

Israel vs. Islamic Jihad: What is source of latest conflict and whether it could mean all-out war

Jotam Confino - USA Today

TEL AVIV – Israel’s assassination of a top military commander in the Islamic Jihad militant group in Gaza on Friday raised concerns that the conflict could escalate into an all-out war in the territory that is home to 2 million Palestinians.



Hatem Moussa, AP Smoke rises following Israeli airstrikes on a building in Gaza City, Friday, Aug. 5, 2022. Palestinian officials say Israeli airstrikes on Gaza have killed several people, including a senior militant, and wounded 40 others.

Israel launched a [series of airstrikes Friday](#) in Gaza in an operation known as “Breaking Dawn” that killed Islamic Jihad military commander Tayseer Jabari. According to a spokesperson for the Israel Defense Forces, Jabari was responsible for several terror attacks against Israel, a country roughly the size of New Jersey.

While Israel and the Palestinian Health Ministry have both said 10 people were killed, the Israeli government said they were terrorists. The Palestinian Health Ministry in Gaza says the casualties include a 5-year-old girl.

The latest

Tensions escalate: Islamic Jihad responded to the assassination of its military commander by firing more than 100 missiles at Israel, pushing the two sides closer to all-out war.

Conflict to continue: The Israeli military says operation Breaking Dawn will continue.

Young victim identified: The 5-year-old Palestinian girl killed in the airstrikes was identified as Alla Qadoom, according to the Palestinian Health Ministry.

Islamic Jihad responds: *Islamic Jihad leader Ziad al-Nakhala issued a statement after the killing of Jabari, saying, "This is a day destined for victory, and the enemy must understand that there will be a war without surrender. ... The resistance fighters must stand as one. We have no red lines, and there is no room to stop."*

Israeli leaders respond: *A joint statement by Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid and Defense Minister Benny Gantz after the operation was launched said: "The Israeli government will not allow terrorist organizations to set the agenda in towns near the Gaza Strip and threaten the citizens of Israel. Anyone who seeks harm to Israel must know that we will get to them. Security forces will act against Islamic Jihad terrorists to remove the threat from the citizens of Israel."*

Top takeaways

Israel has been on high alert along the Gaza border since Tuesday morning after the military arrested Islamic Jihad commander Bassam al-Saadi in Jenin in the West Bank.

The assessment in the military was that Islamic Jihad was planning an imminent attack in retaliation, leading authorities to close roads near the Gaza border on Tuesday until Friday. Islamic Jihad never retaliated, but was about to launch an attack right on Friday, causing Israel to launch the airstrike, according to the Israeli military spokesperson.

Hamas runs the Gaza Strip and Israel normally holds the organization responsible for all violence coming from the enclave. The war in Gaza last year was mainly between Israel and Hamas, while the current operation is only targeted at Islamic Jihad, which is considered more extreme than Hamas.

Hamas managed to portray itself as the protector of Palestinians in the war last year, increasing its popularity among Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. If it stays out of this fight, Islamic Jihad will manage to steal its thunder, while Hamas pays the price for being responsible for the lives of Palestinian civilians in Gaza.

All border crossings have been shut, preventing thousands of Gazans from entering Israel to work every day, as well as goods from coming into the Strip.

Islamic Jihad's military capability is weaker than Hamas but is operating in both Gaza and the West Bank. Its leader, al-Nakhala, met with Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran earlier this week. Iran has been supporting Islamic Jihad financially and militarily for years.

Why it matters

Counter-terrorism experts in the U.S. and Middle East said the strike is significant for a number of reasons and could have major repercussions, including on the already-fraught efforts to negotiate a new nuclear deal with Iran to get it to stop trying to make nuclear weapons.

That's especially the case because Islamic Jihad is considered a proxy fighting force for Iran, which has long considered it a major priority to have influence in the Palestinian territories given their proximity to Israel, its number one enemy.

The group had been very active in the recent wave of terror attacks against Israel beginning in May, along with Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups, said Yoram Schweitzer, a former top Israeli intelligence official who is director of the Terrorism and Low-Intensity Conflict program at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv.

In response, Israel has conducted aggressive counter-terror operations including within the refugee camps in Jenin and Nablus, Schweitzer told USA TODAY. Last Monday, it swept through the Jenin camp north of the occupied West Bank, which is known to be the heart of the Palestinian armed resistance to Israeli, exchanging gunfire with militants.

Israeli forces arrested al-Saadi, one of the leaders of Islamic Jihad in the West Bank, and brought him back to Israel, Schweitzer said. That significantly ratcheted up tensions, with the Islamic Jihad accelerating its attempts to launch operations from Gaza, Schweitzer said, citing “concrete” Israeli intelligence.

Israel upped its readiness and put certain areas in the southern part of the territory under curfew. But after two days, it went on the offensive after learning of plans to attack Israeli targets and after a few Islamic Jihad cells tried to launch rockets toward Israel, Schweitzer said.

Israel’s aggressive response is meant as a warning to Tehran and to Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of an even more powerful Iranian proxy in the region, Hezbollah.

“The whole campaign is intended to send a clear message to Nasrallah, who has also been threatening Israel in the last few weeks,” Schweitzer said.

“They are all watching,” including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran’s most potent military force, which Israel believes is providing intelligence to Islamic Jihad to help it launch attacks.

How important is Jabari?

According to the Israeli military, Jabari was a senior commander who held a number of positions for in Islamic Jihad, including Head of Operations. He was also responsible for carrying out anti-tank missile and sniper attacks against Israeli soldiers and civilians recently and fired rockets at Israel during the Gaza war in 2021.

Jabari replaced Baha Abu al-Ata as the Commanding Officer of Islamic Jihads Gaza division after al-Ata was killed in an Israeli airstrike in 2019.

Why would Islamic Jihad attack Israel now?

Islamic Jihad is seen as the ultimate resistance to Israel among Palestinians. Israel has carried out numerous arrests and killed a number of Islamic Jihad members in the West Bank in recent months, including the arrest of its senior member on Tuesday morning.

Islamic Jihad is likely to respond to the operation Israel launched on Friday and to the killing of Jabari in order to avoid appearing weak or harming its reputation among Palestinians.

Violence between Fatah and Hamas?

Islamic Jihad is an independent entity but is subordinate to Hamas. Hamas could try and lower the flames by either arresting Islamic Jihad members, which could lead to infighting between them, but it's not expected to end up like the Fatah-Hamas fight in 2006.

Hamas is seen as too strong for Islamic Jihad to topple them. On the other hand, Hamas could feel pressure to join Islamic Jihad to show the Palestinians that it's supporting their fight against Israel.

Impact on U.S.-Israel relations

Iran and Hezbollah have a rooting interest in Islamic Jihad attacking Israel. Islamic Jihad leader al-Nakhala was in Iran this week, meeting with President Ebrahim Raisi.

The U.S. will support Israel in its initial phase, but if casualties approach the same level as those in last year's war in Gaza, the Biden administration will put pressure on both Israel, Egypt and Qatar to reach a ceasefire.

What they're saying

"I know the building that was hit very well," Gaza resident Najla Shawa told USA TODAY. "It's a residential building, and it even has some offices there. I pass by there every day. It's crazy."

"When I heard the huge explosion of the air strike I got scared and shouted at my kids to leave our apartment," said Samah Abu Ramadan, a 39-year-old mother of four from Gaza.

"I did not know that our building was the targeted place. I did not know what to do, so I stayed for 15 minutes near the door to the apartment until the rescue teams came and evacuated us from the building. I cannot go back to our home because I don't feel it's secure enough for me and my kids."

"As a citizen of southern Israel, I support the actions of the Israeli military today," Alex Kushnir, an Israeli lawmaker from the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu, told USA TODAY.

"The situation where terrorist organizations can threaten Israeli citizens cannot be continued."

"Hamas will not wish to be lead blind by Islamic Jihad," former Mossad chief Efraim Halevy said.

"It is too early to speculate and a lot will depend on the retaliation Islamic Jihad will try to carry out. They have much to loose."

"The United States firmly believes that Israel has a right to protect itself," Tom Nides, U.S. ambassador to Israel, said in a statement. "We are engaging with different parties and urge all sides for calm."