



Hostilities in Gaza: latest developments

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In recent weeks, hostilities have broken out between Israel and Palestinian militant organisations such as Hamas. Israel is conducting military operations in the Gaza Strip with the aim of preventing militants from firing rockets into Israeli territory. Air strikes were launched from 7 July, whilst ground incursions began on 17 July. Civilian casualties have been high, and attempts to reach a ceasefire have so far been unsuccessful. This Note provides an overview of developments.

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1 Introduction

In recent weeks, hostilities have broken out between Israel and Palestinian militant organisations such as Hamas. Israel is conducting military operations in the Gaza Strip with the aim of preventing militants from firing rockets into Israeli territory. Air strikes were launched from 7 July, whilst ground incursions began on 17 July. Civilian casualties have been high, and attempts to reach a ceasefire have so far been unsuccessful. This Note provides an overview of developments.

2 Gaza: political background

The Gaza Strip (Gaza) has been under the occupation of Israel since 1967, and along with the West Bank is known as the Occupied Palestinian Territory. From the beginning of the occupation until the mid-1990s, these territories were under full Israeli control. Much of the Gaza Strip came under the control of the Palestinian Authority following the signing of the Oslo Accords;¹ the remainder of Gaza remained under Israeli control until 2005, when the PA assumed control of the whole Gaza Strip.²

The most recent Palestinian Authority legislative elections took place in January 2006, leaving Hamas as the largest party.³ Hamas refuses to recognise the state of Israel. Following the elections Hamas formed a coalition administration alongside the more moderate (and previously ruling) Fatah.⁴ However, in June 2007, tensions between the two parties spilled over into armed conflict. Hamas seized control of Gaza by force,⁵ leaving a separate Fatah administration in control of the West Bank.⁶

On 23 April 2014 it was announced that Fatah and Hamas had signed a reconciliation agreement:⁷ a unity Government was formed within weeks, with jurisdiction over both the West Bank and Gaza. Whilst the Cabinet has the support of both Fatah and Hamas, its makeup is primarily technocratic: there are no Hamas ministers.⁸ Whilst the unity Government officially has jurisdiction over both the West Bank and Gaza, Hamas remains in de facto control of Gaza.⁹ Further details are available in the [House of Commons Library Standard Note](#) on the subject.

3 Outbreak of hostilities

The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) provides a good summary of the events leading to the outbreak of hostilities:

On 7 July 2014, the Israeli army launched a large military operation in the Gaza Strip, codenamed “Protective Edge”, with the stated objective of stopping Palestinian rocket firing at southern Israel and destroying the military infrastructure of Hamas and other armed groups.

¹ UNDP, [About the occupied Palestinian territory](#) (accessed on 30 June 2014)

² ["Israel completes Gaza withdrawal"](#), *BBC News website*, 12 September 2005

³ ["Hamas celebrates election victory"](#), *The Guardian*, 26 January 2006

⁴ ["Israel snubs Palestinian coalition"](#), *The Guardian*, 18 March 2007

⁵ ["Hamas takes control of Gaza"](#), *The Guardian*, 15 June 2007

⁶ International Development Committee, *The UK's Development Work in the Middle East*, [evidence submitted by DFID](#)

⁷ ["Fatah and the Hamas agree unity government"](#), *The Telegraph*, 23 April 2014

⁸ ["Palestinian unity government of Fatah and Hamas sworn in"](#), *The Guardian*, 2 June 2014

⁹ ["Thousands of Israelis rally for abducted youths"](#), *Boston Herald*, 29 June 2014.

This development marked the collapse of the Egyptian-brokered ceasefire understanding reached between Israel and Hamas in November 2012, which has been gradually undermined since December 2013. The latest escalation round started on early June, characterized by an intensification of Israeli airstrikes and Palestinian shooting rockets at southern Israel. Tensions further increased following the abduction of three Israeli youths in the southern West Bank, on 12 June, which the Israeli government attributed to Hamas [see the [House of Commons Library Standard Note](#) on the subject]. Overall, in the period leading to the start of the current operation a total of 15 Palestinians, including one civilian, were killed, and another 58 others, mostly civilians, injured, as a result of Israeli airstrikes in the Gaza Strip; seven Israelis, five of whom were civilians, were injured due to rocket firing.

The current crisis comes against a backdrop of heightened vulnerability and instability. Unemployment increased dramatically since mid-2013, following a halt of the illegal tunnel trade, exacerbating the impact of the longstanding access restrictions imposed by Israel. Additionally, former de facto government employees, including the security forces, have not been paid salaries regularly since August 2013 and no salaries at all since April 2014. Delivery of basic services has been also undermined due an ongoing energy crisis, involving power outages of 12 hours per day.¹⁰

4 Israeli ground incursions

On the night of 17 July, Israeli troops entered northern and south-eastern areas of the Gaza Strip. OCHA provides a good overview of developments:

According to the Government of Israel, the objective of the ground offensive is to destroy tunnels leading into Israel, to prevent the infiltration of Palestinian armed groups and subsequent attacks. This [the launch of the ground offensive] came a few hours after a failed attack by a Palestinian armed cell that reached southern Israel through a tunnel.

The incursion was preceded by a heavy barrage of artillery fire from Israeli troops, combined with intense shelling from gunboats, as well as airstrikes, which continued until 8 am [on 18 July].

[...]

Prior to entering Gaza, the Israeli military announced that the “No Go” zone along Gaza’s perimeter fence had been expanded from 300 meters to 3 kilometers from the fence. Tens of thousands of people residing within this area in the Rafah and Khan Younis governorates have received Israeli warnings to evacuate their homes.¹¹

On 19 July, the Israeli offensive was extended into more densely populated areas of the Gaza Strip, including Ash Shuja’iyeh in the eastern part of Gaza City.¹² The Israeli military has declared some areas of Gaza to be “no-go-zones”, and has issued evacuation orders in other areas, in anticipation of air strikes or incursions: at present, 43% of Gaza’s territory is covered by evacuation warnings or “no-go” declarations.¹³

¹⁰ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 16 July 2014, 1500 hours)", OCHA, 17 July 2014

¹¹ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 18 July 2014, 1500 hours)", OCHA, 19 July 2014

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza emergency Humanitarian Snapshot (as of 20 July 2014)", OCHA, 17 July 2014

Israeli military action has thus far failed to prevent militants firing rockets into Israeli territory. In its latest update, covering the period between 1500 hours on 20 July and 1500 hours on 21 July, OCHA reports that:

Indiscriminate firing by Palestinian armed groups in Gaza into Israel also continued, with most falling in open areas or intercepted by the Iron Dome system.¹⁴

5 Casualties and humanitarian situation

As at 22 July, it was reported that 28 Israeli soldiers plus two Israeli civilians had been killed since the outbreak of hostilities. Casualties amongst Palestinians have been far higher. As at 22 July, it was reported that 183 Palestinian militants plus 426 other Palestinians (the majority of whom were assumed to be civilians) had been killed.¹⁵ On 16 July, four children from one Palestinian family were killed by Israeli shelling whilst playing on the beach in Gaza city.¹⁶

The humanitarian situation in Gaza is dire. Over 110,000 people have been displaced, with over 100,000 sheltering in schools run by the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). For 1.2 million Gaza residents, access to water or sanitation services is very limited or non-existent.¹⁷ 80% of Gaza residents receive no more than four hours of electricity per day. There has been major damage to structures: 85 schools and 18 health facilities have been damaged; 2,200 housing units have been destroyed or severely damaged; and a further 2,720 housing units have sustained lesser damage.¹⁸

6 Ceasefire proposals

There was much discussion of a possible ceasefire on 15 July: the Government of Egypt proposed a cessation of all hostilities. This suggestion was accepted by the Government of Israel but not by Hamas. On 17 July it was reported that Hamas had imposed a number of conditions for any ceasefire, including the lifting of Israel's blockade of Gaza (at present, residents of Gaza are only allowed to leave the Strip under special circumstances). Hamas was also reported to have demanded the release of a number of Palestinians arrested during Israel's investigation into the abduction and murder of three Israeli teenagers in June¹⁹ (see the [House of Commons Library Standard Note](#) on the subject). US Secretary of State John Kerry has said the Egyptian proposal will be the basis for any ceasefire.²⁰

On 17 July, both Israeli and Hamas accepted a UN initiative calling for a "humanitarian pause" between the hours of 10:00am and 3:00pm local time.²¹ On 20 July, the International

¹⁴ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 21 July 2014, 1500 hours)", OCHA, 22 July 2014

¹⁵ "Gaza crisis: John Kerry and Ban Ki-Moon step up attempts to broker ceasefire - live updates", *The Guardian*, 22 July 2014

¹⁶ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 16 July 2014, 1500 hours)", OCHA, 17 July 2014

¹⁷ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 21 July 2014, 1500 hours)", OCHA, 22 July 2014

¹⁸ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza emergency Humanitarian Snapshot (as of 20 July 2014)", OCHA, 17 July 2014

¹⁹ "Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal lays out terms of ceasefire", *The Telegraph*, 17 July 2014.

²⁰ "Gaza conflict: New diplomatic push for ceasefire", *BBC News website*, 22 July 2014.

²¹ "Occupied Palestinian Territory: Gaza Emergency Situation Report (as of 16 July 2014, 1500 hours)", OCHA, 17 July 2014

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) negotiated another “humanitarian pause,” which was scheduled to take place between 13:30 and 15:30 local time. It was interrupted by crossfire, before being extended until 16:30.²²

7 International reaction

The following declaration was issued on behalf of the European Union on 18 July:

We are very concerned about the escalation in the Gaza Strip including the resumption of rocket fire into Israel and the Israeli ground operation.

We welcome yesterday's humanitarian pause and deeply regret that this did not lead to a lasting ceasefire. We call on all parties to immediately agree to a ceasefire. We underline the obligation to allow full and unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance.

We have already witnessed too many civilian deaths, including many children such as those killed on a beach in Gaza. We strongly deplore such incidents and we call for them to be investigated swiftly. We condemn the continued firing of rockets from Gaza into Israel by Hamas and other militant groups and the indiscriminate targeting of civilians. We share the UN condemnation of the placement of rockets in a UN school. Israel has the right to protect its population from this kind of attacks. In doing so, it must act proportionately and ensure the protection of civilians at all times.

These events make the efforts to establish a ceasefire even more urgent. We welcome the on-going efforts by regional partners and in particular the initiative launched by Egypt. We reiterate our call on both sides to de-escalate the situation, to end the violence and to end the suffering of the civilian populations. A lasting solution must be found which ensures peace and security for all Israelis and Palestinians. The EU reiterates its readiness to provide the necessary support to this end.²³

On 20 July, speaking from Doha, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said:

I know that while I was en route to Doha, dozens more civilians, including children, have been killed in Israeli military strikes in the Shejaiyah neighborhood in Gaza.

I condemn this atrocious action. Israel must exercise maximum restraint and do far more to protect civilians.

I repeat my demand to all sides that they must respect international humanitarian law.

The violence must stop now.

[...]

As I travel the region, I will continue to press for an [immediate] ceasefire – an immediate end to the Israeli military operation in Gaza and the rocket fire by Hamas and Islamic Jihad.

And beyond a ceasefire, we know that it is folly to simply try to return to the way things were.

Going back to the status quo ante in Gaza and the continuing siege of Gaza is not sustainable.

²² Ibid.

²³ ["Declaration on behalf of the European Union on the escalation in the Gaza Strip", Council of the European Union, 18 July 2014.](#)

There is only one way to avoid the cycle of war and perpetual insecurity for all – and that is by addressing the root causes of the conflict.

That means a return to the negotiating table and talks for a two-state solution.

Israelis, but also Palestinians, need to feel a sense of security.

Palestinians, but also Israelis, need to see a horizon of hope.

And all sides need to be assured that international humanitarian law counts -- and that there will be accountability and justice for crimes committed by any party.²⁴

On the evening of 20 July, a Downing Street spokesman said:

The Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Netanyahu earlier this evening about the situation in Israel and Gaza. The Prime Minister noted the ongoing rocket attacks from Hamas and reiterated the UK's strong support for Israel's right to take proportionate action to defend itself from them. The Prime Minister expressed condolences for the deaths of Israeli troops and concern about mounting civilian casualties in Gaza. The Prime Minister agreed with Prime Minister Netanyahu that the way out of the spiral of violence was for both sides to observe a lasting ceasefire in line with the initiative that was put forward by Egypt.²⁵

²⁴ "Opening remarks to the press with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar", *UN News Centre*, 20 July 2014.

²⁵ "PM call with Prime Minister Netanyahu", *gov.uk*, 20 July 2014