Israeli strikes kill 2 Gaza militants; death toll now at 12

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Palestinians check the damage of a house targeted by Israeli missile strikes in Gaza City, Tuesday, Nov. 12, 2019.Â (AP)

Gaza City: Israeli airstrikes killed two Islamic Jihad militants in Gaza on Wednesday as rocket fire toward Israel resumed after a brief overnight lull, raising the death toll in the strip to 12 Palestinians in the heaviest round of fighting in months.

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Schools remained closed in Israeli communities near the Gaza border and restrictions on public gatherings continued as rockets rained down albeit in lesser ferocity than during the relentless barrage the previous day. Those attacks came after the early morning strike that killed Bahaa Abu el-Atta and his wife as they were sleeping. Rocket fire from Gaza reached as far north as Tel Aviv, and two people were wounded by debris.

No deaths were caused by the militant rockets, mostly thanks to Israelâ€™s Iron Dome defense system, which the military said intercepted some 90% of the projectiles. A few homes suffered direct strikes, though, and there was a near miss on a major highway, where a rocket crashed down just after a vehicle has passed.

In a sign that the current round could be brief, Gazaâ€™s Hamas rulers have yet to enter the fray. Although larger and more powerful than the Iranian-backed Islamic Jihad, Hamas is also more pragmatic. With Gazaâ€™s economy in tatters, it appears to have little desire for another round of fighting with Israel.

Egypt, which frequently mediates between Israel and Gaza militants, has been working to de-escalate tensions, according to officials in Cairo.

Seeking to keep the outburst under control, the Israeli military has restricted its operations to Islamic Jihad, and nearly all the Gaza casualties so far are members of the militant group.

Tuesdayâ€™s pre-dawn Israeli strike came almost simultaneously as another strike attributed to Israel, which targeted a senior Islamic Jihad commander based in Syria. The strikes appeared to be a new surge in the open warfare between Israel and Iranian proxies in the region.

Iran has forces based in Syria, Israelâ€™s northern neighbor, and supports Hezbollah militants in Lebanon. In Gaza, it supplies Islamic Jihad with cash, weapons and expertise. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has also claimed that Iran is using Iraq and far-off Yemen, where Tehran supports Shiite Houthi rebels at war with a Saudi-led coalition backing the government, to plan attacks against Israel. Hamas also receives some support from Iran.

Israel frequently strikes Iranian interests in Syria but Tuesdayâ€™s attack in Damascus appeared to be a rare

assassination attempt of a Palestinian militant in the Syrian capital.

Despite the disruption it has caused to daily life, there appeared to be widespread support in Israel for the targeting of Abu el-Atta _ whom political and military leaders called a â€œticking bombâ€• who was actively orchestrating new attacks against Israel. Netanyahu said the operation was approved 10 days in advance and was carried out when the optimal conditions allowed to strike him without causing collateral damage.

Still, some opposition figures suggested the timing could not be divorced from the political reality in Israel, where Netanyahu leads a caretaker government after two inconclusive elections and hiss chief challenger, former military chief Benny Gantz, is currently trying to build a coalition government of his own.

Gantz said he had been briefed on the airstrike in advance, calling it â€œthe right decision,â€• and Netanyahu updated his rival on developments later Tuesday, according to the prime ministerâ€™s office. But a successful military operation could bolster Netanyahu as he seeks to hold onto power _ especially if he is indicted on corruption charges.

Israelâ€™s attorney general is expected to make a decision in the coming weeks, and an indictment would increase pressure on Netanyahu to step aside. Netanyahu has sought to portray himself as the leader best capable of steering the country through its many security challenges.

- AP