



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Thursday, February 22*

### Headlines:

- **Poll: Most Israelis Say ‘Absolute Victory’ in Gaza Unlikely**
- **Knesset Overwhelmingly Rejects Imposition of Palestinian State**
- **IDF Seeks to Divide Gaza in Two to Contain Hamas**
- **UK and Jordan Air Drop Aid to Hospital in Northern Gaza**
- **Gantz: “Early Signs of Progress” in Hostage Deal Negotiations**
- **2 Palestinians Killed in Gaza Area Where They Were Told to Shelter**
- **Israeli Association: Sexual Assault Took Place During Hamas Attack**
- **IRG Official Escapes Harm in Damascus Strike**

### Commentary:

- **Yedioth Ahronoth: “Democracy in Danger”**  
- By Nadav Eyal
- **Yedioth Ahronoth: “Back to Paris for a Deal”**  
- By Nahum Barnea

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

# News Excerpts

February 22, 2023

## Ha'aretz

### **Poll: Most Israelis Say 'Absolute Victory' in Gaza Unlikely**

Most Israelis do not believe an "absolute victory" in the war in Gaza is likely according to a poll published by the Israel Democracy Institute. The survey polled 510 men and women in Hebrew and 102 in Arabic as a representative sample of the entire adult population of Israel aged 18 and older. Of those polled, 51% of Jewish respondents and 77.5% of Arab respondents said there is a low likelihood of achieving absolute victory. The term "absolute victory" was deliberately chosen as it has become a phrase favored by Netanyahu, although he is disinclined to define what that actually means strategically. Among the Israeli Jews polled, those on the political right tended to agree with Netanyahu (55%), saying there is a high likelihood of achieving "absolute victory," while (84%) and in the center (63%) said there is a low likelihood.

## Israel National News

### **Knesset Rejects Imposition of Palestinian State**

The Knesset approved with a large majority of 99 yes votes, the government's statement opposing unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state by international actors. A majority of opposition MKs voted to support the statement. After the declaration was approved, Netanyahu spoke in the plenum and said, "I don't remember many votes in which the Knesset voted by a majority of 99 out of 120 on any vote." This comes three days after the Cabinet unanimously approved the government statement rejecting attempts to unilaterally force a Palestinian state on Israel. The full statement reads: "1. Israel absolutely rejects international diktat regarding the permanent arrangement with the Palestinians. Such an arrangement will be achieved only by direct negotiations between the parties, without preconditions." "2. Israel will continue to oppose unilateral recognition of a Palestinian state. Such recognition, following the October 7 massacre, will award an immense and unprecedented prize to terrorism, and prevent any future peace agreement."

## Jerusalem Post

### **IDF Seeks to Divide Gaza in Two to Contain Hamas**

The head of the Arab media division in the IDF Spokesperson Unit, Avichay Adraee, issued a call in Arabic to civilians still remaining in the Zitun and Turkmen neighborhoods of Gaza City, telling them to evacuate to the humanitarian areas south of the Gaza Strip. The areas in which the directive was issued are located next to a significant junction that the IDF has cleared in the south of Gaza City, effectively dividing Gaza into two parts. This is one of the significant logistical operations that the military has carried out in the Strip. IDF soldiers have created a partition on the Palestinian side of the Gaza border fence with Israel. It has already earned the nickname "Gaza crossroad".

Reuters

## **UK and Jordan Air Drop Aid to Hospital in Northern Gaza**

Britain and Jordan have air-dropped four tonnes of aid including medicines, fuel, and food to Tal Al-Hawa Hospital in northern Gaza, Britain's Foreign Office said. The UK-funded aid was delivered by the Jordanian Air Force. "Thousands of patients will benefit and the fuel will enable this vital hospital to continue its life-saving work," British Foreign Secretary David Cameron said in a statement. "However, the situation in Gaza is desperate and significantly more aid is needed, and fast. We are calling for an immediate humanitarian pause to allow additional aid into Gaza as quickly as possible and bring hostages home." United Nations agencies and aid groups say the ongoing war, the [Israeli military's](#) refusal to facilitate deliveries, and the breakdown of order inside Hamas-run Gaza make it increasingly difficult to bring vital aid to much of the coastal enclave. [Read More "UK Parliament Descends Into Chaos Over Gaza Ceasefire Vote" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

I24 News

## **Gantz: "Early Signs of Progress" in Hostage Negotiations**

Israeli War Cabinet Minister Benny Gantz provided an update on the ongoing negotiations for the release of hostages held since the October 7 attack, stating, "There are early signs that suggest progress." Gantz expressed cautious optimism about the possibility of reaching a new agreement for their release. Gantz reiterated Israel's unwavering commitment to bringing the hostages home, asserting, "We will not neglect any opportunity to bring the [hostages] home." He emphasized that no effort will be spared in ensuring the safe return of the captives. Regarding the impending start of Ramadan, Gantz emphasized Israel's readiness to escalate its offensive in Rafah if a hostage deal is not reached before the Muslim holy month begins.

Times of Israel

## **2 Palestinians Killed in Area Where They Were Told to Go**

The aid group Doctors Without Borders says two people were killed when building housing staff in the Gaza Strip was struck during an Israeli operation in an area where Palestinians have been told to seek shelter. "While details are still emerging, ambulance crews have now reached the site, where at least two family members of our colleagues have been killed and six people wounded. We are horrified by what has taken place," the group said. The attack took place in Muwasi, a sandy, mostly undeveloped strip of land along the coast that has been transformed into a sprawling tent camp with little in the way of basic services. Doctors Without Borders does not identify the source of the fire. The Israeli military says it is looking into the reports. Meanwhile, Israel intensified its bombardment of Rafah and over a dozen members of one family were killed in an air strike. Abdulrahman Juma says his wife Noor, who was from the Al-Noor family, as well as his one-year-old daughter Kinza, had both been killed in the strike, along with Noor's parents, brother and other relatives. [Read More "IDF's Top Lawyer Warns Against 'Cases of Unacceptable Conduct' by Troops in Gaza" \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Associated Press

## **Sexual Assault Took Place During Hamas Attack**

The Association of Rape Crisis Centers in Israel said it has found evidence of “systematic and intentional” rape and sexual abuse during the Hamas attack on Oct. 7 that ignited the war in Gaza. The report said the attacks were more widespread than earlier thought, taking place at a series of locations across southern Israel. “In some cases, rape was conducted in front of an audience, such as partners, family, or friends, to increase the pain and humiliation for all present,” it said. Orit Sulitzeanu, the executive director of the association, said that in many cases, the bodies of male and female victims, including their genitals, were severely mutilated. The report did not specify the number of cases it had documented or identify any victims, even anonymously. Sulitzeanu said victim identification was difficult because many were killed after being assaulted, and first responders were so overwhelmed by the scale of death and destruction that they did not document signs of sexual abuse. The report’s authors said they based their research on confidential and public interviews with officials and first responders, as well as media reports. Sulitzeanu said they also relied on “confidential sources” but declined to say whether they had spoken to victims. [Read More “New Footage Purportedly Shows Gazan Civilians Protesting Against Hamas” \(Times of Israel\)](#)

Ynet News

## **IRG Official Escapes Harm in Damascus Strike**

An air strike on Damascus attributed to Israel directed missiles at apartments that were rented to Iranian commanders and their families, but none of them were present at the time of the attack. According to a Syrian opposition group The Voice of the Capital, no Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps members were hurt and, although the apartments were rented to them, they vacated them late last year. Sources told the opposition group that an Iranian commander had been staying over the past two days in an apartment on the fourth floor of the building that was attacked, likely with a woman. The second apartment hit was on the second floor and was used as a temporary accommodation. But, according to the sources, no foreigners were in the area ahead of the strike that killed three Syrians and wounded others. There was no information about the current whereabouts of the Iranian commander. The UK based Observatory for Human Rights, another group opposed to the Bashar Assad regime, said that Iranian and Hezbollah officials were frequently in the building and that the attack was an assassination attempt carried out by Israel. The official Syrian news agency Sanaa also claimed Iranians had been the target of the strike. A second explosion shook windows in Damascus. The Syrian opposition site also attributed to Israel and said it was on a rural area outside the capital. [Read More “US Senators: Truce in Gaza Could Pave Way for Israel and Hezbollah ‘To De-escalate’ \(Times of Israel\)](#)

## **Democracy in Danger**

By Nadav Eyal

- **A noticeable change has occurred in the past number of weeks in the Prisons Service. In the past, anytime GSS officials asked to interview Jewish prisoners who either had been convicted of acts of terrorism or who were being held under administrative detention, they were able to set up a meeting quickly by putting in a request to the specific prison's intelligence officer. Setting up the meeting with the prisoners was purely a technical matter. Sources connected to the Prisons Service told me, "Up until a few weeks ago, a GSS official's access to a Palestinian security prisoner, a [Jewish] administrative detainee or a Jewish prisoner who had been involved in terrorism was absolute, period." That has changed in recent weeks. GSS officials who have wanted to meet with Jewish prisoners as part of their regular work have encountered obstacles. GSS officials have been asked about the purpose of the requested meeting.**
- **One prison intelligence officer told GSS officials that [the requested meeting] has to be approved by the warden. In another case, [the GSS official was told that] the district commander has to sign off [on requested meeting]. In other words, the GSS has discovered that it no longer has the kind of free access to Jewish terrorists who are in prison that it used to have. Let's all bear the following in mind: the GSS is trying to prevent terror attacks, and that is the reason why it needs to speak from time to time with Jewish prisoners and detainees who are being held in the context of those kinds of offenses. The GSS declined to comment on the issue.**
- **Prisons Service officials told me that they were unfamiliar with the allegations, and said that no change had been made to provide the GSS with unfettered access, adding that "any pinpoint failing will be dealt with." The impression I received was that top Prisons Service officials have not changed their policy of cooperation with the GSS, and that includes the acting Prisons Service commissioner, Kobi Yaakobi. It is my impression that Prisons Service officials were horrified by the very question that I asked. Possibly, more junior Prisons Service officials have been acting independently after they came to see which side of the bread is buttered, and after hearing the music. The music is as follows: Anyone who wants to be promoted needs to curry favor with Itamar Ben Gvir and his cohorts—the very same people who in the past provided legal defense to suspects of Jewish terrorism.**
- **The above is part of a broader trend. There have been several reports in recent months about meddling by Ben Gvir's office in Prisons Service decisions about Jewish prisoners and Jews who are being held in administrative detention for terrorism-related reasons. According to a long investigative report by Josh Breiner in Ha'aretz a month and a half ago, Otzma Yehudit MK Limor Sonn Har Melech has met regularly and repeatedly with a number of Jewish prisoners and detainees, including Amiram Ben Ulilel, the murderer of the Dawabsheh family. According to that report, Ben Gvir has personally acted to improve the incarceration conditions for Jewish terrorists.**

- A high-ranking Prisons Service official was quoted as saying, “There isn’t another prisoner who is dealt with more by the organization than Prisoner 1361713, Ben Uliel. Requests regarding him from the minister’s office have been incessant, but the bottom line is the GSS’s.” That quote is from December. It is just one example. In terms of governance, there are three official bodies that defend Israeli democracy. The State Attorney’s Office and the Justice Ministry, the GSS and all of the organizations that are subordinate to the National Security Ministry, first among them the Israel Police.
- The former two haven’t shown any signs of breaking. But deep cracks have begun to form in the organizations that are under the purview of Ben Gvir, a Kahanist and a convicted criminal. In early February, Elisha Ben Kimon reported in Ynet [and Yedioth Ahronoth] that Border Police troops in Judea and Samaria would be tasked with dealing with “nationalist crime” (Jewish terrorism), given the poor performance by the Samaria and Judea District Police. What is the meaning of that decision? We would be best served by breaking down [what has happened]. The IDF and/or the GSS informs the police that they suspect an act of Jewish nationalist crime either has been or is about to be committed.
- Then—according to security officials—Samaria and Judea District Police officials reply by saying they don’t have any officers in the area. Either that or they make excuses about the large geographical size of the district that makes it hard for them to get officers to the scene. Either that or they say they don’t have an available patrol car. Security officials describe all of the above as “excuses,” and say that Ben Gvir’s spirit has taken hold of the police. In early November Ynet [and Yedioth Ahronoth] reported that Ben Gvir prevented Defense Minister Yoav Gallant from meeting with Samaria and Judea District Police Commander Cmdr. Uzi Levy to discuss those very issues. This might sound like a case of inter-departmental fighting, but it isn’t. If Cmdr. Uzi Levy isn’t adequately enforcing the law against Jewish ideological criminals (or criminals more broadly), if he is being uncooperative with the IDF and the GSS, and if the Samaria and Judea District Police is making decisions based on political calculations—that spells the end of the rule of law. The police officers’ allegiance to the law and to upholding it gets trampled underfoot. The rule of law isn’t just a lofty democratic value, it is essential for security.
- In the most recent act of Jewish terrorism, a Palestinian home was set on fire a few weeks ago while people were inside. It was only thanks to the intervention of the Border Police, who rescued them from the burning building, that this incident didn’t culminate with a Dawabsheh-family-styled murder. The IDF Central Command, the Border Police and the GSS are all playing the role of the Little Dutch Boy who has his finger in the dike, trying to keep Judea and Samaria from exploding and going up in flames. An eruption of violence of that kind could result in Israel losing the war, since huge numbers of troops will have to be redeployed in Judea and Samaria. There are excellent people in the ranks of the Israel Police and the Prisons Service. They proved their courage and capability on October 7 and they work under very difficult conditions. But there are two ways to gut demonstration mechanisms. The short but difficult way is to pass legislative changes that curtail democratic rights.

- **That is why the government tried to do with its judicial coup. It failed and, along the way, it weakened the State of Israel deeply and dangerously, so much so as to lead its enemies to believe that they might be able to overrun and devour it. The easy way to do away with a democratic mechanism takes much longer, but it is also far easier to accomplish: personal appointments. Loyalty over professionalism. The ranks of the Israel Police, the Prisons Service and the Gun Licensing Department are all filled with people who are loyal to the rule of law and the state. But all it takes is for there to be a few people who prioritize their own professional advancement careers over their dutiful fealty to their jobs for the entire mechanism to become corrupted. A good example of that is the exceptionally scandalous decision to issue a huge number of gun permits, including to political cronies, in violation of regulations and without authority.**
- **The Justice Ministry is currently studying whether that warrants a criminal investigation. No matter which way you look at the developments described here, we are suffering from a breakdown: The police that haven't been properly enforcing the law in an entire district that is under Israeli control, possibly with the goal of currying favor with the minister who has oversight or a political lobby; the GSS that has found itself running into obstacles that are designed to impede its efforts to prevent acts of terrorism; politician who have been intervening to improve the incarceration conditions given to imprisoned terrorists; and 14,000 gun permits that were recklessly issued. That breakdown has happened while the guns have been roaring and our attention has been distracted and, obviously, it isn't restricted only to spheres that fall under the National Security Ministry's purview. The danger to Israeli democracy hasn't passed. It has grown worse under the cover of the ongoing war.**

## **Back to Paris for a Deal**

By Nahum Barnea

- **No agreement has been reached yet about an exchange deal—responsible sources put the chances at 50%—but a resumption of negotiations appears to be near at hand. As Ynet first reported, an agreement has been reached that is supposed to facilitate a resumption of the talks on Saturday, this time in Paris. The move from Cairo to Paris is more than an act of physical relocation. The general idea is to go back to the framework that was agreed upon in early February and to advance from there. Hamas responded to the proposal that was drafted in Paris with a proposal of its own, one that was far harder for Israel to accept. The Israelis were divided. The negotiating team believed progress could be made, notwithstanding the difficult terms Hamas had presented in its opening position. Some of the war cabinet ministers agreed. Netanyahu vetoed that idea.**
- **Initially, he refused to send the Israeli team to Cairo. He subsequently agreed to send the team but stripped it of its mandate to negotiate, and he saddled it with a babysitter—a staffer with the Prime Minister’s Bureau. He also toughened his stance on the substantive issues. The news about a possible resumption of the talks in Paris lets both sides claim to have been right. Netanyahu can say that it was his rejection that prompted Hamas to begin to show flexibility. He can say he insisted and prevailed. Others can say that nothing of the kind happened: Sinwar has come to realize in the past two weeks that the advantages of reaching a deal outweigh the disadvantages.**
- **A similar process [of reevaluating advantages versus disadvantages] unfolded among Israeli decision-makers. The change is tactical. It is fragile and might still change. What has changed? The Americans ratcheted up their pressure on Qatar and Israel. The Americans are convinced that without a hostage deal now, they won’t be able to clinch a larger regional deal. The Egyptians are afraid that continued fighting during Ramadan will result in an outbreak of violence along its border with the Gaza Strip, as well as operations by the Muslim Brotherhood across Egypt. Regarding Hamas, Sinwar is the man who calls the shots. That is the way things have worked from the beginning. Reports about him either being out of contact or having fled to Egypt were either fabrications by journalists or false propaganda by Israeli officials.**
- **The petro-states’ governments told Sinwar and his colleagues that if Hamas failed to show more flexibility, they would stop providing funding and refuge for them and their families. That is an existential threat from Hamas’s perspective. The question of [Hamas’s] responsibility for the civilian population in Gaza on the eve of Ramadan was also brought into sharper focus, and possibly also the question of the personal survival of Hamas’s leaders in Gaza. A deal will provide them with an insurance policy. Israeli fears about a third Intifada erupting in the West Bank during Ramadan redoubled the demand to calm tensions. The IDF needs a pause in the fighting, which it will use to allow the troops, to discharge reservists and to learn lessons from the fighting. The most important factor that has changed is time. The time that has passed has put the hostages’ lives in increasingly grave danger.**



- The proposed framework is designed to lead to a trade of hostages for prisoners, a pause in fighting that will last for several weeks and a redeployment of IDF troops in the Gaza Strip. No agreement has been reached yet on the specifics: the quantities, the amounts of time and the distances. The document that Eisenkot submitted to the war cabinet, parts of which were reported by Channel 12 News' Yaron Avraham, called to move forward towards a deal. The prevailing assessment is that the person who leaked the document wanted to hurt two people—Netanyahu and Eisenkot. I wonder who that was. Or maybe the person who leaked it wanted only to help himself.