

Israel-Hamas war

Benjamin Netanyahu defies western allies over Gaza strategy

'Have you so quickly lost your moral consciences?' asks Israeli prime minister



Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, second left, accused international critics of having a 'short memory' about the brutality of Hamas's October attack on the Jewish state © Debbie Hill/UPI/Shutterstock

Mehul Srivastava in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

Benjamin Netanyahu has lashed out at sharp criticism from western allies of Israel's strategy in Gaza, accusing them of seeking to orchestrate elections that would "paralyse" the country and lead to its defeat in the war against Hamas.

The Israeli prime minister on Sunday vowed to resist the intensifying international pressure, especially from the White House, to delay an offensive into the city of Rafah on the southern edge of the Gaza Strip. European leaders have also urged [Netanyahu](#) to refrain from invading Rafah.

Netanyahu responded directly to criticism made last week by US senator Chuck Schumer, in which America's most prominent Jewish politician said Netanyahu's hard-right government [needed to be replaced](#) to avoid Israel becoming a "pariah".

The Israeli leader accused the international community of having a "short memory" about the brutal toll of Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, in which 1,200 people were killed and about 240 taken hostage, according to Israeli authorities.

"Have you so quickly forgotten October 7, the most horrific massacre of Jews since the Holocaust?" he said in Jerusalem, before a meeting with government ministers. "Are you so quick to deny Israel the right to defend itself against the Hamas

monsters? Have you so quickly lost your moral consciences?”

Without naming Schumer, Netanyahu said some in the international community were “trying to stop the war now . . . by hurling false accusations at the Israel Defense Forces, the government of Israel and the prime minister of Israel.

“They are doing so by means of an effort to bring about elections now, at the height of the war,” he said. “They are doing this because they know that elections now will halt the war and paralyse the country for at least six months.”

He told CNN in an interview aired on Sunday that Schumer’s comments were “totally inappropriate”.



A sign referring to Chuck Schumer's remarks is held by a demonstrator at a rally in Tel Aviv calling for the release of Israeli hostages
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Since the Hamas assault, Netanyahu has overseen a war in [Gaza](#) in which almost 32,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, have died, according to Gaza health officials. Israel claims to have killed at least 10,000 Hamas fighters.

In his remarks on Thursday, Schumer said Netanyahu had been too willing to tolerate the civilian toll in Gaza and was pushing support for Israel worldwide to “historic lows”, hurting Israel’s “political and moral fabric” and being an “obstacle to peace”.

Schumer’s criticism capped weeks of frustration with Netanyahu from US President Joe Biden and many in the Democratic party, stemming from the Israeli leader’s refusal to discuss a two-state solution for the Arab-Israeli conflict and to delay an

offensive into Rafah without a clear plan to protect more than 1mn Palestinian civilians seeking shelter there.

The Israeli premier has capitalised on the public rift by appealing to the hard-right base in his coalition, presenting himself as a leader able to resist international, and especially US, pressure.

His latest comments coincided with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's visit to Israel, who on Sunday morning warned that if the Rafah offensive resulted in large civilian casualties, it would make regional peace "very difficult".

Scholz said before meeting Netanyahu: "Israel has every right to protect itself. At the same time, it cannot be that those in Gaza who fled to Rafah are directly threatened by whatever military actions and operations are undertaken there."

Separately, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen on Sunday said: "We are also very concerned about the risks a full-scale offensive in Rafah would have on the vulnerable civilian population. This needs to be avoided at all costs."

Netanyahu vowed on Sunday that an offensive in Rafah would take place, without setting a date. In his CNN interview, he drew a parallel between Rafah, where Israel estimates a fourth of Hamas' fighters are hiding, and the Allied invasion of Berlin in the second world war.

"That's like leaving a quarter of the Nazi terrorist army in Germany and saying 'No, we're not going to finish the last quarter. And we're not going into Berlin,'" he said.

US National Security Council's spokesman John Kirby told ABC News that Israel had not yet presented America with a plan to evacuate civilians before any military operation into Rafah.

"We would not support such an operation unless or until they can accommodate the 1.5mn refugees that are there and preserve their safety and security," he said. "The Israel Defense Forces say that they have such a plan for an evacuation. They talked about humanitarian islands in Gaza. Again, we welcome the opportunity to see that, to see if that's actually executable and doable."

Israel's war cabinet was scheduled to meet on Sunday evening to discuss parallel hostage swap negotiations taking place in Doha between Israeli and Qatari mediators, in addition to a plan to move Palestinian civilians out of the IDF path.

The proposal under discussion would require Israel to accept a temporary ceasefire in

return for Hamas freeing of most of the remaining civilians in its captivity and to agree to a surge in humanitarian aid into the besieged enclave and the release of a large number of Palestinian prisoners, including those convicted of attacking Israeli citizens.

“No international pressure will stop us from realising all of the goals of the war [and] in order to do this, we will operate in Rafah,” said Netanyahu.

“To this end, we have approved the operational plans for action in Rafah, including advancing the steps to evacuate the civilian population from the combat zones.”

Additional reporting by Olaf Storbeck in Frankfurt, Stefania Palma in Washington and Paola Tamma in Brussels

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