



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Closing the exit to Palestinian refugees - a move that changes Israel's battle plans



Neighbouring countries will not open their borders to Palestinian refugees from Gaza and the West Bank - this now appears to be a fact on the ground, which would significantly affect Israel's military plans against Hamas.

King Abdullah II of Jordan was specific last Tuesday when he said his country would not accept Palestinian refugees and that he could say this on behalf of Egypt.

"That is a red line, because I think that is the plan by certain of the usual suspects to try and create de facto issues on the ground," said King Abdullah after talks with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin.

The Israelis are the "usual suspects". The Jordanian king suggests they are attempting to drive the Palestinians out of Gaza and create a new situation in addressing their issue.

Despite his explicit announcement that neither Jordan nor Egypt would accept Palestinian refugees, new dramatic circumstances followed, further shattering the expectations of Palestinians from threatened areas hoping to escape to safety.

The bombing of the Al Ahli hospital in Gaza, killing hundreds of people, is a tragedy that will further radicalise the situation while slowing efforts to achieve peace.

Israel claims that a misfired rocket from Gaza by Islamic Jihad hit the hospital. But while the "war" continues over who is responsible for the hospital bombing, a possible crucial meeting to resolve the crisis, the one that US President Joe Biden was supposed to have in Jordan with Arab leaders, has already been cancelled.

At the same time, angry supporters of Palestine are protesting in front of - and even attacking - Israeli and US facilities in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan.

Palestinians are staying - how to protect civilians?

This effectively puts an end to the debate about the evacuation of Palestinians from dangerous regions, primarily Gaza.

Their fate should have been one of the more significant topics in President Biden's announced but postponed talks with the leaders of Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinian Authority.

The US has focused on ensuring that Palestinian civilians remain protected during Israeli operations after providing Israel with complete political and, shortly after that, substantial military support in response to the terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas.

Faced with high domestic public expectations to carry out swift and total retaliation against Hamas, the Israeli government risks endangering civilians in densely populated Gaza and even committing war crimes. This would threaten the credibility of the Israeli action and call into question the previous support of the allies, primarily the US.

Egypt refuses to open the only border crossing to Gaza for the Palestinian civilians to exit and enter Sinai, particularly since the Israeli army called on civilians to withdraw from the northern to the southern part of Gaza so as not to be exposed to attacks.

Mass evacuation would determine the solution to the Palestinian issue

The expectation that the exodus of Palestinians from Gaza would trigger the emigration of Palestinians from the West Bank, which borders Jordan, is the cause of Jordan's explicit refusal to admit Palestinian refugees.

Also, the 2 neighbours, which have the closest relations with Israel out of all Arab states, want to keep the Palestinians in the territories they are currently in with this blockade so that the factual situation on the ground does not change before any future negotiations on the status of the Palestinians.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi recently criticised Israel that its operation in Gaza "went beyond the right to self-defence" and that Egypt rejects Israel's "displacement policy and attempts to finish the Palestinian cause at the expense of its neighbours".

King Abdullah II of Jordan has the same point of view - "this is a situation that has to be handled within Gaza and the West Bank. And you don't have to do it on the shoulders of others".

Little room for compromise

Western leaders will not be able to correct these strong positions of their 2 closest allies in the region. Egypt and Jordan do not want to receive Palestinian refugees for economic reasons, regardless of the partners' promises to participate in the costs of their care.

But there are also security risks, which neither Cairo nor Amman want to take with a large influx of refugees because they are aware that along with civilian refugees, they would receive a number of extremists who would continue to operate from their territory.

That is why the US and its Western allies are even more compelled than before to put pressure on Israel to make its military operations as safe as possible for civilians. As the principal mediator in the crisis, the US advocates creating a safe zone within the Gaza Strip where civilians would not be exposed to danger.

But the bombing of Al Ahli Hospital makes even such compromise solutions challenging to achieve, while others are not even in sight.

US on the move to convince Israel

US President Biden has no other option but to convince the Israeli leadership to reduce the intensity of its action in Gaza because there are no other efficient options for protecting

civilians, who are now definitely shuttered in a densely populated zone.

Benjamin Netanyahu's government could accept such demands from the US, primarily to preserve the most significant foreign political and military support. However, the reduction in the intensity of the action in Gaza corresponds to the overall military strategy of Israel.

Over time, it has become evident that the pro-Iranian Hezbollah hesitated to attack Israel from the north because it was waiting for Israel to deploy as many troops as possible in Gaza, in the south, so that the north of the country would remain weakly defended.

It will be much easier for the government of Israel to present slower and more cautious conduct of the operation in Gaza to its outraged public as a need to protect the country from a potential attack by Hamas from the north rather than simply protecting Palestinian civilians.

Such a development would have a chance to satisfy not only Israel but even more Arab neighbours, particularly the US, because the credibility of the Israeli operation would be preserved as an effort to eradicate Hamas terrorists, providing the protection of Palestinian civilians.