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Israeli underground wall along Gaza border should be finished ‘within months’

September 25, 2016

A senior Israeli military official said on Sunday that a massive underground barrier being built along the Gaza border to defend against Hamas tunnels should be finished in a matter of months, dealing what he said would be a serious blow to the group.

The Southern Command official said the structure was at the forefront of a new effort meant to rob Hamas of one of its most potent weapons.

Mushir Al Masri, a Hamas official in Gaza, said the Israeli efforts would fail.

"They must realise that they will not enjoy security as long as the Palestinian people don't enjoy it," he said. "The language of threats no longer terrifies our people."

During Israel's 2014 war on Gaza, Hamas militants made their way into Israel through a tunnel network on several occasions, though they did not manage to reach civilian areas. Israel destroyed 32 tunnels during the war, but has since announced the discovery of several more.

The official said Hamas is now trying to restore its military capabilities, with its primary focus on building a subterranean warren of tunnels to hide from Israeli strikes and sneak into Israel to carry out attacks in a future round of fighting.

In recent weeks, Israel is believed to have begun work on a 60-kilometre-long underground barrier expected to stretch dozens of metres deep. Work crews have been spotted digging trenches and installing infrastructure in the ground.

In a briefing with reporters on Sunday, the Israeli official showed video footage of heavy machinery raking the sandy border area, a series of holes drilled deep into the ground, a stretch of land the army has flooded, and some controlled explosions. The army also showed a photo of simulated tunnels where soldiers train for subterranean combat.

He declined to discuss specific features of the barrier being built, calling it a key strategic project. But he said the new wall will defend Israel's border with Gaza both above and below the ground. The army's goal, he said, is to turn the underground battlefield into a "death trap" for Hamas.

"It will take time to build it. It's a big project. But it is a main goal," he said.

Israel has already surrounded Gaza with a sophisticated aboveground fence fortified with sensors, cameras, barbed wire and watch towers.

More than 2,200 Palestinians, over half of them civilians, were killed in the 2014 war, along with 73 Israelis – most of whom were soldiers.