

Israel says its troops will remain in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria indefinitely



Tel Aviv, April 16 (RHC)-- Israel's defense minister says that Israeli troops will remain in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria indefinitely, as the military tightens its grip on several occupied territories. "Unlike in the past, the [Israeli military] is not evacuating areas that have been cleared and seized," Israel Katz said in a statement on Wednesday.

The army "will remain in the security zones as a buffer between the enemy and [Israeli] communities in any temporary or permanent situation in Gaza – as in Lebanon and Syria", said the statement.

The military said that it had turned 30 percent of Gaza into a "security" buffer zone and struck around 1,200 "terror targets" since resuming its offensive on March 18, following a nearly two-month truce in Gaza with the Palestinian group Hamas.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to annihilate Hamas and return 59 captives being held by armed groups in Gaza, including 24 who Israel believes are alive. Hamas has said it will not agree to release the captives without a complete Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and a lasting ceasefire.

The Palestinian Islamic Jihad group on Wednesday released a video of captive Rom Braslavski. He appeared to be under duress, said he was covered in sores, and pleaded with Netanyahu to stop the war. The main organisation representing captives' families accused the Israeli government in a statement of "choosing to seize territory before the hostages".

Israel says it must maintain control of what it calls "security zones" to prevent a repeat of Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack in which some 1,139 people were killed and 250 others were abducted – including captives who have already been released by Hamas, and those still being held by the group.

Netanyahu also has said that Israel will implement US President Donald Trump's proposal for the resettlement of much of Gaza's population in other countries through what Netanyahu refers to as "voluntary emigration".

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun said that Israel's continued presence in some areas of southern Lebanon was "hindering" the Lebanese army's full deployment as required by the ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel.

According to the deal signed in November, which ended more than a year of war, both parties agreed to withdraw from southern Lebanon and leave the area to be controlled by the Lebanese army. However, Israel only partially pulled out its troops from the country's south, leaving soldiers in at least five locations.

Lebanon's Health Ministry said two Israeli drone strikes in southern Lebanon killed two people on Wednesday. Israeli strikes in Lebanon have killed more than 70 civilians since the ceasefire took effect in November.

Israel also established several military posts inside Syrian territory, including on the summit of Mount Hermon, after warplanes launched hundreds of strikes in the aftermath of the ousting of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The Israeli government immediately revealed its position towards the new Syrian government led by the former opposition group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), calling it "a terror group from Idlib that took Damascus by force", and has since refused to withdraw from the territories it seized.

Katz said in a statement on X that Israel's policy was "clear." "No humanitarian aid will be allowed into Gaza," the defence minister said on Wednesday.

Preventing humanitarian aid from entering the Gaza Strip "is one of the main pressure tools that stops Hamas from using this means against the population," he added. "In the current reality, no one is going to allow any humanitarian aid into Gaza, and no preparations are being made to allow any aid of this kind."

Israeli Culture Minister Miki Zohar echoed this position, saying, "the despicable murderers in Gaza deserve no humanitarian assistance from any civilian or military mechanism." "Only hellfire should be poured on the makers of terrorism until the last hostage returns from Gaza," Zohar said on X.

Israeli authorities have blocked all aid from entering Gaza for more than six weeks, worsening the already catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza.

The United Nations on Wednesday rejected a new authorisation mechanism that purported to introduce greater control over aid delivery in Gaza by Israeli forces, stating that aid organisations already had a mechanism in place to ensure that aid is not diverted to Hamas.

“Aid delivery into Gaza has for too long been obstructed,” the UN said, adding its teams were “ready to deliver assistance to those most in need based on humanitarian principles”.

Meanwhile, Israeli air raids continued on Wednesday, with at least 25 people killed in attacks across Gaza. Palestinian journalist Fatima Hassounah and 10 members of her family were killed in an Israeli air strike that targeted their home in Gaza City.

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