

Senior IDF Official: Israel at closest point to war since 2014

“Iran has an interest in escalating the situation in Gaza in light of what is happening in Syria,” the senior IDF officer said.

- > After 130 rockets fired from Gaza, Israelis wake to tentative calm
- > Iran is the culprit behind Tuesday’s Gaza rocket barrage, Israel says

Despite relative calm returning to southern Israel after more than 100 mortars and rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip, Israel is at its closest point to war since Operation Protective Edge four years ago, a senior IDF officer in the Southern Command said on Thursday.

According to the senior officer, the Iranian-funded Islamic Jihad did not show all its strength and, under the guidance of Tehran, might still be able to act against Israel from the Hamas-run Gaza Strip.

“This week, Islamic Jihad operated with Iranian consent and Iran has an interest in escalating the situation in Gaza in light of what is happening in Syria and other areas,” he told reporters.

The Southern Command, he said, operated with a “very clear” directive on Tuesday to make sure the latest round of violence didn’t escalate into a full-blown war so that Israel “could focus” on confronting larger threats like Iran and Syria.

The officer said that the army had anticipated an attack by Islamic Jihad, and while the military was not certain when the attack by the Gazan terrorist group would happen, the IDF had spoken to regional council heads and had deployed Iron Dome batteries. The warning system has also been improved for residents living within seven kilometers of the Gaza Strip, giving them 23 seconds to run for shelter instead of the previous 15, he said.

According to the senior officer, Israel struck dozens of high-value Hamas and Islamic Jihad targets but admitted that the IDF did not succeed in targeting the

cells that had fired the projectiles.

“We were instructed to locate and attack the cells that carried out the launches, but the enemy has improved and learned lessons since the last round of fighting, and much of the shooting was carried out with timers and from underground,” he said.

The officer nevertheless stressed that “the terrorist organizations limited themselves regarding the range of [their] rocket fire this week.” But “if it continued, we were ready for something a lot broader and more meaningful - and Hamas knew it. It could have ended very differently.”

The senior officer said that the 65 targets struck by the IDF “were targets that have been on our ‘waiting list,’” adding that Hamas planned to use them in the next war with Israel.

Among the high-value targets was an offensive tunnel built in the last year that infiltrated both into Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula as well as into Israeli territory. The officer explained that the intelligence on the tunnel has been shared with Egypt, which has neutralized it on its territory as well.

While rocket fire from Gaza remains a major concern for Israel, the threat posed by offensive tunnels infiltrating Israel led the IDF to invest millions of shekels into building an underground barrier with the Strip, dubbed by Israel “the guillotine.”

According to the officer, 12 Hamas tunnels have been destroyed in the past two years, including six that infiltrated into Israeli territory.

While the underground barrier - which is to also extend into the Mediterranean Sea in the form of a breakwater - is set to be completed by the end of 2019, “whoever gives the number of tunnels which remain is irresponsible,” the officer said. “We don’t know everything yet and the threat [posed by the tunnels] remains until the barrier is completed.”

On Wednesday, UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov told the UN Security Council that the escalation was a “warning to all of us of how close we are to the brink of war every day.”

According to the senior officer, Israel should allow for additional measures in order to stabilize the humanitarian situation. “Otherwise, we will be on a slippery

slope.” He pointed out that even the Palestinian Authority has disengaged itself from the Strip.

Hamas, the senior officer said, is trying to save itself from collapse but has no solution.

“No one wants the problem of Gaza, even us,” he said. “Small steps can be taken that will give a year and a half of quiet, and allow for a long arrangement to be reached. We do not need to help Hamas or lift it up... as large as Hamas’s concessions will be, so will be the size of the arrangement,” he said.

Beyond the ongoing operations of the Erez and Kerem Shalom crossings, as well as the limited opening of the Rafah crossing with Egypt, additional “arrangements” are being examined, the senior officer said.

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