

# Israel warns of imminent ground invasion of Gaza

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Israel yesterday told an estimated 100,000 Gaza residents living in cities near the border with Israel to leave their homes immediately, in a clear warning of an imminent ground invasion of the densely-populated enclave that houses nearly two million Palestinians.

According to Israeli media reports, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) yesterday sent phone calls to people living in cities and towns, including Beit Lahia, Beit Hanoun, and Absan al-Saghira, ordering them to evacuate and move to the west or south.

Residents are largely unable to leave the territory, however, because the US-backed military regime in Egypt, headed by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has closed the only possible border crossing, at Rafah, except temporarily for some injured people who need to seek hospital treatment.

After four days of relentless aerial bombardments, which have already killed 89 Gaza residents, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government has approved a call-up of 40,000 IDF reservists. About 20,000 have already been mobilised to the Gaza border in anticipation of a possible ground assault.

In a statement televised following a meeting of his security cabinet, Netanyahu declared: "So far the battle is progressing as planned but we can expect further stages in future."

Defence Minister Moshe Yaalon added, "We have long days of fighting ahead of us."

The Israeli offensive is being intensified with the clear backing of the United States. President Barack Obama phoned Netanyahu late yesterday, reportedly offering to broker a ceasefire, while stressing his support for the view that Israel has the right to employ overwhelming force against Gaza, supposedly to defend itself.

Netanyahu had already flatly dismissed any prospect

of a truce, despite reports of a proposed offer by the leadership of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist party that has governed Gaza since 2006. A ceasefire was "not even on the agenda," Netanyahu told members of the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, just hours before his call with the US leader.

IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Benny Gantz on Wednesday approved all the plans for the ground offensive, according to IDF spokesman Brigadier General Moti Almoz.

Intelligence Minister Yuval Steinitz told Israel Radio yesterday that the military "will have to take over Gaza temporarily, for a few weeks."

The deadly Israeli bombing of Gaza's population also dramatically intensified yesterday. IDF military spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Peter Lerner boasted that the air raids had struck more than 320 targets. "We aimed at 322 targets in Gaza overnight, taking to 750 the total number of Hamas targets hit by the army since the start of Operation Protective Edge," he told reporters.

Medical officials in Gaza reported more than 22 people killed yesterday, bringing the toll among Palestinians to at least 89 dead and more than 600 injured. While the Israeli government claims it is simply retaliating for Hamas rocket attacks, no Israelis have been killed, and the injuries reported have mostly been light.

The Palestinian health ministry reported at least 16 people, including 5 children, were killed in air strikes that demolished two neighbouring homes—occupied by the same family—and a beachside cafe at Khan Younis in Gaza's south, near the Egyptian border. Khaled Ali, 45, a Gaza taxi driver told Reuters: "The Jews say they are fighting Hamas and fighting gunmen while all the bodies we have seen on television are those of women

and children.”

Israel’s claims that its population is facing a barrage of Hamas rockets have been vastly exaggerated. Two rockets fell in open areas in the Tel Aviv region, but no injuries were reported. Another rocket exploded near a home in Netivot, and one woman reportedly suffered from shock.

The rapidly rising number of Palestinian civilian casualties has seen senior Israeli figures scrambling to defend the targeting of houses in civilian neighbourhoods, in violation of international law. The IDF claims that every demolished house belonged to a Hamas member involved in military activity. If innocents were hit, Netanyahu said yesterday, “It is because Hamas is maliciously hiding behind Palestinian civilians.”

A ground invasion would aim to exterminate hundreds of alleged Hamas supporters, destroy much of Gaza’s infrastructure, and terrorise the entire Palestinian population. Mustafa Barghouti, a member of the Palestinian legislature in the West Bank, warned that a ground assault could amount to “the most bloody massacre ever in this region,” costing “thousands of lives.”

Netanyahu’s government is proceeding, confident of US backing if it launches an invasion. After Obama’s phone call to the Israeli prime minister, the White House indicated that the president had defended Israel’s bombings, while cynically calling for “all sides to do everything they can to protect the lives of civilians and restore calm.”

Asked whether the US had taken a position on an Israeli invasion into Gaza, State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki did not rule out a ground assault, instead replying that such an outcome was “no one’s preference.” She declared: “I would remind you who is at fault here, and that is Hamas.”

Likewise, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon effectively blamed Hamas for any Israeli invasion. He told an emergency meeting of the Security Council yesterday that a ground offensive and “all-out escalation” was preventable “only if Hamas stops rocket firing.”

With the US government confronted by debacles in both countries in the region—Afghanistan and Iraq—that it invaded after 2001, and the resulting turmoil engulfing other Middle Eastern states, the Israeli

administration is moving aggressively to prosecute its own strategic interests. It is also intent on derailing an April agreement between Hamas and its rival Fatah on the West Bank to form a unity government.

When three Israeli teenagers went missing in the West Bank in June, Israel immediately blamed their abduction on Hamas—an allegation that Hamas has denied. The Israeli government then launched a military crackdown on the occupied territory, arresting more than 500 Palestinians, including many Hamas members, and killing at least six protesters in clashes over the violent raids. Last week, a teenage Palestinian was kidnapped and found killed in Jerusalem, provoking further Palestinian protests.

“Operation Protective Edge” marks the third major Israeli assault on the Gaza Strip since 2005, when Israel “disengaged” from the territory, removing all settlements that were considered illegal under international law. The IDF last waged a ground invasion in early 2009, and bombarded the enclave with missiles for eight days in 2012.

Since 2000, more than 1,000 children have been killed as a result of repeated Israeli offensives in Gaza, according to Defense for Children International-Palestine. In addition, the Israeli military remains in control of Gaza’s borders, airspace and sea—imposing a strict blockade on the territory, causing immense hardship and poverty.



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