

Israel-Hamas war

Israeli cabinet discusses punitive measures against UN agencies

Months of tensions boil over after UN chief adds Israeli military to blacklist for failing to protect children in conflict



Benjamin Netanyahu's cabinet considered a range of options against UN agencies at a meeting on Sunday night © Gil Cohen-Magen/Reuters

By **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

Benjamin Netanyahu's government has discussed far-reaching measures against UN agencies operating in Israel and the Palestinian territories, including the possible expulsion of staff, according to five people familiar with the matter.

Tensions between the Jewish state and the international organisation have reached crisis point after eight months of [war in Gaza](#), where bodies such as the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) are integral to aid operations.

But this hardening of Israel's attitude was spurred by the move late last week of António Guterres, UN secretary-general, to add Israel's military to a list of countries and organisations that fail to protect children in conflict — which puts the Israel Defense Forces on a par with Boko Haram and Isis.

Gilad Erdan, Israel's ambassador to the UN, described the blacklisting as “shameful,” with officials vowing a reprisal against UN bodies that have worked in Israel, Jerusalem and the occupied Palestinian Territories for decades.

The Israeli cabinet considered a range of options at a meeting on Sunday night, with the National Security Council continuing discussions on Monday, according to two people familiar with the matter.

“They need to be concerned,” one Israeli official said of the UN agencies.

While no final decision has been taken, measures under discussion include the “slow-roll” or outright rejection of visa renewals for foreign UN staff, the boycott by the Israeli government of key UN officials, as well as the unilateral termination and expulsion of entire UN missions, such as the UNTSO peacekeeping force established in 1948.

Additional alarm has been raised in western diplomatic circles about the fate of UN agencies that are integral to humanitarian aid operations in Gaza and the occupied West Bank, including the Unicef children’s agency and OCHA. The Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process (UNSCO), the main political arm of the UN effort in Israel and the Palestinian territories, may also be targeted, according to several people.

UNSCO has been central to de-escalating tensions and securing ceasefires via back-channel diplomacy through multiple previous rounds of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Relations between Israel and the UN were already strained to near breaking even prior to last week’s decision about the IDF. Israeli and UN officials have exchanged near daily mutual — and highly public — recriminations over the lack of humanitarian aid that has reached Gaza.

Israel has alleged that dozens of Hamas and other militant operatives who took part in the October 7 attack on Israel were employed by UNRWA, the agency for Palestinian refugees. Israel has also targeted multiple UNRWA schools and facilities in Gaza, including last week, alleging that they were being used by Hamas as military installations.

Erdan last month blasted the UN as a “terror organisation” that “co-operates with Hamas” and “provides cover for it”.

The UN has slammed Israel for not doing enough to protect either the organisation’s own humanitarian personnel in Gaza or Palestinian civilians, with Guterres calling Gaza a “graveyard for children”.

The secretary-general also condemned the deaths over the weekend of “hundreds of Palestinian civilians” during an Israeli special forces raid on the Nuseirat refugee camp in central Gaza that [freed four Israeli hostages](#) held by Hamas.

One person familiar with the matter said that whatever punitive actions the Israeli government enacted, the role and functions the UN agencies fulfilled on the ground would not disappear, but simply shift on to Israel itself.

“Who do they think will work with them to get aid into Gaza? Who do they think will rebuild Gaza after the war? If they want to do it themselves then let them,” the person said.

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