Rocket shot down by Iron Dome as Gaza border violence persists

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A rocket shot from Gaza was shot down by the Iron Dome anti-missile system early Thursday, the Israel Defense Forces said, as cross-border violence in the volatile region persisted for a second day.

The army said the rocket was the latest of nine projectiles to be fired at Israel from Gaza since Wednesday evening, as fighting ramped up following several days of shaky calm along the restive border.

The IDF said all the missiles landed in open areas near the border fence. There were no reports of injuries or damage.

Rocket sirens had rang out in the Eshkol region just after 5:30 a.m., sending residents of three communities in the area scrambling to enter bomb shelters.

Earlier, sirens rang out in the Hof Ashkelon, Shaar Hanegev and Sdot Hanegev areas at about 11:30 p.m. and just after midnight.

The rocket fire came as several days of calm gave way to intense fighting on the border, after an Israeli officer was shot and moderately wounded by a Gazan sniper.

Israel responded by attacking a number of Hamas positions in Gaza, killing three members of the terror group.

Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman convened a late night meeting in Tel Aviv with IDF Chief of Staff Gadi Eisenkot, Shin Bet head Nadav Argaman and National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat to discuss the increase in tensions.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was updated by the group by telephone, according to Army Radio.

The outburst of violence came after several days of calm following intense Israeli airstrikes in the Strip over the weekend in retaliation for the shooting death of an IDF soldier on the border Friday. On Tuesday, UN mediator Nikolas Mladenov said the sides were “minutes from war” before a tacit ceasefire was reached.

The soldier injured by sniper fire from southern Gaza on Wednesday was rushed to Soroka hospital in Beersheba, where he underwent surgery for gunshot wounds to the chest and abdomen, according to a hospital spokesperson. His condition was initially described as serious, but was upgraded to moderate after the surgery.

In response, the IDF said tanks struck seven Hamas positions. Hadashot TV news said both the Air Force and tanks opened fire on targets in the Strip.

According to the IDF, a group of 20 minors were rioting along the border fence, which was used as a decoy by the sniper to fire upon soldiers responding to the unrest.

Some Hebrew media reports cited initial army assessments that the sniper was not acting on behalf of Hamas, the terror group that rules Gaza. Military sources told Army Radio late Wednesday, however, that Hamas had encouraged the demonstration by young Gazans at the fence, drawing an IDF patrol, and then its snipers opened fire on the soldiers.

The sources said the same sequence played out on Friday, when IDF soldier Aviv Levi was shot dead by a Gaza sniper at the border.

The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said three Palestinians were killed in the Israeli strikes. It named them as 28-year-old Ahmad al-Basous, 29-year-old Abada Farawna and 27-year-old Muhammed al-Ara’er.

Hamas’ military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, later acknowledged the three as its members.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad, another Gaza-based terror group, both vowed revenge.