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## **How Clumsy, Inaccurate Gaza Rockets Could Start a War**

**By IAN FISHER**

SDEROT, Israel, June 15 — The Qassam rocket is not much to look at: a 70-pound tube of rough steel and hand-mixed explosive, like the one that pounded through the roof of Universe Packaging here on Thursday. Tons of falling concrete just missed Lior Levi, 28, a worker there.

"My ears were ringing, so it took me a few seconds to realize what really happened," said Mr. Levi, who counts himself a lucky man. "I didn't realize it was a direct hit."

However crude, the Qassam rocket, fired by Palestinian militants from Gaza into Israel, has nonetheless won its spot as symbol of the moment in the long conflict here. At a delicate time, the rocket is not only raising tensions between Palestinians and Israelis, as usual, but is also dividing Palestinian from Palestinian, Israeli from Israeli.

Most immediately, the number of rockets fired by Palestinians from Gaza, and whether they happen to hit anyone, will be crucial in determining whether the Israeli-Palestinian conflict explodes again into high-intensity warfare.

On Thursday, after a week in which at least 16 Palestinian civilians were killed and several Israelis wounded, there were signs that Israel and the Palestinian government, now led by the militant group Hamas, did not want that to happen.

After several Qassams landed here and elsewhere in the Negev, a Hamas spokesman said the group was willing to reinstate a 16-month cease-fire that it had proclaimed invalid last week after seven members of a Palestinian family were killed on a beach during an Israeli retaliatory bombardment.

"I spoke today with the prime minister and he said we definitely want quiet everywhere," the spokesman, Ghazi Hamad, said Thursday on Israeli radio, referring to Ismail Haniya, the top Hamas leader. "We are interested in a cease-fire everywhere."

He later qualified that, saying Israel would have to stop all attacks against Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank.

But he also said that in that case, Hamas would attempt the difficult task of restraining other Palestinian militants from firing Qassams on their own. In Gaza the launchings are generally regarded as legitimate resistance in the wider war against Israel.

Israel responded with its own condition — that the rocket attacks end — but did not dismiss the offer.

"If this terrorist activity ceases, of course we will be more than happy to cease our defensive measures," said Mark Regev, a spokesman for the Foreign Ministry.

For such a simple rocket, with low accuracy and a range of less than five miles, the Qassam has raised complicated issues.

On the Palestinian side, Hamas is being forced to evaluate the transition it has made from a resistance group that carried out deadly attacks against Israeli civilians, to leader of the Palestinian government. Already, a lack of money is weakening Hamas's grip on power, and more rockets and wider fighting are unlikely to persuade Western governments to resume financial aid.

Israel is divided by the question of its military response, whether it has been disproportionate to the threat of the Qassams, and whether the lives of innocent Palestinians could have been spared.

As with many issues here, the Qassam problem began in earnest with the Israeli pullout of settlers from Gaza, completed last September.

For many Israelis, full disengagement should have begun the moment Gaza, finally free from Israeli soldiers, ceased to be a threat. But according to the Israeli military, more than 600 rockets have fallen since then. They have killed one person inside Israel and injured many more, including a friend of the Israeli defense minister, Amir Peretz, who lives here in Sderot.

But even with relatively few casualties, the barrage has infuriated residents, many of them working poor Israelis with roots in Morocco and Ethiopia.

"Disengagement blew up in our faces, in the faces of our children," said Alon David, 32, a leader of a group of Sderot residents who have been camped out in front of Mr. Peretz's house here.

Mr. David and five other people have been on a liquids-only protest diet for the past five days. Since a barrage of Qassams that peaked at 30 or 40 last week, children have stopped going to school, and residents have complained that the government has abandoned them in the name of its international image.

"The children are sleeping in bed with us," said Sima Hadad, 33, one of the hunger strikers. "Every boom — even things that are not Qassams — scares them."

Another hunger striker, Sharon Ben Abu, 33, added, "Even if the watermelon salesman screams 'Watermelon!' on the street, they get scared."

The mayor and others have called for a huge military assault on Gaza. But human rights groups, and some Israelis, contend that has already happened: Israel has fired nearly 6,000 artillery shells into Gaza over roughly the past year in retaliation for the Qassams, and the United Nations says that more than 80 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli attacks since the beginning of the year. Since 2004, eight people have died in Israel from Qassam fire, the military says.

The issue came into tragic focus last week when seven members of a Palestinian family were killed on the beach as Israel attacked Gaza. (An eighth person was also killed.)

On Tuesday the military said its internal investigation showed the blast that killed them was not from an Israeli explosive. But Israel has been plunged into introspection, highlighted in dueling commentaries on Thursday in the newspaper Maariv.

One writer said that when such tragedies occurred, "we regret it, but we must not condemn and vilify those who do it." Another sarcastically bemoaned avoidable death: "When they kill us, it is a massacre. When we kill them, it is a pinpointed killing."

Peter Bouckaert, a Human Rights Watch official who investigated both the Qassam firing and the Israeli response, said neither side was adequately safeguarding civilians.

"The Qassams are ineffective from a military perspective, but it doesn't matter how many people they kill because they indiscriminately target civilians," he said. "On the other hand, the Israeli response has been a lot more deadly in terms of the civilians killed in Gaza.

"Both sides justify their methods by the abuses committed by the other side, but I think we need to get out of this cycle of violence."

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