

US Puts Pressure on Israel to Refrain from Attacks

Contributed by Tim McGirk / TIME / Jerusalem
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U.S. officials have asked Israel to refrain from launching any major military action in the region during the waning days of the Bush presidency, Israeli sources have told TIME. Previously, some Israeli military officials had hinted to the media that if Israel were to carry out its threats to strike at Iranian nuclear installations, it might do so before Barack Obama enters the White House in January. But now a Defense Ministry official says, "We have been warned off."

The call for restraint was relayed to Israeli officials by senior U.S. counterparts, TIME's sources say, and it is likely to be reinforced during Monday's valedictory meeting in Washington between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and President George W. Bush. (See pictures of President Bush in the Middle East.)

Washington's concerns are not limited to the possibility of Israel attacking Iran, the sources say; U.S. officials have also cautioned Israelis against launching a ground assault inside the besieged Palestinian territory of Gaza in a bid to stop militants there from firing rockets into southern Israel. Bush Administration officials warn that such an attack could cost many lives and jeopardize the painstaking, thus far futile efforts of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to broker a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

To strengthen the case against Israel invading Gaza, U.S. officials turned to Jordan's King Abdullah for help in stemming the rocket attacks from Gaza, according to knowledgeable Palestinian and Jordanian officials. Because the U.S. has avoided direct talks with the militant Hamas movement, which runs Gaza but which the U.S. deems a terrorist organization, Abdullah was approached to act as a go-between, these sources told TIME. The Jordanian monarch complied with the U.S. request and last week dispatched a senior intelligence officer to Damascus to warn exiled Hamas leader Khaled Mashaal that Gaza was in danger of an Israeli attack unless the rocket fire was immediately stopped. (See pictures of tension along the Gaza border.)

Rocket fire from Gaza had largely stopped during a five-month cease-fire between Israel and Hamas that was brokered by Egypt, but that unraveled on Nov. 4, when Israel raided Gaza to destroy a tunnel it accused Hamas of digging to conduct cross-border raids. Since then, dozens of rockets have been fired at Israel, and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have responded with land and air attacks and by halting supplies that were to enter Gaza. Israel has hoped to tighten the screws on Hamas by blocking all but a trickle of aid from reaching Gaza's 1.5 million stricken inhabitants, leading to what U.N. officials describe as a humanitarian crisis. For the past two weeks, the Israeli military has barred foreign journalists from entering the Palestinian territory to report on the siege.

Israeli officials told TIME that Israeli forces have no immediate plans to mount a ground assault on Gaza, and that the division commander in charge of the area had recently been transferred out. Israel faces a general election in February, and the current Defense Minister and Labor leader Ehud Barak, who is far behind in the polls, is unlikely to risk sending troops on a hazardous foray into Gaza.

In Damascus, Hamas leader Mashaal reportedly agreed to the request to halt rocket attacks and relayed orders to Gaza, Jordanian sources say. On Wednesday, according to sources in Gaza, senior Hamas military commanders met with leaders of Islamic Jihad and other smaller militant bands and ordered them to stop firing rockets.

Once Abdullah secured a promise from Hamas to halt the rocket fire, he summoned Olmert and Barak for an urgent meeting at his palace in Amman on Tuesday night, where he relayed the news of Hamas' willingness to curb the rocket fire. He also warned the two Israelis that an assault on Gaza would destroy any chance of an Arab peace initiative and would jeopardize Israel's ties with its moderate Arab neighbors, Jordan and Egypt.

"Olmert and Barak listened carefully but pointed out that Israel cannot stand idle while the rockets are falling," said one Jordanian official who requested anonymity. Abdullah, says this official, was angered when Olmert's advisers told the Israeli media after the meeting that Abdullah's intervention was driven by concern over the fate of his monarchy. On the contrary, says this Jordanian official. "We warned Israel that they were making matters worse with Jordan and Egypt. But they chose not to see it that way," said the official. But even if the interventions of the U.S. and its Arab allies have succeeded in averting a full-scale confrontation on the eve of the Obama Inauguration, the resulting calm will be tense and quite possibly temporary. The new President and his Secretary of State will clearly have their work cut out for them.

— With reporting by Massimo Calabresi / Washington; Jamil Hamad / Ramallah; and Aaron J. Klein / Jerusalem

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