Headlines:

- IDF Admits Christmas Eve Gaza Airstrike Killed Innocents
- Israeli Strikes Across Gaza Kill Dozens of Palestinians
- Netanyahu Cancels War Cabinet Meeting on Post-war Gaza Planning
- Thousands Rally Calling to Free All Hostages Held by Hamas
- Israeli Raids in West Bank Target Hamas Funding
- Biden in Call Told Netanyahu to Solve PA Tax Revenue Issue
- US Allies Reluctant on Red Sea Task Force
- Sudan Civilians Rush for Arms as Paramilitaries Advance

Commentary:

- Yedioth Ahronoth: “Israeli Plan For Underground Barrier at Rafah”
  - By Yossi Yehoshua

- Ha’aretz: “Israel Must Cease Hostilities and Bring the Hostages Home”
  - By Ehud Olmert
Jerusalem Post

IDF Admits Christmas Eve Gaza Airstrike Killed Innocents

The extensive damage caused by Israel's airstrike on the Maghazi refugee camp in Gaza was a mistake, according to an IDF military official who spoke to KAN news. The official said following an internal IAF investigation, it came out that the type of weaponry used did not match the nature of the mission. As a result, there was extensive collateral damage that did not need to occur and could have been avoided if the correct weaponry had been used. Dozens of innocent civilians were killed in this strike, KAN said, adding a report that the IDF had expressed regret over the incident. The Israeli air strike that hit central Gaza's Maghazi refugee camp killed 106 people, according to Palestinian health ministry spokesman Ashraf al-Qidra, who said the death toll was likely to climb.

Associated Press

Israeli Strikes Across Gaza Kill Dozens of Palestinians

Israeli forces bombarded cities, towns and refugee camps across Gaza, killing dozens of people in a widening air and ground offensive against Hamas that has forced thousands more to flee from homes and shelters in recent days. The war has already killed over 20,000 Palestinians and driven around 85% of the population of 2.3 million from their homes. Much of northern Gaza has been leveled, and it has been largely depopulated and isolated from the rest of the territory for weeks. Many fear a similar fate awaits the south as Israel expands its offensive to most of the tiny enclave. Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas — which is still putting up stiff resistance, even in the north — and bring back more than 100 hostages still held by the militants after their Oct. 7 attack into southern Israel, in which some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed. Israeli officials have brushed off international calls for a cease-fire — saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas. Read More “Israeli Tanks Push Deep Into Central Gaza Town, Air Strike Kills 20 in South” (Reuters)

Times of Israel

PM Cancels War Cabinet Meeting on Post-war Gaza Planning

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has canceled a war cabinet meeting that was supposed to discuss Israel's plan for who will govern Gaza after the war. Netanyahu has refused to hold any such meetings until now, angering the Biden administration, which argues that failure to plan for who will govern Gaza after the war will lead to the IDF being bogged down in the enclave indefinitely. The Israeli premier’s stance has been influenced by his far-right coalition partners who have similarly rejected any discussion about Palestinian Authority rule in Gaza. This leaves few if any other options, but Netanyahu has appeared committed to keeping his coalition intact and has accordingly sought to delay “day-after” discussions for nearly three months. Dig Deeper “What Will Israel’s Next Phase Entail in Gaza as War Drags On?” (Al-Monitor)
Ynet News

**Thousands Rally Calling to Free All Hostages Held by Hamas**

After five days of marching from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thousands of youth and their supporters demonstrated in front of the Knesset, calling for the release of all of the hostages. The march was organized by youth from Kibbutz Kfar Aza, in collaboration with the surrounding communities, the National Scout Movement, and the Sha'ar Hanegev Regional Council. Thousands of the participating youth called for the immediate return of all Israeli hostages held by the Hamas terror group. Dig Deeper “Battalion Chief Told Hostage to Approach; When He Did, a Soldier Shot Him, Probe Finds” (Times of Israel)

Reuters

**Israeli Raids in West Bank Target Hamas Funding**

Israeli forces raided foreign exchange and money transfer agencies in Ramallah and other cities in the occupied West Bank, seizing millions of dollars suspected of being intended to fund the Islamist group Hamas, the military said. At least one person was killed and 14 others were wounded in a clash between Israeli troops and Palestinians in the center of Ramallah, the main city in the West Bank and the seat of the PA, the Palestinian health ministry said. An Israeli military statement said police, army and Shin Bet security personnel carried out the raids across the West Bank, making 21 arrests in Ramallah as well as Tulkarm and Jenin, in the northern West Bank and Hebron in the south. As well as financial service providers, the operation also targeted cryptographic currencies, with a special cybercrimes unit taking part in the investigation, the military said. Clashes also broke out in several other locations. The Israeli military said its soldiers opened fire after explosives, petrol bombs and rocks were thrown at them. Read More “Two Israelis Wounded in Stabbing Attack South of Jerusalem, Assailant Shot” (Reuters)

Axios

**Biden in Call Told Netanyahu to Solve PA Tax Revenue Issue**

President Biden held a difficult conversation last weekend with Prime Minister Netanyahu over Israel's decision to withhold part of the tax revenue it collects for the PA. A US official said this part of last Saturday's call between the two leaders was one of the most difficult and "frustrating" conversations Biden has had with Netanyahu since the beginning of the war in Gaza. It's a sign of the growing tensions between Biden and Netanyahu. The tax revenues Israel collects for the PA under an agreement between the parties are a major source of income for the PA, which is already in a financial crisis. The issue has become a thorn for Netanyahu, who is facing pressure from the Biden administration to release the funds, and Smotrich, who has expressed opposition to the release of any of the funds, even indirectly, and has threatened to resign over the issue, which could put the prime minister's coalition government at risk. The Biden administration has expressed concerns that an economic collapse of the PA could lead to a violent escalation in the occupied West Bank as a result of it not being able to pay its security forces their salaries.
Reuters

US Allies Reluctant on Red Sea Task Force

President Biden hoped to present a firm international response to Yemen's Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping by launching a new maritime force, but a week after its launch many allies don't want to be associated with it, publicly, or at all. Two of America's European allies who were listed as contributors to Operation Prosperity Guardian - Italy and Spain - issued statements appearing to distance themselves from the maritime force. The Pentagon says the force is a defensive coalition of more than 20 nations to ensure billions of dollars' worth of commerce can flow freely through a vital shipping chokepoint in Red Sea waters off Yemen. But nearly half of those countries have so far not come forward to acknowledge their contributions or allowed the US to do so. Those contributions can range from dispatching warships to merely sending a staff officer. The reluctance of some U.S. allies to link themselves to the effort partly reflects the fissures created by the conflict in Gaza, which has seen Biden maintain firm support for Israel even as international criticism rises over its offensive, which Gaza's health ministry says has killed more than 21,000 Palestinians. The Rea Sea is the entry point for ships using the Suez Canal, which handles about 12% of worldwide trade and is vital for the movement of goods between Asia and Europe. Houthi attacks have seen some ships rerouted around Africa's Cape of Good Hope, substantially increasing sailing time and costs.

Al-Monitor

Sudan Civilians Rush for Arms as Paramilitaries Advance

US Secretary of State Tony Blinken is expected to travel to the Middle East late next week to discuss the Gaza war, according to five US, Israeli and Arab officials. This will be Blinken's fourth trip to the Middle East and his fifth visit to Israel since the war started. His trip is part of an ongoing series of high-level visits by Biden administration officials to conduct constant consultations with the Israeli government and regional partners about the crisis. The officials said Blinken is expected to arrive in Israel late next week — likely on Friday. He is also expected to visit the occupied West Bank, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. The State Department said it had no travel to announce at this time. A US official said the expected stops on the trip are not final and could still change. Dig Deeper “Two Gaza Wars: Why the Gulf Between Israelis and Outsiders Is So Vast, and Jarring” (Ha'aretz)
Israeli Plan For Underground Barrier at Rafah

By Yossi Yehoshua

- Amid ongoing deliberations over whether and how to operate in Rafah—the city into which Hamas smuggled the overwhelming majority of its weapons through tunnels from Egypt—Defense Minister Yoav Gallant proposed in a meeting with Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin a week ago that Israel, together with Egypt and with some American funding, build a deep underground wall along the Egyptian side of the border fitted with technological devices similar to those that were installed on the Gaza Strip border immediately after Operation Protective Edge. This would be in a comparatively short section of up to 13 kilometers, much shorter than the 40 miles of underground wall built along the Israeli border with Gaza.

- That underground barrier, as opposed to the one above ground, has proved so far to be effective—and has not been breached by a Hamas tunnel to this day. Among other things, it is fitted with technological devices that provide indication as to whether any digging is being done in the vicinity. The barrier, which was built after Operation Protective Edge, sliced through existing tunnels and rendered them useless. The idea now is that the two countries, Israel and Egypt, would receive any digging indications directly to war rooms that will be established. The proposal is that in the event of any such indications, or in the event that an attempt is being made to break through the underground barrier, the IDF will be able to resume its operations at any given time. The Egyptians are opposed to an Israeli ground operation in the Rafah area because, among other reasons, they are afraid of a mass flight by Palestinians into their territory.

- Egypt claims that no weapons were smuggled through the Rafah crossing, a claim that holds no water. The idea is to build the barrier on the Egyptian side, which would not require major underground work by the IDF, and not on the Gaza side, where Hamas could sabotage it. Until now, the IDF has made do with pinpoint air strikes in the Rafah area and not carried out ground operations there. The IDF assassinated Subhi Ferwana, who played a key role in supplying Hamas with tens of millions of dollars, in a targeted killing in the heart of Rafah. An attempt was also made on the life of Hamas’ Rafah brigade commander a week ago. So far, no official announcement has been made as to whether he survived. Any decision to carry out a ground operation in Rafah will have to be made by the security cabinet and will obviously take into account Egyptian requests.

- The top IDF brass believes that the war cannot end with Hamas’s chief oxygen line still operable since that will allow it to regain its footing quickly and replenish its supply of arms. Blocking it by means of a barrier that has proved to be impervious could be a solution that both countries can live with. Brig. Gen. Eran Ofir, who is considered to be an expert in this field, is the person who built the Gaza barrier. He is likely to be involved in the planning, thanks to the experience he gained and the lessons learned from how Hamas breached the above-ground barrier at the start of the war. The inquiry into that incident found that it was breached in 60 locations after Hamas attacked the cameras trained on the fence and “blinded” the observers in the war rooms.
Inside the Gaza Strip, the IDF continued its offensives in the refugee camps in the central Gaza Strip with the 36th Division, and with the 98th Division in Khan Yunis. The latter division has also been operating underground, and not just by means of raids, and has achieved important results. In the end, the objective is to put pressure on Hamas’s center of gravity, where its top leaders are located. In the north, was another day of heated fighting. Dozens of rockets were fired at the Galilee from the morning and a Hizbullah UAV exploded on Mt. Dov. In retaliation, IAF combat jets carried out a targeted air strike on terrorist objectives inside Lebanon in the afternoon. The strike destroyed terrorist infrastructure and Hizbullah military sites. In the evening, Hizbullah claimed responsibility—for the sixth time—for “firing 30 rockets at Kiryat Shmona.”
Israel Must Cease Hostilities and Bring the Hostages Home
By Ehud Olmert

- The odds of achieving the complete elimination of Hamas were nil from the moment that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared them to be the chief goal of the war. Even then it was clear to anyone who thought about it that the complete destruction of the terrorist organization is wishful thinking that is militarily unfeasible even under conditions unlike those that exist in the Gaza Strip. The intelligence (which has since proved to be very limited) that we had before October 7 was enough for us to realize that a sophisticated network of tunnels was spread all across the Gaza Strip. What we suffered from these attack tunnels in the 2014 Gaza war was enough to know that the tunnel network, which runs under hospitals and many other public buildings in the relatively small area that is the Strip, would preclude a quick and decisive military operation that could eliminate the terrorist organization even under more favorable conditions. Hamas is not easily defeated.

- Of course, Netanyahu knew from the get-go that his rhetoric was baseless and would ultimately collapse in the face of a military and humanitarian reality that would force Israel to reach an endpoint in the current campaign. That time has now arrived. The defeat of Hamas is a long way away. We haven't even reached the point at which we are in control of the timetable of the war that began on October 7. The best of Israel's enlisted and reserve troops are fighting with determination, courage and admirable professionalism.

- Cooperation, coordination and synchronization between the army, the air force, the navy and Military Intelligence has been more effective than in any conflict since the Yom Kippur War. Never have the various fighting forces demonstrated such an impressive level of coordination – not in the first or second Lebanon wars, nor during any of the military operations in the West Bank. That includes the operation in 2002, at the height of the second intifada, which was in essence a violent conflict inside several refugee camps without the subterranean infrastructure that poses such a threat to our forces today. The 2002 operation didn't lead to the elimination of terror groups in the West Bank, but it did dramatically reduce the incidence of terror. It took several years before we could say that the operation was truly over.

- The various military operations of Gaza – in 2008-2009, 2014, 2021 and all the others – were not as impressive as the offensive being waged today. But it's deceptive to think that it will bring about the destruction of the terrorist organization, unless it is a pre-planned and comprehensive campaign that is designed to drag on long after the events of October 7 in order to create time for Netanyahu to stave off a rapid descent into the abyss of the forgotten, as he deserves. We should expect difficult days ahead, with a growing number of fallen soldiers and painful scenes of destruction and desolation in Gaza, which cast a heavy shadow on the State of Israel and undermine the support and patience shown toward us by even the friendliest countries. What should we do? I believe that the time has come for Israel to express its readiness to end the fighting.
Yes, end the fighting. Not a pause and not a temporary cessation of two, three or four days. An end to the hostility – period. At that time, Israel will need to bring back the hostages, those who are alive and those who are dead. If we wait, it won't be long before the only ones we can bring back will be the dead, because there won't be any living ones. A cessation of hostilities must be conditioned on the release of all the hostages, every last one of them, the soldiers and the bodies of all those who have been held by Hamas for years. All of them. In exchange, Israel will have no choice but to release all the Hamas prisoners it holds. I refused to agree to a deal that was offered to me when I was prime minister that would have led to the release of Gilad Shalit. The terms were much better than those that Netanyahu finally agreed to, that called for freeing 1,027 murderers, among them the one whom the prime minister today calls a Nazi, Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. He released all those murderers, including residents of East Jerusalem and citizens of Israel, in exchange for one soldier.

Back then, I refused the dubious honor of taking credit for the joy at Shalit's release because I feared that releasing far fewer prisoners, even without blood on their hands, was unacceptable. Today, I say, release them. If there is no other way to bring the hostages home, there is no way to avoid a swap. The obligation of the State of Israel to those of its citizens who were abducted from their homes, their bedrooms, living rooms and shelters is greater than the shame entailed in making concessions to Hamas. Israel must say that the end to the fighting will involve freezing the deployment of the military forces wherever they are on the day the cessation goes into effect. At the same time, Israel must say that negotiations will begin with the Palestinians on the future of the Gaza Strip, with Egypt acting as mediator.

This is how the situation looks today: On the one hand, Israel has racked up impressive military achievements. At the same time, Israel's justified and inevitable military action threatens the existence of Gaza as a habitable place. On the other hand, a black cloud is casting a shadow over the State of Israel as a result of the destruction it has wrought. We can justifiably be angry at the self-righteousness and hypocrisy of public opinion, governments and world leaders who preach morals to us in circumstances that, had they suffered them, they would have reacted to more harshly than we have.

Many of those who criticize us have acted no less brutally themselves without hesitation, indiscriminately bombing and wreaking destruction on countries and populated areas thousands of kilometers away from their homelands when their citizens have been threatened, and in some cases killed by terrorist organizations. But only complete fools, like the ignoramuses from Channel 14 and their viewers who eat up such nonsense, fail to understand how much Israel depends on the goodwill of the leaders of these countries, led by US President Joe Biden, and how much their cursed messiah, Netanyahu, has made Israel dependent on aid from the United States and other countries for its stability and deterrence. The time has come. We need to take a determined stand without hesitation, without political calculations about opinion polls and future Knesset mandates, and immediately bring about the next phase of the current conflict – the cessation of hostilities, the return of the hostages (living and dead) and negotiations mediated by Egypt on the future of Gaza.
There is no chance that Netanyahu will ever agree to this because he believes his personal future, his survival, his political career, his legacy, his family and children all depend on continuing the war. For that, he is willing to let the nation burn. Will any of his war cabinet colleagues have enough courage and determination to do what is needed now?