



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

Israel and Middle East News Update

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News Excerpts

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Ynet News

Israel Denies Report of Gaza Truce as Part of Hostage Deal

A pause in the fighting in the Gaza Strip is set to come into effect today as part of an agreement to release Israeli hostages, a Hamas official told the Jordanian newspaper Al Ghad. An Israeli official denied the report, saying there was no such agreement. Despite official denials, the war Cabinet was updated with a document from Qatar, in which Hamas for the first time showed willingness for a significant deal. According to Qatari mediators, Hamas said it was ready to release a group of 50 captives in the first stage in exchange for a four-to-five-day pause in fighting, the release of about 150 Palestinian children and women imprisoned in Israel and the entry of fuel into the Gaza. Israeli officials believe that the necessary approval processes in the war Cabinet, the expanded Cabinet and the full government - which has sole authority over prisoner releases - could be completed within 72 hours. [Dig Deeper “Hamas Resumes Hostage Talks and Narrows Gaps with Israel” \(Axios\)](#)

I24 News

IDF Unveils Footage Showing Role of Shifa in Oct 7 Attack

Israeli military spokesman unveiled surveillance camera footage from Shifa Hospital showing Hamas terrorists bringing a Nepali and Thai citizen abducted from Israel on October 7 to the Gazan medical center. Further images released by the IDF from security cameras within the hospital show Israeli vehicles captured by Hamas entering the hospital through the main gate on October 7th. Al-Shifa hospital has become a focal point for Israel's military operations in the Gaza Strip, launched after the October 7 massacre, the worst antisemitic atrocity since the Holocaust. [Read More “IDF It Found Bodies of 2 Hostages Held by Hamas in Gaza” \(Axios\)](#)

The Media Line

PM: Condemns Allegation of Involvement in Oct. 7 Massacre

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu fiercely criticized the Palestinian Authority (PA) for its “utterly preposterous” claim that Israel itself was responsible for the Oct. 7 massacre at the Nova music festival. In a statement released in both Hebrew and English, Netanyahu expressed his disbelief and labeled the PA's allegations as a “complete reversal of truth.” He highlighted PA President [Mahmoud Abbas'](#) history of controversial statements, including past Holocaust denial, and his current denial of Hamas' involvement in the recent massacre. Netanyahu then emphasized his opposition to proposals suggesting the PA's governance of Gaza after the Israel-Hamas war. He outlined his vision for Gaza's future governance, stressing the need for an administration that acknowledges the massacre, promotes peace, and refrains from inciting hate, terrorism, or hostility toward Israel. [Dig Deeper “Denial of Hamas' October 7 Massacre Is Gaining Pace Online” \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

IDF Ignored Lookouts' Warnings Over Hamas Massacre

IDF lookouts who had warned their commanders that they were concerned about the situation along the Gaza border in the months before the October 7 attack were told to stop bothering them and even threatened with a court-martial, N12 reported. According to the report, the lookouts warned that they had seen unusual training and other actions taking place next to the border, with more and more people suddenly getting near the fence in the months leading up to the attack. The lookouts felt that they weren't being heard; one of them decided to go directly to a senior commander in the area and was told "I don't want to hear again about this nonsense. If you all bother us again with these things, you'll be court-martialed." In the weeks since the attack, lookouts who served along the Gaza border have told Israeli media that they had warned their commanders for months about unusual actions along the border but were ignored.

Ha'aretz

US Presses Israel to Postpone Strikes in South Gaza

The United States is pressing Israel to delay military operations in southern Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have moved after Israel urged them to over the past several weeks to escape the fighting. "In the event that we believe that Israel is likely to embark on combat operations, including in the south, we believe both that they have the right to do that, but that there is a real concern because hundreds of thousands of residents of Gaza have fled now from the north to the south at Israel's request," said US Deputy National Security Adviser Jon Finer on CBS' "Face the Nation." Israeli officials have been telling their US counterparts that they anticipate several more weeks of operating in the north before dedicating its focus to the south, according to US officials. Over 13,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli strikes on Gaza since October 7, according to Hamas-run health authorities, while the UN has estimated that 1.5 million people have been internally displaced (nearly three-quarters of Gaza's population).

Axios

Biden Could Sanction Settlers Who Attack Palestinians

President Joe Biden stressed that the US is prepared to impose sanctions on Israeli settlers who are involved in attacks against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. It is the first time the US has publicly said it was considering individual sanctions against Israeli settlers. It also signals that the Biden administration is concerned that Israel may not be seriously attempting to stop and prevent the violence. "I have been emphatic with Israel's leaders that extremist violence against Palestinians in the West Bank must stop and that those committing the violence must be held accountable," Biden wrote in an op-ed published in [the Washington Post](#). "The United States is prepared to take our own steps, including issuing visa bans against extremists attacking civilians in the West Bank." Biden has repeatedly raised concerns about attacks on West Bank Palestinians during his calls with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Associated Press

Dissent Over US Israel-Hamas War Policy Stirs Protests

Federal government workers from the State Department to NASA are circulating open letters demanding that President Biden pursue a cease-fire in Israel's war against Hamas.

Congressional staffers are picking up microphones in front of the Capitol, speaking out to condemn what they say is the silence of lawmakers about the toll on Palestinian civilians. As the deaths soar in Gaza, Biden and Congress are facing unusually public challenges from the inside over their support for Israel's offensive. Hundreds of staffers in the administration and on Capitol Hill are signing on to open letters, speaking to reporters and holding vigils, all in an effort to shift US policy toward more urgent action to stem Palestinian casualties. One open letter had been endorsed by 650 staffers of diverse religious backgrounds from more than 30 federal agencies, organizers said. The agencies range from the Executive Office of the President to the Census Bureau and include the State Department, US Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense. Some current and former officials and staffers said it's the public nature of some of the challenges from federal employees that is unusual. It worries some, as a potential threat to government function and to cohesion within agencies.

[Read More "116 Former US Officials Sign Letter Backing Biden Support of Israel" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

Houthis Seize Ship in Red Sea with Link to Israeli Company

Israel said that Yemen's Houthis had seized a British-owned and Japanese-operated cargo ship in the southern Red Sea, describing the incident as an "Iranian act of terrorism" with consequences for international maritime security. The Houthis said they had seized a ship in that area but described it as Israeli. "We are treating the ship's crew in accordance with Islamic principles and values," a spokesperson for the group said, making no reference to the Israeli account. The Houthis, an ally of Tehran, have been launching long-range missile and drone salvos at Israel in solidarity with the Palestinian Hamas militants fighting in the Gaza Strip. Japan's top government spokesperson confirmed the capture of the Nippon Yusen-operated ship, Galaxy Leader, adding that Japan was appealing to the Houthis while seeking the help of Saudi, Omani and Iranian authorities to work toward the swift release of the vessel and its crew. Galaxy Leader is owned by a company registered under Isle of Man-headquartered Ray Car Carriers, which is a unit of Tel Aviv-incorporated Ray Shipping, according to LSEG data. [Read More "Gallant: Hezbollah Has Fired Over 1,000 Munitions at Israel Since Start of War" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Netanyahu's War Cabinet Split on Hostage Deal with Hamas

By Amos Harel

- **With the onset of the seventh week of the war with Hamas, the IDF is expanding its operations in the northern Gaza Strip. Two armored divisions, number 36 and 162, have entered two critical areas in the northern and eastern parts of Gaza City, containing the Jabalya refugee camp and the Zeitoun, Rimal and Sheikh Ajlin quarters of the city. This is the first time the IDF has entered these areas in this war. So far it appears that, like in other sectors, Hamas is finding it difficult to pose an organized defense against the massive military force it is facing, but it's clear that the IDF will face greater military resistance in the coming days. Besides conquering territory and hitting Hamas military targets, three other factors – the release of hostages, the destruction of tunnels and the elimination of senior Hamas commanders – will determine how many achievements this war brings.**
- **Despite progress, the picture on these issues is still mixed. It's difficult to report a decisive military resolution of the confrontation, even though Hamas has suffered a significant blow to its military capabilities in the northern Gaza Strip. The most critical issue is the hostages. From all the information that's been published by Israeli and foreign media, one can cautiously draw the following conclusions: Qatar and the United States are trying to attain an interim deal, in which all 70 mothers and children held by Hamas and other organizations will be released.**
- **Hamas, however, claims that it can only locate with certainty 53 of these (or 50 in another version), and that it will take time to gather them and prepare them for release. The deal includes a five-day cease-fire and a release of 150 Palestinian women and minors held by Israel. On the Israeli side, there are arguments, mainly in the war cabinet. Ministers from the National Unity Party, including Benny Gantz but mainly Gadi Eisenkot, believe that Israel must seize the opportunity and save whomever it can, immediately. Otherwise, their lives will be at risk, with a possible repeat of the case of Ron Arad, an Air Force navigator who was shot down in 1986, held captive and later disappeared. Contact with some hostages could also be lost in the chaos prevailing in Gaza.**
- **In recent days, there were reports of four hostages who have died, some of whom were apparently murdered in Hamas captivity. In contrast, there is another camp, led by Defense Minister Yoav Gallant and partly supported by IDF Chief of Staff Herzl Halevi and senior military and Shin Bet security service officers. They argue that the momentum should not be stopped and that the military pressure on Hamas should be intensified since this is the only way more concessions can be extracted from Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. There is also an argument that Israel should insist on the release of all the 70 women and children who were on the initial list, as a minimum demand before concluding a deal. Both sides know that Hamas will do all it can in order to gain time, even if the deal is successful. It appears that Sinwar is counting on a cease-fire as a way of achieving a total halt in the war, estimating that he can gain time with promises, tempting offers and excuses relating to future deals.**

- The person who has not yet formulated his final position is Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. As written in this column on Friday, Netanyahu is occupied with political considerations, worried about being outflanked from the right by ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich. Meanwhile, Finance Minister Smotrich (who received unfavorable results in a public opinion poll on Thursday) exploited a relatively marginal issue, a decision to allow a small amount of diesel fuel into the Gaza Strip for the use of UN agencies, to publicly assail Netanyahu's judgment, demanding a convening of the broader cabinet. This was scheduled to take place on Saturday night.
- Netanyahu is drawing out time, as is his wont. The pressure from the right is clear, but there is also pressure from the left. A persistent refusal to make a deal could be the last straw that could break the shaky coalition he achieved with Gantz and Eisenkot. Their departure could hasten his collision with the Biden administration. Perhaps given this situation, Netanyahu might show flexibility and go for a deal. As usual, one should remember that there is no limit to the tricks Sinwar could employ. He already cut off indirect contact with mediators for a few days last week, ostensibly due to IDF operations in Al-Shifa Hospital.
- An important question relates to the rate at which tunnels can be demolished. During Operation Protective Edge in 2014, an infrastructure of offensive Hamas tunnels was revealed. Israel made few advances in finding technological solutions to this problem. During the Guardian of the Walls Operation in 2021, then-Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi tried to implement an extensive secret plan to bomb the tunnel network under Gaza City. This tapped a winning strategy which was supposed to be employed in a more extensive war.
- It was meant to cause the death of thousands of Hamas fighters, but in practice, the area that was bombed was almost empty of terrorists, and Hamas losses were very slight. Now, there is an urgent need to find alternate solutions. An immense financial, technological and logistic effort has been devoted to the issue since the war began, and there were some recent positive developments causing cautious optimism in the IDF. Gallant talked last week about a great improvement in the ability to destroy the tunnels from air or land. For now, it's unclear if this will prove to be a tiebreaker, but any improved means of significantly damaging the tunnels may increase the pressure on Hamas.
- This is tied to the third issue, the scope of senior Hamas commanders that are killed. So far, Sinwar and commanders around him have not been affected by the war. There are assessments that they have fled to the southern part of the Gaza Strip and are in a location that is immune from being hit. However, over the last week, there were some successes in hitting a level of commanders directly under the top five. The chaos in the northern strip does not allow a precise confirmation of the situation, but Israel has reported a likelihood that Ahmed Randor, the brigade commander of the northern sector, and another commander, Rawhi Mushtaha (who shared a cell with Sinwar in Israeli jails for years), were killed in airstrikes. There is also substantial damage at the level of battalion commanders, but this will require further attention.

- **All these issues are related to continued ground operations. Gallant and Halevi are planning a deepening and expansion of operations in the northern Gaza Strip. The defense minister has said that the western neighborhoods of Gaza City have been conquered and cleared. The first part of this statement is true. The second is controversial, since Hamas can still snipe at IDF forces, mainly through the use of shafts leading to and from tunnels. The army is not hiding its intention of carrying out similar operations lasting several months in other areas of the Gaza Strip at a later stage.**
- **As has been reported, there may be a phase in which forces inside the strip are thinned out, with the IDF taking positions along the border, or within a security zone inside the strip, which would be a launching ground for more focused attacks against whatever remains of Hamas' military positions. The goal is to systematically dismantle Hamas' capabilities, both military and organizational. This was achieved impressively, but still only partially, in the northern part of the Gaza Strip. This may be more complicated in the south, mainly due to the dense civilian population in the area.**
- **Military plans may encounter an obstacle, the growing humanitarian disaster now unfolding in the Gaza Strip. Israeli leaders are not sufficiently attentive to this problem and are not initiating steps that could somewhat reduce the damage and possibly blunt the diminishing of international legitimization for Israel's future military moves. These difficulties will grow as the fighting moves southward, conducted in the presence of one million civilians over an area which previously held half that number. The winter, the rain and the sewage problems will significantly enhance these risks. The fact that Israel was attacked first, with the atrocities committed by Hamas terrorists in western Negev communities, still affords Israel some legitimacy.**
- **The American administration's refusal to demand a cease-fire, even after a month and a half of fighting, is a significant achievement for Israel. But decision makers, in the IDF as well, must take into account two things: first, that their plans could be disrupted due to unexpected variables, mainly related to friction with civilians. Second, even American credit will not last forever, given the political constraints President Joe Biden has to contend with on his home front. The refusal of political leaders to hold any discussions for now on the morning after the war could detract from any military achievements. The IDF does not operate in a vacuum, and its operations have great impact on the regional strategic configuration, which will gradually take shape in the wake of the October 7 terror attack. Israel must define for itself what it wants to achieve beyond the required removal of Hamas leaders and combatants who perpetrated the massacre.**

The Test of the Hostages

By Nahum Barnea

- One of the painful differences between the Yom Kippur War and the current war is that Israel had a government back then. A group of ministers who had at least minimal respect for one another would meet every day with the top military brass and would make decisions. The ministers looked to the prime minister, whose authority and emotional fortitude weren't in contention. When Defense Minister Moshe Dayan and OC Southern Command Gorodish were hard put withstanding the pressure, they were quietly moved aside. Despite the anger and the fear, the soldiers and their families were all able to believe that they had a functioning leadership behind them. That isn't the situation today.
- Every few days Netanyahu, Gallant and Gantz face the cameras and play their roles in a performance. The prime minister begins with a flowery speech about our heroic troops and our beloved hostages, a speech that contains everything but honesty and information. Gantz and Gallant follow his lead. They are all dressed uniformly in three shades of black, but their body language reflects separation: Gallant and Gantz are brothers; Netanyahu isn't a brother. That might also be a performance. Their rhetoric is belligerent, mainly Netanyahu and Gallant's. It is also belligerent towards the US administration.
- Their political base, if they still have one, loves it when their leader acts like Rambo. Israel's actions are presented separately, as in the case of the diesel deliveries, the humanitarian aid, or the stages [in a hostage release agreement]. The act gets forgotten; the rhetoric remains. The war cabinet ministers have been in disagreement with one another for the past week over a deal that would free hostages. Defense Minister Gallant, Chief of Staff Halevi and GSS Director Bar have been on one side of the divide, whereas Ministers Gantz, Eisenkot and Deri have been on the other. The disagreement is legitimate. Gallant believes that another few days of ground warfare will push Hamas closer to the brink of collapse.
- Gantz and Eisenkot have expressed skepticism. They have placed freeing the hostages at the top [of Israel's priorities]. Gallant and the IDF have placed damaging Hamas at the top. That isn't what the Israelis have been told at the press conferences. They've been told stories about both the one and the other, both destroying Hamas and striking a deal with it; they've been told that the war cabinet is unanimous and that its members are focused exclusively on the war, and not on politics, as if that were at all possible. Nobody believes them, but a lot of Israelis want to be deceived. It feels much better.
- The hostage deal has placed the war cabinet before a difficult test: the lives of 50 Israelis—and possibly more if future deals are reached—are hanging in the balance. The decision mustn't be tainted by any personal or political interests. Human lives are at stake. I may be guilty of being excessively emotional, but I can't stop thinking about the 40 children who have been imprisoned for 45 days by terrorists.

- It's been pouring rain; are they protected from the rain? Are they protected from flooding, from sewage seeping up? From gunfire? Are they being given enough to eat? Are the women protected? The ill? The elderly? Is my government, which already forsook them in their homes, now forsaking them once again to disease, suffering and death? When Golda Meri fought to free the prisoners of war who were being held in Egypt and Syria, when she pressed Kissinger, Sadat and Assad, people believed her despite her flaws: the soldiers who were suffering in captivity weighed heavily on her conscience. I don't know what assails Netanyahu's conscience, but he has got to understand that the job that he insists on holding comes with a price.
- As of October 7, there are no free lunches. We don't have a government in other senses as well. Following is just one example, taken from deep inside the current government: In 2008, Tzahi Hanegbi, who was a Kadima MK at the time, passed the National Security Council bill into law. "The new law constitutes a veritable revolution in the spheres of foreign and security policy," said Hanegbi back then. "Providing the National Security Council with the standing and the tools will prevent the failures and flaws that were exposed in the Second Lebanon War." The goal was ambitious.
- According to the law, the National Security Council's job is to "test Israel's security doctrine and to propose revisions, to present alternatives to issues that pertain to security and to use the council during national crises." Hanegbi, who failed to get elected to the Knesset on the Likud's list, was given compensation by the current government. He serves as the director of the National Security Council and as the national security adviser. Until his appointment, that job was only held by retired generals or retired Mossad division directors. Hanegbi is the first politician. He is a seasoned politician, with strong ties to power nexuses and the media.
- Now, in the aftermath of the October 7 massacre and the chaos that ensued in its wake, the law that Hanegbi passed has come back to haunt him. He is the first person who will be summoned to appear before a commission of inquiry if one is formed. "You promised to prevent the failures and flaws from the Second Lebanon War," the commission chairperson will say to him. "Please show us where you prevented. You promised to test the preconceptions and to present alternatives. Where did you test, where did you present?" Hanegbi is going to need a very skilled lawyer.
- Regrettably for Hanegbi, ever since the war began he has been asked to play the role of the Prime Minister's Bureau's spokesperson, the political counterpart to the IDF spokesperson. Is that the outcome that the National Security Council law was intended to produce? I don't think so. From time to time, I read a dubious report citing a "senior political official" or a "senior security official." The source in question isn't the prime minister, the foreign minister, the defense minister, or the IDF chief of staff. Might the political source and the security source be one and the same? On second thought, if Itamar Ben Gvir can be the national security minister, Tzahi Hanegbi can be the director of the National Security Council. In the absence of a government, everyone is the government.