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Israel-Hamas war

American troops at risk across Middle East amid rising tensions, US warns

Washington sends more air defence systems to the region as Israel continues bombardment of Gaza



Israeli air strikes on Gaza City. Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Lebanese militant group Hezbollah would be making the “mistake of its life” if it decided to enter the war © Mohammed Saber/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

John Reed and **James Shotter** in Jerusalem, **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv, **Raya Jalabi** in Beirut and **Felicia Schwartz** in Washington 4 HOURS AGO

The US has warned that American troops and other personnel in the Middle East face the risk of a “significant escalation” of attacks against them as the Israel-Hamas war threatens to broaden into a regional conflict.

Lloyd Austin, the US secretary of defence, said on Sunday he was “concerned about potential escalation” of fighting in the region.

The US is worried the [war](#) between Israel and Hamas, which began on October 7 when the Palestinian militant group launched attacks that killed more than 1,400 people in southern Israel, will draw in Iran-backed militants across the Middle East.

Militants attacked two military bases housing American troops in Iraq last week. The US has about 2,500 troops in Iraq, where Iranian-backed militants have evolved into the dominant military and political force, and about 900 in Syria, which is also home to Shia militias supported by Iran.

Washington has ordered all non-emergency US government personnel and family members to leave Iraq. The state department cited “increased security threats against US government personnel and interests” for the order.

The concerns came as Israel stepped up its bombardment of Gaza over the weekend

The concerns came as Israel stepped up its bombardment of Gaza over the weekend ahead of an expected ground offensive aimed at dismantling Hamas, and again warned Palestinians to evacuate to the south of the besieged coastal strip.

On Sunday, Israel's defence minister Yoav Gallant said the ground offensive would come "soon", and that it "may take a month, two or three, but at the end there will be no more Hamas".

Austin said the US had a "right to defend ourselves" and was sending more air defences to the Middle East, including a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence system, which can shoot down ballistic missiles.



A US Army Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system © DVIDS/AFP via Getty Images

The US has also redirected one of two carrier strike groups which had been ordered to head to the eastern Mediterranean. It will instead move to the Persian Gulf.

Additional troops have been placed on standby, on top of the 2,000 that have already been authorised. There are also 2,000 marines in the region.

"If any group or any country is looking to widen this conflict, take advantage of this very unfortunate situation that we see, our advice is 'Don't'," said Austin.

Both Israel and the US are concerned about increasing fire across Israel's northern border from Hizbollah, the powerful Lebanese militant group that fought a 34-day war with the Jewish state in 2006.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned that Hizbollah would be making the “mistake of its life” if it decided to enter the war.

“We will strike it with a force it cannot even imagine and the meaning for it and the Lebanese state will be devastating,” he said.

US president Joe Biden spoke with Netanyahu by phone on Sunday to discuss humanitarian assistance in Gaza as well as efforts to secure the release of American hostages held in the enclave.

Israel has said more than 200 people, including foreign nationals, were taken hostage during Hamas’s deadly assault on the country on October 7.

In the call with Netanyahu, the White House said Biden welcomed the two aid convoys that had reached Gaza, including one on Sunday, and the leaders agreed there should be further deliveries.

It added that Biden also thanked Netanyahu for Israel’s help in securing the release of two American hostages on Friday, and discussed efforts to free all remaining people held by Hamas, including US citizens.

Biden also spoke with the leaders of the UK, France, Italy, Germany and Canada and they voiced support for Israel and its right to defend itself, but also called for “adherence to international humanitarian law, including the protection of civilians”, according to a joint statement issued by the White House.

The leaders also called for the immediate release of all remaining hostages, the statement said.

It added that the leaders committed to close diplomatic co-ordination, “including with key partners in the region, to prevent the conflict from spreading, preserve stability in the Middle East, and work toward a political solution and durable peace”.

Netanyahu’s office said Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte and French president Emmanuel Macron were due to visit Israel on Monday and Tuesday respectively.

In a sign of Israeli concerns about fighting on the country's northern border with Lebanon, officials called for residents in 14 more communities in the area to evacuate.

Hizbollah's second-in-command Naim Qassem said on Saturday the group was "in the heart of the battle" and warned that Israel would pay a high price if it launched a ground offensive in Gaza.

Hizbollah said five of its fighters had been killed on Saturday, the highest number in a single day since the start of hostilities two weeks ago, bringing the total number to 23.

"We are trying to weaken the Israeli enemy and let them know that we are ready," Qassem said.

Lebanon's caretaker prime minister Najib Mikati said on Sunday that he would "not hesitate to make every effort to protect Lebanon".

Meanwhile aid workers said the situation in Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas and home to 2.3mn people, is increasingly perilous.

More than 4,700 people have been killed by Israeli attacks in Gaza since the beginning of the war, Palestinian health officials said.

While a small aid convoy was permitted to enter Gaza on Saturday, the UN said the

while a small aid convoy was permitted to enter Gaza on Saturday, the UN said the 20 truckloads were just “a fraction of what is needed after 13 days of complete siege”.

The UN said a further 14 lorries carrying aid crossed from Egypt into Gaza on Sunday evening.

Martin Griffiths, the UN humanitarian chief, said the 14 trucks were “another small glimmer of hope for the millions of people in dire need of humanitarian aid. But they need more, much more.”



On Saturday, a small convoy of aid was allowed to enter Gaza for the first time since the start of the fighting © Ahmad Salem/Bloomberg

According to the UN, almost 1mn people have been forced to flee their homes in Gaza since October 7.

Tensions have also soared in the occupied West Bank. On Sunday, Israel launched an aerial strike on a mosque containing what Israel’s military and Shin Bet internal security service called a “terror compound” belonging to Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Jenin. Two people were killed, the Palestinian Red Crescent said.

That followed one of Israel’s deadliest raids in the West Bank in years, in which at least 13 Palestinians were killed in the Nur Shams refugee camp last week, including five children, in what the Israeli military said was a “counterterror” operation.

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