

**Israel-Hamas war**

## Benjamin Netanyahu says Israeli troops will stay on Egypt-Gaza border

Prime minister's comments come as negotiators seek to reach deal for release of hostages held by Hamas



Egyptian soldiers stand guard near the Egyptian side of the Rafah crossing into Gaza on July 4 © Amr Alfiky/Reuters

**Mehul Srivastava** and **Andrew England** in London and **Heba Saleh** in Cairo YESTERDAY

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Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Israel will control the crossing between Egypt and Gaza indefinitely, signalling a long-term military presence as negotiators push for a hostage and ceasefire deal dependent on a phased withdrawal of Israeli troops.

The Israel Defense Forces took control of the Gazan side of the Rafah border crossing to Egypt in May. They have since have expanded the area under their control to include the besieged enclave's whole border with Egypt, known as the Philadelphi corridor.

“The prime minister insists that Israel will remain in the Philadelphi axis,” Netanyahu’s office said on Friday. “This is how he instructed the negotiating teams, made clear to representatives of the United States, and informed the cabinet about it last night.”

Gaza’s other crossings are with Israel, meaning the country now controls the entirety of the Palestinian territory’s borders.

The Israeli prime minister’s comments came as negotiators held talks in Cairo aiming to reach an agreement to release about 120 hostages, alive and dead, who are held by Hamas in Gaza.

Hamas has previously insisted that any deal must include a phased withdrawal of the Israeli military from Gaza and a pause in fighting.

In a separate speech on Thursday to new military officers, the Israeli prime minister said: “We will not allow the smuggling of weapons to Hamas from Egypt, first and foremost through Israeli control of the Philadelphi corridor and the Rafah crossing.”

He said any deal to release the hostages would hinge on Israel retaining the right to resume fighting Hamas after any temporary pause.

Netanyahu also hinted at a long-term presence in central Gaza, where the Israeli military has built up infrastructure that in effect divides the enclave into two separate zones.

The so-called Netzarim corridor runs from the border with Israel to the sea, and Palestinian civilians and aid convoys must run a gauntlet of checkpoints to cross between northern and southern Gaza.

“We will not allow the return of armed terrorists and war materiel to the northern Gaza Strip,” he said.

Israel’s offensive in Rafah pushed hundreds of thousands of Palestinians into a so-called humanitarian zone by the sea and tested the White House’s “red lines” that had sought to limit its operations.

Its takeover of the Rafah crossing — the enclave’s sole conduit with the Arab world — has rattled Egypt, disrupted humanitarian aid supplies and prevented wounded Palestinians from being evacuated for medical care, while Israel says it has cut off smuggling routes for weapons from Egypt into Gaza.

Israel last controlled the sliver of territory in 2005 when it withdrew troops and Jewish settlers from the enclave. After that, the crossing between Gaza and Egypt became a thriving commercial trade route, with border controls enforced at times by Hamas and at other times by the Ramallah-based Palestinian Authority.

The Egyptian side of the border is a closed military zone and, until the Israeli takeover, had been a major artery for the international aid effort to support Palestinian civilians.

Egypt stopped the entry of aid in protest over the takeover and only recently has allowed trucks to reach the nearby Kerem Shalom crossing between Gaza and

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southern Israel.

Egypt has condemned Israel's takeover of the crossing and refused to reopen it for as long as Israeli forces control it. Cairo has also rejected Israeli control of the 14km non-militarised buffer along its border with Gaza, but official reaction has been muted.

The Israeli military has continued large-scale operations within Gaza in recent days, including a forced evacuation order for Gaza City, once the largest population centre.

The new fighting in the ruins of the enclave has underlined the strength of a Hamas resurgence and provided an early indication of what Israel calls the third phase of its military operation, consisting of high-intensity raids into the enclave, compared with the full-scale invasion that swept through Gaza earlier in the [war](#).

At least 60 bodies were recovered by Palestinian emergency services from two neighbourhoods in Gaza City after Israeli tanks withdrew, local health officials said, while some Israeli soldiers and snipers remained behind.

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