

Israel and Islamic Jihad reach cease-fire to end five days of fighting

Israel and the Islamic Jihad militant group in the Gaza Strip agreed to an Egyptian-brokered cease-fire late Saturday, ending five days of intense fighting that left 33 Palestinians, including at least 13 civilians, dead. Two people in Israel were killed by rocket fire.

The cease-fire took effect just after 10 p.m., with a last-minute burst of rocket fire and Israeli airstrikes stretching several minutes past the deadline announced by [Egypt](#). While the calm brought a sense of relief to Gaza's more than 2 million people and hundreds of thousands of Israelis who had been confined to bomb shelters in recent days, the agreement did nothing to address the underlying issues that have fueled numerous rounds of fighting between [Israel](#) and [Palestinian](#) militant groups in the Gaza Strip.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office put out a statement thanking Egyptian President Abdel-Fatah el-Sissi for his efforts to restore calm. Egypt frequently acts as a broker between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza.

The statement quoted Netanyahu's national security adviser, Tzachi Hanegbi, as saying that "quiet would be answered with quiet" but that Israel would respond to further threats with "whatever needs to be done."

In Gaza, Islamic Jihad spokesman Tareq Selmi said Israel had agreed to halt its policy of targeted strikes on the group's leaders. "Any stupidity or assassination by the occupation will be met with a response and the Zionist enemy bears the responsibility," he said.

Tensions could quickly resume next week when Israel holds a contentious march through a main Palestinian thoroughfare in Jerusalem's Old City.

Still, as the truce took hold, the deafening whooshes of outgoing rockets and booms of Israeli airstrikes was replaced by the honking of cars in Gaza. Streets that had been desolate in recent days quickly teemed with people reveling in the ceasefire, waving Palestinian flags and flashing victory signs from speeding vehicles. Amid the celebration, a fruit vendor used a loudspeaker, enthusiastically promoting his supply of bananas.

The latest violence erupted Tuesday when Israeli airstrikes killed three senior Islamic Jihad commanders. Israel said the airstrikes were in response to a heavy burst of rocket fire the previous week and that its attacks have been focused on Islamic Jihad targets. But residents in Gaza said homes of people uninvolved in fighting also had been struck.

At least 10 civilians, including women, young children and uninvolved neighbors were killed in those initial strikes, which drew regional condemnation.

Over the past few days, Israel has conducted more airstrikes, killing other senior Islamic Jihad commanders and destroying their command centers and rocket-launching sites. But the airstrikes showed no signs of stopping the rocket fire.

Israel reported over 1,200 launches throughout the fighting, with some rockets reaching as far as the Tel Aviv and Jerusalem areas. Israel said about a quarter of the rockets were misfired and landed in Gaza, while most of the rest were either intercepted or landed in open areas. But an 80-year-old woman and a Palestinian laborer who was working inside Israel were killed by rocket fire.

It was the latest in a long series of battles between Israel and Palestinian militants in Gaza since the Islamic militant group Hamas seized control of the seaside territory in 2007.

But the deal was unlikely to deal with many of the causes of the repeated fighting, including Israel's ongoing blockade of Gaza, the large arsenals of weapons possessed by Hamas and Islamic Jihad and Israeli policies in the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem.

Israel captured the West Bank, east Jerusalem and Gaza in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians claim all three areas for a future state. Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, but Hamas subsequently overran the territory and expelled forces loyal to the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority.

The more powerful Hamas has praised Islamic Jihad's strikes but remained on the sidelines during the latest round of fighting, limiting the scope of the conflict. As the de facto government held responsible for the abysmal conditions in the blockaded Gaza Strip, Hamas has recently tried to keep a lid on its conflict with Israel. Islamic Jihad, on the other hand, a more ideological and unruly militant group wedded to violence, has taken the lead in the past few rounds of fighting with Israel.

In a reminder of the combustible situation in the occupied West Bank, the Israeli military raided the Balata refugee camp near the northern city of Nablus, sparking a firefight that killed two Palestinians. In a separate incident near the northern city of Jenin, Israeli police said they shot and killed a suspected Palestinian assailant who ran toward soldiers wielding a knife.

Israeli-Palestinian fighting has surged in the West Bank under Israel's most right-wing government in history. Since the start of the year, 111 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, at least half of them affiliated with militant groups, according to a tally by The Associated Press — the highest death toll in some two decades. In that time, 20 people have been killed in Palestinian attacks on Israelis.

The truce could be further tested on Thursday when Israeli nationalists plan their annual "Jerusalem Day" march through the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. The march, meant to celebrate Israel's capture of the Old City and its Jewish holy sites in 1967, is a frequent source of friction and helped spark an 11-day war with Hamas in 2021.

On Saturday, Palestinians ventured out to assess the damage wrought by Israeli warplanes and salvage whatever they could. One man carefully pulled documents out from under the rubble. Another carried away a mattress.

Four homes in densely populated residential neighborhoods were reduced to dust in the pre-dawn attacks. The Israeli military alleged the targeted homes belonged to or were used by Islamic Jihad militants. The residents denied the army's claims and said they had no idea why their homes were targeted.

"We have no rocket launching pads at all. This is a residential area," said Awni Obaid, beside the debris of what was his three-story house in the central town of Deir al-Balah.

The nearby house of his relative, Jihad Obaid, was also leveled. He had been standing some hundred meters away when his apartment was bombed.

"I felt like vomiting because of the dust," he said. "This is extraordinary hatred. They claim they don't strike at children, but what we see is craziness, destruction."

(AP)