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Al Jazeera

Israel pulls envoy after embassy attack

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Dozens of Egyptian protesters entered a building containing the Israeli embassy after breaking down a wall [EPA]

Israel's ambassador to Egypt and senior staff have been evacuated home after protesters broke into a building containing the country's embassy in Cairo on Friday night, adding further strain to

already tense relations between the neighbours.

A plane carrying Yitzhak Levanon, the ambassador, and others landed in Israel on Saturday, Israel Radio reported, as an Israeli diplomat condemned the attack as a "serious violation" of diplomatic behaviour.

Israel's consul for state affairs was left behind to maintain its embassy, as Israel weighed its formal response to the [attack by dozens of protesters](#) on the building that houses its diplomatic mission.

The AFP news agency reported that Egyptian commandos had entered the embassy building to escort six Israeli citizens to safety.

Israeli public radio said the six rescued men were security officers.

Benjamin Netanyahu the Israeli prime minister's office said they had returned home safe. "When the violence got out of hand, some 80 (Israelis) were taken out" of Egypt, an Israeli official said. "All our people are safe and sound."

Ehud Barak, the Israeli defence minister's office said he called Leon Panetta, the US defence secretary to request help protecting their embassy.

Israel's Ynet news website said Netanyahu thanked the US President Barack Obama. "The mob attack on the Israeli embassy is a serious incident but could have been worse had the rioters managed to get through the last door and hurt our people," Ynet quoted Netanyahu as saying.

"I'm glad we managed to prevent a disaster and would like to thank the US President Barack Obama for his help," he said.

Egyptian officials said three people had been killed and more than 1,000 people injured in clashes between protesters and security forces near the embassy, following [earlier peaceful demonstrations](#) in Tahrir Square.

Obama earlier had called on Egypt to "honour its international obligations" to protect the diplomats and told Netanyahu, that Washington was taking steps to resolve the situation.

Hillary Clinton, the US secretary of state, also spoke with Mohamed Kamel Amr, the Egyptian foreign minister, who cut short a trip to Poland as Essam Sharaf, the Egyptian prime minister, called a crisis cabinet meeting.

An Israeli government official who wanted to remain anonymous told the Al Jazeera bureau in Jerusalem that Israel was grateful to Obama and Egyptian government for helping to resolve the situation.

'Serious violation of diplomatic behaviour'

But he said the incident was a blow to Israeli-Egyptian relations and a "serious violation of accepted diplomatic behavior".

"This could have been a real tragedy, We are thankful to all who helped resolve this matter. Over the last few hours there was a real concern for the lives of our people," said the government official.

Pulling its diplomats even temporarily out of Egypt would represent another regional setback for Israel which has already seen relations with Turkey, another erstwhile regional ally, turn sour amid Turkish anger over last year's deadly raid by Israeli commandos on a Gaza-bound flotilla .

The Israeli embassy has been a focus for protests in Cairo amid a downturn in relations since Hosni Mubarak, the former Egyptian president, was ousted from power in February.

Five Egyptian border guards were killed last month during an Israeli operation against suspected gunmen who killed eight Israeli citizens, prompting Egypt briefly to threaten to withdraw its ambassador.

And diplomatic ties aren't the only thing at stake, Israel imports about forty percent of its natural gas from Egypt.

Some Egyptians say Israel pays too little for the gas, and the pipeline that connects the two countries has been attacked several times this year alone.