



Egypt holds 'secret' intel meeting with Israel on Rafah

Description

WORLD : Top Israeli and Egyptian officials held a secret meeting in Cairo on 24 April, aimed at discussing Tel Aviv's plans for an invasion of Gaza's southernmost city of Rafah.

Three senior Israeli officials told Axios on Wednesday that Shin Bet chief Ronen Bar and Israeli army chief Herzi Halevi met with the head of Egyptian intelligence, Abbas Kamel, and Egypt's army chief Osama Askar.

The report came the same day that an Israeli defense official said that Israel will launch the operation in Rafah as soon as it gets government approval. Israel is "moving ahead" with the operation, a spokesman for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, but gave no specific time frame.

Israel is developing a plan to evacuate civilians from the desperately overcrowded city. Egypt has expressed concern over the possibility of an influx of Palestinian refugees entering its territory once Rafah is attacked and has vowed not to allow any mass displacement of Gazans into its Sinai desert.

Washington has repeatedly called on Israel to ensure the safe evacuation of civilians from Rafah, where military operations pose the threat of a severe humanitarian catastrophe.

"Everyone is waiting for Netanyahu's directive to start evacuating the civilian population from Rafah. It's parked at his desk. He needs to resolve the matter with both the Americans and the Egyptians," one of the Israeli officials told Axios.

US and Israeli officials held a virtual meeting last week to discuss plans for Rafah. The decision to launch the operation is "conditions-based and not time-based, and connected to the humanitarian situation on the ground," Tel Aviv emphasized to Washington during the meeting, according to US officials.

The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported on 23 April, citing Egyptian officials, that Israel's evacuation plans for Rafah are near complete. The plan will take two to three weeks and will be carried out in cooperation with Washington, Cairo, and other Arab states, including the UAE.

Egyptian forces have deployed in the northern Sinai and along the Gaza border, and are at “full readiness” after being briefed by Israel on plans for Rafah, Al-Araby Al-Jadeed reported on 18 April.

Israel’s evacuation plan involves moving Rafah’s civilian population upwards towards the southern city of Khan Yunis, as well as other areas of the strip, the report states, adding that shelters with tents, food supplies, and medical facilities will be set up.

Recently published satellite images show a large tent compound in Khan Yunis and Israeli troop gatherings at army bases and outposts near the strip – signaling that the invasion of Rafah may be imminent.

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