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The Gaza Spring Offensive: Hamas Hybrid Warfare Threat and Israel's Response

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Bottom Line Up Front

Since March 30 Hamas has launched multiple hybrid mass-crowd / armed terror attack against Israel's border with the Gaza strip. The Israel Defense Forces successfully thwarted these attempts with a multi-tier defense combining information operations, non-lethal means, and finally selective live fire. The Palestinian death toll so far unfortunately exceeded 130, arousing vocal criticism in the West, accusing Israel of disproportionate and unjustified use of lethal force against unarmed and peaceful civilian protesters.

Against this backdrop, this report analyses the occurrences from the strategic, operational and tactical levels, from both political and military aspects, and sets the unfolding events in a wide context. A thorough look into the parties' options, choices and actions arrives at a clear conclusion: while the Gaza Strip under Hamas is indeed in dire conditions, the Gaza terror government sought to forcefully coerce Israel into concessions, helping Hamas out of its straits. This was to be achieved through armed terror attacks, seeking mass killing and hostage taking on Israeli soil. The military punch was to be veiled by so called "Marches of Return", seemingly "peaceful, unarmed, popular parades and free speech demonstrations".

At a close look, the IDF response was indeed proportionate, controlled, and professional, applying lethal force as a last resort, and so avoiding much more severe consequences. The high numbers of casualties result from the Hamas's numerous attacks on the border defenses, unrelenting despite non-lethal measures used against it, the recurring friction it sought, its intentional use of human shields, virtually embedding its terrorists among mass civilian crowds, and putting Palestinian women, children, elderly and handicapped persons in harm's way. These facts were misrepresented to foreign watchers by a preplanned media manipulation, including fake stories, distorted visuals and out of context representation.

After culminating on May 14, Hamas leadership seemed to conclude their failure, and turned to other options, especially arson and IED carrying kites and helium balloons, and occasionally mortar and rocket fire. These choices further set the "Parades" in the right context among violence and military operations by a globally recognized terror organization.

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Historical Background

On September 2005, the last Israeli soldier left the Gaza Strip, fulfilling its government bidding to disengage. Under heated public debate, Israel evicted 8,000 of its citizens and razed 21 villages and withdrew to the recognized 1949 armistice line. On January 2006 *Hamas*, the Islamist Resistance Movement, won the Palestinian parliamentary elections, while the ruling *Fatah* nationalist movement refused to recognize it. On June 2006 *Hamas* completed a military takeover of the Gaza Strip, overthrowing the remains of PA administration, and establishing itself as the de facto ruling power there. This spelled the beginning of a “split screen” political architecture of the Palestinian system, with Fatah governing the WB through the PA, and Hamas ruling the Strip.

Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip allowed it to harass Israel continuously with cross-border attacks, IED attacks, kidnapping through attack-tunnels, and recurring indirect fires. IDF border responses drove Hamas to seek additional options, mainly ballistic, and Iran’s funding and arming gave a great boost to its military buildup efforts. Open lines of logistics from Iran, sometimes passing in Sudan and the Red Sea, through Sinai, and into Gaza, provided the materiel. With the IDF gone, Hamas was busy growing the Strip’s tunneling industry, combining commercial taxable traffic (in the early 2010s estimated \$250M yearly value) and military transfers. This allowed Hamas to build up its force, focusing on a mix of mortars and rockets, gradually increasing range, numbers and effect: from early self-made *Qassam* rocket with 1.5 Km 3 Kg warhead to Iranian industry made *Fajr* with 45-90 Kg warhead and 45-75 Km range, and beyond.

Constant military friction initiated by Hamas unfolded to a recurring pattern of flare-ups, harassing Israeli forces and Gaza-neighboring populations, escalating into peaking operations of larger scale. A June 2006 abduction attack developed into a limited IDF operation in Gaza, which was dwarfed only by the second Lebanon war, which started the next month. Ongoing attacks led to operation CAST LEAD at the end of 2008, followed by a significantly lower level of attacks from Gaza. 8 days Operation PILLAR of DEFENSE on November 2012 was followed by longer period of calm, collapsing again in July 2014 into a 51-day operation PROTECTIVE EDGE, followed by the longest period of calm with Gaza ever. Each round of conflict brought a larger Israeli population under Hamas threat, encouraging Israel’s efforts on missile defense capabilities.

The pattern is clear: when Hamas learned that its military brinkmanship leads to wide scale fighting with Israel to no strategic avail, it was not only deterred from attacking Israel, but also restraining other terror groups from doing so out of Gaza. At the same time, Hamas constantly explores new ways to overcome IDF defenses and countermeasures and to challenge Israel “under the threshold of war”. Building its military power, with special stress to cross-border attack tunnels, naval commando, underground rocketry, and subterranean facilities, is still a high priority, even in harsh financial conditions.

The Israeli-Palestinian Calendar

The Israel defense calendar was gradually molded by the anniversaries of historical events, making the spring-summer months a typical period of high sensitivity. Jewish *Passover* in March-April, followed by Palestinian *Land Day* (30 March), Israel's *Independence Day* (April-May), Palestinian *Prisoners' Day* (17 April) Palestinian *Nakba* day (15 May) and *Naksa* Day (5 June), and this year also the holy Muslim month of *Ramadan*, with the Iranian *Qods* Day on its last Friday. Year by year, this period featured new challenges, but a new pattern emerged after the regional turmoil broke out, and as popular demonstrations against the Arab regimes spread across the Middle East.

Towards mid-May 2011, a social media campaign called for a "March of Return" into "Palestinian occupied lands". Importantly, the Palestinian concept of "*Return*" clearly seeks to undo the 1948-9 war results, and so incorporates Israel's elimination and disappearance. That May, the Syrian regime arranged for a mass Palestinian crowd, breaching Israel's border fence with Syria, and breaking into the village of Majdal Shams. Four people were killed in the event, and the rest were peacefully returned to Syria, but no hostilities broke between the assailants and the local community, which is Druze and not Jewish. At the same period, Lebanese Hizbullah arranged a mass-crown border attack near Maroun Er-Ras in Lebanon. 10 attackers were killed trying to breach the border fence. A month later another fence breakthrough attempt was foiled from Syria, leaving 13 dead in gun fire and minefield casualties. In Gaza the main event took place near the Erez crossing, and one Palestinian was killed by IDF. Similar "marches" from Jordan were kept away from the border by Jordanian Armed Forces, with one killed. Egyptian Armed forces dispersed the crowd gathered on Gaza's Rafah border. 2012 and 2013 saw fewer incidents on smaller scale, with little friction. After these costly failures, the attempted border-mass-crowd-attack was temporarily put to rest.

The Current Palestinian Context

The dual-headed Palestinian system is facing a **double deadlock**. The PA, seemingly calling for a political settlement of the conflict, is actually neither able nor willing to engage in meaningful bilateral negotiations or in real statesmanship, preferring declarative blame games and Internationalization. President **Abbas** is nearing the **end of his term**, and **succession** already paralyzes and will possibly destabilize the PA for the next **several years**. Hamas, rallying behind the armed resistance flag, is deterred from military conflict with Israel, isolated from external backing, and under immense pressures due to its failure to provide the needs of its populace. With the "**peace process**" **path blocked** by a paralyzed PA leadership's longevity and succession struggles for the coming years, and the "**armed resistance**" **path blocked** by the Hamas' glorious failure of its Gaza project in strategy, military and economy, the bifurcated Palestinian system is facing dead ends on both paths of the fork junction.

The Gaza situation

Gaza continues to face a multidimensional crisis (unemployment, power, water, sewage) exacerbating the security volatility. The World Bank and others report further deterioration of its economy, with 0.5% growth in 2017 against 8% in 2016, donations dropping from \$400 million to \$55 and youth unemployment nearing 60%. Economic, social, and political pressure is certainly on the rise. According to studies released by OCHA¹ and the INSS², available drinking water is declining and increasing health risk.

The PA-Hamas rivalry only exacerbates the resource scarcity and puts additional obstacles in the way of the shortening line of donors, the latter paradoxically encouraged by Israel to support the Gaza stabilization efforts. Accelerating the crisis, PA had cut much of its funding and salaries previously paid to the strip, and so cornered Hamas, its main rival faction. This took place against the backdrop of ongoing “reconciliation” efforts, mediated by Egyptian General Intelligence seniors, probably in concert with Israel. The efforts hit a hard rock as the PA Prime Minister’s and Chief of Intelligence’s convoy was attacked by IEDs upon entering Gaza on March 13th. Later that day, representatives from 19 countries, including most GCC members, the EU and Israel partook a Whitehouse session about the crisis in Gaza, which the PA chose not to join, in protest of Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and his declared plan to move the US embassy there in mid-May. President Sisi and KSA crown prince discussing Sinai development projects may signal “out of the sand box” approaches to stabilizing both Sinai and Gaza.

Hamas Ends, Ways & Means

Hamas predicament as a governing entity in Gaza is evident. Failing to provide for the populace’s needs, politically isolated, militarily deterred from wide escalation, and suffering from little attention, is sought new ways out of the strait, under growing internal pressures. Hamas is also under extreme pressure by the combined weight of its isolation, its policy failures, Israeli closure and PA’s punitive steps and funds withholding. The socio-economic pressures in the Strip are mounting and starting to turn against Hamas’ government, but still not an imminent threat to its grip on Gaza. Failing to push Israel into alleviating its plight, Hamas is constantly seeking alternative paths to rock the boat without capsizing into unwarranted war.

Strategically, Hamas goals in the spring-summer clashes are several: Internally, to deflect the public pressure towards Israel. Politically, to reclaim national leadership and relevance against the PA, while upholding the high cause of *Return*, a strong symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Externally, to apply pressure on Israel to make concessions towards Gaza, tarnish Israel, harm its international reputation and posture, drive a wedge between it and its supporters in the West, especially US Jewry. Militarily, to degrade Israel’s counter-

tunneling and fence-building projects, which are depriving Hamas of its main offensive assets, and also to cripple Israel's freedom of operation by leveraging external political pressures, keeping in mind the Goldstone report of the 2009 campaign. At the same time, Hamas seeks to allow its military wing to demonstrate its value, with other contenders to the armed resistance championship in mind: Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Islamist radicals, etc.

As early as January 2018, "The Big March of Return" Facebook page was launched by Hamas and PIJ. The concept was to hold an ongoing "Camp of Return" near the border, and launch "civil, nonviolent" mass-crowd-protest parades towards the border, attempting to breach the border if possible. A possible source of inspiration was perhaps Morocco's *Green March* of 1975 into Western Sahara. The 70th anniversary of the 1948 war (Israel's independence and Palestinian *Nakba*) provided a clear goal for Hamas's planning. The US embassy move was only added as a late supplement after it was announced.

Hamas concept was to use the mass crowd twofold: strategically, to frame the dynamic in a civil-right, non-violent protest situation, imprinting an "internal-order-freedom of speech" context for foreign observers. Operationally, the mass-camps availed mass-crowds, serving as civilian screen and human shield for the armed terror teams.

Hamas ways and means to employ its design developed over the course of time. The initial statements were followed by concrete steps. Early operations included a heightened rate of IED attacks (Mid-February) and infiltration attempt into Israel (last week of March), some of them involving attacks on IDF counter-tunnel infrastructure. Early "protests" on the fence also served as cover for IED attacks.

Main Hamas efforts were made on Fridays, using the traditional weekly prayers as a launching pad. The crowd was brought to the sites by Hamas, some of it paid to take higher risk. Hamas's tight control of events was demonstrated both by leadership presence, by the quick dispersion of public protest against Hamas inside urban Gaza, and by the distinct Friday "pulses" of the violent waves. Participation of children, women and handicapped persons was pervasive, seeking to maximize the "civilian" face of the dynamic and the high visibility casualties for propaganda purposes. At least one case was exposed, in which Hamas leadership payed a family to falsely claim its baby-girl, who died from a disease, was killed by IDF tear gas.

Operationally, Hamas prepared its operations to include mass-crowd screens approaching the border fence on multiple locations along the Israel border. Some of the "protesters" used slingshots, fire bombs, rocks and other "riot" gear. Embedded within the "unarmed" crowd were Hamas armed teams, including riflemen, snipers, IED and grenade throwers, and breaching teams with wire-cutters. Later additions were burning tires to smoke-screen the attackers and mirrors to blind IDF troops. In some cases, Hamas fighters tried to attach chains to the fence and drag it down with a towing vehicle. An extensive photography and media presence was stationed to exploit materials serving the strategic-political causes. Many cases were documented with "Paliwood" scenes, orchestrating fake visuals for media consumption.

The main idea, as clearly stated by Hamas leadership, was to breach the border fence under the mass-crowd assault, storm the IDF troops behind it and overwhelm them, and then advance to the nearby villages and communities, residing just hundreds of meters away. Mass killing, abduction and hostage taking would serve Hamas as a popular feat among Palestinians, allow tough negotiations with Israel on prisoner release and Gaza concessions, and undermine the Israeli government among its terrorized public. A fallback achievement would be to produce a mass-casualty scene, in which IDF fells hundreds of “unarmed Palestinians”, evoking global outcry. A famous “resistance” Jihadist once said: “If we kill you, we win; If you kill us, we win”. Hamas leadership was only following this logic.

The hybrid nature of Hamas concept is a typical example of the grey twilight warfare of our times: enjoying the lethal punch of armed terror attack and the legitimate cloak of “civilian unarmed crowd”, intentionally blurring the distinction between the two.



Source: IDF Spokesperson Unit

Israel's Policy Goals

Israel's policy is deadlocked between multiple, seemingly contradicting, goals: seeking to weaken Hamas, while benefitting from the Palestinian system's split; deterring Hamas from attacking Israel while avoiding war and re-occupation of Gaza; preventing Hamas' military buildup while avoiding humanitarian crisis; seeking a more substantial PA role in Gaza against a weak and resentful Abu-Mazen; Israel defense establishment often recommends separating terror from the general population and decreasing escalatory spirals through restrained force employment (minimum casualties) combined with economic positive steps. Israel's government, ever attentive to its base's politics and right-wing outflanking maneuvers, so far explicitly resists the defense establishment recommendations to allow the Strip more breathing space, but implicitly may be ready to work in this direction through Egypt. Two Israeli citizens held in Gaza and two body remains of IDF KIAs from 2009 are a Goal precondition to progress on improving the Gaza situation.

IDF Military Response

Tasked by the government to protect Israel's populace and sovereignty, and to avoid wide scale escalation, the IDF prepared to meet the challenge. Fully aware of Hamas designs, the IDF designed its own response. Early IDF intelligence had shed light on Hamas plans: to breach the border fence, kill IDF soldiers and abduct them, proceed to nearby communities, and inflict mass killing and hostage taking on sovereign Israeli soil.

The IDF response was designed accordingly, several tiers deep, with a clear purpose: to foil Hamas plans, protect Israeli civilian communities, defend Israel's border, avoid own casualties while minimizing the enemy's, deflect propaganda damages, and avoid wide escalation.

The multi-tier operational concept of the IDF comprised of the following elements:

1. Continuous intelligence efforts, providing situational awareness and early warning, and exposing enemy plans.
2. Preparing the theater, the IDF erected a forward barbed-concertina about a 100m into Gaza, creating a clear obstacle before the final border fence. In Israel, earth berms were mounted behind the border fence, creating a third line of defense and providing cover against enemy fire.
3. Communication and outreach operations, seeking to thin out mass crowds by warnings, sent by leaflets, phones, text messages, traditional and social media. Phone calls were even made to Gazan bus drivers dissuading them from shuttling the masses to the border areas.

4. Seeking to keep the crowds as far from the border as possible, through public announcement, leaflets, and non-lethal riot control means, such as tear gas, widely dispensed from across the fence, and also from above by advanced drone application.
5. Stopping enemy efforts from breaching the border obstacle by selectively sniping at armed enemy personnel and those identified while actively busy in cutting, dragging, burning, exploding or otherwise opening passages in Israel's border obstacle system.
6. Disrupting and thwarting mass crowd assaults towards the border obstacles and through openings breached in them, with combination of non-lethal (gas, water cannons) and selective sniping against enemy command elements leading the masses.
7. A Second line of defense inside Israel, ready to stop mass-breakthrough of the enemy into Israel, combining riot police and large regular army units.
8. A Third line of defense around the Israeli border communities, providing perimeter protection as a final and last resort, should all else fail.
9. Documentation and media engagement, to provide the public opinion with real factual visuals and proof of enemy conduct, unveiling the true nature of Hamas efforts and exposing its lies, fabrication and media manipulation campaigning.
10. Real time fact-finding and investigation team, headed by a general, to check and look into every operational case of alleged misconduct, handing problematic cases to the IDF attorney general unit.

Live Fire

It is important to point out the unique features of the security challenge facing Israel in this context. Most riot control efforts in the world take place within a domestic context, between a local government and its citizens. Operationally, the crowd and the riot-controllars share the same, typically urban, space, and hence are in close ranges from each other, the government forces operating in a "stand in" posture. This enables the use of short range non-lethal munitions (tear gas, water cannon, bean bag, rubber), and close quarters means, such as batons and cavalry.

The Gaza challenge is a unique situation globally, differing on almost every parameter: the crowd is a mixture of enemy populace and enemy armed terrorists. Close encounters between IDF and the crowd entail direct mortal threat to troops' lives, and subsequently, Israeli civilian lives. The defense efforts are taking place in a standoff situation, in relatively long distance and with obstacles keeping the parties apart in two separate spaces, across an international border. This unique setup rules out close quarter, lower lethality, high contact methods, such as cavalry, and diminishes the efficacy of many short range non-lethal measures. Determined enemy efforts to breach the border obstacles despite non-lethal measures increase the necessary use of live fire as a last resort.

Successful Hamas armed terrorist teams embedded in raging mass-crowd-attack wave, across Israel's border obstacles, in close contact melee with IDF troops and en-route to Israeli communities would leave IDF with the only one option: massive use of live fire. The expected result would inevitably have been dozens of dead IDF soldiers, and many hundreds among the Palestinian assailants. Successful hostage taking by Hamas or PIJ would have most probably lead to a wide scale escalation, with thousands of deaths and many more injured.

Hence, between the limited effect of non-lethal measures, and the massive use of live fire leading to hundreds of deaths, selective sniping provided a "before-last resort" solution. Tactically, it allowed IDF to neutralize the most dangerous Hamas breaching elements, command personnel, identified armed teams, IED throwers, etc. The snipers' orders were to aim to lower legs, trying to avoid lethal injuries. The multiple leg and foot injuries reported by the Palestinians are another testament to that guidance being enacted. However, it was not the sniper's authority to call the shots. The IDF sniping effort was tightly controlled by a special chain of command. Every sniper was controlled by a senior commanding officer in the field, issuing exact firing permissions based on the stringent IDF directions and his momentary situational judgment at the point of action.



IDF snipers and authorizing commanders. Photo: IDF Spokesperson's Unit

That being said, with black tire smoke and tear gas creating a "fog of war", while enemy terrorists are embedded among a massive crowd, not all sniping casualties were definitely intentional. Stray bullets and ricochet caused collateral casualties, and even fatalities. The large casualty numbers need to be judged against the multi-location, mass-crowd, week after week attempts by Hamas to break through Israel's border. The human cost was heavy

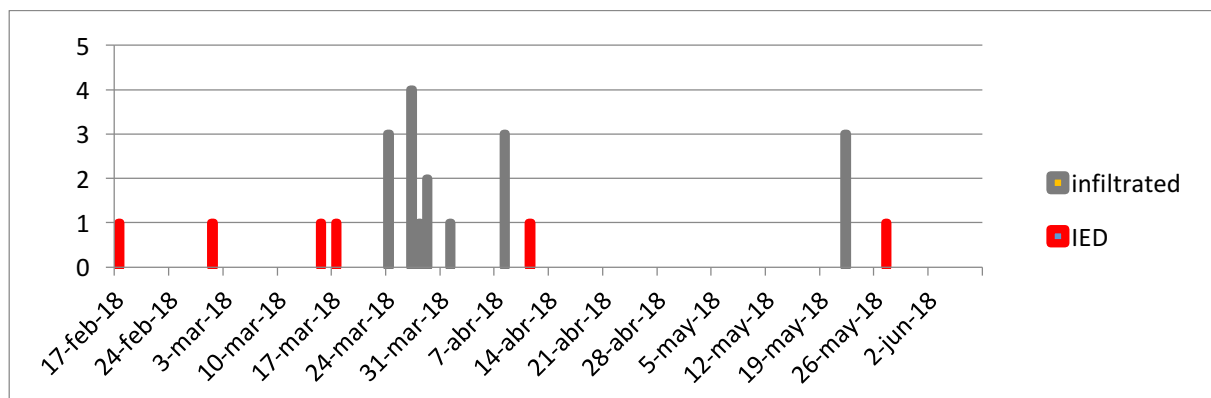
and regrettable, but unfortunately, other force employment alternative would have caused an even heavier toll.

Thus, unlike the impression Hamas seeks to create, the live fire element, usually accused of being inappropriate, disproportionate, and needlessly lethal, was used by the IDF sparingly, in a tightly controlled manner, when non-lethal measures literally fell short, and as a lesser evil to a last resort intensive fire against a hybrid terror and mass-crowd cross border attack.

The Battlefield Unfolding: Between the “March of Return”, “Tires’ Friday” and Nakba Day

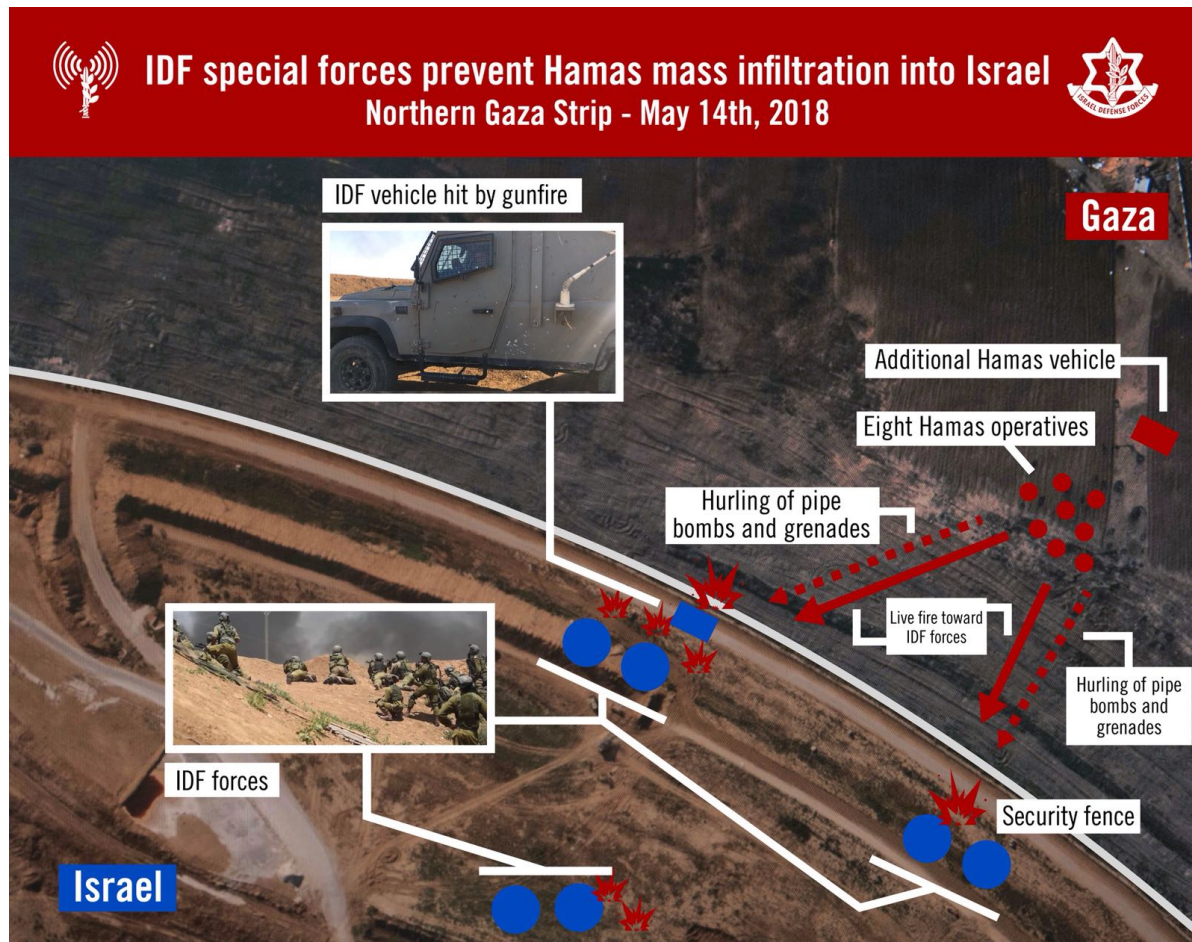
The IED-Protests Combo: On March 15th, an IDF patrol was targeted by an IED attack near the Gaza security fence, the third incident in the previous weeks. The recognized pattern implies that the IEDs were laid during the mass weekend “protests” organized by Hamas, as a seemingly unarmed pressure channel on Israel, and a venting valve to Hamas’ own internal pressures. Some reports assessed that the March 30th (“Land Day”) “protests” would include explosive charges to breach the fence and allow a mass breakout into Israel. Hamas also declared its intent to encourage camp-outs, massive crowds and “protests” near the fence throughout the coming anniversaries (*Land Day, Prisoners’ Day, Nakba Day, Naksa Day*), with the special symbolism of the 70th anniversary of 1948 events. Despite the clear potential for escalation in clear, **Hamas chose brinkmanship over prudence.**

The next weeks saw Hamas encouraging the popular “**March of Return**”, seeking ongoing mass civilian presence, protests, and demonstrations near the border fence with Israel. **Rising friction with IDF** was sought through a series of IED attacks, border infiltrations and military exercises, during which Hamas machine gun fire invoked ballistic alarms in Israeli southern towns and 20 Iron Dome interceptors (worth \$1-2m) being launched.



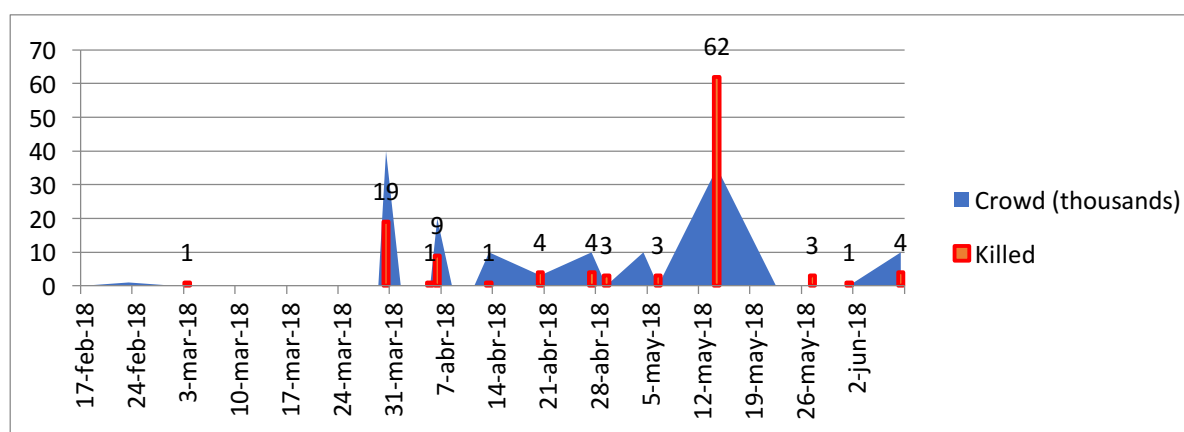
Graph 1: IED attack and infiltration attempts between February-May (Friday clashes excluded)

Friday 30 March was the first official day of the “March of Return” in Gaza. A large crowd of 40,000 gathered along the border fences in what the Palestinians described as a “peaceful demonstration”. Israel faced a combined political-military challenge, spearheaded by Hamas military cadres operating among massive unarmed civilian crowds. Hamas planned and attempted to shoot IDF troops, to breach the border fence with explosives, to lead a mass-popular assault into Israel, and to execute terror operations, including hostage taking against IDF troops and among Israeli border communities. At the end of the first two Fridays both sides were content with accomplishing their parallel-warfare objectives³.



IDF successfully and forcefully foiled Palestinian physical attempts to break into sovereign territory and cause Israeli casualties, leaving 29 Palestinians dead and hundreds wounded. At that stage, roughly a third of the dead were confidently identified as Hamas military operatives; two thirds were hit on the first Friday. The following Friday saw Hamas fewer military operatives in forward positions, the crowd shrinking to 20,000 and the number of deaths halved to 9. The protest attraction and swell were shrinking in the face of Israel’s effective response. Over the following Fridays, both crowd size and casualties have dropped dramatically. The Syrian events drew most international attention northwards and away from Gaza. Hamas still tried to ride the April-May anniversaries’ waves and fan the popular embers into flames against Israel, and the May 14th events were a last attempt (so far) to execute the original design. Crowd size again grew to 35,000, extreme efforts were made by Hamas to actually breach the fence, and the Palestinian death toll peaked

to 62. Hamas leadership, addressing its own public, praised the 50 Hamas martyrs of the day, hence unveiling the true face of the so called “civilian parades”. The next weeks attested that this operational pattern was deemed a failure by Hamas, which dramatically dropped the crowd numbers, and with them the attempted breaches and resulting deaths. The tide may have just turned, and as Egyptian political efforts and economic gestures from Israel went on, Hamas turns to seek other channels to ease up its plight.



Graph 2: Palestinian mass-crowd and fatalities (February- June 8)

On the international public theater, Israel faced a tougher challenge. Event driven media and politics, always eager to reinforce their long-held positions with first impressive visuals and easy-to-sell gore, were quick to buy Hamas’s manipulated visuals, part-truths, and superficial spins. Accordingly, fast judgements were made, and blame addressed as promptly. Hamas thus declared victory, turning its casualties into political capital, imposing political and reputational costs on Israel and fanning criticism towards it on what was presented as an excessive use of lethal force against unarmed civilians. Most importantly, it succeeded in returning Gaza to international attention, all the way to the UNSC, ever ready to skew Israel and grill it, barred only by a US veto.

After 14 May: Back to IEDs, Mortars and Rockets

Hamas’s “Parade of Return” border challenge to Israel failed both in itself and as a popular camouflage to a terror assault. Its political momentum culminating in a UNSC resolution against Israel was thwarted by a US veto, but it still provided strong back wind to cancelling the planned Soccer game with Argentina’s national team. Hamas’s apparent media success has thus proven to be but a fleeting moment, as little global trust remained in Hamas’s alleged “peaceful demonstrations”. Hamas attempts to run the “protest” card thus continue, but on lower keys, seeking alternatives to storming the border en-mass.

The next weeks saw new steps in Gaza's ongoing predicament, peaking on May 29th Battle day. Seeking new vents to its pressures, Hamas allowed PIJ to go ahead with attempted IED attacks. The tactical tail wagged the strategic dog, as IDF response killed 3 PIJ men, and perhaps with Iran's encouragement, evoked PIJ retaliation by mortar fire. Strike and counter fire, including Hamas rocket launching, escalated through the day and night until terminated by Egyptian mediation, the severest eruption since 2014. IDF strikes caused no casualties in Gaza, indicating extreme IDF caution to allow de-escalation. Israel's politicians competed in the media on who calls for toughest steps, while the cabinet quietly chose to call it a day and later vocally denied that it had anything to do with Egypt success in achieving a ceasefire. Additional rockets launched by "rogues" in June 3 indicate Hamas' unanswered issues, awaiting progress.

Can't punch through the Fence? Hamas Arson Kites, IED, Balloons and other means

As June nears its end, Hamas still suffers from the same known pressures, still seeking new ways to push Israel into concessions. Its fence challenges are gradually decreasing, facing operational failure, high casualties and limited political gains; another potential line of attack is Hamas capabilities in Lebanon. These stress the Iran-Hizbullah-Gaza axis's destabilizing influence, adding to the leading Iranian proxy in Gaza, PIJ, who had played a major role in the last battle day with Israel on May 29. "Over and above the fence" approach is implemented by IED, incendiary kites and balloons as the tool-de-jour, and farmland fires became burning routine, peppered by occasional rocket launches; A wave of incendiary kites is sent from Gaza, emblazing hundreds of fires in fields and natural reserves in the Negev, a cheap and creative application of Sun Tsu's "Attack by Fire" with nowadays' "weaponize everything" fashion. Israel's media is busy describing the IDF hi-tech drone response to the low-tech poor men's threat, the techno-tactical level always capturing peoples' imagination and interest.

Israel's response to the cheap flying weapons was typical: on the military level, the expected learning curve against the new low-tech threats was steep: first, by a techno-tactical approach, with IDF's kite-counter-measures by drones; next, by initial warning strikes against attack-kite-launching teams, now legally considered "kosher" military targets.⁴ While "direct approach" cabinet members publicly called for strikes on the kite-launching teams, the PM and MoD opted for the IDF proposed indirect approach, sending first warning strikes near the kite-teams, but mostly striking other Hamas military targets as a deterring message. Among those targets, a new focus area is noteworthy: Hamas naval-commando unit, suffering recurring strikes on its infrastructure, including the latest coast-sea tunnel. These indicate both Hamas' ongoing efforts to develop new "around the

fence” attack axes into Israel, and the latter’s relentless counter efforts, combining quality intel, precision strikes of opportunity, as well as building a special coastal obstacle⁵.

All that said, Israel’s strategic level response remained seemingly unchanged, when the cabinet again publicly rejected the IDF recommendation to allow some relief to Gaza. However, a significant channel is evidently at play in Cairo, explaining why the low-flame routine has so far been kept from full-scale eruption of hostilities, Israel’s government denials notwithstanding. At the same time, it also creates the best potential for temporarily and partially defusing the tensions, by addressing some of Israel’s demands on the lower end of “disarmament” and some of Hamas’ demands for relief. Wider arrangements may follow, and Cairo’s ceasefire success may reflect a first step in that direction.

Conclusion

Militarily, the IDF can conclude its mission successfully accomplished, at least partly: Hamas’s ongoing friction along the fence and recurring attempts to breach it into Israel were all foiled, then subsided abruptly. The grand Hamas plan to breakthrough into Israel and execute a mass killing and hostage taking spree among Israeli civilians and troops was thoroughly thwarted. The military/non-combatant ratio among Palestinian assailants (50 out of 62 killed in the bloodiest day so far, by Hamas’s own admission) reflects distinctive force employment by IDF in very demanding conditions. All this, while the both close-quarters and stand-off nature of the friction resulted in no serious casualties among Israel’s troops and civilians.

Strategically, Hamas achieved utterly modest real gains of its highest priority goals, mainly alleviating Gaza’s resource scarcity and its governance challenges. However, it has indeed gained some ground redrawing global attention to Gaza. By nature, this attention is known to be fleeting. Moreover, just as an inefficient light-bulb, most of the buzzing energy is spent generating heat (anti-Israel rhetoric and pressures) rather than light (relief for Gaza), the former hardly correlated to the latter. Some indications may show that Israel and Egypt quietly agreed on decreasing Gaza’s pressure (i.e. partially opening the Rafah crossing) while threatening Hamas’s leadership quite personally. If these steps are harbingers to a policy change is too soon to judge, but with Israeli politics and Hamas’s intransigence, skepticism in this aspect is often advised.

The **Perceptions and Narratives frontier** is where the game played differently. The military narrative described above was readily accepted by the majority of the Israeli audience, whose past record with Hamas and with Gaza predisposes it to see the events as a yet another chapter in the ongoing armed conflict⁶. Most Arab audiences showed little interest, save weak statements of solidarity. Campaigning Muslim politicians, championed by Premier (read: Sultan) Erdogan of Turkey, were quick to use the “Jewish massacre of Muslims” card, and blame Israel with terrorism and worse. Western audiences and media were receptive each to his predisposed narrative: American right-wingers to the Israel defense facts and explanations, while a vast majority in the center-left at least partially bought into the well-brewed and superbly served Hamas narrative. At its heart: “a peaceful,

unarmed parade and demonstrations” were unjustifiably met by IDF excessive force, mainly lethal and indiscriminate live fire. In the media and perception frontline, Hamas has won the day and the IDF failed, not only due to the underdog’s advantages in the eye of the beholder. Over time, these results may change as the events continue to unfold.

International Politics and Diplomacy quickly cascaded after Israel’s landslide defeat in the global media and audiences, and the UN theater became the usual axe and pitchfork festival in pursuit of the Jewish state and its forces. But for the US veto at the UNSC, Israel would be facing dire straits down the road.

Israel will probably seek minor steps to deescalate the tension, working in concert with Egypt, and maybe also with Gulf partners, perhaps with the White House team working to prime the region for the President’s Peace plan. However, the wicked problem called Gaza remains cocked and loaded, awaiting the next spark. Ramadan has just begun, and summer is coming. More heatwaves are expected.

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Annex 1: Main reports on the Gaza Events and Dynamics

February

1,2 Feb: Despite growing pressures in Gaza, the situation remained relatively quiet with the exception of two rocket launches followed by an Israeli air force response strike against two Hamas targets. | **4 Feb:** Israel's MOD revealed that an attempt to smuggle bomb-making materials into Gaza was thwarted | **12 Feb:** As ongoing Hamas efforts are focusing on terror attempts in Judea, Samaria, and within Israel, Israel Security Agency (ISA) and Israel Police released that two men suspected of having been recruited for Hamas activity through Turkey were arrested last month. | **17 Feb:** IED attack (4 IDF wounded) on the fence east of Khan Yunis, probably placed during the border "protests" a day earlier. The **Popular Resistance Committees**, an alliance of fighters from various Gaza nationalist and Islamist Palestinian groups, claimed responsibility for the attack⁷; In response, Israel struck 18 targets in Gaza, including an attack tunnel, and on the day after struck another tunnel, following a rocket launched into Israel.⁸ | **18 Feb.** IAF strikes another tunnel following a rocket fired into Israel.⁹ | **23 Feb.** Orchestrated by Hamas, hundreds of Palestinians demonstrated in five different locations on Gaza border.¹⁰

March

1 March: IDF neutralized another IED on the Gaza border fence.¹¹ | **3 March:** Egyptian delegation met senior Hamas officials in Gaza; warned of another escalation;¹² A Palestinian was shot and killed by the IDF near the fence in Southern Gaza.¹³ | **4 March:** PA PM Hamdallah claimed obstacles to reconciliation removed through 2018 budget.^{14,15} | **5 March:** IDF Southern Commander: "Hamas getting closer to Iran & Hezbollah".¹⁶ | **9 March:** Senior Hamas leader Haniyyeh: mass demonstrations will be held in Gaza to mark 'Nakba Day' and to protest US embassy move to Jerusalem.¹⁷ | **13 March:** White House meeting on Gaza crisis, while reports expect its peace plan to be launched soon;¹⁸ | IED targeted Palestinian PM Hamdallah & Intel Chief Faraj while visiting Gaza.¹⁹ | **15 March:** IDF patrol targeted by IED attack in northern Gaza - no casualties.²⁰ | **17 March:** IDF neutralized another IED on the Gaza border fence (5th incident in three months)²¹ | **18 March:** Two Gaza tunnels destroyed by IDF²² | **22 March:** Hamas seeks alliance with Iran and Hezbollah to foil Trump peace plan²³; Hamas plans mass demonstration near the border fence to demand 'Right Of Return',²⁴ Hamas kills two "suspects" in PM Hamdallah's assassination attempt²⁵ | **24, 27, 28, 29 March:** Four Palestinians infiltrated into Israel and escaped back to Gaza; Three armed Palestinians from Gaza infiltrated deep into Israel before being arrested²⁶, One Palestinian tried to infiltrate into Israel from Gaza, caught by IDF²⁷, Two Palestinians from Gaza tried to infiltrate into Israel, fourth incident in a week.²⁸ | **24 March:** IDF responded to the March 27th infiltration with an air strike against a Hamas training camp²⁹ | **25 March:** Hamas drill triggered barrage of IDF Iron Dome interceptors³⁰ | **28 March:** As Egypt pressures for reconciliation, PA Intel Chief heads to Egypt with 'evidences' of Hamas responsibility of attempted PM hit.³¹ | **30 March:** 'Land Day' events of the "Great Return March" began,

some 40,000 protesters, 19 Palestinians killed, most of them while trying to infiltrate into Israel³²

April

1 April: 3 Palestinians infiltrated Israel before being arrested³³ | **4 April:** PIJ terror attack on an Israeli warship foiled by IDF, ISS & Police³⁴ | **5 April:** Palestinian killed while approaching Gaza fence at night³⁵ | **6 April:** 'Tire Protest' Day: some 20,000 Palestinians protesting & burning thousands of tires; 9 Palestinians killed by IDF forces³⁶ | **7 April:** IDF warns it will target Hamas military positions if damage to the security fence continues³⁷ | **8, 9 April:** 3 Palestinians infiltrated into Israel and were returned to the Gaza Strip; IDF strikes a Hamas target in response | **10 April:** Israel expands Gaza sailing zone for spring fishing season to 9 nautical miles, up from the usual 6³⁸ | **11; 12 April:** IED attack against an IDF bulldozer on Gaza border³⁹; In response, IAF struck a Hamas military training base; MG fire from Gaza triggered 'Red Alert' and caused minor damages to Israeli houses.⁴⁰ | **13 April:** Third week of Gaza border protests, 10,000 protesters – Palestinians report 1 killed and hundreds wounded by Israeli fire⁴¹ | **15 April:** Israel destroys fifth, 'longest and deepest' Gaza tunnel⁴², then lifts veil of IDF operational counter tunneling lab⁴³ | **16; 23 April:** Blazing kites from Gaza set fire to Israeli wheat fields⁴⁴ | **18 April:** Truck bomb attack foiled on Israel's Independence Day⁴⁵ | **20 April:** Fourth Friday of Gaza Protests, ~3,000 protesters, Palestinians report 4 killed and 156 wounded⁴⁶ | **21 April:** Hamas scientist Fadi El-Batsh shot dead in Malaysia, PIJ blames Mossad for assassination⁴⁷ | **22 April:** Intel Minister Katz threatens Hamas: terror attacks abroad will be met with leadership targeting⁴⁸ | **27 April:** Fifth Friday of Gaza "Protests", ~10,000 crowded, Palestinians report 4 killed and 349 wounded⁴⁹; IDF struck Hamas targets following damage to the fence⁵⁰ | **29 April:** 3 Palestinians attempting to infiltrate into Israel shot dead⁵¹

May

1 May: IDF COS Eisenkot: Hamas abduction attempts on Gaza border thwarted in the last few weeks⁵² | **2 May:** Israel's Government to High Court petition: "Gaza protests" are part of the State of War with Hamas, human rights law not applicable⁵³; Incendiary kites cause massive fires in Israel⁵⁴ | **4 May:** Abbas reelected as Palestinian President by PNC⁵⁵; Sixth Friday of Gaza clashes, ~10,000 crowded, Palestinians report 431 wounded and no fatalities, set fire to gas and fuel installation in Kerem Shalom crossing⁵⁶ | **5 May:** Israel strikes Hamas post in response to Gazan incendiary kites damages⁵⁷ | **6 May:** 3 Gazans shot dead while attempting to sabotage security infrastructures⁵⁸ | **7 May:** "Hamas willing to negotiate long-term truce with Israel"⁵⁹ | **11 May:** Palestinians rioters set fire to gas pipes at Kerem Shalom crossing for the second time in days⁶⁰ | **12 May:** MoD shut down Kerem Shalom crossing due to the destruction⁶¹, IDF destroyed half-mile-long terror tunnel approaching Kibbutz Erez, the 9th tunnel destroyed in recent months⁶² | **14 May:** Palestinian *Nakba* Day, ~35,000 crowded, Palestinians report 62 killed and 2770 wounded⁶³ | **16 May:** Hamas senior official says 50 of Gaza 'Martyrs' killed were Hamas members⁶⁴ | **18 May:** Egypt and Qatar seek long-term Gaza ceasefire and Hamas disarmament⁶⁵; Egypt to keep the Rafah crossing open for Ramadan⁶⁶; UNHR calls for international inquiry in Gaza⁶⁷ | **20 May:** Palestinian President Abbas taken to hospital, third time in a week⁶⁸; A Palestinian set himself in fire due to economic situation and to protest against the government in Gaza⁶⁹ | **21 May:** Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar says that Iran supplied Hamas with "money, equipment, & expertise" and that Hamas has "excellent"

relations and coordination with Hizbullah⁷⁰ | **22 May:** Israeli security establishment sees the beginning of the end of Abbas era while his health deteriorates⁷¹; Palestinians from Gaza infiltrated into Israel, set and empty IDF outpost on fire⁷² | **23 May:** IDF strikes a Hamas tunnel in northern Gaza and 2 Hamas naval targets⁷³ | **27 May:** IDF strikes PIJ outpost in response to IED attack, 3 PIJ members killed⁷⁴ | **28 May:** Explosive drone launched from Gaza found in Israel⁷⁵; Israel strikes Hamas post after infiltration from Gaza⁷⁶; Machine gun fire from Gaza hits Sderot⁷⁷ | **29 May: Battle Day in Gaza,** Hamas & PIJ fire ~70 mortars and rockets into southern Israel; IDF responds with airstrikes across Gaza⁷⁸; Israeli Navy stops outgoing Gaza “flotilla”⁷⁹ | **30 May:** Israel agrees to Cairo-mediated cease-fire, “shifting focus back to Northern border threats”⁸⁰ | **31 May:** IDF (Southern Commander): Conditions ripe for an agreement with Hamas⁸¹

June

1 June: 10th Friday protests in Gaza, Palestinians report one female paramedic killed and 100 wounded⁸²; 122,000 Palestinians in Jerusalem for Ramadan prayers⁸³; U.S. vetoes UNSC “grossly one-sided” resolution on Gaza⁸⁴ | **2 June:** Renewed rocket fire from Gaza into Israel | **3 June:** Israel strikes 15 Hamas targets after rocket fire⁸⁵ | **4 June:** IDF intercepted hundreds of Gaza’s incendiary kites⁸⁶ | **5 June:** Palestinian *Naksa* Day; Israel seeks to avert a humanitarian crisis in Gaza⁸⁷ | **8 June:** 11th Friday protests in Gaza; Palestinian *Naksa* Day, ~10,000 crowded; Palestinians report four killed and over 600 wounded⁸⁸ | **9 June:** Following incessant field fires, an IDF aircraft fired a warning shot to drive away a cell preparing to launch incendiary kites⁸⁹; “Hamas controls the Gaza Strip but the escalation is tuned by the PIJ”⁹⁰ | **10 June:** “Relative calm since 2014 is over, Hamas will continue to protest this upcoming summer”⁹¹; Israel destroyed a Hamas Frogmen’s underwater tunnel⁹²; Israeli security cabinet meeting on Gaza economy, no new decisions taken despite defense officials’ warnings of an economic collapse in Gaza⁹³ | **11 June:** ~1,500 Palestinian protesters in Ramallah demand end to PA sanctions on Gaza⁹⁴; “PM Netanyahu and the White House acting to drive wedge between Palestinians and Gulf States”⁹⁵ | **12 June:** Kushner to visit Israel next week to discuss US peace plan⁹⁶ | **13 June:** ISA has foiled ~250 “significant terror attacks” since January, including suicide bombings, abductions, and shootings⁹⁷ | **15 June:** POTUS envoys Kushner and Greenblatt discuss peace plan with UN ahead of Mideast visit⁹⁸ | **17 June:** Twenty Hamas members from Nablus arrested, planning deadly attacks against Israel, including a Jerusalem suicide bombing⁹⁹; IDF targets car of Gaza incendiary balloon and kite ‘cell leader’¹⁰⁰; Israeli Navy proposed solutions for a Gaza port services, conditioned on full cargo screening by Israeli security¹⁰¹; Trump administration to demand Gulf States up to \$1 billion for Gaza economy¹⁰² | **18 June:** IDF strikes 9 Hamas targets following ongoing incendiary kites from Gaza; shortly afterward three rockets were fired from Gaza into Israel¹⁰³

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