

MIDDLE EAST CONFLICT

Israel orders troops to remain in Syria buffer zone through winter

United Nations chief António Guterres urged Israel to halt its aerial attacks and advance into Syrian territory after the overthrow of the Assad regime.



— Images supplied by the Israeli military show Israeli forces at a location given as Mount Hermon, Syria on Monday. Israel Defense Forces via Reuters

Dec. 13, 2024, 4:55 AM EST / Updated Dec. 13, 2024, 6:52 AM EST

By Chantal Da Silva

Israel ordered troops Friday to prepare to remain throughout winter on Mount Hermon – a strategic peak inside a buffer zone that has existed for decades with Syria but which Israeli forces have seized in the wake of the Assad regime's collapse.

It was the latest sign that Israel may maintain a presence in Syria for a prolonged period, defying international pressure to halt its advances and airstrikes as the world hopes to secure a peaceful transition in the country.

On Friday crowds massed in central squares across Syria to celebrate the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad, urged on by the head of the Islamist group who led the stunning rebel advance.

The U.S. has defended Israel's actions in Syria. Washington's latest bid to prevent wider conflict in the Middle East has raised hopes of a cease-fire deal with Hamas, despite local officials in Gaza reporting that dozens were killed in the latest Israeli airstrike on a refugee camp in the Palestinian enclave.

Assad family mausoleum torched and looted by Syrian rebels

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Israel to keep troops on Mt Hermon

Israel has said that its actions in Syria are temporary and defensive, but backlash has grown over what United Nations chief António Guterres on Thursday called “extensive violations of Syria’s

sovereignty and territorial integrity" as he urged Israeli forces to withdraw from the buffer zone.

He also expressed concern over hundreds of Israeli strikes on locations across Syria following the toppling of the Assad regime, which Israel has said are aimed at preventing the regime's arsenal falling into the hands of militants.

"Due to what is happening in [Syria](#), there is a huge security importance to our holding of the Hermon peak and everything must be done to ensure the IDF's preparations in the area, to allow the troops to stay there in the difficult weather conditions," Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said in a statement Friday.

He shared a photo on X that he said showed him with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu overlooking Mount Hermon with binoculars, saying the site had "returned to Israeli control after 51 years."

"An exciting historical moment," he [wrote](#).

Netanyahu's office has said that the collapse of the Assad regime "created a vacuum on Israel's border and in the buffer zone," which was established as part of a ceasefire between the countries following the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

"Israel will not permit jihadi groups to fill that vacuum and threaten Israeli communities on the Golan Heights," his office said.

Israel occupied and later annexed the Golan Heights after the 1967 Mideast war, a move not recognized by most of the international community.

At over 9,000 feet, Mount Hermon stands as the highest peak in the eastern Mediterranean coast. Israel has drawn swift backlash over its seizure of the area in the past week, with critics accusing the country of exploiting the situation with a land grab.

In Syria, tens of thousands gathered across the country for mass rallies celebrating Assad's ouster after worshippers gathered for the first Friday prayers since his family's 50 years of brutal rule was brought to an end.

Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, the leader of the main rebel group that ousted Assad, called on Syrians in a video message to "take to the squares to celebrate the victory."

But he urged revelers to celebrate without firing bullets or causing a commotion "so that we can then move on to building this country."



— People attend the first Friday prayers since the fall of the Assad regim, inside the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus old city. Ammar Awad / Reuters



— A rebel fighter stands on a carpet bearing the portrait of ousted president Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on Friday. Aris Messinis / AFP - Getty Images

Deadly strikes continue in Gaza

Concerns over Israel's actions in Syria come as Israeli forces also continued their campaign in [Gaza](#), where Palestinian health officials said dozens of people were killed in an assault on the Nuseirat refugee camp on Thursday.

Dr. Marwan Al-Hamas, Director of the Field Hospitals in Gaza, told NBC News that at least 36 people were killed and 43 injured after Israeli forces struck a post office building and several homes in the area in central Gaza.

The Israel Defense Forces said it was targeting a "senior terrorist in the Islamic Jihad" whom it said was "responsible for leading terror attacks against Israeli civilians and IDF troops."

The IDF said an initial inquiry suggested that "secondary explosions" occurred due to numerous weapons in the area. The IDF did not provide evidence for the claim and said it was reviewing reports of casualties related to the strike.

Video captured by NBC News' crew in Gaza showed harrowing scenes of people being rescued from a mass of rubble. At one point, a young child could be seen being carried into a hospital, with their face heavily bloodied and their body motionless.

The child was laid down in a room where the bodies of those killed were being wrapped in shrouds. Another small child could also be seen lying on the floor.

Dozens killed by missile strike on Nuseirat camp

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It comes as the Biden administration has continued to push for a truce between Israel and Hamas in its final months.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan said in Tel Aviv on Thursday that he was optimistic about the prospect of reaching a deal.

He also defended Israel's actions in Syria, saying the U.S. ally had perceived an "immediate threat" in the collapse of a longstanding regime and that Israel has "a right to self-defense."

Sullivan met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog on Friday to discuss efforts to secure the release of hostages and the changing landscape in the region.



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