**IDF says large-scale terror attack thwarted as troops prevent Gaza infiltration**

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The Israeli military said on Saturday that a “large-scale terror attack” was thwarted as troops killed four Palestinians who attempted to infiltrate into Israel from the Gaza Strip, armed with AK-47 rifles, rocket-propelled grenades, hand grenades, hunting knives and bolt cutters. The IDF released a number of photos of the seized weapons.

The military said in a statement that the incident began at 4:00 a.m. Saturday as lookout troops spotted four figures heading toward the border fence “in military formation” from the direction of Khan Younis in southern Gaza.

Forces from the IDF’s Golani Brigade were alerted of the infiltration attempt and made their way to the area, the IDF said.

The four Gazans were killed by Israeli soldiers who “opened fire once one of the terrorists scaled the fence,” the military said in an initial statement, adding that a hand grenade was launched at the troops during the clash but none of the soldiers were injured.

Palestinian media posted pictures of the infiltrators (below)

AFP earlier reported that an army spokeswoman told the French news agency that troops “opened fire after one of the terrorists scaled the barrier and hurled a grenade at the soldiers.”

“One of the terrorists crossed into our territory and was shot, and three were killed along the concrete barrier at point-blank range,” the IDF added later Saturday. An IDF tank also fired a cannon shot into the vicinity of the infiltration attempt.

The Gazan cell was armed with “Kalashnikov [AK-47] weapons, bags filled with equipment for cutting the fence, energy bars and dates for the possibility of a prolonged stay [on Israeli soil], grenades and pipe bombs,” according to the military statement. The Palestinians were wearing improvised fatigues and had a medical box among their belongings.

“A large-scale terror attack was foiled here. It is not clear if the attack was intended to hurt soldiers or civilians, but a major attack has been thwarted,” said IDF spokesperson Brigadier General Ronen Manelis.

Manelis added that the cell’s preparedness and the amount of equipment and weaponry it carried, showed that there was a carefully prepared operation in motion.

The IDF said it holds terror group Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip, responsible. “The expectation is that Hamas will control events [in the Strip] and prevent them; it is therefore responsible for whatever happens in the Gaza Strip in these aspects,” the military said.

Hamas said in response that the four Gazans “acted independently,” the Ynet news site reported Saturday. “Israel’s actions push Gaza’s youth to respond to them independently,” the terror organization said in a statement cited by Ynet. “Israel is being hit with the results of the constant pressure and rage in which the residents of Gaza live,” the group added.

Palestinian media reported that some or all of the four were former Hamas terrorists. Conflicting reports late Saturday said they had quit the Gaza-ruling terror group or had been ejected from it.

Shortly after the infiltration attempt, Israeli aircraft targeted an outpost operated by Hamas near Deir el-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, according to Palestinian news reports.

The incident comes as organizers of Friday’s weekly protests and riots this week along the Israel-Gaza border called them off due to the upcoming Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, which begins on Sunday. Last Friday, some 6,000 Gazans took part in the protests.

Recent months saw a dramatic increase in the level of violence along the Gaza border, with near-nightly riots and airborne arson attacks, but the violence waned in recent weeks due to a de facto ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas.

However, tensions flared again earlier this week after West Bank after terrorists stabbed to death 18-year-old Dvir Sorek outside the settlement of Migdal Oz. His body was found in the predawn hours on Thursday outside the settlement where he was studying in seminary.

Overnight Friday-Saturday, IDF troops conducted search raids in the Palestinian village of Beit Kahil, near Hebron in the southern West Bank, according to Palestinian media reports. There were some clashes between villagers and Israeli soldiers but no injuries were reported.

Later Saturday, the IDF said four suspects were arrested in the village, including a woman and three men. The arrest came on the heels of an arrest on Friday by security forces of a 29-year-old suspect from the Palestinian village of Beit Fajjar, near Migdal Oz, during a door-to-door manhunt for the killers, according to Palestinian reports.

Soldiers also reportedly seized the car of the suspect over suspicions it was used in Wednesday’s attack.

The Ynet news site said that Israeli security forces apparently knew the identity of the killer or killers.

There was no confirmation of Friday’s arrest from the army, which said in a statement the manhunt for the terrorists was ongoing.

Sorek was studying at a seminary as part of a program combining Torah study and military service. He was last seen leaving the settlement Wednesday to buy books for his teachers in Jerusalem.

In an effort to locate the terrorists who carried out the Wednesday night attack, the Shin Bet security service, assisted by the Israel Defense Forces and Israel Police, launched a massive manhunt in the surrounding area on Thursday morning and the military deployed additional troops throughout the West Bank.

The military fears the terrorists may attempt to carry out additional attacks or serve as inspiration for other would-be attackers. These concerns were especially heightened in light of the upcoming Eid al-Adha holiday and the Jewish fast day of Tisha B’Av on Sunday.

Security forces were also reportedly concerned the terror cell behind the deadly stabbing attack may have split up, making the search effort more difficult. The group is believed to be receiving assistance to evade capture.

As of Thursday night, no one had taken responsibility for killing Sorek. However, two of the largest Palestinian terror groups — Hamas and the Iran-backed Palestinian Islamic Jihad — praised the attack and indicated it was a response to a recent wave of East Jerusalem demolitions carried out by Israel last month.

In a statement, Hamas said it praised “our people’s heroic fighters who carried out the heroic operation that killed a soldier in the occupation’s army.” Hamas, a jihadist terror group, seeks to destroy Israel.

Hazem Qassim, a spokesperson for Hamas, told the Gaza-based Shehab news outlet that the attack was proof of the failure of security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinian Authority security forces.

The cooperation is seen as a key component to Israeli security operations in the West Bank and as a bulwark against Hamas.

In recent months, the Shin Bet warned that the Gaza-based Hamas has put considerable effort and resources into recruiting operatives to carry out attacks in the West Bank and Israel.