

Israel-Hamas war

Benjamin Netanyahu says Israeli forces to seize more territory in Gaza

Prime minister says country has 'shifted gears' in its efforts to force Hamas to release 59 hostages it still holds



Palestinians walk along a street near the rubble of destroyed buildings after fleeing northern Gaza following an Israeli military evacuation order on Tuesday © Mohammed Saber/EPA-EFE/Shutterstock

James Shotter in Jerusalem

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel's armed forces would seize more territory in Gaza, as its military expanded a renewed offensive in the Palestinian enclave.

The announcement marks the latest intensification of Israeli operations in [Gaza](#) since it broke a two-month ceasefire with Hamas last month and cut off supplies of food, fuel, medicine and humanitarian aid to the 2.2mn people living in the shattered strip.

Netanyahu said in a statement on Wednesday evening that [Israel](#) had “shifted gears” in a bid to force the militant group to free the 59 hostages it still holds in Gaza, and was seizing a swath of land between the towns of Rafah and Khan Younis that he called the Morag corridor.

“We are currently dividing up the strip, we are adding pressure step by step, so that our hostages will be given back to us. And the longer [Hamas] don't give them back, the more we will increase pressure,” he said.

His defence minister Israel Katz said in an earlier statement that Israel would seize “large areas” of territory and turn them into buffer zones, adding that the renewed

large areas of territory and turn them into buffer zones, adding that the renewed fighting would be accompanied by a “large-scale” evacuation of Gaza’s population from combat areas.

Israel has already turned large tracts of land along Gaza’s border into buffer zones, and created a similar area in the Netzarim Corridor, which runs through the centre of the strip, separating its north and south.

The move to seize more territory in Gaza was met with dismay by relatives of the hostages, with the organisation representing them issuing a statement accusing the Netanyahu government of “sacrificing the hostages for seizing territory”.

“Instead of freeing the hostages through a deal and ending the war, the Israeli government is sending more troops into Gaza, to fight in the same places where they have already fought time and time again,” said the Hostages and Missing Families Forum.

The statements from Netanyahu and Katz came two days after Israel issued an evacuation order for the town of Rafah, which lies near the border between Gaza and Egypt, forcing tens of thousands of people to flee.

Palestinian media reported on Wednesday that Israeli forces had carried out a heavy bombardment of the area overnight, and that Israeli forces had advanced into the centre and east of Rafah.

Juliette Touma, spokesperson for UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, said on Wednesday that an Israeli strike had hit a UNRWA building in Jabalia in northern Gaza that had previously served as a health centre and was now functioning as a shelter for 730 displaced people.

Gaza health officials said the strike had killed 19 people, including nine children. The Israeli military said it had hit militants hiding in a compound in the area.

UN officials and aid groups have warned that the renewed fighting and Israel’s accompanying siege of Gaza have intensified the catastrophic humanitarian conditions in the enclave.

On Tuesday, the World Food Programme said the 25 bakeries it supported in Gaza had all been forced to shut down because of a lack of fuel and flour, and warned that its remaining supplies of hot meals in the territory would last for a maximum of two weeks.

Israel's offensive has now killed more than 50,000 people in Gaza, according to Palestinian officials, as well as displacing most of its population — many of them multiple times — and reducing much of the strip to uninhabitable rubble.

Israel launched the offensive in response to Hamas's October 7 2023 attack on Israel, during which militants killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials, and took 250 hostage.

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