



S. DANIEL ABRAHAM  
CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## Israel and Middle East News Update

*Wednesday, March 27*

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- Gaza Hostage Talks Deadlock and Spark US-Israel Blame Game
- Haniyeh Heads to Iran for Second Time Since Gaza War
- Gallant's Washington Trip Hopes to Stop US Arms Embargo
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# News Excerpts

March 27, 2023

## Jerusalem Post

### **Poll: Israeli Public Ranks Netanyahu's Performance as 'Poor'**

According to a new survey published by the Israeli Democracy Institute (IDI), IDF Chief of Staff Herzi Halevi holds the highest rating among other Israeli officials regarding positive performance in the eyes of the Israeli public amid the ongoing war. According to the survey, Halevi topped the rankings with an approval rating of 48%, with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant following in second place with an approval rating of 40%. Minister-without-portfolio Benny Gantz ranked in the middle of the pack, with 34%, still polling higher than Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who only received 28% of public approval for his performance. This slightly improved from the Prime minister's rating in November, when he only received 26.5%. However, 57% of respondents ranked the prime minister as "poor" or "very poor."

## Axios

### **Hostage Talks Deadlock and Spark US-Israel Blame Game**

Israel has called its negotiations team back from Qatar after 10 days of talks over a possible hostage deal reached a dead-end, sparking a blame game between the United States and Israel. The fallout over the deadlock adds to already spiraling relations between Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Biden administration. US officials, together with Qatari and Egyptian mediators, pushed hard in recent days for a deal, stressing it is the only way to reach a six-week ceasefire in Gaza, where more than 30,000 Palestinians have been killed. Shortly after the Israeli negotiations team was called back from Doha, the Israeli prime minister's office issued a statement blaming Hamas for the deadlock. The statement added that the Biden administration's decision not to veto the UN Security Council resolution calling for a ceasefire and the release of hostages led to Hamas hardening its position. The statement angered the White House, which sees it as an attempt by Netanyahu to continue the fight that started the day before between the US and Israel over the UNSC resolution.

## Al-Monitor

### **Haniyeh Heads to Iran for Second Time Since Gaza War**

Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh who heads Hamas's political bureau arrived in Tehran at the head of a high-level delegation, on his second visit to Iran since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip erupted in October. An unnamed Hamas source had told the Saudi-owned Asharq News website that Haniyeh will stay in Iran for two days, where he will meet with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian as well as other officials. According to the source, the discussions will focus on the situation in Gaza in light of the ongoing war. Haniyeh's last visit to Tehran was in November when he met with Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to brief him on the developments in the Gaza Strip.

## **Gallant's Washington Trip Hopes to Stop US Arms Embargo**

Israeli Defense Minister Gallant flew to the US to meet with American senior officials regarding the ongoing negotiations for the release of the hostages and Israel's intention to operate in Rafah. According to IDF Maj.-Gen. Nimrod Shafer, one of the goals of the visit is to prevent an American arms embargo on Israel. Shafer added that "there is a difference between an embargo and taking certain measures. You can take all kinds of steps, for example, to slow down arms deliveries. Certain items say 'We are examining the request,' but never arrive. There are all kinds of ways in politics to make it very difficult." On a possible operation in Rafah, Shafer said, "I think that doing an operation in Rafah is the right decision. It's essential and could have been done in the first weeks of the war. The State of Israel chose not to go into Rafah because there were no real plans for the operation and no one wanted to talk about what would happen the day after. We did not fight in Rafah, and in my opinion, this opportunity is no longer in our hands."

## **Hostage Uriel Baruch Killed, Body Held in Gaza**

The family of abducted hostage Uriel Baruch was informed by the IDF that their intelligence shows he was murdered and his body is being held by Hamas in Gaza. Baruch, 35, who was married and a father of two, was abducted from the Nova music festival during the Hamas massacre on October 7. There are still 134 Israeli hostages that have been held by Hamas for 172 days since the massacre. Some are confirmed to have died and their bodies are being held by the terror group. Baruch's family, along with many other families of hostages being held in Gaza, took part on Thursday in a global event to recite the fundamental Shema Yisrael prayer together. The family of hostages protested in Tel Aviv to demand the government bring about their release. They blocked a main city thoroughfare, some sitting inside cages to demonstrate the plight of the hostages.

## **Israel Strikes Deepest Into Lebanon Since Start of War**

The Israeli army has struck its northernmost point in Lebanon since the war began in response to a rocket attack on an air force base on Mount Meron. The IDF said it hit several Hezbollah targets near the town of Hermel, which is more than 100 kilometers from the Israeli border. The targets included an airfield and other structures in a military facility belonging to Hezbollah's air arm. The rocket attack on the aerial monitoring base didn't interfere with the base's ability to function, the IDF said. Later that the day, Hezbollah also fired dozens of rockets at the Upper Galilee. This was the fourth time Hezbollah has attacked the Meron airbase since the war began on October 7. The first time was on January 6. Hezbollah subsequently released footage showing that multiple missiles hit it, out of a total of 62 that the organization said it launched, and the IDF admitted that the strikes caused damage.

## **Colombian President Threatens to Cut Ties with Israel**

Colombian President Gustavo Petro threatened to break off diplomatic ties with Israel if the country fails to comply with a UN Security Council resolution approved that calls for an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip. On Monday, he published another message in which he celebrated the resolution's approval and urged other nations to suspend ties with Israel if it doesn't cease its military offensive in the Gaza Strip. Israel's Foreign Minister Israel Katz responded to Petro's threat and wrote, "The support of the President of Colombia for the Hamas murderers who committed massacres and horrific sexual crimes against babies, women and adults is a disgrace to the Colombian people." Petro has been repeatedly critical of Israel's war in Gaza. In November, Petro announced that Colombia had recalled its ambassador to Israel over the war. A month later, he said that Israel's operation in Gaza against Hamas was like "Nazism in Germany." Last month, Petro expressed support for comments made by Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who compared Israel's actions in Gaza to those of Nazi leader Adolf Hitler against Jews during World War II.

Reuters

## **Dozens Killed in Israeli Strikes on North and South of Gaza**

Israeli air strikes killed dozens of Palestinians at both ends of the Gaza Strip, hitting the area around Al Shifa hospital in the north and Rafah on the southern edge where more than a million people have sought shelter. In the north, where intense fighting has raged for more than a week around Al Shifa, members of the Haseera family told Reuters dozens had been killed in a strike that wiped out a family compound near Gaza's biggest hospital. "A new massacre against the families of Abu Suhail Abu Haseera, his children and grandchildren, totaling around 30 people," family member Abu Ali Abu Haseera said in a text message to Reuters. Reuters journalists were not able to reach the area around Al Shifa, which Israeli forces stormed on March 18. Israel says it has killed and arrested hundreds of Hamas fighters who were using the hospital as a base. Hamas and medical staff deny fighters were present and say civilians have been rounded up. In the south, where more than half of Gaza's 2.3 million people are sheltering in Rafah against the border fence with Egypt, health authorities said 18 people including eight children were killed in a strike on the Abu Nqaira family home. Blankets and children's clothes were strewn amid the rubble, where relatives picked through the debris to retrieve belongings. Outside, a pillar of reinforced concrete had crushed a burnt-out car. Family members wept over corpses laid out at a nearby hospital morgue. Israel says it plans a ground offensive into Rafah, where it believes most Hamas fighters are now sheltering. Its closest ally the United States opposes such an assault, arguing it would cause too much harm to civilians who have sought refuge there. Also in the south, a siege by tanks around two other hospitals in Khan Younis continued for the third day. [Read More "Twelve Drown Trying to Reach Aid off Gaza Beach, Palestinian Authorities Say" \(Reuters\)](#)

## **Inside Israel's Disturbing Denial of Starvation in Gaza**

By Dahlia Scheindlin

- Among the ugliest spectacles of the ugliest phase of Israeli and Palestinian history is the attempt to deny the horrors committed by "our" side. Israeli authorities and pro-Israel keyboard warriors are cultivating denialism daily, and shamelessly. In addition to waging a war of shocking brutality against civilians, the narrative-makers are busy doing the unthinkable: denying hunger in Gaza. Caveat: the word for "hunger" and "famine" are identical in Hebrew, but it's splitting hairs to argue that they deny famine, not hunger. The aim is to absolve Israel. These efforts range from clownish to methodical. Yoseph Haddad, Israel's favorite Arab hasbarista, has proclaimed that there is no famine in Gaza – so it must be true.
- Some YouTuber named Tal Louria posted a selfie video simply saying there cannot be any famine in Gaza, because he hasn't seen pictures of people starving "like in Africa." Clearly he hasn't looked hard enough (though one doesn't need to). Officials tend to be less clownish, with strategies of denial deflection. Just last week, Gilad Erdan, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations, told Arutz 7: "If there is even a problem of lack of food in Gaza Strip – and we claim otherwise – only the Hamas terrorists are to blame, who loot humanitarian aid that Israel allows to enter with no limitations."
- Similarly, former Foreign Minister Eli Cohen's insistence that: "I don't know another country that would work like Israel is working to get humanitarian aid into Gaza. So, no preaching morality to us. The residents of Gaza are suffering, but Israel's not to blame for what's happening – Hamas and Iran are to blame." It takes zero sympathy for Hamas – which is how much I have – to know that Israel controls the crossings and most of Gaza by now and that Hamas carries blame but Israel is in charge. Particularly disturbing efforts touch the edges and tactics of disinformation.
- Eylon Levy, until recently the primary English-speaking voice of Israel's war, is among the chief defenders of Israel's humanitarian credentials – so much so that he picked a fight against British Foreign Secretary David Cameron on the issue, which is what appears to have got him suspended last week. Levy continues to crusade for Israel's humanitarian righteousness. This involves retweeting a certain AGHamilton29, a mysterious but for hasbara purposes apparently unimpeachable source with nearly 156,000 followers on X, whose previous handle was "AG Conservative."
- He has written a handful of articles in the National Review, which identified his byline as "the pseudonym of a licensed attorney." The articles accused "the media" of misleading readers about the rising threat of COVID-19 in 2020, where the author did his own research and made his own charts. He defended US Sen. Tom Cotton and Facebook; what he didn't do was devote a single article to Israel, Palestine and Gaza. Fair enough – it was 2019-2020, when the issue apparently didn't exist. This renowned authority on Gaza and famine has posted a screenshot of a post – the author and platform are absent, but Hamilton says that it was written "inside Gaza."

- The unnamed post talks about the theft of food distribution; this mess is Levy's killer evidence of Israel's blamelessness. It's almost a marginal anecdote. I found the original Gazan post from a much more credible source – but this is how disinformation and conspiracies get started. They begin with kernels of truth – no one doubts that aid in Gaza is being violently intercepted, and that Hamas is part of the armed, toxic brew – but knotted into nonsensical narratives designed to uphold a predetermined conclusion that Israel has no role, no responsibility.
- If you want to know what's actually happening in Gaza, there are professionals and experts to tell you – that's what the Israeli government wants you to avoid. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification has been tracking the risk and onset of famine with transparent methodology, data and on-the-ground sources; data is collected and analyzed via methods repeated around the world, in at least 54 different countries. The full report is available at a click. The organization's analysis, concluded in mid-March, found that 70 percent of Gazans in the north (about 210,000 people) are facing Phase 5 food insecurity – catastrophe. In the southern regions, where the hasbara crowds have been arguing vigorously that markets are open and food is plentiful, the report found that the Deir al-Balah, Khan Yunis and Rafah governates are in Phase 4 – a state of emergency. All of Gaza is facing acute food insecurity.
- There are more people on the ground. The World Health Organization stated that the IPC report matched its direct experience servicing populations in Gaza since the start of the war. The WHO stated that "the IPC report confirms what we, our UN partners and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been witnessing and reporting for months. When our missions reach hospitals, we meet exhausted and hungry health workers who ask us for food and water." You can talk to people from Gaza, with names, faces and phone numbers.
- You could also listen to masses of Gazans themselves, through survey research: The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research's recent poll by Khalil Shikaki, conducted in early March, found that just one-third of Palestinians in Gaza or less had water and food "available" – the majority said they could access them "with great difficulty and risk." Thirteen percent said water and food were simply not available at all. Meanwhile, 27 percent said that medical care was not available. The same portion said this about toilets; only 24 percent said they were available.
- That's a formula for death. Listen to the commissioner general of the UN Relief and Works Agency, who observed that all UNRWA food convoys to northern Gaza were blocked last week, even though 62 percent of Palestinians in the PSR survey said UNRWA is organizing their shelters. Don't like UNRWA? Listen to UN Secretary-General António Guterres as he watched a long line of trucks stand still, blocked for entry. Think about the story Israeli officials aren't telling you behind the high number of trucks they claim entered in March: entire trucks can be turned back for including a pair of surgical scissors – categorized as dual use. But famine can't be treated without full medical care; lack of clean water means that food requiring cooking water can't be used properly.

- The most prominent actor downplaying the humanitarian crisis and hunger is Israel's Coordinator for Government Activities in the Territories, known as COGAT. Claiming that the number of food trucks entering Gaza is now 126 per day, higher than prewar truck entries, as COGAT foolishly tried to do, makes no sense: Tania Hary, director of Gisha, the Israeli human rights organization focused on Gaza, pointed out on X that before the war, nearly 2 million people were not displaced, they had local food production and agriculture (and they were still deprived relative to pre-closure crossings, 17 years ago).
- The need has grown exponentially; it can't be compared to prewar demand, which wasn't being met anyway. COGAT conveniently began counting the daily average from March (126), when the average since October is 60 per day, according to Gisha – less than the prewar numbers – in a far greater catastrophe. Most damningly, Gisha's Hary says that neither COGAT nor any Israeli authority has published data to prove their own claims denying serious hunger or famine in Gaza. Gisha has submitted a freedom of information request on whether the government is monitoring the humanitarian situation – and, if so, how. "If they're saying it's not hunger, how do they know? They've never published anything indicating a methodology," she said in an interview. Denialists want you to just believe everyone else is wrong because they said so. They have their own facts.
- A cottage industry has already sprung up on the right denying the number of deaths in Gaza; one of them is at least authored by a data scientist (in Tablet) – a guy who also argued against vaccines in summer camps and seems comfortably ensconced at Wharton, far from Gaza. He graciously thanks the person who helped "check and correct" his numbers, a board member of Honest Reporting, an "Israel=good" media gotcha group. At least he linked to the source data: a single jpeg file, with no identifying markings and no link or source indicated. In fact, if the number of deaths in Gaza are off, they're probably being undercounted.
- What do these denialists want? The aims range from insisting on Israeli moral superiority to fending off a genocide verdict at the International Court of Justice. Or maybe, as Hary believes, "The idea that Israel's not responsible is at the heart of everything – all roads lead back to that. It's a vacuum of responsibility." But most of all, they want you to ignore the evidence, ignore firsthand knowledge, ignore actual experts in the field with transparent data and methodology, but listen to the crackpots. Then a government that uses these tactics can say – and do – anything.



## **Flawed Paradigms**

By Noam Tibon

- The debate over the question of who is responsible for the severe failures that led to the October 7 massacre—the political leadership or top military-security brass—is a pointless debate. Responsibility resides with both. Only a state commission of inquiry will be able to get properly to the root of the issue and illuminate the failures and the mistakes that were made. More importantly, it will be able to point to the corrective measures needed to prevent a similar catastrophe from happening in the future. There are several salient failures that nevertheless can be clearly pointed to even now. The first is the paradigm that viewed Hamas as an “asset.” That flawed paradigm was best described by Binyamin Netanyahu himself in 2019.
- Netanyahu said that strengthening Hamas by providing it with funding “is part of our strategy—to distinguish between Gaza and the Palestinians in Judea and Samaria.” In 2020, Netanyahu dispatched Mossad Director Yossi Cohen to Qatar to make sure that that evil Persian Gulf state would continue supplying Hamas with funding. That failure is Netanyahu’s responsibility. The assumptions that Hamas could be bribed— “quiet in exchange for billions of dollars”—and that the murderous terrorist organization’s military buildup could be viewed in a positive light was lethal. His partner in government, Bezalel Smotrich, said in 2015, “Hamas is an asset and the Palestinian Authority is a liability,” thus contributing to the failure. Hamas took the money and invested it in excavating its immense network of tunnels inside the Gaza Strip—tunnels that Nukhba terrorists emerged from on the morning of October 7 on motorcycles and pickup trucks on their way to cross the border.
- That money also made it possible for the terrorists to engage in battle with IDF troops while equipped with rocket-propelled grenades, hand grenades, ceramic vests and new assault rifles and helmets. To that, we need to add the debacle of the enemy’s misapprehension. Time and time again, Netanyahu stood before the cameras throughout his many years in office and declared that Hamas was “deterred” and was afraid of a conflict with Israel. In March 2023, just six months before the massacre, Netanyahu bragged about that in an interview to his home network, Channel 14: “Hamas and Islamic Jihad took a harsh beating in Operation Guardian of the Walls. They are leery of clashing with the government under my leadership and with the State of Israel.” Netanyahu repeated that mendacious message just three months before the massacre when he said that Hamas was deterred by the 2021 Operation Guardian of the Walls and did not want to clash with Israel.
- During that time, Hamas continued to prepare for its surprise attack and continued to set murderous terror attacks in motion inside Israel. That wasn’t the behavior of a weak and deterred organization, but of a savvy enemy that was meticulously planning its future moves. Saleh al-Aruri, the man who set in motion Hamas’s worst terror attacks in Judea and Samaria, said in an August 2023 interview that Israel had been forced to keep roughly 30 battalions in that sector as a result of his operational successes.



- Hamas, in other words, set the territory on fire, forced Israel to beef up its troop numbers there—and then launched the terror attack on the Gaza periphery. The misreading of Hamas as if it were an enemy leery of a conflagration, was also voiced by top IDF and GSS officials, who toed the preconception's line, and specifically so IDF Intelligence Director Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva who shared it a mere few weeks before the surprise October 7 attack. Just like in the debacle that preceded the Yom Kippur War, Israel had intelligence that Hamas was planning to attack, but the director of military intelligence was dismissive of the warnings that he received from his subordinates, leaving the Gaza periphery vulnerable.