

## Syrian crisis

# Israeli military to hold on to Syrian territory indefinitely

Defence minister says forces will remain in positions seized after collapse of Assad's regime 'for an unlimited time'



An Israeli military vehicle on the Syrian side of the border fence along the buffer zone in Golan Heights last month © Bloomberg

**James Shotter** in Jerusalem and Malaika Kanaaneh Tapper in Beirut YESTERDAY

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Israel's defence minister on Tuesday said the country's forces would remain indefinitely in positions in Syria they seized after the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime last year.

Israel initially cast its incursion into a previously demilitarised buffer zone inside [Syria](#) as a temporary move to prevent hostile forces moving into the area in the [power vacuum](#) left by the collapse of Assad's dictatorship in December.

But visiting the Syrian side of Mount Hermon on Tuesday, Israel Katz said Israeli forces would remain "on the summit of Hermon and in the security zone for an unlimited time to ensure the security of the Golan Heights and northern settlements and all residents of the [State of Israel](#)".

"We will not be dependent on others for our defence — here and anywhere else," Katz said. "We will not allow hostile forces to establish themselves in the security zone in southern Syria . . . and we will act against any threat."

There was no immediate reaction from Syria's authorities. But the country's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa this month denounced what he called Israel's "pretexts" for the land seizure. Syrian officials have repeatedly stressed they do not want new conflicts, including with Israel, saying they want to focus on rebuilding

the country.

Katz's announcement came as Israeli forces carried out some of the deepest air strikes inside Lebanon since a ceasefire agreement between two countries took effect in November.

Lebanon's health ministry said 24 people were injured during the strikes. The Israel Defense Forces said they were targeting Hizbollah vehicles transferring weapons.

The ceasefire deal was intended to halt more than a year of fighting between Israel and Hizbollah, the Lebanese militant group that began attacking the Jewish state in solidarity with Hamas. The IDF has killed at least 61 people in Lebanon since the accord was implemented, Lebanese officials said.

Israeli forces entered Syria last month, moving tanks and infantry from the occupied Golan Heights into and beyond a demilitarised buffer zone established by an armistice agreement between the two sides in 1974.

As part of the incursion, commandos seized a strategic Syrian military position at the highest point on the Golan Heights, known as Jabal al-Shaykh.

The incursion was accompanied by strikes across Syria that targeted the country's air force, navy and strategic weapons stockpiles.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu claimed the 1974 agreement had "collapsed" after Syrian army units abandoned their positions in the wake of the fall of Assad, and Israeli forces had moved in to prevent militant groups gaining a foothold near Israel.

But the incursion drew condemnation from across the Middle East, with Turkey accusing Israel of an "occupier mentality" and Egypt saying it had "exploited the . . . vacuum in Syria in order to occupy more Syrian land and to impose new facts on the ground in contravention of international law".

Meanwhile, Geir Pedersen, UN envoy to Syria, warned Israel risked damaging the chances of a peaceful transition in the fragile state.

Israel has occupied most of the Golan Heights after capturing it from Syria during the six day war in 1967 and annexing it in 1981, though its claim over the land is not recognised internationally.

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