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## Operation Cast Lead – Background

At 11:30 on Shabbat morning, 64 Israeli air force planes attacked nearly 100 Hamas related targets in the Gaza strip. On early Sunday, an additional 60 targets were hit. 230 Palestinians were killed and 800 injured. Dubbed by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) as '[Operation Cast Lead](#),' the Israeli offensive against Hamas is the largest Israeli operation in the Gaza Strip since the 1967 Six Days War.

In a press conference on Saturday afternoon, [Defense Minister Ehud Barak](#) stated the three basic goals underlying the Israeli government decision to launch 'Operation Cast Lead':

1. dealing Hamas a forceful blow,
2. fundamentally changing the situation in Gaza,
3. and bringing to the cessation of rocket attacks against Israeli citizens.

[Foreign Minister Tzippi Livni](#), in a briefing to the foreign press, described 'Operation Cast Lead' as, "the translation of our basic right to self defense"<sup>1</sup> in the wake of years of rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip onto nearby Israeli towns and villages in the Western Negev.

"Israeli citizens have been under the threat of daily attack from Gaza for years. Only this week - hundreds of missiles and mortars shells were fired at Israeli civilian communities including the firing of 80 missiles on a single day.

Until now we have shown restraint. But today there is no other option than a military operation. We need to protect our citizens from attack through a military response against the terror infrastructure in Gaza."<sup>2</sup>

In August 2005, the Government of the State of Israel headed by then [Prime Minister Ariel Sharon](#), dismantled the Jewish civilian settlements in the Gaza Strip ending 38 years of Israeli control over Gaza. PM Sharon, a central figure from the 1970's in the establishment of Jewish settlement in the areas captured by Israel during the 1967 Six Days War, began to argue for an Israeli disengagement from Gaza in December 2003. Based on his assessment of long term Israeli strategic needs, Sharon became increasingly convinced that Israeli control of the impoverished, over-crowded Gaza Strip was a detriment to Israeli interests.

"Like all Israeli citizens, I yearn for peace. I attach supreme importance to taking all steps which will enable progress toward resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians. However, in light of the other challenges we are faced with, if the Palestinians do not make a similar effort toward a solution of the conflict, I do not intend to wait for them indefinitely."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/About+the+Ministry/MFA+Spokesman/2008/Briefing+to+the+Foreign+Press+27-Dec-2008.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [ibid](#)

<sup>3</sup>

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Guide+to+the+Peace+Process/Israels+Disengagement+Plan+-+Renewing+the+Peace+Process+Apr+2005.htm>

Among the issues that pushed Sharon towards his newly emerging position was the basic demographic [situation of the Gaza](#). In 2003, it's population included some 7,500 Jews and some 1.5 million Palestinians. One of the most crowded places on Earth, some 4,270 people share each square kilometer. Comparatively, [population density](#) in Mumbai stands at 29,650 residents per square kilometer, and 2050 residents per square kilometer in New York City.

In the wake of the Israeli decision to turn the Gaza over the control of the Palestinian National Authority, Israel unilaterally established its south-western border.

From 2001 until May 2008, over 3000 rockets and missiles have been fired from the Gaza Strip on civilian targets in Israel. From January through November 2008, over 2500 rockets and mortar rounds have been fired at Israel.<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch called Hamas targeting of Israeli civilians – ["blatant violations of the most fundamental principles of international humanitarian law."](#)

The towns and villages of Israel's Western Negev have lived under a constant barrage that has both been life threatening and has seriously disrupted the ability to carry out daily life in any normal way. In the town of Sderot, public health officials estimate that nearly 1/3 of all children suffer from post traumatic stress disorder. Following the Israeli disengagement from Gaza, Prime Minister Sharon addressed the United Nations and defined Israeli expectations regarding Palestinian responsibilities in a post-disengagement era:

"Now it is the Palestinians' turn to prove their desire for peace. The end of Israeli control over and responsibility for the Gaza Strip allows the Palestinians, if they so wish, to develop their economy and build a peace-seeking society, which is developed, free, law-abiding, and transparent, and which adheres to democratic principles. The most important test the Palestinian leadership will face is in fulfilling their commitment to put an end to terrorism and its infrastructures, eliminate the anarchic regime of armed gangs, and cease the incitement and indoctrination of hatred towards Israel and the Jews."<sup>5</sup>

From the Israeli disengagement, and especially after the June 2007 Hamas takeover of the Gaza Strip from the Palestinian National Authority, the security situation of the Western Negev has continued to deteriorate.

Within Israel, the question of appropriate and effective Israeli policy vis a vis the Gaza and the security needs of the Western Negev remained a central issue of debate. What kinds of military operations was the best answer to Palestinian rocket fire? What kinds of economic or political sanctions could be brought to bear? What means could be used against the Hamas that would minimize injury to the Palestinian civilian population of the Gaza? Was their a possible diplomatic venue, either indirectly or directly with the Hamas, that might quiet the situation? And as the dogs of war are unleashed, what does this all mean regarding the fate of Israeli POW [Gilad Shalit](#) taken prisoner by the Hamas on 25 June 2006?

In June 2008, Israel and the Hamas began another [cease fire](#). Throughout the period of the cease fire, Hamas continued to launch rocket attacks against Israel. As the cease fire drew to an end last week, Hamas stepped up rocket fire in the hope that increased violence would force Israel to renew the cease fire under conditions considered by Hamas as benefiting it's position. Both Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abu Abbas and Egyptian

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-+Obstacle+to+Peace/Palestinian+terror+since+2000/Missile+fire+from+Gaza+on+Israeli+civilian+targets+Aug+2007.htm#statistics>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Peace+Process/Key+Speeches/PM+Sharon+addresses+the+UN+General+Assembly+15-Sep-2005.htm>

Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit came out criticizing the Hamas leadership for reckless provocation prompting the Israeli action, and charged the Hamas with disregard for the welfare of the Palestinian public. Aboul Gheit, in an interview on 27 December 2008, charged that the Hamas was preventing Palestinians from crossing from Rafiah into Egypt to receive medical aid. Asked who was to blame for the dire situation in Gaza, the foreign minister replied: "Ask the party that controls Gaza."<sup>6</sup>

The opening of 'Operation Cast Lead' comes in the wake of a long period of Israeli patience. The continuation and extent of the operation will depend on Israeli government appraisals of the ongoing situation in light of operation goals as defined by government leaders in consultation with security officials. Especially in light of public criticism of Israeli government and IDF leadership in the wake of Israel's Second Lebanon War, 'Operation Cast Lead' needs to not only achieve its military objectives, it also needs to help restore the Israeli public's sense of security and faith in Israel's national leadership.

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