

Israel launches retaliatory airstrikes in Gaza after Hamas rocket attacks



Israel has launched airstrikes against targets throughout the Gaza Strip after the armed wing of the ruling group in the Palestinian territory launched dozens of rockets and mortar shells into southern Israel.

The confrontation, which continued into Wednesday morning, is the worst episode of violence between Israel and Hamas since they fought a seven-week-long war in 2014.

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What we know so far

- The Israeli military said around 70 rockets and bombs had been fired into Israel by 8 p.m. local time on Tuesday (1700 GMT). One mortar shell landed near a kindergarten.
- Israeli forces intercepted most of the rockets and mortar shells, the military said, and tanks and bombers responded by targeting 55 militant

locations within Gaza. There were no immediate reports of Palestinian casualties.

- Three Israeli soldiers were wounded, according to the military.
- The armed faction of Hamas and Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attacks in a joint statement. They said they were retaliating against “Zionist aggression and crimes against our people” since clashes between Israeli forces and Palestinian protesters on March 30.
- Islamic Jihad said Egypt had brokered a ceasefire agreement with Israel, but Israel later dismissed the report.

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‘Threshold of war’

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said: “The Israeli army will respond with great force to these attacks, and Israel will exact a heavy price from anyone who tries to harm it, and we see Hamas as responsible for preventing these attacks against us.”

Israeli Intelligence Minister Israel Katz said Hamas and Israel were “at the closest point to the threshold of war” since 2014. “If the firing [from Gaza] does not stop, we will have to escalate our responses and it could lead to a deterioration of the situation,” Katz told Army Radio.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, whose Fatah group rules the Palestinian West Bank and is a rival of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, said Israel had used “vigorous aggression” against Gaza and was not interested in peace.

US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley called for an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council for Wednesday and said: “The Security Council should be outraged and respond to this latest bout of violence directed at innocent Israeli civilians.”

The European Union’s foreign policy chief, Federica Mogherini, called on Hamas to end its rocket and mortar strikes and said “indiscriminate attacks against civilians are completely unacceptable under any circumstances.”

Nickolay Mladenov, the UN’s special coordinator for the Middle East peace process, denounced “the indiscriminate firing of rockets by Palestinian militants

from Gaza toward communities in southern Israel.”

Weeks of violence: The exchanges follow weeks of clashes along the Gaza-Israeli border. Israeli forces have shot and killed more than 110 Palestinians protesting against Israel’s occupation of lands claimed by Palestinians. Israel has said the use of force against protesters was necessary to defend Israel’s border, and has accused Hamas of using civilians as human shields.

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amp/cm (dpa, AP, Reuters)

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