

## Israel rolls back army chief comments on AP's 'coffee with Hamas'

*Defence minister Gantz says his military chief was speaking in figurative terms when he accused AP reporters of drinking coffee with Hamas in Gaza's al-Jalaa tower.*



*Israel bombed the al-Jalaa tower housing the AP and Al Jazeera offices in Gaza City on May 15*

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Israel's defence minister has distanced himself from comments made by his military chief after Israel bombed a Gaza Strip high-rise housing Al Jazeera and The Associated Press offices as well as other news outlets, saying the remarks were not meant to be taken literally.

In an article published on the website of Israel's Channel 12 news over the weekend, the military chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Aviv Kohavi, was quoted as saying "the building was destroyed justly" and he did not have a "gram of regret".

The article claimed Hamas used various floors of the al-Jalaa tower for "significant electronic warfare" meant to disrupt Israeli air force GPS communications.

The article then said Kohavi told "a foreign source" the AP's journalists drank coffee each morning in a cafeteria in the building's entrance with Hamas electronics experts, whether they knew it or not.

The AP called the comments “patently false”, noting “there was not even a cafeteria in the building”.

Al Jazeera also rejected the Israeli claim that Hamas was active in the building.

“I have been working in this office for more than 10 years and I have never seen anything [suspicious],” Al Jazeera’s Gaza correspondent Safwat al-Kahlout said the day after the Israeli air raid levelled the tower.

“I even asked my colleagues if they’ve seen anything suspicious and they all confirmed to me that they have never seen any military aspects or the fighters even coming in and out,” he added. “In our building we have lots of families that we know for more than 10 years, we meet each other every day on our way in and out to the office.”

### **‘Portray the atmosphere’**

Asked about Kohavi’s comments, Defence Minister Benny Gantz told foreign journalists on Monday the military chief was only speaking in figurative terms.

“When the chief of staff talked about it, he was trying to portray the atmosphere, not the actual aspects,” Gantz said.

Gantz again alleged “there was Hamas infrastructure in offices that operated from this building”.

“It was never claimed that AP journalists were knowingly interacting with Hamas personnel. On the contrary, due to the nature of Hamas’ activities, AP journalists had no means of knowing that Hamas personnel were in the building,” the military spokesman’s office said.

“The chief of the general staff explained the possible circumstances of such an encounter where the terrorist organisation Hamas embeds itself within the civilian population and uses civilian buildings for military purposes.”

The Israeli army gave occupants of the building one hour to evacuate before the May 15 air raid. No one was injured, but the high-rise tower was flattened into a pile of rubble.

Al Jazeera and AP said the outlets had no indication of a Hamas presence in the building and were never warned of any possible presence before that day. The news organisations called for an independent investigation and urged Israel to make public its intelligence.

Gantz said Israel has shared its intelligence with the US government. But he indicated that Israel has no intention of making the information public, saying it did not want to divulge its sources.

Commenting on the bombing of al-Jalaa building, Al Jazeera’s acting Director-General Mostefa Souag, said: “We call on the international community to condemn such barbaric actions and targeting of journalists and we demand an immediate

international action to hold Israel accountable for its deliberate targeting of journalists and the media institutions.”

Souag added: “The aim of this heinous crime is to silence the media and to hide the untold carnage and suffering of the people of Gaza. The destruction of Al Jazeera offices and that of other media organisations in al-Jalaa tower in Gaza is a blatant violation of human rights and is internationally considered a war crime.”