150 rockets fired at Israel after IDF assassinates Gaza terror leader

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-orders-schools-businesses-shot-from-gaza-to-tel-aviv-for-1st-time-since-14/>

The Israel Defense Forces on Tuesday ordered schools closed in southern and central Israel, including the Tel Aviv metropolitan area, as terror groups in the Gaza Strip began firing dozens of rockets at cities and towns throughout the country in retaliation for the assassination of Palestinian Islamic Jihad senior commander Baha Abu al-Ata.

“We are prepared for several days of battle with an aerial defense shield, including in the center of the country,” IDF spokesperson Hidai Zilberman told reporters Tuesday morning.

Approximately 150 rockets and mortar shells were fired from the Gaza Strip at central and southern Israel on Tuesday as of 1 p.m., according to unofficial tallies. Soldiers operating the Iron Dome missile defense system shot down some 60 of those incoming projectiles.

A 35-year-old man was lightly injured by rocket fire outside the town of Gan Yavne, and six people were brought to the hospital with injuries sustained while running to bomb shelters or with panic attacks. An 8-year-old girl was also in serious condition in the Tel Aviv suburb of Holon after she lost consciousness suddenly during the rocket attack at 8 a.m. It was not immediately clear if her collapse was caused by the attack.

Shortly before 11 a.m., an Israeli drone bombed two Palestinian Islamic Jihad terrorists preparing to fire rockets at Israel from the northern Gaza Strip, Palestinian media outlets reported. According to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry, one of the PIJ members was killed and the other was injured.

The IDF confirmed carrying out the airstrike, saying it had done so to “remove the immediate threat.” It was Israel’s first strike in the Gaza Strip since the rocket fire began, following the assassination of Abu al-Ata earlier in the day.

The IDF Home Front Command ordered all schools and non-essential businesses closed in the following areas: the Gaza periphery; the Lachish region; the western Negev; the central Negev; and the Shfela region. The IDF also forbade gatherings of more than 100 people.

Schools were also closed in the Dan region, including Tel Aviv, and in the Yarkon region. Businesses were temporarily ordered shut there as well, but were allowed to reopen on Tuesday morning, providing there was a bomb shelter nearby, the military said. In the Dan and Yarkon regions, the IDF forbade all public gatherings of more than 300 people.

It was the first time that the IDF ordered a closure of schools and businesses in the Tel Aviv metropolitan area since the 2014 Gaza war, known in Israel as Operation Protective Edge.

Rocket attacks began shortly after the killing of Abu al-Ata early Tuesday morning, most of them focused on Israeli towns and cities surrounding the northern Gaza Strip. Shortly after 7 a.m., rocket sirens sounded in the Tel Aviv suburbs of Rishon Lezion and Holon. An hour later, sirens blared in the southern neighborhoods of Tel Aviv and in the nearby suburbs of Bat Yam and Holon.

At approximately 10:30 a.m., rocket sirens were triggered in the central Israeli town of Modi’in, halfway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. At least two Iron Dome interceptor missiles were fired in response to the incoming projectile. It was not immediately clear if they shot down the rocket.

A rocket struck a home in the southern town of Netivot, causing damage to the building but no injuries, police said.

Another struck the Route 4 highway near the Gan Yavne Junction, lightly injuring the 35-year-old man and causing significant damage to the road and several cars. Police sappers were called to the scene to remove the projectile.

Several rockets also struck the town of Sderot, northeast of the Gaza Strip; one hit the city of Ashdod, damaging a car; and one struck a street in the central Israeli city of Rishon Lezion.

A mortar shell fired from the Gaza Strip landed in an open field in the Sha’ar Hanegev region of southern Israel, sparking a fire, a regional spokesperson said.

Firefighters were called to the scene to put out the blaze.

Hospitals and other emergency services were put on high alert in light of the ongoing rocket attacks.

The Ben Gurion International Airport was not affected by the closures. “Ben Gurion Airport is working as usual with no changes to the flight schedule,” a spokesman for the Israeli Airports Authority said.

“We are ready for various scenarios, both offensive and defensive. We are not interested in escalating the situation,” IDF spokesman Jonathan Conricus said Tuesday.

He said the IDF has sent messages to Hamas, through unidentified third parties, urging the terror group to not take part in this round of fighting.

“We are monitoring [Hamas’s] activities and will conduct ourselves accordingly,” he said.

At approximately 4 a.m. Tuesday, Israeli Air Force jets fired precision ammunition at a building in the Shejaiya area of Gaza City where Abu al-Ata was staying, killing him, in a joint operation by the IDF and Shin Bet security service. A woman was also killed and two other people were injured in the strike, according to the Hamas-run Gaza health ministry.

According to the IDF, Abu al-Ata was planning to carry out rocket attacks and other terrorist activities against Israel and was also directly responsible for several cases of rocket fire over the past six months.

“We know that he was behind most and almost all of the PIJ’s attacks against Israel going back to the [25 of August](https://www.timesofisrael.com/3-rockets-fired-at-israel-from-gaza-as-tensions-soar-iron-dome-intercepts-2/), including [before Memorial Day](https://www.timesofisrael.com/israeli-aircraft-said-to-strike-targets-in-gaza-after-wave-of-fire-balloons/),” Conricus said, referring to several cases of rocket strikes.

The military said it had sent a number of warnings to Abu al-Ata — through unidentified mediators — to call off his operations, but they went unheeded.

“We tried to send a message to Abu al-Ata and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad that we are aware of his actions and to persuade him to stop these attacks. Obviously, these warnings were not successful,” said IDF spokesman Jonathan Conricus.

Conricus said the assassination did not signify “a return to previous policies of what has been termed in the media ‘targeted killings.'”

“We conducted the attack because there were no other choice,” he said.

The timing of the IAF strike — in the midst of heated political debate as prime minister-designate Benny Gantz works to form a coalition — drew immediate criticism from opponents of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who questioned the need to conduct a targeted assassination at this time.

Conricus said the IDF asked for permission from Netanyahu, who serves as both prime and defense minister, as well as the security cabinet to carry out the assassination operation a week ago and was waiting for the right time to act.

“Over the last week, we have been waiting for the opportune moment to conduct the surgical strike,” he said.

The army spokesman said the military saw its chance on Tuesday morning when Abu al-Ata was relatively isolated and the risk to civilians was less.

“The missiles were fired from fighter jets with the intention of not bringing down the entire building, but just the floor where he was located,” Conricus said.

He said he was aware of the reports of additional casualties in the strike, but could not comment on the matter.

Conricus said the military did not believe that Abu al-Ata was acting on the orders of Iran, which backs the PIJ, but was “more a local terrorist who acted unchecked.”

Israeli military officials hinted at having Abu al-Ata on their kill list in recent weeks, leaking his name and picture to the media in what was widely seen as a tacit threat.

The targeted killing of a Palestinian leader in Gaza is a rare event.

In May, during the most serious flareup in recent years, when Palestinian terrorists fired more than 700 rockets into Israel, the IAF killed Hamed Hamdan al-Khodari, who it said was responsible for funneling money from Iran to Gaza terror groups.

Israel and Gaza have engaged in several sporadic rounds of violence over the last two years as the sides attempted to reach a long-term ceasefire.