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Israel's Operation Swords of Iron Update May 20, 2024

JINSA's [Israel at War](#) webpage is a dedicated resource for analysis, commentary, webinars, and media coverage about the 10/7 attacks and the ensuing conflict between Israel, the Iranian regime, and the regime's proxies. JINSA will release the Swords of Iron Update on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. An update with the latest information and analysis about the war is below.

Analysis

- On May 20, International Criminal Court (ICC) Prosecutor Karim Khan [announced](#) that he applied for arrest warrants for Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel's Defense Minister Yoav Gallant for alleged "war crimes and crimes against humanity" stemming from Israel's conduct in Gaza. Arrest warrants would have material consequences if issued, as Netanyahu and Gallant would be [subject to arrest](#) if they travel to any of the over 120 ICC member states.
 - » Though a panel of ICC judges will still need to approve Khan's application, Khan's decision to request arrest warrants highlights the court's bias against Israel, as "the ICC has not seriously pursued action against grievous perpetrators of war crimes in cases where the ICC has clear jurisdiction," as JINSA Fellow Gabriel Noronha and JINSA Policy Analyst Yoni Tobin have [noted](#).
 - » Khan also applied for arrest warrants for Hamas leaders, though as Israel's Opposition Leader Yair Lapid [stated](#) on May 20, "it is not possible to issue arrest warrants against Netanyahu, Sinwar and Deif. There is no such comparison."
- On May 19, Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian died in a [helicopter crash](#). Their deaths are unlikely to have a major impact on Iran's regional strategy or fighting between Israel and Hamas, Hezbollah, or the Iranian regime's other proxies. Iran's Supreme Leader directly oversees the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which funds, arms, and directs Tehran's proxies, including Hamas and Hezbollah.
 - » At the same time, JINSA President and CEO Michael Makovsky [noted](#) that the Iranian regime "could be a little more self-engaged, wrapped up in internal politics, as it sorts out the election for the next president."

Last 72 Hours

Attacks Against Israel

Gaza

- Sirens [sounded](#) in Sderot, Ibim, Nir Am, [Ashkelon](#), and [Kibbutz Zikim](#).
- On May 20, one rocket [launched](#) from the northern Gaza Strip targeting Sderot struck an open area.
- The IDF [said](#) on May 19 that terrorists in Gaza fired a rocket from northern Gaza toward Sderot in southern Israel, which the Iron Dome shot down. The projectile inflicted no reported damage or injuries.
- On May 18, the IDF [said](#) that terrorists in Gaza targeted Ashkelon with 10 rockets, five of which Israel intercepted. There was no reported damage or injuries.

Lebanon

- Sirens [sounded](#) in Snir, Shear Yeshuv, Dan, Ghajar, HaGoshrim, and Dafna.
- Drone infiltration sirens [sounded](#) in Rehaniya, Alma, Kerem Ben Zimra, Yir'on, Dalton, Baram, Ramat Dalton Industrial Zone, Avivim, [Kiryat Shmona](#), Kfar Yuval, Misgav Am, Ma'ayan Baruch, Manara, Metula, Kfar Giladi, Beit Hillel, Tel Hai, Margalioth, [Malkiya](#), Yiftach, Ramot Naftali, Dishon, and the Mevuot Hermon Regional Council.
- On May 19, 10 rockets [were](#) fired from Lebanon targeting the Malkia and Mount Dov areas. No injuries were reported.
- On May 18, the IDF [said](#) one one-way attack drone launched from Lebanon struck an area near Yiftah. No injuries were reported.

West Bank

- On May 19, Israel's Border Police [said](#) that a Palestinian attacker attempted to stab officers at a checkpoint close to Abu Dis, prompting police to shoot and neutralize the suspect.

IDF Operations

Gaza

- On May 20, the IDF [indicated](#) that it had struck more than 80 terrorist sites across Gaza over the previous day, including terrorist cells, buildings used to target Israeli soldiers, weapon stockpiles, and rocket launchers.
- On May 20, the IDF and Shin Bet [announced](#) that two top Hamas military operatives were killed in recent airstrikes in the Gaza Strip.
 - » On May 19, Zaher al-Houli, a senior police officer and member of Hamas's military wing, was targeted and killed in an Israeli airstrike.
 - » On May 18, Rami Khalil Faki, a senior police officer and member of Hamas's military wing, was targeted and killed in an Israeli airstrike, along with Faki's deputy and four other Hamas members.
- On May 19, the IDF [announced](#) that the Palestinian Islamic Jihad's (PIJ) head of logistics in Rafah was killed in an airstrike in Rafah. The terror operative was not named.

- On May 19, the IDF [conducted](#) airstrikes against more than 70 targets across the Gaza Strip, including terror infrastructure, weapons depots, and other terror infrastructure.
- On May 19, the IDF [said](#) that it killed Hamas operative Azmi Abu Daqqa in an airstrike, who the IDF said smuggled weapons and money for the terror group.
- On May 18, Israel's Minister without portfolio, Benny Gantz, [said](#), referring to unnamed Israeli leaders, "while Israeli soldiers are displaying incredible bravery on the front, some of the people who sent them to battle are acting with cowardice and a lack of responsibility," and "while in the dark tunnels of Gaza, the hostages are undergoing the agonies of hell, there are some who are involved in nonsense."
 - » He went on, "while the Israeli public is outdoing itself, some of the politicians are thinking of themselves," and "within the holy of holies of Israeli security, personal and political considerations have begun to penetrate."
 - » He argued, "a war is only won with a clear and realistic strategic compass," and "a war is only won when all Israelis do their part, and take part in the war effort."
 - » Gantz insisted that although he and others have done "everything we can in closed rooms," "change is needed here and now."
 - » He [declared](#) that by June 8, the cabinet must "formulate and approve a plan of action" to complete "six strategic goals:"
 - "To bring the hostages home;"
 - "To topple Hamas rule, demilitarize the Gaza Strip and gain Israeli security control [of Gaza];"
 - "To create an international civilian governance mechanism for Gaza, including American, European, Arab and Palestinian elements — which will also serve as a basis for a future alternative that is not Hamas and is not [Palestinian Authority President] Abbas;"
 - "To return residents of the north to their homes by September 1, and to rehabilitate the western Negev (adjacent to Gaza, targeted by Hamas on October 7);"
 - "To advance normalization with Saudi Arabia as part of a comprehensive process to create an alliance with the free world and the West against Iran and its allies;"
 - "To adopt a framework for [military/national] service under which all Israelis will serve the state and contribute to the national effort."
 - » In response to Gantz's statement, Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said](#) that Gantz is "issuing an ultimatum to the prime minister instead of issuing an ultimatum to Hamas."
 - » Netanyahu argued that Gantz's proposals amount to "an end to the war and defeat for Israel, abandoning the majority of the hostages, leaving Hamas in power, and creating a Palestinian state."
 - » He posed three questions to Gantz, which, according to *The Times of Israel*, were:
 - "Does Gantz want to see the operation in Rafah through to its end, and if so, why is he threatening to topple the unity government during the IDF operation?"
 - "Does he oppose Palestinian Authority rule in Gaza, even if Mahmoud Abbas is not involved?"

- “Would he support a Palestinian state as part of a normalization process with Saudi Arabia?”
- » Netanyahu’s office said further that he “is determined to eliminate the Hamas battalions,” and “he opposes bringing the Palestinian Authority into Gaza, and establishing a Palestinian state that will inevitably be a terror state.”
- On May 18, the IDF said that it recovered the body of Ron Binyamin, 52, in Gaza. IDF spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari [said](#), “based on verified intelligence in our possession, Ron Benjamin was murdered during the October 7 Massacre at the Mefalsim Intersection, and his body was seized and brought to Gaza by Hamas terrorists.”
 - » He added that the operation was “based on precise Shin Bet (Israel Security Agency) intelligence obtained during the interrogations of terrorists who were apprehended in the Gaza Strip, as well as intelligence from the IDF Intelligence Directorate.”
- On May 17, *The Washington Post* [reported](#) that “Israeli troops are fortifying [the] strategic [Netzarim Corridor] that carves Gaza in two, building bases, taking over civilian structures and razing homes, according to satellite imagery and other visual evidence—an effort that military analysts and Israeli experts say is part of a large-scale project to reshape the Strip and entrench the Israeli military presence there.”
 - » The outlet argued that “control of the corridor gives the Israeli military valuable flexibility, allowing troops to be deployed quickly throughout the enclave. It also affords the Israel Defense Forces the ability to maintain control over the flow of aid and the movement of displaced Palestinians, which it says is necessary to prevent Hamas fighters from regrouping.”
 - » The outlet also noted, “at least 750 buildings have been destroyed in what appears to be a systematic effort to create a ‘buffer zone’ that stretches at least 500 yards on either side of the road, according to an analysis by Hebrew University’s Adi Ben-Nun, a geographic data specialist.”

Lebanon

- On May 20, the IDF [conducted](#) an airstrike against a Hezbollah cell in the town of Mays-al Jabal in southern Lebanon. The IDF said in a statement that the terror cell was at a location used to launch rockets at Israel in recent days.
- On May 20, the IDF [said](#) it used fighter jets to strike a Hezbollah cell in Mays al-Jabal and a weapons depot in Naqoura.
- Overnight on May 20, the IDF [said](#) it used fighter jets to strike Hezbollah sites in southern Lebanon, including buildings in Blida, Jibbain, and Odaisseh, and an observation post in Chihine.
- On May 19, the IDF [said](#) it used fighter jets to strike a building where Hezbollah operatives were spotted in Maroun al-Ras.
- On May 19, *The Times of Israel* [reported](#) that during a “stormy meeting” with the heads of municipalities in northern Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu vowed to restore security to northern Israel.
 - » The municipal leaders reportedly urged Netanyahu to announce a date by which residents of northern Israel would be able to return to their homes, but that Netanyahu pushed back.

- » Netanyahu reportedly said, “I am not going to tell Hezbollah what we are going to do. I am not going to share with our sworn enemy the dates and how we are going to do it ... we are committed to restoring security, and we will do it.”
- On May 18, the IDF [said](#) it used fighter jets to strike Hezbollah buildings and infrastructure in Ayta ash-Shab, Odaisseh, Aitaroun, and Ramyeh.
- Soon after Lebanese outlets [reported](#) on May 17 that Israel conducted a drone strike against a vehicle near the border with Syria, the IDF [said](#) that it killed Sharhabil Sayed, who was a member of the terror group al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya, according to the IDF.
- On May 17, the IDF announced that it [killed](#) Sharhabil Sayed, a senior operative in the al-Jama’a al-Islamiyya terrorist organization, in an airstrike in eastern Lebanon.
 - » According to a press release from the IDF, Sayed “led and advanced numerous terror attacks from Lebanese territory against Israel in [Lebanon’s] eastern region in the recent period ... in cooperation with the Lebanon branch of the Hamas terrorist organization.”
- On May 17, the IDF [said](#) that it used fighter jets to target a rocket launcher in Deir Seryan that Hezbollah used to attack the Golan Heights that day. The IDF also said that it struck other Hezbollah targets in Kfarhamam and Odaisseh.
- On May 17, after Israel carried out an airstrike against Hezbollah targets in Najjarieh, video of the strike’s aftermath [showed](#) remains of Iran’s Sayyad-2 surface-to-air missile, according to expert Tal Inbar. *The Times of Israel* pointed out that this “is apparently the first public evidence suggesting that Hezbollah has such missiles.”
- On May 17, the IDF [said](#) it used fighter jets to strike a Hezbollah rocket launcher in Deir Seyran which had been used earlier in the day to fire a barrage of rockets that targeted the Golan Heights. The IDF said it also struck additional Hezbollah infrastructure in Kfarhamam and Odaisseh.

Syria

- On May 20, the U.K.-based NGO Syrian Observatory for Human Rights [said](#), “Israeli strikes targeted two positions of pro-Iran groups in the Homs region,” one of which was “a Hezbollah site in the Qusayr area,” killing “six Iran-backed fighters.”

West Bank

- On May 17, the IDF [conducted](#) an airstrike in the West Bank city of Jenin, eliminating terror operative Islam Khamayseh.
 - » The IDF said that Khamayseh was involved in a series of deadly terror attacks in recent years and was in an “operational war room” in Jenin along with other terrorists when he was killed.

Humanitarian Efforts

- According to Israel’s Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories ([COGAT](#)), from the beginning of the war to May 15, there have been 542,570 tons of humanitarian aid that entered Gaza on 28,255 trucks.
- On May 20, Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant [met](#) with U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to update him on efforts to evacuate civilians from Rafah.

- On May 19, United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) chief Philippe Lazzarini [posted](#) on X that “800,000 people are on the road having been forced to flee since the Israeli forces started the military operation in the area on 6 May.”
- On May 18, the IDF called for Palestinians living in the al-Atatra and al-Karama areas on the coast of northern Gaza to [evacuate](#) as Israel continues its operations in Jabaliya.
- On May 17, U.S. officials arranged for the [evacuation](#) of 17 U.S. doctors who had been stuck in Gaza to leave via the Kerem Shalom crossing. Three other U.S. doctors who were part of their group chose to stay.
- On May 17, U.S. National Security Communications Advisor John Kirby [said](#) that the United States communicated messages via third parties to Hamas that the nascent pier off the coast of Gaza is solely for humanitarian aid deliveries.
- On May 17, the United Kingdom [delivered](#) aid into Gaza via the new floating pier for the first time.
- On May 17, the UN’s World Food Program [announced](#) that Israel’s decision in recent weeks to open a second land crossing into northern Gaza has enabled the agency to double its aid operations in northern Gaza.

Ceasefire and Hostage Negotiations

- On May 17, Israel’s *Channel 12* quoted an anonymous senior member of Israel’s ceasefire and hostage negotiation team as [claiming](#) that expanding Israel’s military operation in Rafah will put the hostages at risk. This was the first report with a member of the Israeli negotiation team publicly expressing these views.

Iranian Involvement and Response

- On May 19, Iran’s President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, and six other passengers and crew members died after the helicopter carrying them [crashed](#).
 - » Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei announced that Iran’s First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber would take over as Iran’s president.
 - » Rescue workers [found](#) the crash site on May 20 after an overnight search through blizzard conditions and indicated that there were no signs of survivors.
- On May 19, at approximately 9:35 p.m. local time, the Houthis [launched](#) one anti-ship ballistic missile from Yemen over the Gulf of Aden. There were no reported injuries or damage.
- On May 18, at approximately 1 a.m. local time, the Houthis [launched](#) one anti-ship ballistic missile that struck the MT *Wind*, a Panamanian-flagged, Greek-owned and -operated oil tanker, as it sailed in the Red Sea. The MT *Wind* was recently docked in Russia and headed to China.

U.S. Response

- On May 19, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met Prime Minister Netanyahu and senior Israeli officials to discuss the IDF’s plans for a larger operation in [Rafah](#) and the possibility of moving toward [normalization](#) with Saudi Arabia if Israel agrees to recognize a Palestinian state.

- On May 19, Rep. Elise Stefanik (R-NY) criticized President Biden’s withholding of an arms package to Israel during a [speech](#) in Israel before the Knesset Caucus’s Jewish and Pro-Israel Students on Campuses Around the World.
- A *Politico* [article](#) on May 19 indicated that Secretary of State Antony Blinken has ordered senior State Department staff to crack down on leaks to the press. According to the report, senior State Department aides were particularly concerned about reports that revealed lower-level staffers felt that Israel was not using U.S. weapons in accordance with U.S. and international law.

International Response

- On May 20, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) Karim Khan stated that he requested [arrest warrants](#) for Israel’s Prime Minister Netanyahu, Israel’s Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, and Hamas leaders Yahya Sinwar, Mohammad Deif, and Ismail Haniyeh.

Rising Antisemitism, Protests, and Attacks

- On May 19, students [disrupted](#) the George Washington University graduation ceremony in Washington, D.C. by chanting anti-Israel slogans, wearing keffiyehs, holding signs, and staging a walkout.
- On May 19, hundreds of pro-Palestinian protesters [rallied](#) outside of the U.S. Capitol building to demonstrate against the foundation of Israel, which they described as the Nakba, or catastrophe, which they claimed caused the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homes.
- On May 19, police [arrested](#) 19 anti-Israel protesters, including a half dozen students, who attempted to re-occupy a building at the University of Pennsylvania.
- On May 18, thousands of protesters [gathered](#) in Tel Aviv for a rally aimed at garnering international support for the hostages in Gaza.
- On May 17, the Kehillat Shaarei Torah synagogue in Toronto, Canada, was [vandalized](#) for the second time in a month after a vandal smashed the synagogue’s windows.
- On May 17, France’s Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin [said](#) that an earlier attempted arson attack against a synagogue in Rouen was an “anti-Semitic act against a place that is sacred to the Republic” and “unacceptable” and “despicable.”
- On May 17, *The Times of Israel* [reported](#), citing Israel’s *Channel 12*, that “a Jewish father and his daughter were attacked by a group after he removed an anti-Israel sticker at a train station in Brugge, Belgium.”
- On May 17, Sweden’s police [announced](#) that “due to suspected shots near Israel’s embassy in Stockholm, the police are taking security measures [to protect] Israeli and Jewish property and interests across the country.”
- On May 16, the anti-Israel encampment at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois, was [removed](#) by police due to safety concerns after the school had seen weapons in the encampment, numerous allegations of violent assaults, harassment, and intimidation, and hundreds of complaints were filed by members of the community.

Since the War Began

Attacks Against Israel

- At least 15,000 rockets, mortars, drones, and other projectiles have been fired at Israel from all fronts combined during the war, according to JINSA data.

Casualties and Hostage Figures

- Over 1,200 people were [killed](#) in Israel, and 13,000 Israelis have been [injured](#) in the war.
 - » 631 Israeli soldiers have been [killed](#).
 - 282 IDF soldiers have been [killed](#) during ground combat in Gaza so far.
 - The IDF announced the deaths of Sgt. [Ben Avishay](#), 20, from Nahariya; Maj. [Gal Shabbat](#), 24, from Katzir; Staff Sgt. [Nachman Meir Haim Vaknin](#), 20, from Eilat; and Staff Sgt. [Noam Bittan](#), 20, from Yad Rambam.
 - As of May 20, 3,533 IDF soldiers have been [injured](#) during ground combat in Gaza, including at least 545 who have been severely injured.
 - On May 18, in the same incident that killed Staff Sgts. Vaknin and Bittan, two soldiers were [seriously wounded](#) when a booby-trapped tunnel shaft in Rafah exploded. In a separate incident, a reservist was seriously wounded in Rafah when his armored bulldozer was struck by an RPG.
 - » Numerous foreign nationals have been killed in the war, including at least 34 [American nationals](#), 34 [Thai](#) nationals, 39 [French](#) nationals, 19 [Russian](#) nationals, 12 [British](#) nationals, 10 [Nepalese](#) nationals, 9 [Argentinian](#) nationals, 6 [Canadian](#) nationals, 4 [Philippines](#) nationals, 4 [Austrian](#) nationals, 4 [Romanian](#) nationals, 4 [Portuguese](#) nationals, 4 [Chinese](#) nationals, 3 [Brazilian](#) nationals, 3 [Belarusian](#) nationals, 3 [Italian](#) nationals, 3 [Peruvian](#) nationals, a [Cambodian](#) national, a [Chilean](#) national, an [Irish](#) national, a [Spanish](#) national, an [Australian](#) national, an [Azeri](#) national, a [Honduran](#) national, a [Swiss](#) national, a [Tanzanian](#) national, and a [Turkish](#) national.
- According to unverified figures from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Health Ministry, 35,456 people have been [killed](#) in Gaza, and 79,476 have been injured during the war.
 - » On October 25, 2023, President Biden [cautioned](#) against trusting Gaza Health Ministry casualty figures, stating: “I have no notion that the Palestinians are telling the truth about how many people are killed ... I have no confidence in the number that the Palestinians are using.”
 - » Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu [said](#) as of March 10 that Israel has killed approximately 13,000 Hamas operatives over the course of the war.
- According to the Palestinian Authority-run Palestinian Ministry of Health, 506 people have been [killed](#), and over 5,000 have been wounded in the West Bank.
- The IDF [claims](#) that it has killed at least 1,500 infiltrators from Gaza since the start of the war.
- So far, [105](#) hostages in Gaza have been released, [three](#) have been rescued by the IDF, [eight](#) have been [found dead](#), three have been [mistakenly](#) killed by the IDF, and one was [killed](#) during an IDF attempt to rescue him.
 - » 81 Israeli hostages have been released.

- » 46 hostages with foreign nationalities—some also holding Israeli citizenship—have been released.
 - Thus far, 23 [Thai](#) nationals, 6 [Argentinian](#) nationals, 5 [German nationals](#), 3 [French](#) nationals, 4 [Russian nationals](#), 1 [Dutch](#) national, 1 [Filipino national](#), 1 [Mexican](#) national, 1 [Uruguayan](#) national, and 1 [American](#) national have been released.
 - Hamas has released [36 children](#) and still holds two as hostages.
- Israel has said that terrorists in Gaza currently [hold](#) 132 hostages and deceased hostage bodies.
 - » Israeli officials [believe](#) that 40 of the hostages are deceased, including two hostages who were abducted in 2014.
 - » Many of the hostages are foreign or dual nationals, including up to 5 [American](#) nationals, 6 [German](#) nationals, 13 [Thai](#) nationals, 4 [Portuguese](#) nationals, 3 [British](#) nationals, 2 [Italian](#) nationals, 4 [Romanian](#) nationals, and 2 [Mexican](#) nationals.

Recent and Relevant JINSA Products About Israel at War

- Webinar: [Gaza Update 5/16](#), with IDF MG (ret.) Yaakov Amidror, IDF MG (ret.) Yaacov Ayish, and Ari Cicurel, May 16, 2024
- LTC Geoffrey Corn and Emanuela-Chiara Gillard, “[The War Crime Of Starvation – The Irony Of Grasping At Low Hanging Fruit](#),” *Articles of War*, May 15, 2024
- Jacob Olidort, [Possible Terrorist Ties to U.S. Campus Protests](#), May 15, 2024
- “[Open Letter from Retired U.S. Military Leaders in Support of Israel](#),” Originally Released on May 10, 2024, Updated and Published in *The New York Times* on May 15, 2024