



January 13, 2008

Daily News Issue Date: January 13, 2009

News Blurb: Israeli officials are claiming that as result of the offensive in Gaza Hamas has been "weakened but not destroyed" (1),(2). The offensive has forced tens of thousands of Palestinians to flee their homes (3). Israeli leaders debate how and when to end the 17-day operation (5). Egypt is urging Hamas to agree to a truce (6). Israel is facing increased international pressure due to the mounting civilian death toll in Gaza (9),(10). Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton reaffirms commitment to Palestinian state at confirmation hearing (11).

Israeli Officials Say Hamas Damaged But Not Destroyed

Article Author(s): Steven Erlanger

Article Author(s): Sabrina Tavernise

Media Outlet: The New York Times

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/middleeast/14mideast.html?_r=1&ref=world ^[1]

TEL AVIV ? As Israeli forces tightened their circle around Gaza on Tuesday, senior Israeli intelligence officials said Hamas military forces had been damaged but remained substantially intact. The intelligence officials were briefing reporters.

The assessment, which comes in stark contrast to officials' comments on Sunday suggesting that the leadership had been damaged and that Hamas was ready to accept a truce, came as the war on Hamas entered its 18th day. The Israeli military saying its warplanes launched 60 air strikes overnight in a continued drive to destroy Hamas's ability to fire rockets into Israel.

One target was a hotel where Hamas gunmen were said by Israel to be gathering, the military said.

Speaking in return for customary anonymity, the intelligence officials said the military wing of Hamas has been hit ?to a certain extent? with ?a few hundred,? Hamas fighters killed during the ground offensive that began midway through the war.

But greater damage has been done to Hamas's capacity to run the Gaza strip, with a large number of governmental buildings destroyed over the course of the operation.

One Israeli soldier has been killed by a suicide bomber during the operations, intelligence officials said.

Hamas militants are using rockets that are Chinese-made and supplied by Iran, the intelligence officials said.

The rockets are now hitting targets that are up to 25 miles away, a longer distance than before, with some of them being smuggled into Gaza in parts and assembled inside to be shot. The officials said ranges longer than 25 miles were unlikely.

The launches have diminished, with between 70 and 80 a day before the war to between 20 and 30 now, including as many as 10 more serious grad missiles.

Under growing military pressure, Hamas fired at least two rockets into southern Israel on Tuesday, far fewer than in some recent days. The missiles struck the city of Beersheba but there were no reports of casualties.

The assessment of Hamas's resilience came just two days after Israel's cabinet secretary, Oved Yehezkel, told reporters that in the regular weekly cabinet meeting the heads of army intelligence and of the Shin Bet security service had said that Hamas was inclined to agree to a cease-fire, "given the harsh blow it received and given the absence of accomplishment on the ground."

That day, another senior Israeli security official said that Hamas units were making mistakes and fighting without clear direction.

Despite international demands for a cease-fire and mounting humanitarian worries, there seemed little prospect of a respite.

Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi said on Israel Army Radio on Tuesday that Israeli forces were making progress "in hitting Hamas, its infrastructure, its regime," but said that forces yet to complete their mission. "We still have work ahead of us," he said.

Palestinians in central Gaza City reported hearing numerous explosions on Monday night, as well as the sound of tanks moving closer to the center of the city.

The Israeli military said one Israeli officer was critically wounded and two Israeli soldiers suffered light wounds in overnight fighting. The three were hurt, the military said, after a bomb exploded in a booby trapped house that they were searching.

The fighting came amid continued diplomacy in Egypt, whose officials were talking with Hamas representatives about a possible truce.

In a televised speech on Monday night, a senior Hamas official, Ismail Haniya, expressed an openness to a diplomatic solution but reiterated previous demands that any deal include the opening of Gaza's border crossings, which Israel and Egypt have kept mostly closed since Hamas violently pushed out its rival Fatah in 2007.

"We are not closed to this path," he said of diplomacy, speaking from hiding in Gaza.

On Tuesday, however, Hamas said it had "substantial reservations" about an Egyptian proposal for a cease-fire in Gaza.

"There are reservations on this initiative, substantial reservations, related to the position of the resistance on the ground," a senior Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzouq told Al Jazeera television, Reuters reported from Cairo.

An Israeli official postponed a trip to Cairo on Monday. It was not clear whether he would depart on Tuesday.

Humanitarian shipments continued to flow on Tuesday. The Regional Director for the Middle East of the World Food Program, Daly Belgasmi, presided over a shipment at the Kerem Shalom crossing point. The president for the International Committee of the Red Cross, Jakob Kellenberger, visited Gaza City on Tuesday as the Israeli Army continued to press its military campaign.

Israel also said it would order a temporary lull Tuesday to permit around 100 trucks with relief supplies into the beleaguered coastal strip, one of the world's most overcrowded places.

In Gaza, Hamas is battered, not broken, Israeli official says

Article Author(s): Jeffrey Fleishman

Article Author(s): Sebastian Rotella

Media Outlet: The Los Angeles Times

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-gaza14-2009jan14,0,7837955.s...> [2]

Reporting from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem ? The military power of Hamas has been weakened and its political leadership is divided over plans for a possible ceasefire, but an Israeli intelligence official said today that the radical group remains formidable, with 15,000 fighters and a sophisticated arsenal of rockets and anti-tank weapons and tunnels.

The senior official's assessment was delivered in a news briefing on a day when Israeli ground forces and Hamas fighters battled fiercely in a southeastern neighborhood of high-rise apartments in Gaza City. Civilians fled for cover as Israeli units, backed by shelling from warships along the seaside enclave, pushed deeper into the city but appeared to stop short of advancing toward Hamas strongholds.

Israel's move into the Tel Hawwa neighborhood of Gaza City -- about one mile from the city's center -- increases the pressure on Hamas fighters and on humanitarian groups and hospitals trying to cope with rising numbers of homeless and wounded Palestinians. Since Israel's incursion began Dec. 27, more than 900 Gazans, at least one-third of them women and children, have been killed.

Human Rights Watch and other international organizations have called for Israel to allow Palestinians to escape the fighting and for humanitarian groups to enter with medical supplies, food, fuel and equipment. Israel said it has allowed 22,000 tons of humanitarian aid and 1.3 million liters of fuel into Gaza, but much of the enclave has no electrical power, and pleas for donations echo endlessly from the loudspeakers of mosques.

"We don't know the full extent of what's happening inside Gaza because we are blocked from getting in," said Fred Abrahams, senior emergencies researcher for Human Rights Watch. "But what we are observing is a deeply disturbing disregard for human life."

The Israeli intelligence official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, did not underestimate Hamas but indicated the group had been overwhelmed by 18 days of Israeli bombardment. The Israeli Defense Forces reported that at least 30 militants had been killed in fighting today and that Hamas was occasionally using suicide bombers as spearheads for its combat missions.

"The level of damage to Hamas' military wing is less than the damage" to its civil infrastructure, the official

said. "I think they will try to do their best to hit us, to come up with some symbolic achievement, a suicide operation or the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier. This is something they very much want to succeed."

Israeli political leaders, including Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, suggested that Israel was still hoping for an agreement on an Egyptian-backed ceasefire plan. Israeli security officials were expected to return to Cairo for talks on Wednesday. A Hamas delegation met with the Egyptians today, but there was no announcement of any breakthrough.

Refugees surge raise concerns of a broader Gaza war

Article Author(s): Taghreed El-Khodary

Article Author(s): Sabrina Tavernise

Media Outlet: International Herald Tribune

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.ihf.com/articles/2009/01/13/mideast/refugees.php> ^[3]

GAZA: Growing numbers of Palestinians are fleeing their homes for makeshift shelters in schools, office buildings and a park as the Israeli Army continues to press its military campaign deeper into the city of Gaza.

According to the United Nations, about 30,000 people are living in schools it sponsors, and an estimated 60,000 have fled to the houses of relatives. The figures represent a small part of Gaza's 1.5 million population but have doubled in the past four days, UN officials said, raising concerns about the humanitarian impact of a broader war.

"What began as very small, isolated numbers is now turning into a torrent," said Aidan O'Leary, deputy director for the UN agency that deals with Palestinian refugees.

Major Jacob Dalal, an Israeli military spokesman, said units used leaflets to warn families to leave areas where they planned to operate.

Aid officials say that with Gaza's borders closed, choices for shelters in the 360-square-kilometer, or 140-square-mile, strip are slim and not completely safe. Last week, as many as 43 people were killed at a UN school by an Israeli mortar fired, the military said, in response to a Hamas attack. The Israeli military disputes the death toll.

Aid groups have been pointing to what they say is a growing number of refugees. When Israeli soldiers moved deeper into the Zeitoun neighborhood on Sunday night, Olfat Jaawanah decided she had had enough. Shrapnel flew through a window, wounding her son, Ali, she said, and on Monday morning, she gathered a few blankets and moved her nine children out of their large house.

The nearby UN school was full - its bare classrooms packed with families and its toilets fetid - so she brought her family instead to her husband's office, a building belonging to an international organization in the center of Gaza, the strip's main city.

According to O'Leary, about a third of the agency's 91 schools are now full.

"Explosions, rockets," she said, arranging her children's clothes. "We can't take it anymore."

Movement is complicated by the confusion over when it is safe to leave. When the Abu Hajaj family received a leaflet last weekend, they took it as a sign of safe passage.

But Majad Abdel Karim Abu Hajaj, a teacher at a UN school, said his mother and sister were killed as they walked holding a white flag. Their bodies remain where they fell, he said, because ambulances cannot get to the area.

Sarit Michaeli of B'Tselem, an Israeli human rights group, said she had had six reports of families stuck in areas now occupied by Israeli troops.

At times, the city took on a surreal quality. A woman came with a pan and dough to Al Nasir hospital, asking for the use of their electricity so she could bake. A corpse was wheeled in a donkey cart where an ambulance was afraid to go.

Humanitarian shipments were moving on Monday, and Egypt, under pressure to do more for Palestinian victims, agreed to allow in 38 Arab doctors and a group of European lawmakers.

Palestinians interviewed in Gaza on Monday cited another reason for their flight: Israeli soldiers, they allege, are firing rounds of a noxious substance that burns skin and makes it hard to breathe.

A resident in the southwest part of Gaza on Monday showed a reporter a piece of metal casing with the identifying number, M825A1, which Marc Garlasco, a military analyst with Human Rights Watch, identified as white phosphorous. It is typically used for signaling, producing smoke screens and destroying enemy equipment.

In recent years, military experts and human rights advocates have argued over whether its use to harm people violates international conventions.

Dallal would not say whether Israel was using white phosphorous but said: "The munitions we use are consistent with international law."

Still, white phosphorous causes injury, and a growing number of Gazans report being hurt by it in Beit Lahiya, Khan Yunis, and in eastern and southwestern Gaza City. When exposed to air, it ignites, the group says, and if packed into an artillery shell, it can rain down flaming chemicals that cling to anything they touch.

Luay Suboh, 10, from Beit Lahiya, lost his eyesight and skin on his face Saturday when, his mother Siham said, a casing clung to him as he darted home from a shelter where his family is staying.

The substance smelled like burned trash, said Jaawanah, the mother who fled her home in Zeitoun, who had experienced it too.

She had no affection for Hamas, but her sufferings are changing that.

"Do you think I'm against them firing rockets now?" she asked, referring to Hamas. "No. I was against it before. Not anymore."

Israel's Top Leaders Weighing Their Next Steps in Gaza

Article Author(s): Griff Witte

Media Outlet: The Washington Post

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/12/AR2009011203013...>

[4]

Israel's leaders debated Monday how and when to bring their 17-day-old offensive in Gaza to an end, as battles continued to rage on the edge of Gaza City and as Israeli reservists flowed into the territory, ready for a possible deeper push into urban areas.

The moves came as negotiators in Cairo sought to reach a cease-fire agreement, hoping to put a halt to violence that medical officials in the Gaza Strip said has claimed the lives of more than 900 Palestinians, as many as half of them civilians. Thirteen Israelis have been killed, three of them civilians.

Speaking after a meeting with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, special Middle East envoy Tony Blair said that "the elements of an agreement" for a cease-fire were in place. But Israeli officials with knowledge of the talks said significant obstacles remained.

Hamas representatives were also in Cairo on Monday, conferring with Egyptian officials including intelligence chief Omar Suleiman. An Israeli Defense Ministry official, Amos Gilad, was negotiating with the Egyptians by phone Monday and was expected to travel to Cairo later in the week.

The talks in Egypt center on the question of how to keep Hamas from smuggling weapons across the Egypt-Gaza border. A senior Israeli official said Israel and Egypt are in basic agreement on a plan that would allow the European Union and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority to share responsibility for monitoring the border and the crossing point at Rafah.

"We think the Egyptian position is very reasonable," the senior Israeli official said. Egypt has said that it is reluctant to have any international monitoring presence on its borders.

But the Israeli official said the Islamist Hamas movement is adamantly opposed to any deal that would permit the Palestinian Authority, which is led by the secular Fatah party, to return to Gaza. Hamas, which won 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, routed Fatah forces in June 2007 and has had control of Gaza ever since.

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, speaking from an undisclosed location on the movement's television station, attempted Monday to rally supporters. "As we are in the middle of this crisis, we tell our people we, God willing, are closer to victory. All the blood that is being shed will not be in vain," Haniyeh said, while also acknowledging that the group is pursuing diplomacy. Hamas leaders in Gaza could not be reached for comment because they have gone into hiding.

If the negotiations in Cairo are successful, they could preempt an Israeli push into the strip's densely packed cities and refugee camps, where Hamas leaders are believed to have taken refuge. Israeli military officials allege that Hamas politicians are riding out the war in a bunker beneath Gaza City's main medical center, Shifa Hospital, in addition to other sites.

Any broadening of the Israeli operation would also be likely to include an effort to retake the area around the Egyptian border, known to Israelis as the Philadelphi corridor, military analysts say.

Israel pulled its troops and settlers out of Gaza in 2005 but continued to carry out raids in the coastal territory as Hamas and its allies used the strip to launch rockets at Israel. A six-month cease-fire expired in mid-December, followed by a barrage of rocket launches aimed at southern Israel. Israel began its military

offensive with a surprise attack on Dec. 27.

On Monday, Israel carried out more than 60 airstrikes, continuing to bomb tunnels along the border, as well as homes of Hamas leaders. There was intense fighting reported around Gaza City as Israel tightened its cordon on Gaza's largest population center, home to 400,000 of Gaza's 1.5 million residents.

Officials and analysts say Israel's top three political leaders disagree over how the remainder of the war should play out. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert is said to favor an expansion, while Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Defense Minister Ehud Barak are believed to be more hesitant. Barak has aggressively pushed the talks in Egypt; Livni has said that Israel can soon declare victory and withdraw. The three run the country together and must achieve consensus before Israel can act.

Olmert spokesman Mark Regev acknowledged that Barak, Livni and Olmert don't always see eye-to-eye, but said they have agreed on the war's aims. "It's probably a very good thing that we don't have group-think at the top levels of the Israeli government," he said.

In an interview with Israel Radio on Monday, Livni said Israel had succeeded in proving to Hamas it is serious about deterrence.

"Israel is a country that reacts vigorously when its citizens are fired upon, which is a good thing," she said. "That is something that Hamas now understands, and that is how we are going to react in the future if they so much as dare fire one missile at Israel." Israel and the United States consider Hamas a terrorist organization.

Gabriel Sheffer, a political scientist at Hebrew University, said politics may play a role in the differing opinions among the three. In elections slated for Feb. 10, both Barak and Livni are hoping to succeed Olmert, who is stepping down under an ethics cloud. "If the number of Israeli casualties goes up, the effect on Barak and Livni will be very bad," he said. "Olmert has nothing to lose."

Sheffer said U.S. politics may also be a factor: Israel probably does not want to be fighting a war when President-elect Barack Obama is inaugurated next week, he said.

As international pressure to end the war has mounted, Obama has largely stayed out of the debate over whether Israel should be allowed to continue its offensive, while President Bush has staunchly backed the Jewish state. In his final news conference as president, Bush again asserted Israel's "right to defend herself" and called on Hamas to stop its rocket fire.

"There will not be a sustainable cease-fire if they continue firing rockets," he said. "I happen to believe the choice is Hamas's to make."

Hamas and its allies continued to fire rockets into southern Israel on Monday, launching more than 20. There were no reports of major injuries, and the number was significantly down from earlier in the war, when Hamas was launching 40 per day or more.

"The organization has lost much of its willingness to fight," said Shlomo Dror, spokesman for Israel's Defense Ministry. "It's much less than we anticipated."

Military analysts, however, have warned that Hamas could be saving its ammunition, with plans to launch urban warfare if Israeli troops push into Gaza's cities and camps.

Ahmed Qassim, a 30-year-old insurance salesman, said Hamas fighters had moved into densely populated parts of Gaza City in recent days and were using residential neighborhoods as bases for firing

rockets. But he blamed Israel for the civilian casualties that result when the military strikes at those fighters. "The Israelis are so powerful and they have so much technology," he said. "They should be able to tell the difference between the resistance and civilians."

The Israeli military has not allowed foreign journalists into Gaza to work independently. But the military on Monday permitted a small group of reporters to travel with troops into the strip. A Reuters journalist reported from the outskirts of Gaza City that soldiers said they were meeting little resistance, but that they were pushing into urban centers to try to draw Palestinian fire.

"We are tightening the encirclement of the city," Brig. Eyal Eisenberg said, according to Reuters. "We are not static. We are careful to be constantly on the move."

Egypt wants Hamas to sign up to truce deal 'now'

Media Outlet: Agence France Presse (AFP)

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g6vmei4DlvtiZxkPPKboDODUKj1w>

[5]

CAIRO (AFP) ? Egypt was on Tuesday holding talks with Hamas on Cairo's Gaza truce proposal, with an official calling for the Islamists to sign up "now" in the hope of announcing a ceasefire before the end of the week.

A Hamas delegation was to hold a fresh round of talks with Egyptian intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, as Israel's offensive ploughed on for an 18th day and diplomatic efforts to end the bloodshed plodded forward.

"We're working seriously with Hamas, we need to end the vagueness and they need to say yes, now, to our plan," a senior Egyptian diplomat told AFP, requesting anonymity.

"Egypt hopes that the Israeli war machine can be stopped by the end of the week and the massacres can be ended," with more than 900 Palestinians dead and 4,000 wounded.

The diplomat said that Israel "appears now to agree" with the truce plan launched by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak a week ago, but Hamas is having difficulty signing up to it.

The plan calls for a ceasefire for a pre-determined time, securing tunnels which Israel says are used to smuggle weapons from Egypt into Gaza, opening the embattled enclave's borders and restarting Palestinian reconciliation talks.

"Hamas delegates coming from Damascus demonstrate the luxury of patience while those from Gaza are in more of a hurry to end it," the diplomat said. "Syria could clearly play a more positive role."

The Hamas negotiating team is made up of five officials, three from the exiled political leadership in Damascus and two from the Gaza Strip.

"The problem is that until now there have been no real negotiations, no engagement or clear answers from them," the diplomat said.

The Syria-based Hamas delegates have been shuttling between Cairo and Damascus for the last few days, reporting their talks to the exiled leadership.

Two of the divisive issues are the possible presence of a multinational observer force on the Palestinian side of Egypt's 14-kilometre (nine-mile) border with Egypt and the duration of an eventual truce.

"Hamas says it doesn't want this force while Israel does, and the Jewish state wants an indefinite truce and the Islamists want it to be for a fixed period of time, around six months," the diplomat said.

He said that Israel's main negotiator, senior defence official Amos Gilad, is "ready and waiting" to return to Cairo, after an initial round of talks with Egypt's Suleiman.

The two men brokered the last six-month Israel-Hamas truce which ended in December, heralding the latest violence. Suleiman has negotiated previous truces with different Palestinian factions in 2001, 2003 and 2005.

"It appears, through various signals, that Israel accepts our plan but is not ready to announce it publicly," the Egyptian diplomat said.

"The concept of the new truce has not changed, but on top of an agreement between the two parties not to use violence, it must be applied with undertakings, guarantees and multinational controls," he said.

Such guarantees and controls must include securing borders -- Israel's demand of an end to arms trafficking through tunnels into Gaza -- and "opening border crossings and lifting the siege," as demanded by the Palestinians.

Another key element is the Palestinian reconciliation process aimed at bringing Hamas and the rival Fatah of president Mahmud Abbas -- who reigns in the occupied West Bank -- back together again.

Hamas's Gaza-based political leader Ismail Haniya said on Monday that any truce plan must stipulate "a withdrawal of Zionist forces," as well as an "end to the aggression," and ending the blockade by opening border crossing points.

"The Egyptian plan will work out," the diplomat said.

Report: Hamas agrees to Turkey troops on Gaza-Egypt border

Article Author(s): Avi Issacharoff

Article Author(s): Yoav Stern

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1055144.html> ^[6]

Hamas sources have said that the Palestinian militant organization would agree to the deployment of Turkish troops along Gaza's border with Egypt, the London-based Arabic daily Al-Hayat reported Tuesday.

"We trust Turkey and its role as an Islamic country," the Hamas officials said. They were referring to a proposal recently submitted to Hamas' Damascus-based political chief Khaled Meshal by Turkish officials.

But a senior Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzouq told Al Jazeera television any cease-fire proposal must address the group's demands for an Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and a complete opening of border crossings.

"This initiative, if it is to be accepted, will be on the basis set by the movement from the beginning," he said.

"I believe this track will be the launch point for the acceptance of any initiative, Egyptian or otherwise" by Hamas, he added.

A Hamas delegation is in Cairo to relay the group's position to Egyptian intelligence officials.

Hamas envoys resumed talks in Cairo with Egyptian intelligence officials on an Egyptian truce proposal for the embattled Gaza Strip, according to officials in Cairo.

The Egyptian initiative calls for a temporary truce, followed by a long ceasefire and the opening of border crossings with the presence of the Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas, whose forces Hamas drove out of Gaza in 2007.

The third phase of the initiative deals with efforts to reconcile Hamas and Abbas's Fatah group.

The talks follow diplomatic efforts that have made little concrete progress in reconciling key differences between Israel and Hamas.

Al-Arabia television reported that Hamas has asked for the exact dates of the proposed Israel Defense Forces withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and the reopening of the border crossings.

Egypt: Hamas using Gaza war for political gain

Egyptian officials said Tuesday they agree with Israeli estimates that there is a rift growing between Hamas' Gaza leadership and its leadership abroad.

Egyptian weekly Al-Ahram on Tuesday reported that while Hamas' leadership in Gaza supports the Egyptian cease-fire proposal, Hamas' leadership in Syria is being pressured by Syria and Iran to reject or sabotage the Egyptian proposal.

Egyptian officials also told Al-Ahram that Hamas is trying to use the war in Gaza for political gain.

Al-Ahram reported that Israel has officially apologized to Egypt for the four Egyptian citizens who were wounded by shrapnel during an Israeli air strike on Gaza targets near the border with Egypt.

Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, meanwhile, left for Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on Tuesday for talks with his ally, King Abdullah on the conflict which has pitched Arabs in a new controversy.

Egyptian officials said Mubarak will brief Abdullah on the Egyptian efforts to convince Hamas to accept an immediate cease-fire with Israel.

Mubarak's previously unannounced departure followed reports in Egyptian state-owned papers about difficulties in the ongoing talks with Hamas.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks, said Egypt intelligence chief Omar Suleiman was accompanying Mubarak on his Saudi trip. They said Suleiman left the talks with Hamas officials to be handled by his aides.

There is no indication what transpired in the negotiations prior to Suleiman's departure. A three-member Hamas delegation from the group's exiled leadership in Syria had returned to Cairo from Damascus late Monday to resume the talks and several Hamas members from Gaza were already in the Egyptian capital.

The group has said it is sticking to its demands for an immediate withdrawal of Israeli forces and said it will only observe a cease-fire afterward.

The talks come as Israeli ground troops pushed deeper into Gaza, battling Palestinian militants in the streets of a densely populated Gaza City neighborhood early Tuesday.

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Israel would end the military operations only when Hamas stops rocketing Israel and halts weapons smuggling across the porous border.

Hamas downplays rift between group leaders in Syria and Gaza

Meanwhile, a Hamas official in Syria downplayed rumors of a rift between members in Gaza and the exiled leadership in Damascus.

Mohammad Nazal of the Hamas political bureau, told The Associated Press that such reports were meant to cause confusion over where Hamas stands and were part of psychological warfare by Israel.

Representing Hamas in talks in Egypt were Salah Bardaweel and Jamal Abu Hashem from Gaza, and Mohammed Nasr from the Damascus-based Political Bureau of the group, Nazal said.

Everything is complicated, but nothing is impossible

Article Author(s): Hamida Ghafour

Media Outlet: The National

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090113/OPINION/998813858/1080> ^[7]

The roads from Cairo to the northern Sinai peninsula are patrolled by Egyptian police and intelligence officers and many checkpoints have been set up along the way since Israel began its attack on the Gaza Strip.

At the Rafah crossing on the border between Egypt and Gaza, the Egyptians are allowing through only convoys of medical aid, and accepting Palestinians injured by Israeli attacks. In Cairo the wail of ambulances continues day and night as the wounded are taken to local hospitals for treatment.

In another effort to control visitors, a road sign on the Sinai peninsula reads: "No foreigners are allowed off the main road."

One of the checkpoints is set up on the road in Balouza, Sinai. I watched two tour buses carrying journalists and political activists who were turned back.

"This is a very difficult checkpoint, there may be trouble for us," my driver said. Without another word the car veered sharply to the right, across a sandy traffic island, and joined a parallel road about 100 metres away. We drove straight past the checkpoint, in clear view of the police, without being stopped.

It was a rather obvious loophole considering how tight security is. My colleague from a French television network, who was travelling with me, had a more philosophical explanation.

?In Egypt everything is complicated but nothing is impossible,? he said.

* * * * *

Most people flee from bombs and rockets, but at the Rafah border crossing there were several stories of Gazan Palestinians who had returned to the Gaza Strip even as the Israelis continued the shelling. They had been stuck in Al Arish, a resort town 60 kilometres from the border, when the Israelis launched their attack on December 27.

I thought these stories were apocryphal until I met a Scottish-Palestinian relief worker, Khalil Alniss, who has spent the past couple of weeks giving blankets, water, flour, rice and other essential supplies to several hundred Palestinians to take back with them. He bought the goods at the local market and left them at the gate of the border for the refugees to collect before they returned home.

These were ordinary citizens: mothers, fathers, children, sons, and daughters. I met one such woman, in her early 20s, who crossed with her infant daughter on Thursday. There was no time to ask her for details about her life because it was getting dark and we were kicked out of the customs area where she was boarding the bus. I wonder what has happened to her and whether she managed to get home safely ? whatever that means in Gaza?s terrible environment.

But the tragic fate of another woman was shared on the walkie-talkie of an Egyptian security official. The woman, a mother, returned to Gaza to be with the rest of her family. Within half an hour of crossing the border she was killed by a bomb.

?This is Palestinian culture, they want to go back and die and I?m not surprised,? said Alniss.

* * * * *

What is also not surprising is that most Arabs are reluctant to give their honest opinions about politics because no one wants to be accused of being unpatriotic, or worse. I spent ages trying to find out what an Egyptian bedouin chief from Sinai thought about Arab politics. He was friendly, but evasive ? until he received a text message.

The mobile phone alert was a sound byte from an old speech by the Hizbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, addressed to the Israelis.

?We have a message and it has been delivered,? it said.

* * * * *

A British woman recently found a hoard of ancient gold coins in a car park in Jerusalem. She found the coins, minted in the 7th century, near the walls of the Old City during an excavation by an Israeli archeological organisation.

Most evenings I drive around the crowded car park outside my flat in Abu Dhabi in search of a free spot, and usually end up next to the smelly skip overflowing with rubbish. But the stray cats always look as if they?ve discovered a treasure.

Neither Israel nor Hamas can be choosy in Gaza

Article Author(s): Amir Oren

Media Outlet: Haaretz

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1054907.html> ^[8]

To judge by the sights and sounds on the Negev's roads, at military staff headquarters and at training facilities, Operation Cast Lead is about to take off to new heights.

This is not fraud, and not even self-delusion. They really are preparing, and who if not the Israel Defense Forces of recent years knows that it is better to be prepared to fight without fighting than to fight without being prepared? But the implementation of the operation's next phase will mean admitting failure because the operation, including surrounding Gaza to pressure Hamas, is meant to support diplomatic moves. The international arena and the politics of decision making all focus now on stopping the operation.

On Monday, a white flag was raised for the first time - not Hamas', but Ehud Olmert's, as he joined Tzipi Livni and Ehud Barak in understanding that stopping now is better than an entanglement that will overshadow the operation's achievements.

Defense Minister Barak, IDF chief of staff Gabi Ashkenazi and Shin Bet security service head Yuval Diskin know that the desire to thwart terror justified doubling the operation. But they also know that broader considerations are working against this desire. They are all devoted to the principle of "sticking to the mission in light of its goal," and when the mission - striking hard at Hamas - clashes with the goal, the goal wins out.

The main goal, which dictated the operation's logic in its aerial phase and ground phase so far, was deterrence - to convince Hamas to refrain from shooting its rockets for a very long time. The image of solid American support builds deterrence no less than the taking of a fortified objective in some God-forsaken neighborhood.

The Israeli threat to embark on a year-long operation is not serious, GOC Southern Command Yoav Galant warned (and did not recommend) Olmert and Barak at the Gaza Division headquarters. A week before Barack Obama moves into the White House, and a month before Barak and Livni hope to reach the elections without a slap in the face from the Americans, who would risk a bitter honeymoon with Obama?

We are quick to forget, but our great friend George W. Bush protested vehemently after Operation Defensive Shield entered Palestinian population centers in the West Bank, and demanded that we stop. If that was Bush, what will Obama do when the IDF conceded that of 901 Palestinians killed (as of Monday morning) only 400 were identified as Hamas operatives? Some 250 men, women and children were caught in the cross-fire, and the others are in some in-between group.

And what will happen when the forces roll southward in a firestorm, followed by bulldozers that will mow down hundreds of houses on the Philadelphi route to put an end to the tunnels? Israel will be quickly tossed out of both south and north, losing diplomatic assets in the process.

Israel, a proud country with solid yet flexible principles, is prepared to conduct indirect talks with Hamas, as long as they are not defined as indirect talks a la Turkey-Syria. The bride will meet with the Egyptian matchmaker, Omar Suleiman, not only without the groom, but on a different day. But it is likely that a match, albeit loveless, will result, since neither side can be choosy.

The chances of persuading Hamas to stop the rocket fire is high: The rate of firing has fallen continually, from 80 to 60 to 40 to 20. And the chances of it signing a pledge to stop smuggling is low. Israel will have to take what it can get, not as little compared with before December 27, but less than it had hoped.

Groups say Israel failed to plan for the safety of Gaza civilians

Article Author(s): Ahmed Abu Hamda

Article Author(s): Shashank Bengali

Media Outlet: McClatchy News

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.kansascity.com/451/story/977472.html> ^[9]

Israel's offensive in Gaza has forced as many as 90,000 Gazans to abandon their homes, and thousands more may soon have to flee in search of safety, humanitarian aid organizations said Monday.

For civilians caught in the crossfire between Hamas militants and Israel's military, however, there's no escape to safety abroad and no sure sanctuary in Gaza. Some families have had to move repeatedly to escape the violence.

In the 17 days since Israel began pummeling Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip, Mohammed al-Sultan's family has moved four times, from house to house, shelter to shelter, having left all their possessions behind. Now they're among hundreds of displaced Palestinians who are sleeping in cold concrete classrooms in a schoolhouse that's serving as a temporary shelter in Gaza City.

"They have no place to hide, and no place to run," said U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who announced that he would visit the region this week to push for a cease-fire that the U.N. Security Council has ordered but that Israel and Hamas have ignored.

Senior Israeli officials said they're close to achieving the objectives they set for the war: stopping Hamas militants from firing rockets into Israel and preventing the group from re-arming itself. Relief officials and human rights groups, however, said the Israeli military failed to plan for the safety of civilians in one of the most densely populated patches of the Middle East.

When Maj. Avital Leibovich, an Israeli military spokeswoman, was asked at a news conference on Sunday where civilians would be safe in Gaza, she suggested that refugees could find shelter in the razed Israeli settlements on Gaza's northern border with Israel. That would require refugees to go through Israeli-controlled military areas, however.

Israeli officials said that Hamas operates from the vicinity of homes, schools and mosques, making fighting in civilian areas unavoidable. Of the more than 900 Palestinians who have died in the conflict, about half were civilians, according to Gaza medical officials.

"They (Israel) knew this operation was coming, they knew what the geography and demographics of Gaza are like, and apparently they didn't plan for the humanitarian needs," said Fred Abrahams, a senior researcher for Human Rights Watch, a New York-based advocacy group.

So 1.5 million Gazans remain bottled up inside their tiny coastal strip - at about 140 square miles, roughly

twice the size of the District of Columbia but three times as populous.

Al-Sultan's family has been on the run since the early days of the Israeli offensive. On the morning of Dec. 28, he was sitting with his wife and two daughters in the garden outside their home in the Salateen section of Gaza City when an Israeli airstrike hit nearby, jolting them "like a volcanic eruption" and sending shards of shrapnel into his back, he said.

The bespectacled 60-year-old went to a hospital, and his family moved in with his brother, but four days later a night of heavy bombardment forced them to move again, to the home of a friend in a neighborhood close to the beach. They moved so fast they carried nothing with them, not even al-Sultan's ID card.

"Four or five days and the bullets reached us again," al Sultan said. They moved to a U.N.-operated shelter, but it was overflowing with people, so when they got word over the weekend that another shelter was open at the Salahedeen school in Gaza City, they moved for the fourth time in two weeks.

And perhaps not the last, he said.

The U.N. has opened 36 temporary shelters housing more than 28,000 people, but two of those have come under fire. Relief officials said that tens of thousands more displaced Palestinians are on their own, staying with family members or friends.

In the shelters, many of them in school buildings, most food comes from Palestinian or international charity groups. Women and girls wash clothes in buckets and hang them to dry anywhere they can find. Men haul desks into courtyards and sit idly or huddle in chilly classrooms to pass the time.

Human rights experts said the plight of displaced Palestinians is particularly severe because Gaza is completely sealed off from its neighbors, Israel and Egypt.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak has allowed in scores of wounded Gazans to receive medical care, but despite public pressure he hasn't agreed to host a large refugee population from such a volatile region.

"Gaza is truly exceptional," said Rupert Colville, a spokesman for the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights. "The way this conflict is unfolding, they clearly could be at risk wherever they are."

The U.N. has said that Egypt and Israel could be in violation of international refugee laws that give people in war zones the right to seek asylum in foreign countries.

"Normally people can at least dream of going somewhere safe," Colville said. "Gazans can't."

Even Gaza's so-called safe areas aren't safe. In what international humanitarian groups describe as one of the deadliest incidents of the conflict, an Israeli artillery strike on Hamas targets last week landed near a school that the U.N. had opened as a temporary shelter for displaced families, reportedly killing more than 40 people.

Israeli military officials said they're investigating the incident but that their ground forces were merely returning fire from Hamas fighters operating from near the school. U.N. officials didn't dispute Israel's contention that militants sometimes use their shelters as cover, but they've called for an independent inquiry.

The tensions over the war reverberated into Israeli politics Monday when Israel's election committee voted overwhelmingly to ban the nation's two Arab parties from running in next month's national election.

Ultrnationalist Israeli lawmakers proposed the ban. They accused their Arab colleagues of betraying Israel and supporting terrorism because some of them have visited Israel's enemy neighbors, Syria and Lebanon. Arab lawmakers vowed to appeal the ruling.

Despite fiery rhetoric from Hamas leaders who have vowed to keep fighting, Israeli officials continued to declare that they had dealt a substantial blow to Hamas's infrastructure in Gaza. Israel's security Cabinet reportedly is divided between ending the conflict and sending ground troops deeper into urban areas.

"We're beginning to enter the end game," said government spokesman Mark Regev. "We're not there yet."

Israelis United on Gaza War as Censure Rises Abroad

Article Author(s): Ethan Bronner

Media Outlet: The New York Times

Date: January 12, 2009

Source Link(s): <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/13/world/middleeast/13israel.html?hp> ^[10]

JERUSALEM ? To Israel?s critics abroad, the picture could not be clearer: Israel?s war in Gaza is a wildly disproportionate response to the rockets of Hamas, causing untold human suffering and bombing an already isolated and impoverished population into the Stone Age, and it must be stopped.

Yet here in Israel very few, at least among the Jewish population, see it that way.

Since Israeli warplanes opened the assault on Gaza 17 days ago, about 900 Palestinians have been reported killed, many of them civilians. Red Cross workers were denied access to scores of dead and wounded Gazans, and a civilian crowd near a United Nations school was hit, with at least 40 people killed.

But voices of dissent in this country have been rare. And while tens of thousands have poured into the streets of world capitals demonstrating against the Israeli military operation, antiwar rallies here have struggled to draw 1,000 participants. The Peace Now organization has received many messages from supporters telling it to stay out of the streets on this one.

As the editorial page of The Jerusalem Post put it on Monday, the world must be wondering, do Israelis really believe that everybody is wrong and they alone are right?

The answer is yes.

?It is very frustrating for us not to be understood,? remarked Yoel Esteron, editor of a daily business newspaper called Calcalist. ?Almost 100 percent of Israelis feel that the world is hypocritical. Where was the world when our cities were rocketed for eight years and our soldier was kidnapped? Why should we care about the world?s view now??

Israel, which is sometimes a fractured, bickering society, has turned in the past couple of weeks into a paradigm of unity and mutual support. Flags are flying high. Celebrities are visiting schoolchildren in at-risk areas, soldiers are praising the equipment and camaraderie of their army units, and neighbors are worried about families whose fathers are on reserve duty. Ask people anywhere how they feel about the army?s barring journalists from entering Gaza and the response is: let the army do its job.

Israelis deeply believe, rightly or wrongly, that their military works harder than most to spare civilians, holding their fire in many more cases than using it.

Because Hamas booby-traps schools, apartment buildings and the zoo, and its fighters hide among civilians, it is Hamas that is viewed here as responsible for the civilian toll. Hamas is committed to Israel's destruction and gets help and inspiration from Iran, so that what looks to the world like a disproportionate war of choice is seen by many here as an obligatory war for existence.

"This is a just war and we don't feel guilty when civilians we don't intend to hurt get hurt, because we feel Hamas uses these civilians as human shields," said Elliot Jager, editorial page editor of The Jerusalem Post, who happened to answer his phone for an interview while in Ashkelon, an Israeli city about 10 miles from Gaza, standing in front of a house that had been hit two hours earlier by a Hamas rocket.

"We do feel bad about it, but we don't feel guilty," Mr. Jager added. "The most ethical moral imperative is for Israel to prevail in this conflict over an immoral Islamist philosophy. It is a zero sum conflict. That is what is not understood outside this country."

It is true that there are voices of concern here that the war may be outliving its value. Worries over the risk to Israeli troops and over even steeper civilian casualties as the ground war escalates have produced calls to declare victory and pull out.

For many of the 1.4 million Israelis who are Arabs, the war has produced a very different feeling, a mix of anger and despair. The largest demonstration against the war so far, with some 6,000 participants, was organized by an Arab political party. But that is still distinctly a minority view. Polls have shown nearly 90 percent support for the war thus far, and street interviews confirm that Israelis not only favor it but do so quite strongly. The country's leaders, while seeking an arrangement to stop Hamas's ability to rearm, do not want a face-saving agreement. They want one that works, or else they want to continue the war until Hamas has lost either its rockets or its will to fire them.

Boaz Gaon, a playwright and peace activist, said he found it deeply depressing how the Israeli public had embraced the military's arguments in explaining the deaths of civilians. But he was livid at Hamas, both for what it had done to its own people and civilians in the south, and for its impact on the Israeli left.

"Hamas has pushed Israeli thinking back 30 years," he said. "It has killed the peace camp."

Moshe Halbertal, a left-leaning professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University, helped write the army's ethics code. He said he knew from personal experience how much laborious discussion went into deciding when it was acceptable to shoot at a legitimate target if civilians were nearby, adding that there had been several events in this war in which he suspected that the wrong decision had been made.

For example, Israel killed a top Hamas ideologue, Nizar Rayyan, during the first week of the war and at the same time killed his four wives and at least nine of his children. Looking back at it, Mr. Halbertal disapproves, assuming that the decision was made consciously, even if Mr. Rayyan purposely hid among his family to protect himself, as it appears he did. Yet almost no one here publicly questioned the decision to drop a bomb on his house and kill civilians; all the sentiment in Israel was how satisfying and just it was to kill a man whose ideology and activity had been so virulent and destructive.

But Mr. Halbertal takes quite seriously the threat that Hamas poses to Israel's existence, and that issue affects him in his judgments of the war.

"Rockets from Hamas could eventually reach all of Israel," he said. "This is not a fantasy. It is a real

problem. So there is a gap between actual images on the screen and the geopolitical situation.

"You have Al Jazeera standing at Shifa Hospital and the wounded are coming in," he continued, referring to an Arab news outlet. "So you have this great Goliath crushing these poor people, and they are perceived as victims. But from the Israeli perspective, Hamas and Hezbollah are really the spearhead of a whole larger threat that is invisible. Israelis feel like the tiny David faced with an immense Muslim Goliath. The question is: who is the David here?"

The war, of course, is portrayed differently here and abroad. What Israelis see on the front pages of their newspapers and on their evening broadcasts is not what the rest of the world is reading and seeing. Israeli news focuses on Israeli suffering — the continuing rocket attacks on Israel, the wounded Israeli soldiers with pictures from Gaza coming later. On a day last week when the foreign news media focused on Red Cross allegations of possible war crimes, Israeli news outlets played down the story.

But the Israeli news media are not so much determining the national agenda as reflecting it. Even the left and what was long called the peace camp consider this conflict almost entirely the responsibility of Hamas, and thus a moral and just struggle.

"By this stage in the first and second Lebanon wars, there were much larger street demonstrations, vigils and op-ed pieces," said Janet Aviad, a former sociologist and peace activist. "But in this case, the entire Israeli public is angry at the immoral behavior of Hamas."

The writer A.B. Yehoshua, who opposes Israel's occupation and promotes a Palestinian state, has been trying to explain the war to foreigners.

"Imagine," I tell a French reporter, "that every two days a missile falls in the Champs-Élysées and only the glass windows of the shops break and five people suffer from shock," Mr. Yehoshua told a reporter from Yediot Aharonot, a Tel Aviv newspaper. "What would you say? Wouldn't you be angry? Wouldn't you send missiles at Belgium if it were responsible for missiles on your grand boulevard?"

Clinton Sympathizes With Palestinians In Confirmation Hearing

Article Author(s): Ryan Grim

Media Outlet: The Huffington Post

Date: January 13, 2009

Source Link(s): http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/13/clinton-sympathizes-with_n_157487.html?... [11]

Hillary Clinton sent a message to Israel Tuesday during her Secretary of State confirmation hearing testimony, telling the Foreign Relations Committee that because of the conflict in Gaza "we have ...been reminded of the tragic humanitarian costs of conflict in the Middle East, and pained by the suffering of Palestinian and Israeli civilians."

Mainstream American politicians are famously reluctant to utter the words "suffering" and "Palestinian" in the same sentence. By breaking from that tradition, Clinton appeared to send a signal to Israel that that it would not have a free hand to operate in the Middle East.

President-elect Barack Obama found out the hard way early in the campaign what heat can come to a

candidate who expresses sympathy for Palestinian suffering. He was quoted in the Des Moines Register as saying that "[n]obody is suffering more than the Palestinian people." The report said that Obama considered the suffering "a result of stalled peace efforts with Israel."

Asked later in a debate about the remark, he backpedaled. "Well, keep in mind what the remark actually, if you had the whole thing, said. And what I said is nobody has suffered more than the Palestinian people from the failure of the Palestinian leadership to recognize Israel, to renounce violence, and to get serious about negotiating peace and security for the region," Obama explained.

Clinton went on to say that the current crisis "must only increase our determination" to seek a two-state solution.

"The President-elect and I understand and are deeply sympathetic to Israel's desire to defend itself under the current conditions, and to be free of shelling by Hamas by rockets. However, we have also been reminded of the tragic humanitarian costs of conflict in the Middle East, and pained by the suffering of Palestinian and Israeli civilians," Clinton said. "This must only increase our determination to seek a just and lasting peace agreement that brings real security to Israel; normal and positive relationships with its neighbors; and independence, economic progress, and security to the Palestinians in their own state."

[Events](#) | [Daily News](#) | [About Us](#) | [Resources](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Donate](#) | [Site Map](#)

[Front Page Features](#) [World Press Roundup](#) [ATFP in the News](#) [Policy and Analysis](#)
[Briefing Summaries](#)

Source URL (retrieved on Feb 4 2012 - 1:43am):

http://www.americantaskforce.org/world_press_roundup/20090113t000000

Links:

- [1] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/14/world/middleeast/14mideast.html?_r=1&ref=world
- [2] <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-gaza14-2009jan14,0,7837955.story>
- [3] <http://www.iht.com/articles/2009/01/13/mideast/refugees.php>
- [4] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/12/AR2009011203013.html>
- [5] <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5g6vmei4DlvtiZxkPPKboDODUKj1w>
- [6] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1055144.html>
- [7] <http://www.thenational.ae/article/20090113/OPINION/998813858/1080>
- [8] <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1054907.html>
- [9] <http://www.kansascity.com/451/story/977472.html>
- [10] <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/13/world/middleeast/13israel.html?hp>
- [11] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/01/13/clinton-sympathizes-with_n_157487.html?view=print