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Israel and Middle East News Update

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S. Daniel Abraham Center for Middle East Peace
1725 I St NW Suite 300, Washington, DC 20006
The Hon. Robert Wexler, President

News Excerpts

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Israel National News

Poll: Gantz Is Most Suitable Candidate to Be Prime Minister

A poll published by Channel 12 News finds that the public believes that the chairman of the National Unity Party, Minister Benny Gantz, is the most suitable candidate for Prime Minister. Gantz leads with 43% compared to 27% who said that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is more suitable for the role. 22% of respondents answered that neither is suitable, and 8% answered: "I don't know". When asked who is more suitable to be Prime Minister – Netanyahu or Yair Lapid, the Likud chairman leads with 31%, compared to 25% for Lapid. In response to this question, 39% believed that neither candidate is suitable for the position. If the elections were to be held today, the poll found, the National Unity Party led by Benny Gantz would win 37 seats, and the Likud led by Benjamin Netanyahu would win 18 seats. [Dig Deeper “Gantz Holds Wide Lead Over Netanyahu in Polls; Current Coalition Faces Majority Loss” \(Ha’aretz\)](#)

Ynet News

After 3 Weeks, Netanyahu, Biden Talk for 45 Minutes

In the shadow of the tensions between the United States and Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Joe Biden talked for 45 minutes, for the first time in three weeks. An official in the Biden administration said before the conversation that it would focus on the issue of the hostages. Biden told Netanyahu that Israel **should not** proceed with a military operation in Rafah without a plan to ensure the safety of the roughly 1 million people sheltering there, the White House said. Netanyahu replied that just as Israel acted throughout the war to act according to international law and to the highest standards, "we will know how to do the same" in Rafah. Netanyahu also emphasized that the operation in Rafah is necessary and Israel will do everything to minimize harm to civilians. [Dig Deeper “Biden Had a Week to Forget, but There’s Something Netanyahu Should Remember About Him” \(Ha’aretz\)](#)

Jerusalem Post

US: ‘Real Progress’ on Framework for Release of Hostages

Negotiators working on a phased framework deal to secure the release of the remaining hostages held by the in Gaza have made "real progress" over the last few weeks, a senior [Biden](#) administration official said. Israel and Hamas have been at odds on the terms of a hostage deal. Following a Paris meeting led by US CIA Chief William Burns, Israel presented Hamas with a proposal that Hamas rejected presenting one of its own. Israel rejected that counterproposal but has **remained** in the talks, with Burns expected to hold **another meeting** in Cairo this week possibly as early as Tuesday, according to media reports. Both Qatar and Egypt have been the mediators of a deal for the release of the remaining 136 hostages held in Gaza. [Dig Deeper “Top Biden Aide Tells Us-Arab Leaders He Has No Confidence in Israeli Government” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Egypt Warns Against IDF Operation in Rafah

The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement, condemning statements made by 'high-level Israeli officials' pertaining to future IDF operations inside Rafah. The Ministry highlighted that such an action would lead to exasperating 'the humanitarian catastrophe in the Gaza Strip. Egypt's rejection of Israel's intentions is grounded in concerns over the exacerbation of the humanitarian crisis already gripping the Gaza Strip. With Rafah currently serving as a refuge for approximately 1.4 million displaced Palestinians, any military operation targeting the city would risk further worsening the dire conditions faced by its inhabitants. The statement underscores the necessity of concerted international and regional efforts to safeguard Rafah from potential targeting.

Ha'aretz

Israeli Forces Rescue 2 Hostages from Hamas Captivity

Israeli security forces have rescued two hostages who were held captive by Hamas in Gaza overnight Sunday, a joint statement by the IDF, Shin Bet and Israel Police said. The two, Louis Norberto Har, 70, and Fernando Marman, 60, were kidnapped from Kibbutz Nir Yitzhak on October 7 and were held in an apartment in Rafah. They are in good condition and have been taken for medical evaluation at Sheba Medical Center in Ramat Gan. [Read More "Hamas Says More Than 50 People Killed in Israeli Strikes on Rafah" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Reuters

Palestinian President in Qatar to Discuss Ceasefire Efforts

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas arrived in Doha for talks on securing a ceasefire in the Gaza war with the Qatari emir, whose country has been at the heart of mediation efforts and hosts political leaders of the militant group Hamas. Palestinian news agency Wafa said Abbas would meet emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, but did not say if he would also meet leaders of Hamas, a group that has long been at odds with Abbas and his West Bank-based Fatah group. The Palestinian ambassador to Qatar, Munir Ghannam, told Voice of Palestine Radio that Abbas and the emir would discuss efforts to secure a Gaza ceasefire with Israel and ways to increase aid for the territory's 2.3 million people. Qatar hosts the head of Hamas, Ismail Haniyeh, as well as another senior leader in the group, Khaled Meshaal, who handles diaspora affairs in the Hamas political office. Hamas seized control of Gaza in 2007 from Ramallah-based Abbas after a brief civil war with security forces that were loyal to the Palestinian president. Abbas' authority has largely been reduced to the Israeli-occupied West Bank, which is larger than Gaza but which is also fractured by Israeli settlements.

Israel Plans to Build a Neighborhood for Jews in Jerusalem

Israel is moving forward with plans for a new Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem, located on the doorstep of a Palestinian neighborhood. Right-wing activists are participating in the planning of the new Nofei Rachel neighborhood, which will be established just meters from Palestinian homes in Umm Tuba. The initial plans call for the construction of 650 residential units right next to the neighborhood in southeast Jerusalem. Similar to other developments of this kind, Nofei Rachel is a joint project of the Justice Ministry's administrator general and official receiver (formerly the Custodian of Absentee Property) and a real estate company controlled by right-wing activists. Nofei Rachel is the fourth new neighborhood for Jews in East Jerusalem moved along by the Administrator General in recent years. It follows one planned inside the Palestinian village of Umm Lisan; Givat Hashaked, adjacent to the Palestinian town of Beit Safafa; and Kidmat Zion, between the Ras al-Amud neighborhood and the separation fence. According to organizations that monitor construction in the West Bank's settlements, all of these neighborhoods – planned to have a combined 3,000 residential units – are being swiftly advanced. Since the war in the Gaza Strip began on October 7, these neighborhoods have particularly benefited from exceptionally rapid approvals by zoning authorities. [Read More “Israel Said Worried US Could Slap Sanctions on MKs, Soldiers, Settlers in West Bank” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Associated Press

Israel's West Bank Settler Population Grew Nearly 3%

The population of Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank grew nearly 3% in 2023, according to a new report based on population statistics from the Israeli government. The report, released by the pro-settler group WestBankJewishPopulationStats.com, found the settler population jumped to 517,407 as of Dec. 31, from 502,991 a year earlier. The settler population has grown over 15% in the last five years, the report said. Last year, it passed the half-million mark, a major threshold. This year's report predicted “accelerated growth” in the coming years, claiming the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on southern Israel, which triggered the current war in Gaza, persuaded many Israelis who were formerly opposed to settlement-building on occupied land to change positions. The international community overwhelmingly considers Israel's settlements to be illegal and obstacles to peace by occupying land the Palestinians seek for their state. Israel considers the West Bank to be “disputed” and says the territory's fate should be decided in negotiations. The Biden administration recently sanctioned four settlers for violence against Palestinians and activists in the West Bank. The report projected that if the growth rate over the past five years continues, the settler population in the West Bank will exceed 600,000 before 2030. [Dig Deeper “The US And UK Should Recognize a Palestinian State Now” \(Ha'aretz\)](#)

The Public Wants the Truth, Not General Slogans

By Michael Milshstein

- During the Vietnam War, Robert McNamara, the American defense secretary and one of the architects of that bitter historic experiment, asked that a daily report be prepared for him with quantitative data about the US Army's achievements, with the number of enemies killed and the number of destroyed weapons topping the list. The graphs indicated a steady rise in successes, but the war became harder and harder, and victory—like the horizon—kept receding. One of McNamara's frustrated aides commented that there were some things that the graphs did not reflect, such as ideology and mindset, and they were the reason that the collection of tactical successes failed to become a strategic victory. Israel appears to gradually be nearing the trap in which McNamara was caught 60 years ago.
- The military successes in Gaza are very impressive, particularly the number of Hamas terrorists killed or captured, and the destruction of Hamas infrastructure, first and foremost, the tunnel network. That said, the war is still far from the "total victory" that the prime minister talks about without a timetable for ending the conflict or defining the strategy that will bring this about. The current circumstances do not appear to indicate that Hamas is close to breaking. Despite the painful blows it has taken, fighting has continued throughout the Gaza Strip, Hamas's leaders have not been killed and Hamas has gradually begun to return to areas that the IDF left, specifically the northern Gaza Strip.
- There are no signs of the start of either a public protest against Hamas or the development of a local alternative. The Israeli yearning for the sprout of armed clans that might control the public space and provide civilian aid appears to be more wishful thinking than an attainable goal. There are two lessons here for Israel. First, it must change its world of classic military terms when dealing with a flexible organization like Hamas, known for its adaptability, its learning ability and its ability to change. It exists on several dimensions simultaneously and adapts itself to the circumstances. For example, its military operatives dressed in civilian clothes or disguise themselves as municipality workers to maintain their hold on the public institutions, and after its military battalions were dismantled, it transitioned to an urban guerrilla model based on clans. The second lesson for Israel is that it will be impossible to instate a new order in Gaza without controlling, over time, the areas that the IDF conquered and plan to control all of Gaza.
- Since the IDF has failed to meet these essential conditions and is, in fact, constantly reducing its troop numbers in Gaza, all the deliberation between the PA's return, a local Palestinian administration or international forces remain theoretical and mostly disconnected from reality, a reality in which Hamas continues to be the dominant force in the Gaza Strip, even if battered and bruised. Ever since October 7, Israeli society has shown unprecedented resilience that surprised even itself. It is willing to accept sacrifices and to wage a long war in order to achieve the strategic objectives that were defined at the start of the war, first among them, toppling Hamas.

- **That said, the public wants the complex truth, including a presentation of the challenges and the difficulties, and not general slogans ostensibly meant to boost motivation, and the longer the war goes on, more and more doubts arise as to the clarity and the feasibility of the strategic objectives. “Total victory” and “perpetual war” are terms often used to enlist people in countries where civilian society is not democratic, but they are probably not well-suited to the collective Israeli experience. Israel has reached a crossroads in Gaza. It can decide on a comprehensive deal that will bring about the hostages’ release at the price of stopping the war and possibly also a withdrawal from Gaza, and consider, only after the passage of time, to resume the effort to achieve the objective of toppling the Hamas regime, or it can decide on a strategic change of reality in the Gaza Strip that would require a complete takeover and a prolonged stay. The middle road that was chosen fails to meet either of the two strategic objectives and, instead, creates mounting collective frustration and public mistrust in the country’s leadership.**

Total Victory

By Nahum Barnea

- The IDF intends to begin inquiries into the war and what preceded it immediately after things stabilize in western Khan Yunis. The inquiries are to be conducted internally, within the chain of command. Ultimately, though, the chief of staff will have to appoint an external team of retired generals to review the findings. That is the mechanism the military uses to learn why it failed, who failed and what corrections need to be made. The criticism that cabinet ministers leveled against the chief of staff when news of that was leaked to the media was a testament to the panic that grips them every time the October 7 disaster is discussed. They're afraid.
- Ben Gvir's attack on the chief of staff at the security cabinet meeting was even more feckless. Ben Gvir was angry that the chief of staff had asked the police commissioner to make sure that humanitarian aid is delivered to Gaza unhindered. Humanitarian aid isn't an IDF hobby. The decision to send it into the Gaza Strip was made by the security cabinet, of which Ben Gvir is a member. Instead of taking the chief of staff to task, he ought to take himself to task. The truth needs to be said, even if it hurts: humanitarian aid isn't just a lifeline for the Gazans; it is instrumental in enabling the IDF to continue to fight. A large Hamas brigade, the last functioning brigade that Hamas has left, operates in and around Rafah.
- Much of Hamas's top brass may very well be there too. The only way of doing in Rafah what the IDF did in Khan Yunis is to facilitate the safe and orderly relocation of the 1.3 million displaced Gazans who were expelled to Rafah. They need to be relocated north of Rafah after reaching understandings with the Egyptians and the Americans. Military officials are convinced that the quantity and quality of humanitarian aid need to be improved, otherwise, a Rafah operation won't be possible. What did Netanyahu do? He announced that he had "instructed" the IDF to prepare for an incursion into Rafah and, at the same time, he has allowed Ben Gvir and his colleagues in the government to undermine an incursion into Rafah.
- That's what happens when the government is led by Kahanists and by a person who bears the title of a prime-minister-looking-for-an-alibi. When one asks high-ranking military officials what the meaning is of "total victory," an imperative that Netanyahu has frequently repeated in his speeches, they shrug their shoulders. There is no such thing as total victory in a war against a terrorist organization. Victory will only be achieved when political action fills the vacuum that the military has created with its takeover of Gaza. In the absence of political action, the military's achievements on the ground will fade. The war cabinet members have been agonizing for days over the question of how to respond to the hostage deal proposal that Hamas put on the table. It most certainly is an agonizing deliberation. Hamas's opening demands are on the spectrum between hard and impossible, mainly as pertains to the second and third stages of the deal.

- For the time being, no leverage has been found that might force Hamas to soften its positions. But equally important is the discussion that hasn't been held—a discussion about what happens if no deal is reached. What reality will that dictate in Gaza and in the Gaza periphery? How will that impact the situation along the northern border? The IDF probably doesn't have a plan for that. Some of the ministers say, no problem, the IDF will remain on the ground in Gaza as an occupying force for another year. We can rebuild the settlements there, if we want. As a bonus, we can occupy southern Lebanon and reestablish the security zone there. The reservists will complain a bit, but they'll adapt. We'll get by economically, with God's help, and the Americans will turn their attention elsewhere. That will be our total victory.
- A yawning gulf exists between the top leadership in the government and the top IDF brass. Government officials are counting on importing foreign workers to replace the Palestinian laborers. Military officials are troubled by the signs of economic distress in the West Bank. Ramadan will begin in another month, and people there have neither money nor jobs. But they do have guns, and the economic distress will precipitate terrorism. While it may be true that after October 7 the Israeli public is justifiably averse to seeing Palestinian laborers in their neighborhoods, sometimes decisions need to be made. The more extreme potential scenarios that have been envisaged by security officials are grim. They anticipate that in addition to Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the Tanzim and members of the Palestinian Authority's security services might also turn their guns against Israel. That is what happened on the eve of Operation Defensive Shield. The last thing Israel needs now is an Intifada in the West Bank, which could easily spill over into East Jerusalem and mixed cities in Israel. "What has the government got to do with the war," asked Minister Goldknopf last week. My initial reaction to that was that the man has no clue as to where he is living and who is paying his salary. On second thought, the man is a genius: he has a better grasp of the government that he belongs to than the rest of us.