

# IDF strikes Gaza after incendiary balloons spark fires in south

Army says warplanes hit Hamas terror group base located next to school after first suspected arson attacks in weeks; Palestinian media claim Israeli drone shot down.



Illustrative: Explosions light up the night sky above buildings in Gaza City as IDF planes hit the Palestinian enclave, early on June 16, 2021. (MAHMUD HAMS / AFP)

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Israel Defense Forces jets struck a series of targets in Gaza late Sunday night, hours after incendiary balloons launched from the Strip sparked several fires in southern Israel.

The Israel Defense Forces said warplanes hit several buildings in a Hamas military base, as well as unspecified “infrastructure and utilities used for activities” of the terror group.

It noted the base was located “adjacent to civilian sites, including a school,”

without providing details.

According to the Hamas-affiliated al-Resalah, Israeli planes bombed areas west of Gaza City, before striking to the east of Khan Younis. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Palestinian media reported that terrorists fired from machine guns at Israeli aircraft over the Gaza Strip, amid the airstrikes, and managed to down a drone.

An IDF spokesperson said the military was not aware of any reports of drones that had been shot down.

The army said the airstrikes came in response to incendiary balloons launched into Israel.

“The IDF will respond aggressively against continued terror attempts out of the Gaza Strip,” the IDF said in a statement.

Hamas spokesperson Hazem Qasim mocked the Israeli airstrikes as a “failed attempt to show its own impotent power and restore its army’s battered image after it was shaken” during the recent fighting between the two sides.

“The noble resistance is ready to deal with all options, nor will it allow the occupation to impose its equations,” said Qasim, referring to the balance of deterrence between Hamas and Israel.

On Sunday afternoon, Gaza-based terror groups launched incendiary balloons into southern Israel, sparking a number of fires, a Fire and Rescue services investigator determined.

In response to the arson attacks, Israel announced it was cutting the Gaza Strip’s fishing zone in half, from 12 nautical miles to six, effective immediately and until further notice on Sunday night. Prior to May’s conflict between Israel and Palestinian terror groups in Gaza, Palestinian fisherman could operate up to 15 nautical miles from the coast.

“This follows the launching of incendiary balloons from the Gaza Strip into Israeli territory, which is a violation of Israeli sovereignty,” Israel’s military liaison to the Palestinians, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, said in a statement.

According to the fire department, three small brushfires were ignited in the Eshkol region of southern Israel, in the first arson attacks from the Gaza Strip since early July.

“A fire investigator from the Southern District Fire and Rescue Services found that the blaze was caused by the launching of incendiary balloons,” a fire department spokesperson said. There were no injuries or damage to property reported.

In its statement, COGAT said the attacks were ultimately the responsibility of the Hamas terror group, the de facto ruler of the Strip.



Bonfires in southern Israel allegedly sparked by incendiary balloons launched by Gaza-based terror groups on July 25, 2021. (Moshe Brochi)

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Hamas has warned of a return to fighting should Israel seek to again tighten restrictions on the blockaded Gaza Strip. The coastal enclave has seen tighter controls than usual since the 11-day May conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Earlier on Sunday, Israeli authorities prevented 25 trucks bearing Qatari-funded fuel from entering the Gaza Strip. An Israeli defense official, who spoke on

condition of anonymity, cited a failure by Palestinian Authority officials in Gaza to coordinate with them.

PA officials in Gaza rejected the claim, saying that the United Nations and Qatar were responsible for directly coordinating with the Israeli side. Both the UN and the office of Qatar's Gaza envoy declined to comment.

"Further restrictions on Gaza will only generate an explosion in the face of the occupation," Hamas spokesperson Abd al-Latif al-Qanou told official Hamas radio on Sunday evening.

The Israeli defense official said Sunday night that the fuel was expected to enter the Gaza Strip on Monday, but that "nothing was set in stone."



Supporters of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad terror group prepare balloon-borne incendiary devices to launch toward Israel, east of Gaza City, on June 15, 2021. (Atia Mohammed/Flash90)

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Israel regularly responds with airstrikes against Hamas positions in Gaza after incendiary balloon attacks. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett has repeatedly said that he will not allow such incidents to occur without a response.

“Israel is interested in calm and has no interest in harming Gaza residents, but violence... will be met with a strong response,” Bennett told the cabinet following such strikes in early July.

During the war, Israeli airstrikes and Palestinian rockets caused at least \$290 million worth of damage to the Gaza Strip, international assessors reported in early July.

Israel and Hamas have been conducting indirect negotiations in Cairo in an attempt to strengthen the fragile ceasefire between the two sides. Israeli officials have said they will condition allowing the reconstruction of Gaza and easing the heightened restrictions on reaching a prisoner exchange with Hamas that secures the return of Avera Mengistu and Hisham al-Sayed, and the bodies of IDF soldiers Hadar Goldin and Oron Shaul, who died in 2014 fighting.

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