

Israel-Iran conflict on hair trigger as military and diplomatic preparations for war proceed

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Israel and its allies continued Monday with preparations for a war against Iran, which is expected to launch a retaliatory strike soon for Israel's assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh during a visit to Tehran.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told his G7 counterparts late Sunday night that American intelligence believed Iran and Hezbollah could launch such an operation at any time.

Any action could be used by Israel as a pretext to light the fuse on a regional war it has been provoking for months. The atmosphere being whipped up in the country is indicated by the comments of the leader of the opposition Yair Lapid, who demanded of the government, "Is it acceptable to you that for five days an entire country has been sitting and waiting for us to be bombed? Because there is no deterrence."

The World Health Organisation has delivered 32 tons of emergency medical supplies to Lebanon in anticipation of a bloodbath. More and more countries are issuing advisory notices to their citizens leave the country.

Speaking at the Israeli Air Force's underground command centre in Tel Aviv, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant told soldiers, "We must prepare for all possibilities, including a quick transition to offense." A Defence Ministry statement added that Gallant had referred to "the possibilities of offensive action in all combat sectors."

Given that Israel has been carrying out "offensive action," including repeated deadly strikes on neighbouring countries ever since the war began, what Gallant is referring to is a massive escalation.

Major General Ori Gordin, head of the Israel Defense Forces Northern Command, told mayors and council leaders from the north of the country, "I want you to know that our offensive plans going forward are ready and we are prepared for this, in all aspects, from me to every single one of the soldiers.

"We've attacked and destroyed a lot in the last 10 months, but we still have work to do. We are determined and committed."

Since the genocide in Gaza began, Israel has killed more than 450 people in Lebanon with cross-border strikes, including over 100 civilians, wreaking havoc across swathes of the country's south. After an ineffectual drone attack from Hezbollah on Monday, an Israeli strike killed two people in the Lebanese village Mais Al-Jabal, including a paramedic who had been investigating the site for casualties of an earlier attack.

Israel's actions are closely coordinated with the United States and facilitated by its diplomatic pressure. A Monday meeting between Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi and US CENTCOM chief Michael Kurilla discussed "security-strategic issues and joint assessments in the region, as part of the response to threats in the Middle East."

The night before, Gallant met with US Secretary of Defence Lloyd Austin to brief him on "security developments in the region and IDF readiness to defend Israel against potential threats posed by Iran and its proxies," according to the Israeli defence minister's press team.

It stated: "[Gallant] discussed a series of scenarios and corresponding defensive and offensive capabilities" and "expressed his appreciation to Secretary Austin for the close military and strategic coordination between Israel and the United States, including the current and future deployment of US military capabilities and force posture changes in defence of Israel."

Gallant praised "US leadership in forming a coalition of allies and partners to defend Israel and the region from a range of aerial attacks."

This leadership has included recruiting many of the Arab governments to a campaign to stay Iran's hand. US President Joe Biden spoke with Jordanian King Abdullah

Monday, after the country's Ayman Safadi made the first visit by a Jordanian foreign minister to Tehran in two decades. It is understood that he sought to convince Iranian leaders to minimise their response.

Iran has now called a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation for Wednesday, hosted by Saudi Arabia, where it is expected to canvass support for planned strikes against Israel.

On Monday, Foreign Minister Ali Bagheri Kani summoned international ambassadors to inform them that Tehran would exercise "its legitimate and inherent right to prevent the terrorist act committed by the [Israeli] regime with the aim of protecting its national security." He added that it was the United Nations Security Council's failure to respond to Israel's crimes that was mainly responsible for the dangerous tensions in the region.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani later said, "Iran seeks to establish stability in the region, but this will only come with punishing the aggressor and creating deterrence against the adventurism of the Zionist regime." No one, Kanaani continued, "has the right to doubt Iran's legal right to punish the Zionist regime."

Head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Hossein Salami said similarly that Israel "will receive punishment in due time... When they receive a blow, they will notice they are making mistakes."

Highlighting the dangers of a war in the Middle East rapidly drawing in major powers besides the US, Russia's former defence secretary and current security council secretary Sergei Shoigu flew to Tehran for discussions with Iranian leaders, including President Masoud Pezeshkian.

On the ground in Gaza, criminal attacks by the IDF against civilians continue. Simultaneous strikes on the Hassan Salama and Nassr schools and al Aqsa hospital in Gaza City killed at least 30 people, including children and the elderly.

A witness, Abdullah Akila, described what happened:

We were just sitting down when a bomb fell here, and another hit the school next door. The two schools were housing displaced civilians and children... We have been retrieving the remains of children for the past hour. This is so unfair. How long will we remain like this? We are tired... Enough!

Another man told an *Al Jazeera* reporter, "torn bodies are everywhere," and another: "They killed children and old people. They killed women. Only God will save us. What did the children do?"

At al Aqsa hospital, where at least five people were killed, the tents of several displaced people were set on fire by the blasts.

Rescue operations were proceeding with bare hands, *Al Jazeera* journalist Tareq Abu Azzoum reported, since "there isn't enough fuel to operate the vast majority of bulldozers, and due to the Israeli attacks on bulldozers at the municipal facilities." He described a "surge of Israeli attacks on evacuation centres."

The genocidal savagery of Israel's war was spelled out explicitly by fascist Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, who complained to a press conference that any aid at all was getting into Gaza, lamenting, "Nobody will let us cause two million civilians to die of hunger even though it might be justified and moral until our hostages are returned."

Confirming the fact that the war in Gaza is the spearhead of an offensive also targeted against the Palestinians in the West Bank and in Israel, Smotrich tweeted later in the day that he was expanding Israeli settlement building "to remove the threat" of Palestinian statehood.

"Stopping the Arab takeover of the open areas, fighting the terrorist financing of the Palestinian Authority and its leaders and complete Israeli control of the territory [the occupied West Bank]. This is the only way."

Twenty-five Palestinians, including two children, were arrested in the West Bank in overnight raids Sunday-Monday, their homes trashed and families threatened. Two entire homes were destroyed in Jenin, and a marketplace in Nablus was set on fire by IDF soldiers using burning tyres.



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