets, which enables them to target southern Israeli cities such as Beersheva, Ashkelon, and Ashdod. Despite issuing threats to fire towards Tel Aviv and central Israel, the groups have failed to do so since 00:01 on May 16, which indicates that they are either completely deterred from such strikes or prefer to preserve their long-range rockets, which constitute strategic assets. **FORECAST:** With this in mind, Hamas and the PIJ will continue to target southern Israeli cities in retaliation for IAF strikes in the coming hours, at least as long Israel continues to attack targets in the enclave, particularly tunnel and rocket launching infrastructure. A more forceful response, which could involve the firing of singular digit rockets towards central Israel, may be recorded in the event of mass civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip due to Israeli strikes.
4. **FORECAST:** Given the extensive efforts by the international community, including the first public calls by the US to end the current conflict, as well as indications that the IDF has hit a relatively large part of its bank of targets, "Operation Guardian of the Walls" is expected to draw to a conclusion over the coming days, potentially in the coming 48 hours. However, this is far from conclusive as many factors can dictate an intensification in hostilities. During the coming period, Israel and the various militant factions will continue to engage in hostilities as both seek to emerge from the conflict with tangible achievements and the "victory picture". Given the precedent of similar hostilities between these parties over recent years, the final 24 hours prior to a ceasefire and the period thereafter will be particularly volatile as neither side seeks to appear to be weak or to be caving to the other's demands. Hamas in particular will aim to extract concessions, economic or political, from Israel. The latter will be reluctant to give in to any of Hamas' demands, so a more fundamental "quiet in exchange for quiet" formula may emerge, without any change to the situation on the ground.

Strike in Israel by Arab Sector

The current general strike being observed by the Israeli Arab population on May 18 occurs amid the backdrop of heightened intercommunal tensions in Israel and the ongoing conflict between Israel and militants in the Gaza Strip. Within this context, the general strike is primarily symbolic and aims to show the local Arab population's condemnation of Israel's actions towards Palestinians, which they perceive to be oppressive. **FORECAST:** Given the currently heightened ethnic tensions within the country, the strike may prompt further protests in Israel's mixed cities over the coming

hours, which are liable to turn unruly. Therefore, Israeli security forces will likely bolster their presence in such cities despite the Israeli Police already strengthening their security protocols in recent days. The general strike will further elevate ethnic tensions in Israel's mixed cities, particularly in those in which significant unrest has already been recorded in the past week, such as Lod and Jaffa. Israeli security forces are liable to utilize riot dispersal measures, such as stun grenades, should any unruly behaviour be recorded at demonstrations. This is due to the authorities' desire to preserve the rule of law in Israeli cities and to mitigate the threat of intercommunal violence.

Northern Israel

1. The IDF's interception of a UAV in the Jordan Valley during the morning hours of May 18 is a notable event given the rarity of such incidents, with the last interception recorded in February 2018 when a UAV, stated to be "Iranian" by the IDF, was destroyed after it had penetrated Israeli territory. It is also significant because, based on the limited footage of the downed device in the current incident, it appears to be of a relatively elevated sophistication, rather than commercially available quadcopters. The infrequency of such incidents, coupled with the ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza-based militant factions, indicates that the perpetrator of the UAV launch likely perceived Israel as vulnerable to such an attack given its ongoing military operations in the Gaza Strip. The interception therefore highlights the Israeli security establishment's ability to monitor and defend against such threats along all of its borders. The interception also illustrates the IAF's specific vigilance to the threat of UAVs, which has enabled the IDF to thwart near-daily launches emanating from the Gaza Strip over the past week.
2. In terms of the perpetrator of the launch, given Iran's previous involvement in the UAV launched from Syria three years ago and its interest in further destabilizing the security environment in Israel at the current time, it is likely that Iran was involved in the latest incident. This would be either directly through Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) or indirectly through one of its regional militia proxies, most likely based on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. This is bolstered by the fact that Iran is known to have capabilities in the development and deployment of loitering munitions, which it has transferred to its various proxies. **FORECAST:** Further UAV incursions into northern Israel are not anticipated in the coming days. However, the growing utilization of the modus operandi, particularly by Gaza's militant factions, does indicate that explosive-laden UAVs will play an increasingly important role in future conflicts with Israel. This is due to the relatively limited financial investment needed to produce and operate these aerial vehicles, which are increasingly being used by non-state militant actors and rebel forces. Israel will continue to invest in its aerial defense systems, particularly those aimed at mitigating the threat of UAV attacks and thereby maintain its ability to thwart future aerial attacks.

West Bank, Jerusalem

1. The calls by Hamas and Fatah for a "Day of Rage" in the West Bank coincides with the ongoing general strike across the Palestinian Territories as well as Israel's Arab sector. As a result, an uptick in unruly protest activity and "lone-wolf" militant attacks has been recorded in the West Bank and East Jerusalem on May 18. Among various militant attacks that have been recorded, the IDF's foiling of an assailant in Hebron, who attempted to carry out a multi-pronged attack against Israeli security forces is slightly noteworthy. This is because he was armed with an IED, a "Carlo" submachine gun, and a knife, which indicates that the individual was resolute on conducting an attack either using a combination of these weapons or carried them to maximize his chances at a successful attack should any one modus operandi fail.

2. The wounding of the two IDF soldiers in a exchange of gunfire following a violent riot at the al-Bireh checkpoint near Ramallah and the clashes in Jerusalem's Old City between Palestinian protesters and the Israel Police also showcase the heightened level of unrest due to the symbolism of the "Day of Rage". According to reports, violent protests have been witnessed in about 25 hotspots in the West Bank, at the time of writing. **FORECAST:** "Lone-wolf" militant attacks including in Hebron, Ramallah, and other parts of the West Bank will likely continue to occur during the remainder of May 18. Similarly, unruly protests will also likely persist across the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and Jerusalem's Old City during the coming hours and days as tensions continue to remain high. Given that these demonstrations and attacks seek to condemn the Israeli authorities for their perceived oppressive policies against the Palestinian populace, these events will likely be recorded near checkpoints manned by the IDF.

Recommendations:

1. Those operating or residing in Israel should adhere to all Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Home Front Command guidelines regarding early warning sirens for incoming rockets.
2. We advise against all travel within 40 km of the Gaza Strip at this time.
3. Those remaining within this vicinity should stay within close proximity of a shelter and remain abreast of Color Red sirens. We advise downloading the Color Red mobile application to receive timely alerts.
4. In case you hear a siren, seek shelter in a protected area and remain inside for at least 10 minutes. When a Color Red siren is sounded: If a designated shelter exists, immediately go there. If not, go to a room with as few external walls, windows, and openings as possible, close all openings, sit on the floor below the window line and near an internal wall.
5. In an open area, lay down on the ground and cover your head with your hands.
6. When driving, safely pull over and follow the above instructions.
7. Avoid protest gatherings throughout the country due to the high likelihood of unrest. These violent demonstrations are more likely in mixed Jewish-Arab locales, such as Haifa, Jaffa, Lod, Ramla, and Akko, as well as Arab-populated cities and towns.
8. **MAX Security has strong on-ground capabilities in Israel, including secure transportation, provision of safe havens, and contingency consultation and planning. Contact us at operations@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434.**