

Israel-Hamas war

Benjamin Netanyahu's Gaza occupation plan opens rift with IDF

Rancorous week of leaks and mudslinging exposes divisions between political and military leadership

Mehul Srivastava and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv

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Even by the pugilistic standards of Israeli politics, the week of rancour between Benjamin Netanyahu and his handpicked military chief Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir was extraordinary.

Across days of co-ordinated leaks and public mudslinging, Netanyahu and Zamir clashed over the prime minister's plan to expand Israel's offensive in Gaza, bring it under Israeli control and in effect reoccupy the entire enclave of 2.1mn Palestinians.

Government ministers publicly reminded the military that it must obey their orders, Zamir put out a terse statement calling disagreement "an inseparable part of the history of the Jewish people" and Netanyahu's son even accused the army chief of attempting a "coup".

Ultimately, after a heated 10-hour meeting of Israel's security cabinet ended on Friday morning, Netanyahu pulled rank over the square-jawed general and ordered the Israel Defense Forces to "prepare" for invading Gaza City, despite the military's warnings that it would stretch an exhausted army and endanger Israeli hostages.

As for a narrower alternative put forward by Zamir and the IDF? Netanyahu's office dismissed it as capitulation, an option that would "neither achieve the defeat of Hamas nor the return of the hostages".

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Israeli tanks stationed near Gaza border as cabinet approves Gaza City plan © Reuters

It wasn't the first time Israel's political leaders and military chiefs have sparred publicly. Menachem Begin spent 45 minutes cajoling a brigade commander who refused to invade West Beirut in 1982 — "I see children," the commander said — before the prime minister relieved him of his command.

The Israeli military has also previously resisted demands by political leaders, including a call by Ariel Sharon's government to invade Gaza during the second intifada in the early 2000s, and a plan by Netanyahu for a major attack on Iran's nuclear facilities more than a decade ago.

But, at a time of growing international isolation over Israel's conduct in its 22-month war in Gaza, this latest rift threatens to deepen domestic divisions and further undermine trust in the country's institutions as Netanyahu seeks to deploy the IDF to suit his own political gain.

Politicians "used to listen to the army . . . Things have changed in Israel since those days", a former senior Israeli security official said. "There was a lot less politics back then . . . Under this government tectonic changes are under way."





Then-Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon (L) with Prime Minister Menachem Begin (C) in Lebanon in 1982 © Uzi Keren/Getty Images

Cabinet meetings are often shouting matches, with hardline ministers accusing each other and military personnel of defeatism and treason, while leaking private conversations for political gain.

But the recriminations and breakdown of trust that followed Hamas's surprise October 7 2023 attack on Israel, in which officials say the militant group killed 1,200 people and took 250 hostages, have been amplified by Israel's political divisions.

The long-serving premier has attempted to shift all blame for the assault, the worst loss of Jewish life since the Holocaust, on to the security chiefs — while refraining from any expressions of responsibility himself.

Netanyahu's aides even reportedly had the former IDF chief of staff, who later resigned over his failures on October 7, frisked for listening devices before going into briefings, according to the New York Times.

The prime minister and his far-right cabinet allies have repeatedly insisted that any halt to the conflict short of "total victory" over Hamas will ensure it is only a matter of time until the militant group unleashes another October 7-style massacre on the Israeli public.

His far-right cabinet allies have also exploited Netanyahu's political reliance on them to push for the IDF to occupy Gaza, expel Palestinians and resettle the enclave.

Many Israeli generals, past and present, view things very differently. Earlier this week, most living former Israeli military and spy chiefs signed a letter arguing that Hamas was a depleted force and Israel was now in a strong enough position to accept

a ceasefire and end the war.



Palestinians return from a food distribution point run by the US and Israeli-backed Gaza Humanitarian Foundation (GHF) © Eyad Baba/AFP/Getty Images

Zamir, who took up his role in March, has instead advocated a plan one Israeli journalist called “siege and attrition”, in which the IDF encircles remaining pockets of Hamas control and launches targeted raids and strikes.

His allies briefed the Israeli press aggressively, presenting his resistance to Netanyahu's plan as a way to spare the tired army and lessen the risk to the 20 living Israeli hostages still held by Hamas.

This would also keep open the possibility of a ceasefire in which they and the bodies of 30 more Israeli hostages would return home, they said.

Zamir chided the security cabinet that if they ordered the IDF to carry out Netanyahu's plan, they should consider removing the release of hostages from their war goals, according to leaks to Israeli newspapers.





Demonstrators lift placards and chant slogans during an anti-government protest in Tel Aviv © Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images

There are even rumblings in the press, which Zamir has not publicly denied, that the military chief could resign if ordered to take actions he considered counter to national security.

“When there’s too much PR and leaks regarding an operation, including the differences between the government and army, then you know that there are other [political] considerations going on behind the scenes,” said a person familiar with the government’s thinking.

Rarely has so much been at stake for Palestinians, 60,000 of whom have already been killed in Israel’s offensive, according to local officials.

An invasion of Gaza City would force the evacuation of up to 1mn civilians, many of whom have already been displaced multiple times, and deepen the humanitarian disaster that has tipped much of the population into starvation.

Ultimately, the dispute within Israel over next steps in Gaza may be far from over, with the decision to start the offensive on Gaza City still weeks away — enough time, argued Zohar Palti, a former senior official in the defence ministry and Mossad, for the IDF to shape its contours.

“The government’s directive to the IDF, with an emphasis on the word ‘prepare to

take over', gives time and space for many factors to influence the move," he said.

"There is time for the IDF to influence [the decision], there is time for the international community, with an emphasis on the US and the moderate Arab world, to influence — including to renew negotiations on a deal."

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