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Unprecedented Rocket Fire from Gaza: Ongoing Escalations and Recommendations for the Biden Administration

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Taking advantage of violence in Jerusalem precipitated by efforts to evict Palestinians from the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood, Palestinian terrorists in Gaza have once again fired rockets into Israel. Israel and Hamas have been fierce adversaries in recent years, frequently trading rocket fire, but have avoided fighting a major war since 2014. The Biden administration should work diligently to avoid further escalation between Gazan terrorists and Israel hastening actions that indicate U.S. support for Israel—like appointing an ambassador—and fully backing Israel's right to self-defense.

What Happened?

- Since April, Palestinians have been protesting the planned eviction of six Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood of East Jerusalem.
 - Over [300 Palestinians and 21 Israeli police](#) have been injured in clashes in Jerusalem, including at the Haram al-Sharif/Temple Mount.
 - On May 9, the Israeli Supreme Court announced that it would [delay its ruling](#) on the case, which was set to coincide with Israeli celebrations of Jerusalem Day.
- Over the past few days, Gazan terrorists have [fired over 1,050 rockets](#) into Israel, with at least seven of the rockets targeting Jerusalem. The rocket attacks have injured dozens and murdered 6 people in Israel.
 - These attacks are the first to target Jerusalem since the 2014 war and forced the [evacuation of the Israeli Knesset](#), the Israeli parliament.
 - In comparison, Palestinian terrorists fired roughly 4,500 rockets into Israel over six weeks with 735 interceptions during the 2014 conflict.
 - Israel's Iron Dome air defense system has intercepted many of these attacks, protecting the lives of Israeli and Palestinian civilians, as well as infrastructure and religious holy sites.

- Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) claimed an [anti-tank missile attack](#) that injured an Israeli civilian.
- Israel has [responded with airstrikes](#) and bolstered its forces on the border with Gaza.
 - The IDF claimed that it has killed [15 Hamas terrorists](#), as well as the [PIJ rocket arsenal commander](#) and [the deputy commander](#) of PIJ's Gaza Brigade.
 - According to Gaza's Hamas-run Health Ministry, [43 Palestinians have died](#) since the violence began, including 13 children, and 296 people have been injured. The IDF claims that more than half of those killed were terrorists and that some were killed by failed Palestinian rockets that often land in Gaza.
 - On May 10, the Israeli military released a statement that it would [postpone its largest exercise in decades](#), "Chariots of Fire," which would have effectively involved all IDF units, so that it could "focus all efforts on preparations and readiness for escalation scenarios."
 - Prime Minister Netanyahu has signaled that Israel will respond with a [more aggressive and extended air campaign](#) than it has previously, which "could continue for some time."
 - Netanyahu distinguished the recent rocket fire from previous similar incidents, claiming "the terrorist groups in Gaza crossed a red line on the eve of Jerusalem Day, a red line, and attacked us with rockets on the outskirts of Jerusalem."
- On May 11, a rocket attack [damaged the Eilat-Ashkelon oil pipeline](#), quickly diminishing the prospects for de-escalation.

Why is it Important?

- President Biden has not appointed an ambassador to Israel yet, which puts a strain on the relationship at a time when Israel needs close support from Washington to fend off international condemnation for its justified actions.
- Hamas is not shooting rockets at Israelis because of Israeli actions in Jerusalem, but because it is a terrorist organization that readily violates the law of armed conflict by indiscriminately firing on Israeli civilian population centers and without provocation. Hamas seeks to exploit the convergence of Ramadan, Jerusalem Day, the Sheikh Jarrah eviction case and the ensuing violence, as well as the cancellation of Palestinian elections by turning these events into a public relations victory.
 - Hamas rocket attacks could strengthen its bona fides within Palestinian society while also reminding Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and the international community that it is an important local player.

- Thousands of Palestinians chanted Hamas slogans during protests at the Al-Aqsa Mosque on May 8.
- The indiscriminate nature of Hamas' rocket fire renders it in violation of the law of war spelled out in Protocol I (1977 amendment to the Geneva Convention), which calls for belligerent parties to engage in distinction between civilian and non-civilian targets.
- Despite the volatile situation, neither the Israeli leadership nor Hamas desire another major war.
 - Another war in Gaza would detract resources and forces from Israel's chief threats along its northern border, namely Hezbollah and Iran's increasing presence and proliferation of advanced weaponry in Syria and Lebanon.
 - A full-scale operation in Gaza could leave Israel with the unwanted burden of overseeing the territory.
 - Israeli officials prefer having Hamas as a "return address" for retaliation when Palestinian militants in Gaza launch attacks on Israelis.
 - Hamas fears that another war would devastate Gaza's already precarious economic and humanitarian conditions, therefore threatening Hamas's grip on the territory.
- Over the past few years, a form of mutual deterrence has developed between Israel and Hamas.
 - Indirect lines of communication through Egypt and Qatar have allowed Israeli and Hamas leadership to publicly condemn and attack one another, while privately deescalating tensions.
 - Israel's operational capability to intercept rockets with the Iron Dome short-range air defense system has significantly decreased the incentive for the IDF to respond to each incident with strong offensive force but increased incentives for Hamas to fire rockets since it can do so without each attack provoking retaliation.
 - Israeli tunnel detection technology has limited the ability of Palestinian or Hezbollah militants to breach the border and attack civilian populations.
 - Israel's increased technological and intelligence capabilities have allowed it to target Palestinian militants with greater precision, reducing civilian casualties.
 - Hamas maintains a complex network of tunnels inside of Gaza that would turn any Israeli ground operation to clear out Palestinian terrorists or weaponry into a slow, deliberate process.
 - The increased costs from a ground operation compared to a strictly air campaign could deter Israeli leadership from launching such an offensive unless facing significant, prolonged fire from Gaza.

- Both Israel and Hamas might decide to limit hostilities to tit-for-tat retaliation that ends with concessions for both sides.
 - Hitting critical infrastructure at the Eilat-Ashkelon oil pipeline makes this seem increasingly unlikely in the short-term.
 - It is still possible that Israel and Hamas de-escalate after a few days of attacks if Hamas realizes its mistake in initiating the violence and backs down.
- There could also be major escalation.
 - The IDF could respond with offensive operations if rockets evade the Iron Dome system causing casualties or hitting critical infrastructure.
 - Hamas and PIJ's increasingly precise weaponry could force Israel to take additional and necessary offensive action to deter further violence.
 - Hamas has launched an unprecedented frequency of rocket attacks that allow it to claim it is the only Palestinian group fighting the Israelis.
 - Unlike during most previous rounds of violence, this time Hamas is not making demands for Israeli concessions to Gaza, with its only demand being the removal of Israeli police from the Haram al-Shariff/Temple Mount.
 - In the past, Israel has reopened Gaza's fishing zones, allowed cash payments into Gaza, and issued permits for Palestinians to work in Israel, but Hamas is not publicly demanding these concessions, making achieving a ceasefire more difficult.
 - Palestinian Islamic Jihad has its own supply of rockets and has often launched attacks independent of Hamas, occasionally making ceasefire negotiations difficult.
- Whether this round of violence follows the previous pattern of de-escalation depends on whether Hamas shows restraint and an ability to rein in PIJ, signaling on both sides for a ceasefire, and whether tensions in East Jerusalem eventually lessen.

What Can the United States Do Next?

- President Biden should quickly appoint an ambassador to Israel, who may not be in the position to address the ongoing issues but whose appointment would signal America's support for Israel's right to self-defense and an interest on the part of the administration in de-escalating tensions.
- The Biden administration should continue to express support for Israel's right to self-defense against rocket attacks and call on it to maintain the rule of law in Jerusalem with respect to the multiple faiths that place importance on Jerusalem.

- Public statements should support Israeli actions to stop murderous threats against its citizens by a terrorist group committed to its destruction.
 - No country in the world and certainly not the United States would accept such an intolerable situation.
 - America wants to see the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people addressed, but Hamas's terror attacks only guarantees them a future of more hardship and suffering.
- The Biden administration should support de-escalation by working with the Egyptians and Qataris to negotiate a ceasefire between Hamas and Israel.
 - While doing so, the Biden administration officials and media outlets should avoid framing Hamas's actions as retaliation for Israel's actions in Jerusalem (or as the actions of a rational actor) and instead note that the group remains a terrorist organization that is once again trying to coopt Palestinian politics to its advantage.
- The American and Israeli governments should quickly set up their recently agreed upon [joint missile defense working group](#), which is focused on Iranian ballistic precision weapons, but could yield increased defensive capabilities given that many rockets in Gaza are produced with Iranian support.
- Similarly, the United States and Israel should expand joint research and development on emergent air defense technologies, such as direct energy.

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