

Israel Widens Gaza Offensive as US Fends Off Red Sea Attacks (2)

By Antony Sguazzin and Alisa Odenheimer | December 4, 2023 3:27AM ET

Israel's military is expanding its operations across the Gaza Strip, with the expectation of a ground invasion of southern Gaza looming and warnings to many of the territory's 2.2 million residents to evacuate again.

At the same time, a US Navy ship responded to a flurry of drone and missile attacks against commercial ships operating in the Red Sea, underscoring the potential for the nearly two-month-old Mideast conflict to widen into a broader war.

With US officials urging Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government to ensure the safety of civilians, Israeli military struck targets across the Gaza strip overnight including a school in the north of the territory in Beit Hanoun, from which it said Hamas was operating. About 200 targets were hit, including weapons storage facilities, the military said in a statement on Monday.

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Source: Bloomberg

WATCH: Israel is pushing its offensive against Hamas into Southern Gaza. Ian Fisher reports.

Israel is seeking to dismantle Hamas brigades, killing leaders and operatives, in the south as it did in and around Gaza City, Lieutenant General Herzi Halevi, chief of staff for the Israel Defense Forces, said Sunday.

"It will be as fierce, with no lesser results," Halevi said. "It will be as thorough in the south as it has been in the north."

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Photographer: Mohammed Abed/AFP/Getty Images

Palestinians inspect damage to a building in Rafah, Gaza, on Dec. 4.

Al Jazeera reported 10 people were killed and more than 100 wounded in an air-strike in the Al-Genaina neighborhood of the border city of Rafah in southern Gaza, citing eyewitness reports. The information couldn't be independently verified.

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Photographer: Taner Tezol/MarineTraffic

The Unity Explorer bulk cargo ship.

In the Red Sea, the destroyer *USS Carney* blamed Yemen's Houthi rebels for what it said were four attacks against three separate commercial vessels. Those included an anti-ship ballistic missile attack on Sunday morning against the Bahamas-flagged and UK-owned bulk cargo ship, the M/V Unity Explorer, that missed the vessel.

Less than three hours later, the *Carney* shot down a drone headed its way, though US Central Command said it wasn't clear what the unmanned vehicle's target was. Soon after that, the *Unity Explorer* said it was hit by a missile, which caused "minor damage," according to Centcom. The attacks continued, with two other ships saying they were struck, though no casualties were reported. "These attacks represent a direct threat to international commerce and maritime security," Centcom said in a statement. "We also have every reason to believe that these attacks, while launched by the Houthis in Yemen, are fully enabled by Iran."

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The Houthi rebels claimed they targeted "two Israeli ships" in the Red Sea.

The developments showed the conflict ramping up after a tentative cease-fire, which saw hostages and prisoners exchanged between Israel and Hamas and thousands of trucks full of aid enter Gaza. The break in fighting ended late last week and efforts by mediators in Qatar to extend the truce further broke down. Israel has pulled its officials from Doha for now.

After the exchanges of the past week, 137 hostages remain in Gaza with 117 of those being male, including two children, said Eylon Levy, a spokesman for the Israeli government. All but 11 are Israeli, he said, adding the bodies of three hostages have been located by the ministry and six people are still missing.

Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Conricus, an IDF spokesman, said early Monday that Israel is also confronting "quite escalatory" actions by Hezbollah on the country's northern border with Lebanon.

"We have been so far quite successful in defending ourselves," Conricus said in a briefing on X, formerly known as Twitter.

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Photographer: Jack Guez/AFP/Getty Images
Israeli tanks deployed near the border with Gaza on Dec. 3.

Qatar said it will continue efforts to revive the truce, and the nation's foreign minister spoke with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken late Sunday. Levy said Israel is prepared to entertain further offers from Hamas. The militant group released a statement Sunday saying further hostage releases depend on "stopping the aggression and reaching a cease-fire."

Israeli public broadcaster Kan reported on Israeli plans to assassinate Hamas leaders in the Palestinian territories as well as Lebanon, Turkey and Qatar, citing a recording of internal security service Shin Bet's leader, Ronen Bar.

About 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed when Hamas — a designated terrorist group by the US and the European Union — stormed Israeli towns, kibbutzim, army bases and a music festival. The violent incursion triggered Israeli's bombardment and invasion of Gaza. The Hamas-run health ministry in Gaza said more than 15,500 people have been killed, the majority of them women and children.

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Photographer: Said Khatib/AFP/Getty Images
A salvo of rockets is fired from Gaza towards Israel on Dec. 3.

11,000 Rockets

In the past day, the IDF said it continued to strike suspected Hamas targets from fighter jets, helicopters and from the sea. Hamas has responded with heavy rocket fire toward southern and central Israel. Exchanges of fire resumed across the Israel-Lebanon border, with an Israeli military vehicle hit by an anti-tank missile.

Levy said 398 Israeli soldiers and 59 police personnel have been killed since the war began and that 11,000 rockets have been fired toward Israel, with 2,000 falling short and landing in Gaza. He added 800 tunnels used by Hamas have been found and 500 destroyed.

Despite warnings from multiple US officials, including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Vice President [Kamala Harris](#), for Israel to [heed warnings](#) about civilian casualties, Levy said "Israel and the US see eye-to-eye about the goals of this war."

"I have personally pushed Israeli leaders to avoid civilian casualties, and to shun irresponsible rhetoric," Austin said Saturday. "In this kind of a fight, the center of gravity is the civilian population. And if you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat."

Many nations have warned Israel not to use the overwhelming force in the south as it did in the north, where it leveled much of Gaza City.

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Photographer: Said Khatib/AFP/Getty Images
Palestinians stand on the edge of a crater after an Israeli strike in Rafah, Gaza, on Dec. 3.

'As Surgical As We Can'

"We are trying to be as surgical as we can be in a very difficult combat situation," Mark Regev, a senior adviser to Netanyahu, told the BBC on Sunday. He added that casualty estimates from Gaza health authorities "need to be taken with a grain of salt."

John Kirby, spokesman for the US National Security Council, said Israel has taken "a step in the right direction" in being mindful of civilian casualties.

Israel has given civilians in Gaza an online map with “a list of areas where they can go to be more safe,” Kirby said Sunday on NBC. “There’s not too many modern militaries in advance of conducting operations that would actually do that.”

Yet expanding combat in the south is more difficult now because of the displacement of some 1.8 million people, many of whom fled there to avoid the earlier fighting in the north, according to figures by the United Nations.

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