**Israel Sees Escalation in Gazans’ Longer-Range Strikes**

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/29/world/middleeast/29mideast.html>

[Palestinian](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/p/palestinians/index.html?inline=nyt-classifier) militants in [Gaza](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/gaza_strip/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) fired at least eight imported, Katyusha-style rockets on Thursday at Ashkelon, on the Israeli coast, in what Israeli officials said was a serious broadening of the conflict.

Ashkelon has been an occasional target of these longer-range rockets, but never of so many in one day. The attack scored a direct hit on a house there for the first time.

The rocket attacks came on the second day of deadly Israeli airstrikes on Gaza. These attacks killed at least 19 Palestinians, among them four boys, Palestinian hospital officials said.

Many of the others killed were from the military wing of [Hamas](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/organizations/h/hamas/index.html?inline=nyt-org), known as the Qassam Brigades, which claimed responsibility for the latest rocket fire.

Hamas, the Islamic group that controls Gaza, also continued to fire locally made rockets known as Qassams at Sderot, on the Israeli border, where a civilian was killed by a rocket on Wednesday. Thousands of these rockets have been fired at [Israel](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/israel/index.html?inline=nyt-geo) over the past seven years.

The 122-millimeter Katyushas, based on a Russian design, are manufactured in many countries and have a range of at least 10 miles, longer than the relatively crude Qassams. Israelis refer to the Katyushas fired at Ashkelon as “grad” rockets.

No one was hurt in the attacks on Ashkelon, a city of 120,000 whose center lies about 10 miles north of the Gaza Strip, but there was significant damage to the building that was hit, said Micky Rosenfeld, an Israeli police spokesman. Six of the rockets hit central areas and residential neighborhoods, he said, while the others landed in open fields outside the city.

Israel’s strikes in Gaza on Thursday started in the early morning and were aimed at armed men and rocket-launching squads, an army spokeswoman said.

Among the militants killed was Hamza al-Hayya, the son of Khalil al-Hayya, a senior Hamas leader and legislator, the senior Mr. Hayya said. The Israeli Army said the attack was a strike against a squad about to launch rockets. Hamas confirmed that Hamza al-Hayya was leading a rocket squad.

In Gaza, reacting to the news of his son’s death, Khalil al-Hayya said, “I thank God for this gift,” according to The Associated Press, adding, “This is the 10th member of my family to receive the honor of martyrdom.”

Seven members of the Hayya family and a neighbor were killed in May in an Israeli airstrike that hit the family home in Gaza. Khalil al-Hayya was not in the house at the time. Military officials said at the time that the army had “identified and hit a five-member terrorist cell” that was the target of the attack. That month, Hamas had also intensified its rocket fire from Gaza, killing two Israelis in Sderot.

Images filmed by cameramen in Gaza on Thursday showed distraught family members gathering in blankets the body parts of the four boys, ages 8 to 12, who were killed in one of the Israeli strikes. Relatives said they had been playing soccer outdoors not far from their homes near Jabaliya, in the northern Gaza Strip.

The army spokeswoman repeated that the strike was aimed at rocket launchers and that anyone in the vicinity of rocket launchers was at risk.

An Israeli security official said the rockets that landed in Ashkelon on Thursday were “probably made in Iran” and had most likely reached Gaza via Egypt. He was speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to give out such information. An examination of the remains of similar rockets that struck Ashkelon earlier this year led Israeli officials to conclude that they had been made in Iran.

David Baker, an Israeli government spokesman, said the attacks constituted “a definite escalation, and one that we will not tolerate.” He said Israel was “well aware of the steps it must take to halt the rocket fire,” but did not elaborate on any additional Israeli response.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, who was in Tokyo on Thursday at the end of an official visit, told reporters there, “We will reach out for the terrorists and we will attack and we will try to stop them.”

Ehud Barak, the defense minister, was quoted by Israeli news media as saying that the possibility of a large-scale Israeli ground operation in Gaza was “real and tangible,” and that Israel was not afraid of undertaking one.

The Israeli government and the military have so far indicated reluctance to embark on a large ground invasion of Gaza, with some officials saying privately that they fear a heavy toll in lives on both sides and are skeptical about what such a move would achieve.

In what appeared to be a signal to Hamas, the Israeli Air Force struck one of its police posts in the Shati refugee camp near Gaza City on Thursday evening, close to the home of Ismail Haniya, the leader of the Hamas administration. Two Hamas militants were killed but Mr. Haniya was unharmed, Palestinians said. After Israeli threats of retaliation in the recent widening of rocket fire into Israel, many of the Hamas leaders are reported to have gone into hiding.

The rockets that slammed into Sderot left the streets mostly deserted.

A bodyguard for Avi Dichter, Israel’s public security minister, was lightly wounded by shrapnel when a rocket hit the campus of a college on the outskirts of Sderot shortly before Mr. Dichter arrived. A 47-year-old man who was studying logistics at the college was killed by rocket fire there on Wednesday, the first Israeli fatality from rocket fire in nine months.

The latest surge of hostilities started on Wednesday morning, when the Israeli Air Force carried out a strike in southern Gaza and killed five members of the Qassam Brigades. Hamas then bombarded Sderot in retaliation.

Three Palestinian boys and a 5-month-old baby were among those killed in subsequent Israeli strikes on Wednesday, medical officials in Gaza said.