

Egypt's army chief visits Gaza border after Israel says Sissi failed on smuggling

Cairo says Netanyahu trying to hide failures with his comments on need to remain in Philadelphi Corridor; US expresses frustration with PM but blames Hamas for slow progress in talks

By Lazar Berman, and Jacob Magid / 5 September 2024

Amid public criticism from top Israeli officials this week, Egypt's army chief of staff Lt. Gen. Ahmed Fathy Khalifa made a surprise visit on Thursday to the country's border with the Gaza Strip to inspect the security situation, state television reported, citing the army's spokesperson.

The visit was widely seen as an indication of Egypt's displeasure with recent comments from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and senior adviser Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer, who both directly panned Egypt this week for its purported failure to prevent Hamas from smuggling in weapons from the Sinai Peninsula.

Unlike Netanyahu, Dermer mentioned Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi by name. He said that he was "not questioning the intentions of the Egyptians," but rather was "questioning the results."

Egypt pushed back on Israel's accusations on Thursday, with a "high-ranking Egyptian source" telling Al Qahera al-Ikhbariya that Netanyahu's statements are unrealistic, and that "he is trying to blame other countries for his failure to achieve his goals in the Gaza Strip."

The Egyptian official also said that recent months have proven that Netanyahu does not care about the return of Israeli hostages if it gets in the way of his personal interests.

On Monday, Netanyahu made the case for a permanent Israeli presence on the Gaza-Egypt border, arguing that it was a necessary step to ensure Hamas cannot rearm and rebuild its control after its war with Israel ends. However, Dermer indicated that this demand may not be set in stone and that there could be alternative arrangements in the context of a long-term ceasefire.

Cairo has remained vehemently opposed to Israel establishing any form of control over its border route, and on Tuesday protested that by defining the Philadelphi Corridor as a military zone, it would be violating the countries' 1978 peace accord.

Nine years ago, Egypt razed thousands of homes on its side of the border to create a buffer zone with Gaza. Since then, it has said that smuggling is no longer an issue.

The accusations against Egypt also angered its regional allies.

The UAE's foreign ministry put out a statement in which it expressed "its full solidarity with the Arab Republic of Egypt in the face of Israeli allegations and claims regarding the Philadelphi Corridor, and strongly condemns and denounces the offensive Israeli statements in this regard, which threaten stability and exacerbate the situation in the region."

Saudi Arabia similarly said it "strongly condemns and denounces" Israel's comments on the corridor, and accused it of making "futile attempts to justify continued violations of international laws and norms."

According to the Qatari-owned Al-Araby Al-Jadeed news outlet, Netanyahu had told Cairo ahead of his Monday press conference that he was willing to discuss the future of the Gaza-Egypt border in negotiations on the second phase of a deal. He was told, however, that Cairo would accept nothing less than a pledge to withdraw, even if it didn't happen in the first phase of the deal.

Frustrating and difficult

With Netanyahu making his case for remaining in control of the Philadelphi Corridor in press conferences and interviews this week, Washington showed signs of exasperation.

A senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday that Netanyahu's repeated public statements were making things "difficult."

On Thursday, senior US officials eased up on Netanyahu.



US Ambassador Jack Lew (R) speaks with Tamir Hayman (L) the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv on September 5, 2024. (Screengrab)

"Very strong public comments sometimes coexist with residual flexibility, almost always," US Ambassador Jack Lew said at a Tel Aviv **conference**.

Pressed on whether Netanyahu's statements have become an obstacle to hostage negotiations, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby responded on Thursday that "the biggest obstacle to getting a ceasefire deal is Hamas."

"They took the damn hostages in the first place," Kirby said during a press briefing.

"As frustrating as it has been at times, and as unhelpful as not just public comments, but even private machinations in the negotiation purposes have been to the closure of the deal, it has not dimmed one bit President Biden's commitment to trying to see this through," he added.

Hamas's lead negotiator on Thursday urged Washington to press Israel for a truce in Gaza, and reiterated that the terror group will accept nothing less than a full IDF withdrawal from the Philadelphi Corridor and the rest of the Strip.

“If the US administration and its President Biden really want to reach a ceasefire and complete a prisoner exchange deal, they must abandon their blind bias towards the Zionist occupation and exert real pressure on Netanyahu and his government,” Qatar-based Khalil al-Hayya said, according to a Hamas statement.

‘Not close’

Speaking to the “Fox and Friends” morning show amid a media blitz this week, Netanyahu said that an agreement to free hostages and pause the war is “not close,” adding, “There is not a deal in the making, unfortunately.”

Lew said earlier in the day that “progress continues to be made” on attempts to reach a hostage deal, “including on the key issues.”

Lew seemed to indicate that the most intractable topic is not the Philadelphi Corridor: “Negotiations have gotten into the most difficult issues, some of which are not the subject of most of the public discussion.”

“The public debate masks where the real difficult issues are,” said Lew at the Institute for National Security Studies.

On that point, Netanyahu seemed to agree, stressing in his Fox interview that there are unresolved issues beyond the future of the Philadelphi Corridor.

A senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday that a hostage deal between Israel and Hamas was being held up by two remaining obstacles: the list of Palestinian security prisoners Hamas is seeking to free and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Philadelphi Corridor.

Netanyahu dispatched Mossad chief David Barnea to Doha on Monday to inform Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani that the IDF is prepared to fully withdraw from the Philadelphi Corridor in the second phase of the deal.

Of the 251 hostages abducted to Gaza on October 7, 97 are believed to remain in captivity, including the bodies of at least 33 confirmed dead by the IDF. The bodies of 37 other hostages have been recovered.

Hamas executed six hostages last week, days before IDF troops came upon them.

NBC News reported on Wednesday that, given the lack of momentum and the murder of hostages, families of captives with American citizenship are petitioning the Biden administration to cut a unilateral deal with Hamas to free their loved ones.

However, the father of a US-Israeli held hostage in Gaza told Channel 12 that the report is false.

Asked about the report, Netanyahu told Fox that he doesn’t know what was said at a meeting between representatives of the families and Biden’s national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, but that “I don’t judge the families. They’ve gone through this horrible anguish.”

An Israeli source told The Times of Israel on Thursday that Netanyahu’s office is concerned about the possibility of a unilateral US deal, and held an English-language press conference on Wednesday night — which largely repeated points Netanyahu had made to the Israeli press two nights before — in order to convince Washington not to do so.

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/egypts-army-chief-visits-gaza-border-after-israel-says-sissi-failed-on-smuggling/>