

Netanyahu: Hamas Strength 'Significantly Diminished'

In his first public remarks since the cease-fire went into effect, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Wednesday that Operation Protective Edge brought Israel a "great military and diplomatic achievement."

Netanyahu said Hamas had been dealt a tough blow and that it had received none of its cease-fire demands. But, the prime minister cautioned, "it is too soon to say if we achieved our goal of sustained calm."

"We will not tolerate a drizzle of rockets on any part of the State of Israel," Netanyahu said. "We will respond even more vigorously than before."

Speaking at a press conference in Jerusalem with Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon and IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, Netanyahu said, "Hamas suffered the greatest blow since its founding—both militarily and diplomatically."

Netanyahu said Israelis should not be impressed by Hamas' victory celebrations.

"Hamas leaders know very well the prices they paid," Netanyahu said. "Their strength has been significantly diminished. We can do much to prevent the rearmament [of Hamas] and we have international legitimacy to hit them again if they violate the cease-fire."

"Hamas did not receive any of the conditions it set," Netanyahu said. "We destroyed the network of tunnels it took years for it to build. We sent in ground forces for this purpose. When this mission was completed, we pulled the army out, to prevent Hamas from killing or kidnapping soldiers, which were its goals. We continued to attack from the air."

"We killed 1,000 enemy terrorists, including senior commanders. We destroyed arms depots and weapons manufacturing sites. And we operated the Iron Dome." Netanyahu took credit for the decision to equip Israel with "thousands of interceptor missiles."

Netanyahu said he had set realistic goals for Operation Protective Edge. "We do not deal with populism or Facebook; rather, we operate with responsibility and clear vision, prepared for any scenario," he said.

Netanyahu said the toppling of Hamas would occur after the long-term goal of demilitarizing Gaza was achieved.

"Eradicating a terrorist organization is not an easy thing to do," Netanyahu said. "The U.S. did not eradicate al-Qaida. Hamas is an organization supported by Iran and, financially, by Qatar, and it brought in weapons during the Muslim Brotherhood era in Egypt. We struck it in a way it could not have imagined. It begged for a cease-fire and gave up its conditions. The region has seen this. Many in the region understand that in the struggle against radical Islam, Israel is not an enemy, but rather a partner, to a certain extent."

In a speech that followed Netanyahu's, Ya'alon said the demand of southern Israel residents for quiet is "understandable and justified." He said southern Israel residents have shown personal heroism.

"If needed, we will hit Hamas again, harder," Ya'alon said. "We set Gaza back years. The reconstruction of Gaza will take ten years. When the dust settles, [Hamas] will face questions about the fact it did not achieve anything. Don't be impressed by the bragging of Hamas leaders, who hide in medical clinics and use civilians as a human shield. They know that if they dare to challenge us again, they will take an even tougher blow."

"The campaign was managed by the prime minister wisely,

judiciously and responsibly,” Ya’alon said. “We acted in the best interests of the citizens [of Israel] during the war. When we faced internal criticism during the fighting, we bit our lips and acted according to a compass, rather than whichever way the wind blew.”

Gantz said, “We hit Hamas hard, and we brought the fighting to a halt now without diplomatic compromises on our part. We dealt a strong blow to their capabilities and we took from them assets they had built over the years.”

“The IDF is a strong, victorious army that operates the right way,” Gantz said.

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