



Since 2001, Palestinian militants have been launching small rockets – typically referred to as “Qassam Rockets” – from Gaza toward nearby Israeli population centers, notably Sderot and Ashkelon. Israel often tries to justify its violence in Gaza as an attempt to stop the rash of rocket attacks. Sadly, the reporting of such attacks, Palestinian and Israeli, does little to illuminate the context to such attacks.

As of January 18, 2009, a total of 28 Israelis have been killed by Qassam rockets since the attacks started in 2001.¹ As indicated in the graphs at the right, for every Israeli killed by Qassam rockets, Israel has killed about 100 Palestinians through various means.

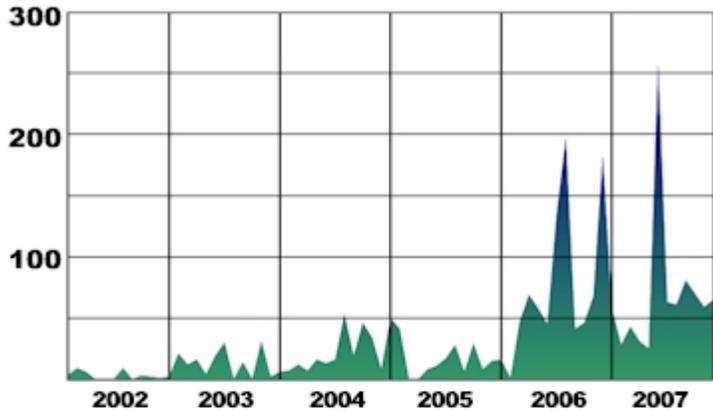
Qassam rockets are small: ranging from 79 cm. in length to about 2 m. in length for the more sophisticated. Warheads can vary from .5 kg. to up to 10 kg. for the biggest rockets. The largest have a range of up to 10 km.² The rockets are deployed on portable launchers, and can be launched by remote control.³

Because the Qassam rockets do not have guidance systems, they are fairly inaccurate, and as a result are aimed at population centers versus military targets.⁴

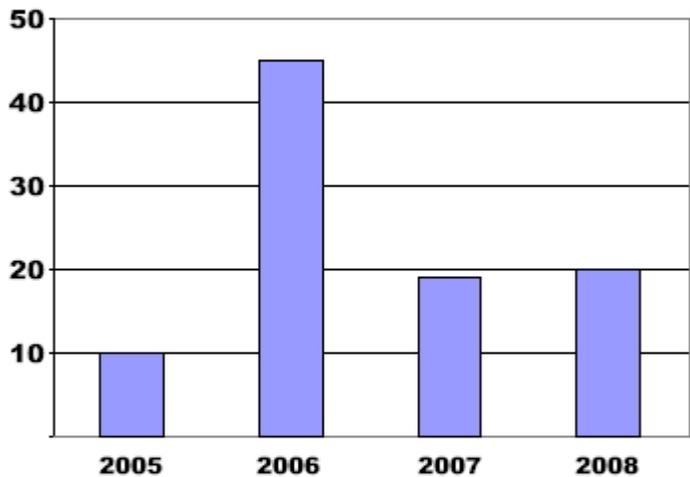
To the international community, Israel has tried to justify years of violence in Gaza as a necessary deterrent to the Qassam attacks.⁵ However, in addition to the extremely rare fatalities, Israeli Army leaders admit that the rockets are “more a psychological than physical threat.”⁶ Even with the threat of more sophisticated rocket technology, only 2.6% of Israel’s population would actually fall into range of the rockets.⁷

Hamas leaders perceive the rocket attacks as the most preferable approach to resisting the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories. Hamas leader Mahmoud Al-Zahar says Hamas prefers rocket attacks to suicide bombings because rockets “cause mass migration, greatly disrupt daily lives and government administration, and make a much [larger] impact.... We have no losses, and the

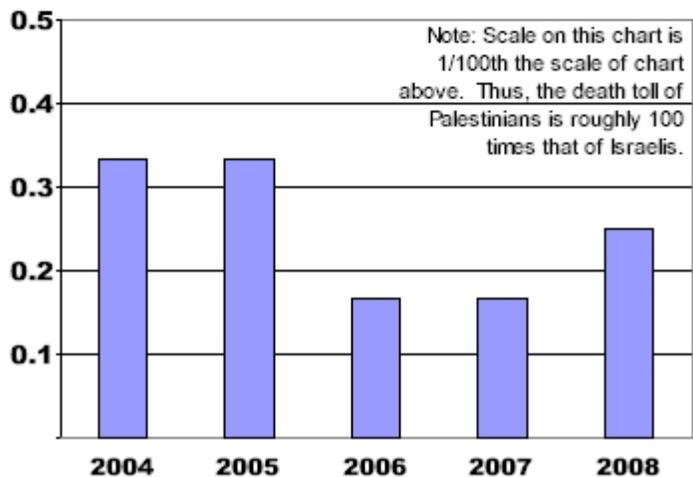
Qassam Rockets launched against Israel per Month



Palestinians Killed in Gaza by Israel - Monthly avg.



Israelis Killed by Qassam Attacks - Monthly average



Figures above use data from several sources: Qassam rocket statistics⁸; Palestinian Fatalities⁹; Israeli Fatalities¹⁰

impact on the Israeli side is so much.”¹¹ Thus, from Hamas’ strategic standpoint, rocket attacks are bound to continue unless the illegal Israeli occupation of Gaza is modulated in some way.

How do average Palestinians feel about the Qassam attacks?

There are two angles to the average Palestinian’s attitude toward the rocket attacks. On the one hand, a modest majority of Palestinians believe the rocket attacks from Gaza should stop: in a poll in late January, 2008, 53 percent of Palestinians rejected the attacks, while 43 percent of them supported the attacks.¹² These results reflected a change in position by Palestinians vis-à-vis a poll conducted in May, 2007, where 51 percent of Palestinians supported the attacks, while 43 percent opposed them.¹³ In addition, in the 2007 poll, 66 percent of Palestinians indicated that the rocket attacks did not provide “any real benefit to the Palestinians.”¹³ However, as Dr. Eyad Sarraj (Gaza psychiatrist and founder of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program) observes, “There is no popular movement against the firing of rockets. How can people oppose this kind of resistance, if there is no hope of ending the occupation? Israel perpetrated a massacre [on 15 January 2008] in which nineteen people, including [Hamas leader] Mahmoud Zahar’s son, were killed. People cheer rockets against Israel and will continue to do so until there is hope that Israel will end the occupation and give Palestinians back their land, their rights and their freedom.”¹⁴

What is the legality of Qassam attacks and Israeli violence in Gaza?

Both types of attacks are illegal under international humanitarian law (IHL.) Since the Qassam rockets cannot be precisely targeted, and are thus launched against civilian population centers, they violate IHL which prohibits direct and/or indiscriminate attacks against civilians and civilian objects.¹⁵ For Israel, its siege of the entire Gazan territory, and its various violent assaults in Gaza are both explicitly illegal under IHL. IHL requires that the occupying force ensure that the civilian population have adequate provision for its economic livelihood, foodstuffs, medical care, education and property: all of which have been violated by Israel in its siege. Israel’s attacks in Gaza against “alleged” militants which incur civilian casualties also do not respect provisions in IHL for the protection of civilians. Human Rights groups have also made compelling legal cases demonstrating Israeli collective punishment in Gaza.¹⁶

¹ “Q&A Gaza conflict.” BBC. January 18, 2009.

² Note that since the beginning of 2008, there have been incidents of Russian “Grad” rockets being used by Palestinian militant groups. These rockets, although still very rare, have a range of up to 20 km.

³ “*Rocket Threat from the Gaza Strip, 2000-2007*,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, December 2007, pp. 48-61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14

⁵ Many examples of public statements exist. E.g. See “*IAF fires missile at two armed Palestinians in north Gaza*,” Mijal Grinberg, Yuval Azoulay and Amos Harel, Haaretz, Feb. 11, 2008

⁶ “*Defense Ministry: Trade with China resumed*,” Hanan Greenberg, www.ynetnews.com (The Yedioth Group), Jan. 3, 2006

⁷ “*Rockets from Gaza: Facts and Figures*,” Britian Israel Communications & Research Center, Feb. 21, 2008

⁸ Source: The [Israeli] Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (chart generated by Wikipedia user).

<http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/site/home/default.asp> accessed Apr. 28, 2008

⁹ Sources: For 2005-2007, “OCHA Special Focus, occupied Palestinian Territory: Israeli-Palestinian Fatalities Since 2000 - Key Trends,” UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, August, 2007. Note that data for 2007 represents monthly fatality averages through August, 2007. For 2008, data obtained through end of March, 2008 from the Middle East Policy Forum “Conflict Statistics”: <http://www.mepc.org/resources/mrates.asp>, accessed April 28, 2008

¹⁰ Source: “*Rocket Threat from the Gaza Strip, 2000-2007*,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israeli Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, December 2007, p. 74

¹¹ “*Weapon of Terror: Development and Impact of the Qassam Rocket*,” Margaret Weiss, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Mar. 11, 2008

¹² “*Palestinian Majority Opposes Rocket Attacks*,” An-Najah National University, results reported by Angus Reid Global Monitor, Feb. 1, 2008. http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/29754/palestinian_majority_opposes_rocket_attacks

¹³ “*Rocket Attacks Pointless, Say Palestinians*,” Near East Consulting, results reported by Angus Reid Global Monitor, Jun. 8, 2007. http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/view/16028/rocket_attacks_pointless_say_palestinians accessed Apr. 28, 2008

¹⁴ “*Gaza is quite a dynamic place now*,” an interview with Eyad Sarraj by openDemocracy, Jan. 29, 2008. Website:

http://www.opendemocracy.net/article/conflicts/gaza_is_quite_a_dynamic_place_now_an_interview, accessed Apr. 28, 2008

¹⁵ For example, see “*Hamas Must End Attacks Against Civilians*,” Human Rights Watch, Jun. 9, 2005

¹⁶ For example, see “*Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, 2007 Annual Report*,” B’Tselem, Dec. 2007, pp. 13-18